THE HOUSE of FANG GOW
By MALCOLM WHEELER NICHOLSON

Nelson was determined to get the keys at any cost
Cover Picture—Scene from “The House Of Fang Gow” Gayle Hoskins

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Nelson's amazing adventures started in a Chinese restaurant in New York and ended in

The House Of Fang Gow

By Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson

CHAPTER I

CHINESE RESTAURANT.

The whole thing probably started because it was a rainy evening. It was just the sort of evening that a lonely man in a big city hotel finds as heavy and oppressive weight. After five years in China, Nelson's dream of getting back to New York had met fulfillment, but after five nights in Manhattan, he found himself longing for the East again as only a man who has lived in the East can long for it. And the rain beat down dispiritingly as he went out through the hotel doors.

"Taxi, sir?" the alert doorman asked. Nelson shook his head. With hat pulled down over his eyes and hands in
pockets, he walked out into the drizzling rain.

Coming to an avenue, he paused while the green lights were mirrored in the jet-black smoothness of the pavements, deep pools of emerald through which a busy stream of traffic splashed and rolled. The brilliant pools of green switched suddenly to liquid ruby, there was a screech of brakes, a slide of rubber, as the north and south traffic came to a halt and the east and west traffic roared into sudden life with much clatter of gears, and Nelson crossed the avenue, his steps idle and purposely drifting with the few pedestrians who were out in the rain.

The side street in which he found himself was walled on either side with a great bulk of office buildings and lofts, their street fronts nearly all dark and deserted.

Halfway down the block, a subdued ray of light cast a greenish glow across the sidewalk and onto the wet asphalt, a small oasis of light in the dank gloominess of this street. Nelson moved toward it unconsciously and found himself at last arrived within the area of the greenish glow.

For the first time since he had started from the hotel his air of preoccupation vanished and he stood stock-still, rooted to the spot, gazing at the source of this light.

It came from a small illuminated sign, made in the likeness of a green dragon. This in itself was not noteworthy. But to a man who had spent so many years in China the dragon was strangely familiar, being an excellently done copy of the Chinese dragon. Now, there are Chinese dragons and Chinese dragons. Nelson's quick eye caught a detail about this dragon that very few white men would have noticed, even in China, but that all Chinamen would have sensed immediately.

For this dragon's feet were armed with seven claws and the seven-clawed dragon is a sacred symbol of the imperial rulers of China.

Gazing at the place curiously, he saw in small letters below the sign a placard which read, "Chinese Restaurant." A small, dark doorway to the left was evidently the entrance, and to the right were closely curtained windows through which no ray of light appeared.

SOMETHING about the place aroused Nelson's curiosity, and this combined with the fact that he had not yet dined, and that he was a little homesick for the sights and scents of China, impelled him to enter the door, which gave easily to his touch.

He found himself in a dark hallway, dimly lighted from discreetly shaded lanterns, which cast a faint glow of light from the main restaurant room on the right.

There was no one about to take hat and coat, so he placed them on the rack against the wall and entered the dimly lighted place.

It contained some eight or nine tables, only four or five of which were lighted by the dim greenish glow of lanterns hung from the ceiling, the light from each not extending farther than the table edge.

No one came to seat him, although he heard a sound as of slippered feet moving in the back of the room. Seating himself at the nearest table, he waited for a serving man to appear.

Several minutes passed while he sat there. He found himself growing uncomfortable, feeling somehow that he was being watched.

At last, becoming impatient, he rapped smartly with his seal ring against a glass, being careful not to rap the center of the ring against the round surface of the water glass, but only using the heavy gold of the ring itself. For the center of the ring was a piece of very fine green jade of peculiar workmanship, done in the likeness of a drag-
on's foot—a dragon's foot with seven claws.

It was a peculiar ring, the jade portion being irregular in outline as though broken from some larger fragment.

The clink of gold against glass brought no response, except what he imagined was a stealthy whispering from the shadows at the far end of the room. He grew angry at last and raised his voice, calling for a waiter. The whispering died instantly and silence followed.

Soon his ears discerned a new sound—the soft pad of unshod feet in the hallway through which he had entered. This was followed by the click of a bolt being shot home.

The eerie silence of the place had already begun to get on his nerves, and the sound of that bolt being shot home brought a little tingle of excitement. He called again. Still there was no response, and angrily he half rose from his chair.

At that second, he became suddenly aware of a human form looming above him, just outside of the circle of light cast by the green lantern. It was with difficulty he repressed a nervous start as his eyes fell on the silent figure—a tall Chinese dressed in dark and flowing robes.

"Isn't there some one in this place to wait on a customer?" he asked irritably.

The man before him bowed his head.

"What do you desire, sir?" said a voice, this time directly behind him so that he whirled in astonishment, only to find another figure standing there in the shadows.

By now his nerves were thoroughly jumpy, and he was angry at himself as well as angry at the two figures dimly seen in the half light.

"This is supposed to be a restaurant, isn't it?" he asked sharply. "Haven't you any menu?"

"No, I am sorry, we have no menu."

The voice was flat and emotionless, but it reminded Nelson somewhat of the dead mechanical sound of a cheap phonograph.

"Well, haven't you anything to eat here?" he asked angrily and went on, asking for roast duck and rice.

Both dim figures shook their heads. He asked for chow mein. Again came the negative shaking of the heads, which repeated itself as he went on requesting various other dishes which he knew were the specialties of the Chinese restaurants of America. The response was the same in every case until at last he grew angry.

"By George, is this a restaurant or isn't it?" he shouted. "Have you any ham and eggs?"

The man at his right and the man in front of him exchanged a single glance. The man in front of him nodded imperceptibly. The man at his right spoke up.

"Yes," he said in his flat, mechanical voice, "I can serve you some ham and eggs."

Both men disappeared into the darkness of the back room, and all grew silent again.

THERE was a brooding air of watchfulness in that restaurant that could not help but make itself felt, and Nelson after a time grew heartily sorry that he had entered the place, and more than a little apprehensive of what unknown danger might lurk there.

He had little time to indulge in his feeling, for again he heard the soft pad of slippered feet and his waiter returned, bearing napkin, knife, fork, and spoon, and a glass of water, placing them silently before him.

Nelson observed curiously that the man carried two more sets of tableware, and after arranging the place of the lone diner, went to another table close against the wall. This table was in
darkness, and the Chinese lighted the hanging lantern above it, set two places with napkins and eating utensils, arranged the two chairs and withdrew silently into the shadows.

Wondering what other guests were expected, Nelson stared at the table until he noticed a dimming of the lights behind him, and turning around, he found that the waiter had returned and was turning off the lights of the extra tables.

In a few seconds the restaurant was almost in complete darkness with the exception of the light over his own table and the light of the table set for the two unknown guests.

He heard the soft footsteps in the hallway again and the click of the door being unlatched. Then the waiter came in and drew back the curtains of the windows facing on the street, lighting two more lanterns which cast a dim light outward through the glass.

That the stage was being set for some one was very evident. Nelson forgot his hunger in his interest and curiosity in these very careful preparations. He sat there, a lean, sinewy figure of a man, with a face bronzed with much outdoor living, a face from which keen eyes probed and studied everything in the room that could be seen.

His ham and eggs were finally brought to him by the silent waiter who appeared suddenly at his elbow as if he had solidified from slim nothingness on the instant.

After serving him, the man went to the opposite wall and lighted two tiny tapers before an image of Buddha, below which there was a silken scarf embroidered in crimson letters, which proclaimed in the old rounded Chinese characters that "Buddha is eternal."

As he ate there in silence, Nelson could hear no sound from behind him in the rear of the restaurant and only dimly could he hear the pulse and the roar of the city outside, sounding like the distant and ceaseless murmur of waves on a rock-bound coast.

His eyes strayed again and again to that other table with its two places ready and waiting, its white tablecloth gleaming pale-green under the rays of the lantern.

His ears caught the slide and creak of a car coming to a stop outside, followed by the slam of a car door.

In another few seconds, he heard two voices at the outer door, one the deep and resonant voice of a man, speaking with a trace of accent, and the other the clear contralto notes of a woman.

There was something warm and infinitely appealing about the musical notes of that second voice, and Nelson felt suddenly a great desire to see the owner of it.

There are voices whose tone and pitch seem to harmonize with beauty and whose notes are like clear notes of music, like a cascade of jewels or the iridescent color harmony of falling water shot through by sunlight, and this voice was such a one.

His conscious mind was occupied in those few seconds in the delight of listening to that voice, but his subconscious mind was noting an unusual stir and rustle from the darkness of the restaurant to the rear. It was as though the darkness had suddenly become alive and vibrant with life.

There flashed across his memory a picture of a visit he had once made to a Ceylonese temple dedicated to the snake god and the darkness of its interior which had suddenly stirred into sluggish, writhing life, unwinding slowly in great coils.

He felt the same sensation again that he had felt on that occasion, at the muffled sounds of activity in the rear of the restaurant.

By now three Chinese had appeared out of the darkness. One was standing in statuesque silence by the vacant and waiting table, one waited inside the
door, and the third was greeting the owners of the two voices at the outer entrance.

CHAPTER II.

SIGN OF THE DRAGON.

NELSON now heard a clear contralto voice coming from the hallway, and the beauty of its notes thrilled him through and through. "I can not say that I care for this place, father," came the voice.

"Don't be foolish, liebchen," boomed the masculine voice reassuringly, and suddenly the doorway was lighted by the subdued whiteness of a feminine form.

So dim was the light that Nelson could see little, except a blur of light, which was eclipsed by the darker bulk of the Chinese inside the door as he stepped forward bowing and led the way toward the waiting and vacant table.

To reach this table, the two newly arrived guests had to pass by Nelson's place, and he put down knife and fork and looked up intently as the Chinese went by, followed by the girl.

The lantern of his table did not extend its radiance much farther than her waist, and he sensed a sudden vision of slim loveliness and grace, crowned by a slender neck and a proudly carried head. The grosser bulk of the man who was her companion crossed his field of vision, giving an impression of power and wealth. As the great hairy hand of the man passed by, just below the level of his eyes, Nelson sat upright, with a start of astonishment as his gaze fell on the ring worn by the newcomer.

It was a solid-gold ring, worn on the third finger of the left hand, a massive affair, but it was not the ring itself which caught his gaze and made him hold his breath a moment; it was the setting.

For embedded in the ring was a fragment of green jade, looking as though it had been broken from a larger piece. Like his own ring, the stone was a delicately carved dragon's foot with seven claws.

His interest and curiosity redoubled at this strange coincidence, and he lost all thought of the food before him, as he watched the two newcomers seat themselves, bringing their faces into the radiance of the light cast by the lantern above their table.

The girl seated herself first, and Nelson gazed at her spellbound. The voice had been truly an index of the girl's beauty, and he found himself drinking in the loveliness that was disclosed by that transition from shadow to light.

It was that rare type of face whose physical beauty is lighted from within by spiritual beauty of a high order. It was as though a delicately carved cameo's translucence was bathed with an inner glow. Her eyes shone forth, clear and candid and full of an infinite kindness.

Nelson's heart throbbed strangely as he gazed upon her.

She suddenly became aware of his intent scrutiny, for she turned her head and gazed frankly and clearly into his eyes. For a few swift and dizzying seconds their glances clung.

There was a little of wonder in her gaze, and her lips half parted as his eyes held hers, and then she broke the contact as though with an effort and averted her head, looking faintly troubled.

To Nelson it was as though he had suddenly quaffed some potent drink that had risen like the bubbles of sparkling champagne to his brain, and he seemed to be breathing in a rarified atmosphere, as heady as wine. But some other influence was forcing its way through the cloudy happiness in which he was bathed, and he turned his head to find the eyes of her father fixed upon him.
in a hard and compelling stare. Somehow this came a little as a shock, after the intoxicating seconds that had preceded.

It was a strong face, that of her father, with a heavy line of jaw and chin that the squarely cut black beard could not conceal. The piercing eyes flashed forth from behind heavily thatched eyebrows, above which was a veritable lion’s mane of iron-gray hair. Powerfully corded neck and strongly thewed shoulders accentuated the impression of leonine strength, and said plainly to all beholders that here was a man who knew what he wanted and allowed nothing to stand in the way of his obtaining it.

THE daughter, sensing the exchange of glances between the two men, distracted her father’s attention by some low-toned remark, and Nelson remembering himself, withdrew his gaze. Out of the corner of one eye, he noted that two tall Chinese were busy serving the newcomers, and he noted with growing surprise that they were being served a complete meal, with bowls of dainty Chinese delicacies and steaming soup and many of the things which had been denied him.

He grew angry at this obvious partiality and turned to seek his waiter. He had difficulty in repressing a faint start when he found the man looming over his left shoulder, so near that in turning his head, he could scent the faint racial odor of the Chinese.

The man leaned forward and placed the check for the meal at the side of his plate. Seeing that he had not half finished the meat and eggs before him, it seemed a little hurried, to say the least.

“I’ll ask for the check when I want it,” Nelson said. “Bring me some tea, some nuts, and some fruit.”

The Chinese shook his head. “Very sorry,” he said. “No tea, no fruits, no nuts.”

Nelson gazed up at him in growing anger then glanced across at the other table, where, in plain view he could see greenish bowls of steaming tea, the wrinkled roundness of the small, thin-skinned mandarin oranges, and the dull rich brown of a heaped-up bowl of litchi nuts. While he stared, the waiter suggestively shoved the check forward again.

It was a plain hint that his custom was not desired and that they wished to dispense with his presence, and Nelson grew not only more angry, but became increasingly stubborn.

“I tell you I haven’t finished my meal yet. I demand what I have asked for. If you can’t get it, send the proprietor here!” His voice rose slightly in his anger and he felt the eyes of the two other guests rest upon him for a fleeting second.

The waiter saw at the same instant and grew suddenly agitated.

“Yes, yes, I will bring them,” he said soothingly and faded into the darkness, reappearing as if by magic in a few seconds, with not only the tea and fruit and nuts, but a bowl of rice cakes and preserved ginger, as if to make amends for his churliness. But he attempted to take away the half-finished plate as though desiring to hurry the meal.

Nelson forestalled this move and calmly went on eating, taking a secret joy in eating in the most unhurried and leisurely manner possible.

Behind him stood the waiter, attempting occasionally to hurry him by moving one of the bowls nearer to hand, and otherwise attempting to speed the departure of this third and very obviously unwanted guest.

The father and daughter conversed together in low tones, their soft-footed waiters appearing and disappearing into the gloom, like wraiths.
From the rear of the restaurant in the darkness came a subdued rustle and whisper, and Nelson grew increasingly certain that there were many men back there.

His anger having cooled off a little, he again began to feel the oppressive atmosphere of the place. It seemed to him that unseen forces were working in the background, laboring at some purpose which he could not fathom, but creating an atmosphere of tense expectancy which was beginning slowly to put his nerves on edge and to make him acutely sensitive to impressions.

Once or twice his eyes encountered those of the girl, and he imagined that he found a little of fear in them and something like an appeal. She, in her turn, was nervous as well, for she scarcely touched her food and glanced about her, the smooth whiteness of her forehead creased with faint lines of worry. Nelson had time to notice that she was plainly and very expensively gowned and that she wore as jewelry a simple strand of real pearls and a single ring, a large square-cut emerald, glowing green in its platinum setting.

The force of waiters now in the restaurant had increased, and there were three men hovering about the table where father and daughter sat, and he sensed rather than saw that another one had added his presence to his own table. It did not take him long to observe that, of the three waiters around the other table, only one of them was serving, while the other two stood behind the chairs of father and daughter respectively.

The conviction slowly grew upon him that there was menace in the crouched and tense attitude of these two Chinese. So strong did this impression become that he seriously considered warning his fellow guests, but then he put the idea aside as ridiculous.

The queer atmosphere of the place, the subdued lights, and the silent-footed waiters had begun to wear upon his nerves, he reasoned, and he attempted to steel himself to a more sane attitude of mind.

The rustle and whisper from the rear of the kitchen had now almost completely died down, and the place was in silence, except for the occasional clink of fork and knife and the voices of father and daughter conversing together in low tones.

It seemed to Nelson that the preceding activity and subdued bustle had been but a preliminary and that this silence had become ominous, like the tense stillness that ushers in the storm.

Again he chided himself for being too strongly imaginative and deliberately relaxed in his chair, leaning back and attempting to rest his tense nerves and muscles. But he was not destined to rest for very long.

The third waiter at the other table, he who was doing the serving, brought in a tray covered with several bowls. Stopping at the table of the two guests, he started to rest the tray's edge against the tablecloth.

To Nelson, who was watching him idly, it seemed that the man deliberately dropped the whole tray upon the floor, creating a loud clatter. The attention of father and daughter became centered upon this for a second.

Nelson rose with a warning shout as the two waiters behind the backs of the black-bearded man and his beautiful daughter made a single swift step forward, holding something white in their hands.

His warning came too late, for the squares of white silk descended with lightning speed over the heads of the two diners. Nelson saw no more, for at that same instant the soft folds of some heavy silken material dropped around his own head and were tightened, nearly stifling him. He lunged
forward, upsetting the table, only to have his legs kicked out from beneath him, and a coil of rope tightened about his arms while strong hands seized him.

CHAPTER III.
THE LONELY ROAD.

NELSON was no weakling himself, but he was as helpless in the grasp of those strong arms as though he were a child. In another second his feet were neatly caught up and a coil of rope twisted around them. He strained and tugged at his bindings with all his might, but could not free himself.

In the midst of his struggle he felt himself being lifted from the ground and carried. The silken cloth about his head, faintly odorous of sandalwood, was so skillfully drawn tight that he could make no outcry as he was borne along.

He felt his captors pushing him through some swinging doors and through what he assumed to be a long narrow corridor, as they carried him head and foot. They turned to the right and went down some steps into what he felt, from the dank, unwholesome atmosphere, was a cellar.

His captors stumbled through this and up some other steps into what he thought must be a yard, for he could feel the gentle beat of rain against his clothing and sense the fresh air of out of doors.

Here his captors paused, placing him on his feet. He heard them whispering to each other and pricked up his ears at the occasional word of the mandarin dialect that he recognized. Mandarin dialect is sufficiently rare in New York to attract the attention of any understanding ear.

He heard several times repeated the words “Yang Gwei-tze,” the Chinese expression for foreign devil. The whispering went on around him and he felt the rain falling softly where they stood in the open.

One combination of words was repeated several times by the group of men, and Nelson puzzled over their significance. As nearly as he could translate the Chinese equivalents, they seemed to be talking about a house, and he understood them to say something about the “house of the lion-guarded gates.”

Suddenly they all fell silent and he heard a new voice issue some command. Again he was picked up and carried, his bearers stumbling through what seemed to be a badly littered yard and out of a gate stumbling into what was, as nearly as he could figure, a narrow, cobblestoned alley.

The faint odor of an automobile exhaust assailed his nostrils and he heard the purr of a motor near at hand. Half shoved and half carried, he was borne into a car and deposited on the rear seat two of his captors seating themselves on either side of him.

There was a muttered word, and the car moved ahead, swaying and bumping over the cobblestones. Nelson tried to remember the various directions as the machine came onto the smooth asphalt and turned to the right, threading its way through traffic which he could hear moving all about him.

In a few minutes he heard the roar of an elevated overhead, and wondered whether he was moving out on Sixth Avenue or Third Avenue, or perhaps Second or Ninth.

THE car traveled very swiftly, stopping at regular intervals for the red lights. Again it turned to the right and Nelson knew that he was going over a bridge. On and on they sped, his captors sitting silently beside him.

The traffic lessened and the car put on greater speed. By now he had lost all sense of direction and could only vaguely guess where they might be
THE HOUSE OF FANG GOW

headed for, feeling somehow that they were on Long Island. He wondered if the girl and her father were being carried to the same destination and tried to reason out the various moves in the chain of events which had led up to the present.

He cursed himself for not paying more heed to his feeling that all was not well in that eerie Chinese restaurant. That a trap had been laid for the bearded stranger and the beautiful daughter was self-evident, but why this group of Chinese should do this thing and what were their motives, he could not for the life of him fathom.

Of one thing he was certain, that life would be a very drab and colorless affair until he again found the beautiful girl whom he had seen at the Green Dragon Restaurant.

Her face rose before him in all its beauty of delicately carved feature and frank and comradely eyes, and his ears still seemed to ring with the warm cantaloo notes of her voice. What fate could be in store for her or her father he could not surmise and in fear for her safety scarcely paused to think of his own danger and what might be awaiting him at the destination for which his captors were headed.

About an hour had passed, as nearly as he could figure, when the car came to a stop. His captors rose, lifting him up by the elbows. Strong hands grasped his feet and he was again out in the open air with the rain beating down upon him. There was a whispered conversation around him. Suddenly he felt the rope about him severed, and his arms and legs were free.

There was a rush of pattering footsteps in the darkness, the grind of gears being put in mesh; and, as he jerked at the silken cover which bound his head, he heard the car rapidly disappearing in the distance. With his arms stiffened by their long constriction, he untied the silken covering about his head with clumsy and fumbling fingers, finally managing to pull it off.

Looking about, he could see little in the darkness and the rain, save a deserted roadway, bordered by trees. There was no sign of car or Chinese.

Without any idea in the world as to where he was, he still remembered the direction in which the car had been going and started walking up the road, back to what he reasoned must be New York City. He hadn't walked many minutes before the glare of automobile lights swept up toward him. Waving the square of silken cloth which he still retained, he tried to attract the attention of the occupants of the car, without any other effect than to impel them to increase their speed.

Two or three attempts with succeeding cars resulted the same way, and he realized that a bareheaded man on a lonely road at night is not considered a safe acquaintance by motorists. He walked on and on, not finding a trace of human habitation or a light, the rain falling dispiritingly upon him, and running down from his hair to his collar.

After twenty or thirty minutes of steady walking, he at last saw a light ahead on the side of the road and quickened his pace when he saw that it was a gasoline filling station.

The attendant, a middle-aged man in khaki trousers and old army shirt, looked at him suspiciously when he asked to use the telephone, but permitted him to enter the little one-room frame shack, and followed him. In response to questioning, the man told him that he was within a few miles of Flushing.

Calling up the police department, Nelson got through to headquarters and told his story to some gruff-voiced individual who answered, and asked a lot of skeptical questions. It was only by reiterating his story angrily that he at last got attention at the other end and a promise to call up the precinct which
held the Green Dragon Restaurant, and have the place investigated.

After giving the police his present telephone number and securing the promise that he would be called immediately there was any news, he hung up, only to call again to a garage in Flushing, telling them to send him a car.

The service station attendant had listened with interest to his story. His air of suspicion had vanished by now.

"Looks like they’re kidnapin’ them people and holdin’ them for ransom," he ventured.

Nelson shook his head. Somehow it did not seem like a ransom proposition, but as the attendant said, it was a wonder that the Chinese did not knock him on the head and throw him in the river as a dangerous witness. While they were talking, the telephone bell rang. It was the gruff voice from the police department which answered.

"No," said the voice, "we sent a sergeant and a couple of men down there, and there wasn’t no sign of anybody. Them birds has flown the coop for sure. Come on in to headquarters and see us as soon as you get here. I’ll be waitin’ for you. Ask for Lieutenant Casey."

CHAPTER IV.
THE HOUSE BY THE SHORE.

In a few minutes after the telephone message, the car he had ordered drew up before the filling station, and he was speeding toward the city in short order. Before reporting to police headquarters he stopped by the Green Dragon Restaurant again, finding a plain-clothes man and two policemen guarding it.

Here he rescued his hat and coat which were still hanging in the passageway, and looked over the building with the policeman. The Chinese had cleared out with every trace of their personal belongings, leaving only the kitchen utensils and dishes.

Nelson, after a rapid survey of the place, drove down to headquarters where he found Lieutenant Casey and two plain-clothes men in conference over the case. They were trying hard to find the identity of the father and daughter and had sent an alarm through the city to all the hotels.

The newspapers had got hold of it in the meantime and the police reporters began to buzz around very quickly. Reports began to come in through the various precincts reporting no trace of the man and his daughter. It was not until two o’clock in the morning that word finally came from an exclusive uptown hotel, identifying the man and his daughter as guests.

They were registered as Mr. Erick von Holtzendorff and daughter, Miss Sigrid von Holtzendorff. The father was said to be a wealthy retired importer, of German birth, but American citizenship.

On receipt of this information, two detectives immediately went to the hotel, Nelson accompanied them while they interviewed the staff. An examination was first made of all telephone messages received and sent.

There was one number that reappeared frequently in the mass of slips. Upon investigation this turned out to be the telephone number of a Wall Street brokerage firm.

Another one was the Chinese consul general; another was the telephone number of the Green Dragon Restaurant, while still another was the number of a very wealthy Chinese importing company.

At this late hour it was impossible to find anybody at the addresses. After further questioning the hotel people about visitors, they discovered that a frequent caller on the Von Holtzendorffs was a sallow-faced black-mustached man who gave his name as
Joseph Stucchi. This man had called five or six times in the two weeks that the Von Holtzendorffs had been at the hotel and had called the last time that afternoon, about five o'clock, leaving about half an hour before the father and daughter went out for dinner.

The Von Holtzendorffs had arrived in New York from Shanghai, China. With these various scraps of information, the detectives next went to the hotel suite which had been occupied by the two. It was a luxurious suite, furnished in a Spanish style with heavy carved and embossed-leather-covered chairs, with rich hangings and softly shaded lights. On the card tray they found several cards bearing the name of Mr. Joseph Stucchi, but these gave no address.

There seemed to be no letters or any personal documents of any sort, nor was there anything else which could be used as a clue to determine the causes for the strange disappearance.

It was now nearly three o'clock in the morning, and Nelson returned to his own hotel to snatch a little sleep before starting the search anew in daylight. His sleep was troubled by the vision of Sigrid's lovely face and the haunting memory of that unspoken appeal in her eyes.

Morning came at last, and with it the morning editions which carried all the news of the happening, as well as the various surmises. They had discovered the identity of Joseph Stucchi, who was said to be down on police records under a charge of larceny, in which no conviction had been secured. Investigation by the newspaper reporters had disclosed the fact that he occupied a room in an inexpensive hotel in Greenwich Village up to the previous night, and that he had checked out, leaving no forwarding address, some time around seven o'clock in the evening.

Nelson called up the police immediately to see if there were any further details, but without finding anything of moment. It was still too early to find business men at their offices, and investigation of various telephone messages had not commenced as yet.

In puzzling over the situation, there came back to Nelson's memory that whispered conversation around him in the darkness, in which the Chinese had spoken of the house with the lion-guarded gates. Here at least was some sort of a clue. Surely there could not be an extraordinary number of houses surrounded by walls, and with sculptured lions on the gateposts.

Somehow Long Island appealed to him as the logical place to look for such a house. But Long Island is a big place and would take a lot of traveling to cover. Then a scheme occurred to him, and he sought and found a directory, spending the next two hours calling up various real estate dealers in Long Island.

The result of his work was to produce four such houses, two on the north shore and two on the south shore. Such was his anxiety to follow up the trail of the beautiful girl he had seen for such a brief time, that he immediately ordered a car and chauffeur and sped away from the city, heading first for the south shore.

About two hours' driving brought him to the first of the houses between Center Moriches and Westhampton, where fronting on the main road was a high wall, broken by a gate which had a sculptured lion on either pillar. He drove up to the house inside.

His ring was answered by a butler of whom he asked to see the proprietor. The man of the house himself came down and turned out to be a retired banker, whom Nelson knew through mutual acquaintances. This was so obviously not the right place that he went quickly on his way to investigate the
next house. This was at Easthampton and turned out to be the residence of a retired business man, obviously not the right party.

Leaving here after a few minutes' chat, Nelson sped back along the way, intending to cross the island to the north shore. For greater comfort he seated himself with the chauffeur and was watching the road ahead.

Just after passing through Hampton Bays, a car came out of a side road and moved ahead of them. There was one man in the rear seat of the black-and-silver-trimmed foreign-built touring car. There was something vaguely familiar about the back of this man's head and the set of his shoulders, and Nelson leaned forward eagerly, studying him, motioning to his chauffeur to speed up.

They came up directly in rear of the other car. Just at that moment the man turned around, and Nelson looked full into the face of the tall Chinese who had waited upon him at the Green Dragon the night before. The recognition was mutual, for the Chinese leaned forward to his chauffeur and his car suddenly drew away at vastly increased speed.

"Keep that car in sight!" directed Nelson, and watched the car ahead as the speedometer flickered from thirty to thirty-five, to forty, to forty-five, and up to fifty miles an hour.

A truck came in from a side road and slowed them down for a moment, but they shot around it and clung tenaciously to the car ahead, of which Nelson had already noted the license number. The road turned ahead, and the other car disappeared from view. As they swung around the curve, the chauffeur threw on his brakes, but it was too late. There was a loud explosion followed by another and another.

The car sagged and careened to one side of the road, nearly upsetting. The tires were ripped to pieces by a litter of jagged glass, strewn along the road, evidently empty bottles thrown out of the forward car. It was just disappearing from view as Nelson's car came to a dead stop and the chauffeur got out, cursing as only a chauffeur can at four ruined tires. They were near a country bungalow, and Nelson wasted no time, but hurried over to it.

An elderly woman in a kimono, evidently just interrupted at washing her hair, came to the door and granted permission to use the telephone. Very hurriedly Nelson called the next towns ahead, warning them of the foreign-built car and giving its number, asking them to hold it. He then called up another garage near by and secured a car, which appeared in about ten minutes. With this he went on.

It was not until he got to Eastport that he heard news of the foreign-built car. It had flashed through the town just after receipt of his message, going on toward Bellport.

He telephoned on to Bellport, asking them to hold the car if it came through and hurried on his way. At the next village he telephoned again, finding that no trace of the car had been seen. Somewhere between Center Moriches and Mastic a motor-cycle policeman remembered having seen the car turn down a side road toward Great South Bay.

Nelson moved on immediately, found the road and followed it up, coming at last to a lone house set back amidst trees on the shore.

The great gateway was closed. There were no sculptured lions on the pillars, but set in the panels of each gate were two lions' heads sculptured in bas-relief. There were fresh automobile tracks in the graveled driveway leading through the gate.

Telling his chauffeur to telephone in to the police, Nelson got out and watched the man turn around and depart.

He stood there studying this grim
and silent gate, over the top of which he could see the distant roof of the house. Two or three hundred yards inside the grounds.

The gate was firmly locked and he wasted no more time with it, but quietly moved around the walls, going toward the shore. There was no other gate to be found on that side until he got to the bay shore itself, and he found a small gate leading to the beach. This was also securely locked.

The top of the wall was some ten feet high and was covered with three strands of heavy barbed wire to keep out intruders—barbed wire which was strung out and over the wall, making it impossible to climb.

Nelson kept on his way, however, following the wall around until he found himself brought up by the fence to the adjoining property, another country house set back from the shore. This property was locked as well, and he retraced his steps, coming back again to the entrance gates with the sculptured lions. Going on beyond this, he found another gate, evidently the service entrance.

He tried this. It gave to his pressure, swinging open easily.

He found himself looking into the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun held by a tall, sallow-faced white man with a dark mustache.

"Hands up!" barked the sallow-faced man.

There was nothing else to do. Slowly and unwillingly, Nelson raised his hands above his head.

CHAPTER V.
FANG GOW THE MYSTERIOUS.

ABOVE an alleyway which leads off Pell Street in New York City, there is an unobtrusive door in an unobtrusive building in which harmless-looking men flit in and out. But these men numbered among their names such men as Hong Ah Kay, the dreamy-eyed poet who was the king of tong killers; Loke Tung, who belonged to the dreaded Three District Men; and Sing Dock, who was known as "Hangman's Noose."

These and others had passed in and out of these doors. But this afternoon there was a deadly seriousness about the men who entered, for the On Leongs and the Hip Sings were at war again, and the two powerful clans had already succeeded in committing half a dozen killings among each other's henchmen.

Two of these men were called into an inner room and bowed low before a portly old man who sat at a teakwood desk and regarded them from heavy-lidded eyes, studying these two, the flower of his hatchet men—hatchet men so-called because their favorite weapon was the razor-edged hatchet with which they slipped up behind and split the skulls of their victims. But Lay Gong and Sing Kay were modern enough to use the automatic pistols which they kept concealed inside their waistbands. They were different in looks, but they were alike in one thing—they killed blandly and smilingly, and went about their work like good craftsmen.

"It is time that we removed him," said the old man quietly.

Even the impassive faces of the two killers showed a trace of excitement at this, but they said nothing. It was the biggest order they had ever received. They bowed their heads in acquiescence.

"He is at the house of the lion-guarded gates. You know what you have to do?"

The two bowed again and went out silently, making their way through the crowded outer room, down into Pell Street where Riley, who was on duty in Chinatown in plain clothes, saw them moving, inconspicuous as a couple of cats, toward the Joss Temple.

He immediately went to the telephone and got Lieutenant Casey on the wire.
It's Riley speaking," he said in a guarded voice. "I just saw Lay Gong and Sing Kay moochin' out o' the Hip Sing headquarters. I'm keepin' them shadowed. Any more news in that kidnapin' case?"

"Yep. It looks like the On Leongs are behind it. There's been two more killin's in the last hour. A couple o' chinks over in Brooklyn. I can't figure it out. There's something funny about it. It ain't just a simple tong war. They got some new factor in it, and some fancy killers are comin' over from China, so I hear. They say there's a gang of them loose somewhere in New York. The chinks are talkin' about a guy named Fang Gow, who seems to be pretty bad medicine. Leastwise they're all scared of him. Get all the dope you can on this guy. Find out where he is, if you can," directed Casey, and he hung up.

Riley went on down the street where his shadow reported that the two killers had given him the slip.

Had Riley but known it, his two men were even now rapidly speeding uptown and crossing the bridge over to Long Island, headed toward that house on the shore where Nelson would be standing an hour or two later, his hands high in the air, gazing calmly at the livid features of the tall, sallow-faced man in front of him who held the sawed-off shotgun.

FROM the appearance of the man, Nelson gathered it was no other than Stucchi. The more he studied the man, the more he realized that the fellow was yellow and badly frightened, for the gun wavered, and Stucchi was trembling like a leaf, his face pasty white and his teeth chattering.

"Well," remarked Nelson after a few seconds of silence, "what's it all about anyway?" He glanced at the man's hand on the trigger of the shotgun.

"What's the matter with you? Have you got St. Vitus dance or something? If you don't stop jerking, that gun will go off and somebody will be hurt."

The fellow swallowed hard and strove to say something.

"You'll find out what it's all about soon enough," he quavered. "Keep them hands up, and no monkey business! Come along with me." And he beckoned to Nelson to follow as he retired backward, his gun still pointed uncomfortably near Nelson's heart.

Nelson came along obediently, hands still raised high in the air, watching his captor narrowly for an opportunity to wrest the gun from him. His brain was working fast, wondering how soon his chauffeur could get in touch with the police and bring some one to help.

Had he but known it, his chauffeur was at that moment being carried in the back of a touring car to the nearest hospital, an ugly gash across his forehead and entirely unconscious.

As the man had neared the junction of the narrow side road and the main road, three men had leaped on the running board of his car, one of them with a heavy blackjack, which he had brought down with a crash on the driver's head. The three leaped off as quickly as they had come. The car had swayed wildly from side to side of the road, finally toppling over in a ditch, from which the unconscious man had been pulled out a few minutes later by a passing motorist.

But Nelson did not know this. He came through the gate at the order of the man with the gun, who began to circle around to get in his rear. In executing this maneuver, he brought the muzzle of the shotgun to within six inches of his captive's chest.

At that second, Nelson jerked his head up and stared with horror over the shoulder of the sallow-faced man. The nervous Stucchi looked behind him instinctively. It was only a brief look,
but it was poor judgment, for in that fraction of time, Nelson grasped the gun barrel, shoved the muzzle away from his body and, lunging forward, struck the sallow-faced man a heavy blow at the angle of his jaw.

Stucchi staggered and dropped the shotgun from nerveless fingers, clapping his hands to his jaw and emitting a faint scream, like a woman. Suddenly, without another word, he turned and ran like a frightened rabbit.

NELSON stared after him, a grimly amused smile on his face, and then looked down at the shotgun. Opening the breach, the amused smile turned to a frown of annoyance. It was no wonder that Stucchi was nervous, for the gun was empty.

He stood in what was evidently the kitchen garden, for rows of vegetables stretched out on either hand, and bordering the path were glass-covered cold frames and hotbeds, in which many tiny green plants flourished in the black soil. The kitchen garden was inclosed by a high hedge, pierced by the gate through which Stucchi had run.

Glancing back at the open gate behind him, Nelson deliberated whether to go forward or to turn back like a sensible person, and wait for the police support, which he felt would be along any moment now. But the vision of Sigrid returned to plague him, with the haunting appeal in her eyes. He decided to go on.

The sawed-off shotgun was not of much use to him, except as a club, but he carried it, nevertheless, and moved cautiously along the path toward the gate in the hedge. He went through this, keeping careful lookout for possible ambush and came out the farther side into a beautiful flower garden, heavy with the scent of roses. From here he could see the house through its encircling trees.

He saw something else as well which made him crouch down behind the shelter of a row of flowering plants, and move rapidly behind it toward a rustic summerhouse, which showed itself in the corner of the hedge. He gained this shelter just as the first of the six Chinese came creeping down the center walk of the flower garden.

If ever there was murder in the bearing of a man, there certainly was murder in the bearing of that first Chinese who carried a glittering knife.

To right and left of him, his fellows came on, searching every inch of the flower garden and gradually converging on the entrance to the garden beyond.

Nelson, from within the obscurity of the summerhouse, studied them dispassionately, then looked about him for a hiding place. The Chinese did not go into the vegetable garden, but stood at the gate a moment, whispering together. Finally three of them went to the right, and three of them came creeping through the flowers toward the summerhouse.

Nelson realized that he was caught like a rat in a trap, and gripped the barrel of his gun, ready to make a fight for it, placing himself inside the door.

On they came, their knives glittering evilly in the afternoon sun, their eyes probing through flower bushes and paths. They were now within ten yards, and Nelson looked around him for some means of concealment or a better weapon.

There was nothing in the summerhouse, except a wicker table and three wicker easy-chairs. He glanced aloft at the rafters. They were bare, except in one corner, where the gardener had stored several boxes and barrels, in the space between the roof and the rafters.

THE nearest Chinaman was now within five yards of the summerhouse. Nelson leaped like a cat to the top of the wicker table which bent under his weight, and plac-
ing the shotgun across two rafters, he swung up by his arms to the cluster of boxes and barrels. In two swift motions he reached shelter of the nearest box, a large square receptacle, open on one side. Into this he crawled, pulling the shotgun in after him just as the leading Chinese stepped to the outside of the door.

The first man stepped within the door and looked about him. The two others crowded behind him. Through a crack in the boards of the box in which he hid, Nelson could see their restless eyes searching every inch of floor and table and finally raising themselves aloft to the rafters.

Two of them were satisfied and turned as though to leave, but the third, a villainous-looking Chinese with broken and yellow-stained teeth, moved two or three steps nearer and stared up at the boxes and barrels on the rafters above. His companions called him to come on, but he shook his head and chattered angrily at them, pointing up at the boxes. The two returned under protest, while he climbed up on the table and placed his hands on the rafters, preparatory to hauling himself up.

Nelson shifted within his hiding place and grasped the shotgun by the muzzle. The Chinese swung himself up.

Just then all three Chinese paused, raising their heads in startled attention. Nelson’s grasp loosened itself on the shotgun muzzle.

For a high-pitched scream broke on their ears. It was the scream of a woman in the direst agony or fear. It came from the direction of the house.

CHAPTER VI.
THE BLACK LIMOUSINE.

To Nelson, there could be only one possible person who could be screaming at this place and time. His mind leaped immediately to a picture of Sigrid overborne by the cold-eyed brutality of these impassive-faced yellow men.

Two of the Chinese waiting below ran out of the summerhouse as the screaming fell on their ears. The third man balanced on the rafters not ten feet away, after listening for a moment. Then he began to move toward the box in which Nelson was concealed, carrying his knife in his teeth as he crawled along the rafters.

With the sound of that heart-rending screaming in his ears, Nelson wasted no time but came out of his hiding and swung his shotgun at the man before him.

The Chinaman dodged, but in dodging, lost his balance and dropped from his precarious perch.

He landed on the table, which smashed beneath his weight, rolling him on the floor.

Here he rose to his feet with the quickness of a cat and picked up the knife he had dropped. He was rising from this effort when Nelson landed silently beside him, letting drive a smashing blow full in the face of the yellow man as he hit the ground.

The fellow went down as though pole-axed. It was a complete knock-out, and the Chinaman sprawled out on the floor with his eyes closed, as Nelson hurried out into the garden and the sunlight.

Casting a hasty glance over the grounds, he saw many men running from different parts of the estate all converging at the same point at a point near the house. Among them were the men who had been combing the garden for him. So intent were they on the cause of the sudden excitement that they paid no attention to him, and he followed them at a run.

The screams were still coming from a point at the corner of the house, and as he arrived at the edge of the lawn, he halted by a cedar tree as he saw a little group of men collected at this point, and saw the cause of the screams.
The group of Chinese, some eight or nine in all, began to disperse, returning, as Nelson reasoned, to their various guard posts. Two of them came toward the tree in whose shelter he was hiding. He pressed farther into the thick and low-set branches as they came nearer, and scarcely drew his breath until they passed by.

They were not more than five or six feet away at the closest point, and he could not help but overhear scraps of their muttered conversation. One name they mentioned, fell on his ear and set up a train of memory. The name was Fang Gow, and it fell upon his ears with a ring of familiarity, although he could not recall when or where he had heard it before.

"It is the Honorable Fang Gow who meets and overcomes all his enemies," chuckled one of the men.

"Only a person denied of understanding by the will of Heaven would be rash enough to brave the wrath of our wise and terrible Fang Gow," affirmed the other as they passed out of earshot.

Strive as he might, Nelson could not recall the idea and associations that would identify that name. Evidently it was the chief of this gang of Chinese—Chinese of stature and dialect unusual in America—for the majority of Celestials who venture abroad come from the crowded and populous districts of Sze Yap, near Canton, in southern China, and these Chinese were from the north.

As he remained there in hiding, he tried to reason out the various causes that might have impelled them to travel so far from home and puzzled over the punishment meted out to their fellow countryman, wondering what relentless battle of Chinese tongs and secret societies was now enacting its drama within the confines of this country estate set on the southern shore of Long Island.

He gave up the puzzle at last, centering his faculties on the immediate prob-
lem before him, which was to rescue from the clutches of these aliens the lovely girl who had so quickly entered his field of vision and so quickly departed, leaving behind her an ineffaceable and glowing memory.

The house reared its bulk up in front of him, a large house built partly of field stone with its upper portion shingled with weather-stained wood from which many small diamond-paned windows stared down at him.

He began to grow worried over the nonappearance of the police whom he had sent his chauffeur to call, and he cast many an anxious glance, not only down to the garden toward the gate by which he had entered, but also down the driveway, which stretched away on the other side down toward the main gate, which he could dimly see through the trees. As nearly as he could estimate, fully three quarters of an hour must have elapsed since he had sent the chauffeur on his errand, and it was high time that reinforcements had arrived.

As his eyes rested on the house, a familiar figure came around the corner, the figure of the sallow-faced white man, Stucchi, with whom he had had the fight at the gate.

Stucchi’s pale face looked even more unhealthy by contrast to the livid welt extending across his chin and cheek.

Nelson smiled and nodded to himself with a feeling of satisfaction at his handiwork.

As Nelson watched, Stucchi made his way to the porte-cochère which covered the main entrance to the house, and stood there staring down the driveway, his eyes fixed on the gate.

Just at that time, the faint notes of a very musical gong fell on Nelson’s ears, coming from somewhere near the gate. It rose and fell, a soft and beautiful sound in that parklike inclosure.

But with the striking of its first note a sudden activity began to take place.

The various tall Chinamen came and went, some in the direction of the gate and some near the house.

Stucchi ran quickly up the steps and disappeared within, only to reappear a moment later and resume his position of watchfulness directed at the main gate.

The gong ceased its pulsing sound for a moment, only to recommence with a quicker, more hurried note which accelerated even more movement around the grounds and in the gardens.

The eyes of all the men that Nelson could see from his vantage point were directed upon the gate, and he could not help but sense the feeling of subdued excitement and expectancy that suddenly had taken possession of every one.

S HIFTING his position slightly so as to get a better view of the gate, Nelson stared intently with the rest of them. He could see two men standing ready to hand at either side of the great gates, prepared to swing them open. A third Chinese stood to one side.

From outside the gate there came the imperative notes of a clear-toned automobile horn. The gates were swung open and a silver-trimmed black limousine purred smoothly into the grounds. The gates were quickly shut and bolted behind it.

The limousine surged quickly up the driveway and came silently to rest under the porte-cochère. From where he stood, Nelson had to strain his neck in order to get a glimpse of the occupants who issued from it—there were three, first a stoutly built Chinese in richer robes than those worn by the rest of the men about this place. He went up the steps and turned to wait for the second person.

When Nelson’s eyes fell on this per-
son, he repressed an eager start and stared breathlessly. For it was none other than the black-bearded, powerfully built form of Von Holtzendorff, Sigrid's father.

His heart beating high with excitement, Nelson watched for the appearance of Sigrid herself, but he waited in vain, for the third person to appear was another burly Chinaman who held a light steel chain in his hand. For the first time Nelson saw that Sigrid's father had his hands handcuffed behind his back. The light steel chain was attached to these.

The car drove through the porte-cochère empty now, save for the chauffeur, making for the garage which lay in the rear.

Von Holtzendorff climbed the steps steadily. When he had arrived nearly at the top, Nelson saw Stucchi step forward directly in the path of the tall German-American.

Drawing back his hand, Stucchi deliberately slapped the other white man across the mouth. Von Holtzendorff roared like an angry bull and charged, bound and helpless as he was, toward his attacker. He was brought up short by a jerk on his chain, and could do no harm. But Stucchi had fled in terror and lost himself somewhere among the little group of Chinese standing below the steps.

CHAPTER VII.
DARK JOURNEY.

It was a coward's blow, that blow of Stucchi's at a man who could not fight back, and Nelson grew hot with anger. But this feeling quickly subsided as he tried to reason out why Sigrid was not with her father and what might have been her fate since he last saw her.

It was well along toward late afternoon by now, and still his reinforcements of police were not here. Some hitch had occurred. What it was, he did not know, but it was high time he ceased to depend upon them and went ahead on his own. What was taking place in New York, he had no means of knowing. His position at the moment was one from which he could neither advance nor retreat. There were too many men about the grounds, and did he leave his shelter for a second, keen eyes would immediately spy him. There was no question in Nelson's mind that discovery of him would end his usefulness.

Fuming at his helplessness, he waited with what patience he could muster for night to come and release him from his concealment. Again his thoughts went back to New York and the activities of the police, and he wondered what, if anything, they had discovered and what the afternoon papers were carrying concerning the case.

As a matter of fact, the whole of New York was following the case, eagerly studying the early afternoon editions for more light on the mysterious kidnapping case, which was said to be tied up in some mysterious way with the war now raging between the On Leong and Hip Sing tongs.

The police had investigated the few telephone numbers found recorded at Holtzendorff's hotel. The Wall Street firm had little information to offer, save that they had acted as brokers for Von Holtzendorff during several years, that he bought large quantities of securities sagely and wisely, telegraphing and cabling his orders in from all parts of the world.

The Chinese importing firm produced slightly more information. They had been commissioned by Holtzendorff to secure for him certain lost pieces of green jade carved into the likeness of an imperial dragon, originally an ancient piece of great rarity of which Holtzendorff already possessed one tiny fragment. They had been engaged in
this task a year at great expense, but so far had not succeeded in finding a single piece, although they had been authorized by the wealthy German-American to offer a reward—an unusually large one, too—for any or all of the remaining pieces.

The Chinese consul general was bland, polite, and as uncommunicative as only a polished Chinese gentleman can be. He did however admit that he had been in touch by telephone with Mr. von Holtzendorff, who had inquired concerning the whereabouts of a Chinese named Fang Gow. No, he did not know him personally. He knew of him slightly, that he was a sort of court chamberlain to the old dowager empress, that he came of noble Chinese birth and had been high in favor at the former imperial court. Further than this he blandly disclaimed any knowledge and intimated that his diplomatic immunity should protect him from being further questioned by the police.

From somewhere else came the information that the man Stucchi had formerly been a butler in the employ of Von Holtzendorff and had been discharged for theft here in New York City. Police records showed that Stucchi had been arrested a year previously on complaint of Mr. von Holtzendorff, but that the charges of theft were not pressed by the latter, and the butler was released from confinement.

DOWN at the quarters of the Hip Sings near Pell Street, there was a sullen current of anger, for word had come that one of their best hatchet men had been done to death. The portly old man of the inner room had received this news in impassive silence and had immediately sent out four more killers to replace the dead man.

These four had quickly left New York by various routes and were now concentrating on the house with the lion-guarded gates, sworn to effect the death of the mysterious Fang Gow.

The proprietor of the building whose lower floor had housed the restaurant of the Green Dragon knew nothing of his Chinese tenants, save that they had come to him about five months previously with excellent bank and business references, and leased the quarters thereafter, paying their rent regularly and conducting themselves in orderly fashion as good tenants, so far as he knew.

It was not until the five o'clock editions came out that newspaper readers on subway and elevated were greeted with big headlines which announced that the war between the On Leong tong and the Hip Sings had come to a sudden end after a conference between the leaders of the two powerful organizations.

No one, not even the police most familiar with the ins and outs of Chinatown's complicated life, knew why the truce had been so suddenly agreed upon, after a week of bitter warfare in which there had been many murders on both sides.

Lieutenant Casey of headquarters gave it as his opinion that the two tongs had buried their mutual grievances in order to present a combined front to a more dangerous enemy. But few people suspected the police of knowing anything, and Casey's statement was buried in a small paragraph at the foot of a column and went unnoticed by most readers.

An extra came out about half an hour later as people were sitting down to their evening meals in apartments and hotel dining rooms, in restaurants and lunch wagons, in cafeterias, and Italian wine restaurants, stating that Mr. John H. Nelson, the young mining engineer who had been the only witness of the kidnaping, had been missing all day, and that it was feared he had been kidnapped as well.
MEANTIME, the said John H. Nelson was waiting the slow coming of darkness which would enable him to leave his shelter within the thick foliage of the cedar tree and proceed on his search for the girl whose eyes had looked so appealingly into his for a few brief seconds.

It was beginning to grow dark enough to make it necessary to turn on lights within the house, for he saw the windows of the lower floor glow into brightness, followed in a few more seconds by a few windows on the second floor.

After five or ten minutes, a single window set high in the attic sprang into light. He gazed at this curiously, wondering if this could be the room where Sigrid or her father was confined, and wondering if Sigrid were in the house at all or where she might be.

As the park and grounds became more heavily blanketed with the sable covering of night, Nelson very quietly made his way to the side of the house where he had seen a cellar door opening into the field-stone foundation.

There seemed to be no one in that immediate vicinity, and after a careful look around, he went down the steps and slowly turned the knob of the door. It gave to his pressure, opening inward, and after assuring himself that there was no one near the door inside, he entered.

The cellar was a low-ceilinged, cement-floored place. On his right, great coal bins occupied a large space. On his left were various small rooms with shelves heavily laden with glass jars and vegetables. Several yards away, beyond the coal bins, a dust-covered electric globe burned dimly above the cold furnace.

Moving forward with his eyes on the light, he suddenly stumbled and nearly fell over a man stretched prone across the passage.

The force of the stumbling kick he had inadvertently delivered would have been enough to awaken the heaviest sleeper. He prepared to grapple with the man and throttle any attempt at an outcry. But the man did not stir.

Bending over, it took but a second’s quick examination for Nelson to determine that the man was dead. He was not only dead, but he had been murdered, as a frightful gash in his neck bore witness. And he had not been dead very long, for the body was still limp and warm.

Nelson rose from this grisly object and stared about the silent cellar. Vaguely menacing shadows concealed the corners and darkened the walls of the place, and there were so many nooks and corners which the light did not enter that twenty or thirty men could have been concealed there, and no man would have known of their presence.

Not a sound broke the silence of the place. As Nelson stood there, a large gray rat fled across the floor on some important business of its own, but for that single sign of life he might have been alone on a desolate island, so quiet was everything about and around him.

There was no time to puzzle over the mystery of the murder of the man in the cellar, and he passed around the body and went on. A sudden idea striking him, he returned and felt the body, seeking for a weapon of some sort wherewith to arm himself. But his search was fruitless. The dead man did not even have a knife.

Beyond the furnace he saw a stairway leading to the first floor and cautiously ascended it. When about to the top, he paused and listened. The subdued hum of many voices and the odor of cooking told him plainly that this staircase gave directly on the kitchen, always a well-occupied place in a house of many servants.

Retracing his steps, he sought for another staircase and finally found it nearer the front part of the house. Up
this he went. About halfway up, he came to a sudden halt and peered down in the semidarkness to see what it was that lay before him, sagging across the steps. It was the body of another dead man.

Like the first one, it was still warm and still limp, and like the first, its neck was horribly gashed so that the head was nearly severed. Nelson shivered in spite of himself at the sight, but he could not afford to go to pieces. He overcame his feelings enough to search this man for weapons.

This time he was more successful, for he found an automatic pistol tucked into the belt of the dead man, a German Luger of approximately .38 caliber, and, best of all, with a fully loaded clip of seven cartridges.

It was surprising to Nelson himself to feel the new access of confidence that came to him as he felt the chill of the pistol in his hand. The body of the dead Chinaman he pushed and shoved to one side, to enable him to pass by on the narrow stairway. It was a little harrowing, this finding his road cluttered with dead men, both obviously murdered within the last few minutes. He wondered if it might be some sort of punishment inflicted by the leader of this band of Chinese or whether there were dissensions within the band that had led to so much bloodletting.

In any case, it was a gruesome prelude to his own attempt to penetrate into this sinister place and he sought to cast aside the feeling of disgust it caused him as he went on up the stairs.

The door at the top yielded to his efforts, and he gazed through the crack at a dimly lighted hallway—evidently the main entrance hall of this large country house. The entrance to the cellar stairway came out directly under the grand staircase, as nearly as he could judge.

Across from him was the entrance to what seemed to be the main drawing-room. It was in darkness, but he could see the furniture shrouded in summer coverings, looming vaguely white in the gloom.

Widening the crack of the door still farther, he saw beyond that the main entrance. For a moment he thought there was no one there until he saw the tiny glow of a small Chinese pipe and made out the dim outline of a man standing on guard there. The fellow's back was to him and he stared outward through the heavy glass panes that bordered the doorway.

Lower down in the hallway was the entrance to a second drawing-room, this one lighted up, and beyond that what was evidently a dining room. After listening for a moment, Nelson stepped forth from his hiding place. Once out from under the staircase he found the hallway carpeted with a soft rich Oriental carpet into which his feet sank noiselessly.

The bottom of the main staircase lay to the front of the hallway just in rear of the sentry at the door. It was up this staircase he must go to explore the upper floors, and he moved quietly nearer and nearer the sentry. The man continued to gaze out of the house down the driveway.

At last Nelson reached the foot of the staircase and turned to climb its broad steps. Then suddenly he ducked back.

Men were descending the staircase—two or three judging by the voices. In a second, they would round the turn above and see him. Behind him was a doorway leading to the library. Into this he backed, quickly casting an anxious eye on the sentry at the main door not six feet away.

The voices on the stairway came nearer. They paused a second outside the door of the library. One man went on down the hallway. The other two turned into the library.
CHAPTER VIII.

THE GRAY SHADOW OF EVIL.

NELSON receded before their advance like the shadow before the oncoming lights of a car. Luckily for him, the library was in almost complete darkness, and he just had time to efface himself behind a carved-wood screen when the lights were switched on, disclosing a large room lined with bookshelves halfway to the ceiling.

The floor was covered with deep soft rugs. Highly polished brass tongs and fire set gleamed from beside the fireplace, and great leather-covered easy-chairs gave an air of comfort and peace to the room.

One of the men who came into the room was the tall Chinaman whom Nelson had seen arriving in the black limousine with Von Holtzendorff.

The second was the man, Stucchi, his cheek and chin still disfigured by the glancing blow that Nelson had administered.

The Chinaman, whose garments were fashioned of richer material than those worn by the other members of this band, strode across the room to the fireplace, above which he hit a vase and set it aside and pressed some spring in the wall.

A small panel opened outward, disclosing a wall safe set behind it. The Chinese twirled the knob a bit backward and forward several times; the door of the wall safe clicked and slowly swung open.

From its dark interior the yellow man drew forth a square package, not much larger than a dinner plate, carefully wrapped in white silk and bound about with a green silk cord from which hung two pendants of green jade in which were inlaid some Chinese letters in crimson.

The sallow-faced Stucchi stood there respectfully, as the Chinaman carefully placed the package on the center table and started to undo the cord.

From the reverence with which the Chinese handled this package, Nelson, watching through the crack of the carved screen, reasoned that it must be something of exceeding value and waited with interest and curiosity to see what it might be.

Another Chinese entered at that moment, bowed and said something in a low tone to the man with the package. He nodded briefly, retied the silken thongs, and hurriedly carried it toward the wall safe again.

Just then the insistent notes of a silver gong echoed musically through the house.

"The master is in a hurry," said the tall Chinaman. "You will see it later."

So saying, he placed the silken-wrapped package within the wall safe, pushed the door to, hastily closed the outer panel and, nodding to Stucchi to follow, hurried out of the library and up the stairs.

As Stucchi went out of the door, he switched off the lights as a well-trained butler should do.

Nelson had noticed that the tall Chinese had only pushed the door of the safe closed; he had not heard the click of the lock.

Being not only curious to see this object which was handled with such evident respect, but being also hopeful that it might be something that would give him a clue to the activities of these people. Nelson wasted no time in hurrying across the room and opening the wall panel.

As he had foreseen, the door of the safe had not been locked, but had only been partially closed, and it opened easily to his hand. His fingers closed on the silken covering of the package, and he hastily withdrew it, hurrying back to his hiding place.

Here he unbound the silken cord, unwrapped the silken covering, and felt
his fingers resting against a square of smooth, hard, heavily carved wood, which formed a sort of frame and background to a centerpiece composed of some hard minutely carved substance which to his experienced finger tips had all the smooth coolness of jade.

As his eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom of the room, he began dimly to see the outlines of this centerpiece of the carving.

It was vaguely familiar, but so poor was the light that he could not make it out.

A faint glow shone in the doorway from the hall beyond, and he stepped from behind the screen with the intention of examining the object in his hands nearer the doorway. But he only made one step forward into the room before he silently withdrew again into the shadows.

For a vague form had flitted as noiselessly as a bat through the open doorway. From his vantage point, he watched as the figure went unerringly as an arrow to the wall safe.

In the silence he heard the click of the panel, followed in a second by a faint gasp of surprise.

The figure stood there undecided for a moment, while Nelson scarcely dared to breathe. Then, as noiselessly as it had come, it departed again, disappearing like a shadow through the open doorway.

After waiting a moment or two to forestall the possible return of the mysterious visitor, Nelson again went forth, more determined than ever to discover what is was that so strongly affected these various people. He edged carefully along the sides of the room until just within the inside of the doorway where the light shone faintly from beyond.

Holding the plaque as closely as he dared to the doorway, he peered at it in growing amazement.

It was a green jade dragon, beautifully and wonderfully carved at the hands of some long-dead master carver, so long dead that the tiny ideograph of the artist showed it to have been made in a period long antedating the Ming dynasty. But the carving was incomplete. The dragon lacked two of its seven-clawed feet.

In his interest and excitement he had forgotten the hallway behind him, but was suddenly made aware of it by some sixth sense which warned him of danger. He turned and gazed out into the dimly lighted hall and then crowded back within the door.

He had just been in time to see what seemed to be that same flitting shadow of a few moments ago, stealing along the hallway toward the sentry who still faced outward, gazing down the driveway.

The sentry stirred and shifted his position. The shadowy figure in the hallway behind him froze into immobility. When all seemed quiet, the figure resumed its approach, creeping forward as relentless as fate itself.

It was then that Nelson noticed a tiny ripple and flash of light on cold steel and held his breath at the immensity of the tragedy about to take place so short a distance away from him.

Nearer and nearer crept the sinister gray shadow until now it was almost within striking distance.

Again the sentry stirred, clearing his throat this time and hunching his shoulders as though at some unconscious warning of the fate about to be dealt him.

As the sentry resumed the statuesque pose again, the slow, stealthy advance of the shadowy assassin recommenced. So fearful was the suspense that to Nelson's overwrought nerves it seemed hours before the man raised his arm, ready to strike.

Nelson's instinct was to cry out, to
warn the defenseless sentry, to avert this death hovering above him, but some paralysis of will held him in its grip until he was like a man in a dream, provided with ability to see and comprehend but unable to lift leaden arms or legs, or to cry out. The matter was suddenly taken out of his hands. There was a confused blur as the shadowy figure leaped, a slight thud, a moaning sort of gurgle from the sentry, and the man toppled slowly to the floor. The assassin fled away as quickly as he had come.

The full realization of what had happened did not dawn upon Nelson until he actually saw the sentry fall, for the whole affair took place too quickly and seemed too dreamlike and fantastic to be real. But mixed with his regret at not having prevented the killing even at the risk of his own life, came an active fear of the consequences to him when the body should be discovered.

It would undoubtedly mean that a close search would be made of every inch of the house and that he would be discovered before he had a chance to rescue Sigrid.

With Nelson, to think was to act. Placing the plaque containing the jade dragon carefully against the wall, he hurried into the hallway. No one seemingly had noticed the murder of the sentry.

Grasping the man’s body by his shoulders, he dragged it into the library, pushed the screen aside, and placed the body against the wall. Replacing the screen, he betook himself of the dragon and sought it out, looking about for a place to hide it.

That old saying that the darkest place is just under the light suggested itself to his mind. There was a bookcase filled with heavy volumes next to the fireplace. He quickly pulled out two or three of these books, placed the plaque in rear of them, and returned them to their place.

Another thought struck him as he finished his task. The absence of the sentry would be noted. From above stairs he heard the sound of voices again. The sentry was very much his own height and build.

Seizing the man’s cloth cap, he ran to the door and placed himself in position, leaning against the door jamb and staring out down the driveway in the same attitude as that of the unfortunate sentry.

He was not a second too soon. Three men rounded the staircase and came on down.

CHAPTER IX. INSIDE THE LOCKED ROOM.

Nearer and nearer came the men. As nearly as he could determine from their voices, they were the tall Chinaman who had been in the library before, the sallow-faced Stucchi, and a third Chinese who had a singularly rich and mellow voice.

Not daring to look around, Nelson strained every faculty to hear what they were saying. It came over him suddenly that if they found the safe rifled of its jade dragon, the first person they would question would be the sentry at the door, and he was in momentary danger of discovery.

The three men were now at the foot of the stairs, not ten feet behind him. It took all his will power to remain with his back to them, lounging in careless fashion against the door jamb.

As they reached the bottom of the steps, they paused for a few seconds. That short pause seemed like an eternity to Nelson, not knowing when a knife or bullet or a blackjack would strike him from the rear. But eventually the three turned into the library.

It was only a matter of seconds now until they should discover the loss of the green jade dragon. If he were to move at all, he must move quickly and get away from that dangerous neigh-
hood. The voices came from within
the library and he could hear them
slowly moving toward the far end where
stood the fireplace.

He turned, preparatory to moving up
the main stairway.

Then he instantly froze again into
immobility.

Two more Chinese were coming along
the hall toward him. Dim as the light
was, they could still pick out the out-
line of his form.

They were almost upon him now. He
drew his cap down low over his eyes
and yawned and stretched in bored
fashion. One of the Chinese went on
up the stairs, the other one stopped
near him.

"Go eat your rice," said this man,
speaking with a strong Yunnanese
dialect. "I will take your place while
you fill your belly."

Nelson blessed the days that he had
spent in Yunnan.

"Good," he grunted in Chinese, and
stretching in such fashion that his arms
would conceal his face, he turned away
and moved down the hallway.

The man who had relieved him from
his post took up his position, staring
down the driveway without noticing
anything amiss.

Nelson kept on his way down the hall-
way, his ears strained to hear the first
shout of warning from within the li-
brary when the theft of the jade plaque
should be discovered.

Ahead of him lay the entrance to
the second drawing-room, casting a
broad pool of light across the hallway,
a pool of light through which he must
pass.

He hesitated a moment at the edge
of it, then boldly walked through, know-
ing full well that any eye that might
happen to rest on him during those few
seconds would most certainly recognize
him as a white man, and an interloper
in that place. As he arrived at the com-
parative darkness on the far side, there
fell upon his ears the sound he had been
dreading.

A shout came from behind him—
from out of the library.

W
O
TH
OUT increasing his pace
in the slightest, he kept on
his way, trusting to find a
rear staircase somewhere before the
alarm could be raised. He heard the
sound of running footsteps behind him,
but did not glance back. He drew
forth the Luger automatic he had taken
from the dead man's clothes and car-
ried it within the palm of his hand,
ready for any chance interference that
he should meet.

The shouts from the front of the
house stirred up an echo from the direc-
tion in which he was going. Suddenly
the harsh notes of a rapidly beaten gong
rang through the building. Nelson hur-
rried his steps down the corridor that
led to the kitchen, reaching across hall
just as the door at the farther end
opened.

He ducked into this as several Chi-
inese, their powerful figures showing in
strong relief against the lights in the
kitchen, came hurrying along the cor-
ridor.

Luck was with him. The hallway
led to a servants' staircase, up which he
hurried. He had almost reached the
top when he paused a second to listen
to the commotion below.

The whole house was in a turmoil,
filled with purposeless shouting and ac-
tivity which he well knew would settle
down in another few minutes into an
organized and relentless hunt for the
despoiler of the wall safe and the mur-
derer of the sentinel.

Opening the door at the top of the
stairs, he looked along the upper hall-
way seeing no one but one man, a
Chinaman who was leaning over the
balustrade at the far end, peering down
at the excitement below.

This man carried a ring with several
keys upon it and was armed with a heavy pistol. His back was toward the rear of the house, and Nelson crept along the hallway toward him. He was determined to get the keys at any cost, certain that among them was the key to the room in which Sigrid von Holtzendorff was imprisoned, if she were in the house at all.

The man was deeply interested in the sight below and did not look around until Nelson was almost upon him. Some slight noise or some instinctive danger made him turn at that moment, only to find Nelson's hand at his throat, and to receive a blow from the pistol butt over the head. But the Chinaman turned so quickly that the blow only glanced off.

The man was a powerfully built fellow. His first rush bore Nelson backward until the white man drew back his arm and let drive a powerful blow that had all the kick of a mule's hind leg.

This staggered the Chinese, who belonged to a race unused to fists, but he continued to struggle, forgetting to cry out in his grim determination to overcome the man before him.

Nelson stepped backward a pace, crouching low, his arms and hands weaving back and forth. The big Chinese rushed like an impetuous bull. Nelson side-stepped neatly and drove a terrific right at the fellow's head as he went by. It caught him above the ear and staggered him. Following up, Nelson let drive his left, full and true with the whole weight of his body behind it, powerful waist and shoulders and back centering in a clean jolt to the point of the jaw.

The big yellow man stumbled in midcareer and fell in a heap without a sound.

Nelson blew on his knuckles reflectively, then reached down and pulled the bunch of keys from the limp fingers of the unconscious man.

The hue and cry was in full swing on the floor below. It would be only a matter of seconds until the search would extend itself to the upper floor. He must work fast.

Studying the keys in his hand, he looked up and down the corridor. From where he stood, he could see at least ten doors, and he had little time to waste.

Reasoning that the Chinese was probably guarding the very door he sought and that he would probably not have moved too far from his post, he hurried to the door nearest the top of the staircase and tried the handle.

It opened to his touch, and he peered inside. It was dark. Finding the wall switch, he turned on the light only to find that this bedroom was vacant, with the bed undisturbed. He tried the next door and the next with similar results, listening between time to the racket coming from below stairs.

It was not until he came to the fourth door from the staircase that he found the locked room for which he sought. He tried one key and then another without success.

As he inserted the third key, he heard the clamor below stairs increase, and the sound of men hurrying up the broad staircase.

This key did not fit. Feverishly he tried the next with no better results. The oncoming group of searchers were now up to the first landing. He tried another key and suddenly the lock clicked beneath his hands. He flung open the door.

Standing in the middle of the room, a dressing gown clutched about her—her face pale with fright stood Sigrid von Holtzendorff.

For one second they faced each other. In that second the girl's terror-stricken look changed to one of dawning recognition. Nelson made a warning gesture to her and
turned abruptly, rushing out to where
the still-unconscious form of the Chi-
inese guard lay sprawled, two or three
yards from the door. He could see the
tops of the heads of the men coming
up the stairs and crouched low as he
jerked the body of the sentry inside
the door.

Closing the door, he quickly locked
it. Then he turned to face the girl.
She gazed at him in bewilderment,
shifted her gaze to the unconscious
Chinaman, then back to Nelson again,
as if asking what had happened.

Pressing his fingers to his lips as a
warning for silence, he turned and lis-
tened intently as the sound of the chase
grew louder in the hallway outside
the door.

Turning, he glanced about the room
seeking for some place to conceal the
Chinese, who was beginning to show
signs of returning consciousness. Hang-
ing against the wall was a sport coat
with a cloth belt. He jerked this belt
out and bound the man’s hands, then
reached for his own handkerchief and
rolled it into a gag, looking about for
some other cord to tie it in place.

The girl sensed his need and swiftly
pulled the silken cord from the waist
of her dressing gown and handed it to
him. He nodded gratefully and com-
pleted the gagging of the man, pausing
occasionally to listen to the sounds from
outside.

There were two clothes closets in the
room. Into the nearest of these, the
one next the door, he dragged the Chi-
inese, rolling him against the wall and
throwing over him some folded curt-
tains and couch covers which were
stacked up on the floor.

The girl came with an armful of
silken-covered pillows and added to the
pile of things. He smiled gratefully
at her.

As they stood there, breathing hard
with the excitement, there came a thun-
derous rapping upon the door.

CHAPTER X.

THE TRAP.

The clamor outside the door in-
creased in volume as they stood
there, the girl’s eyes staring in
frightened questioning at Nelson, who
whispered: “Go to the door, ask them
what they want and tell them that you
have no key.”

The girl nodded soberly, and, draw-
ing her robe about her, went toward
the door. She waited there until the
noise died down a little. A voice could
be heard outside speaking in English,
demanding admission. It was the voice
of Stucchi, the sallow-faced white man.

Nelson stood close beside her, his
pistol in hand. The girl looked up at
him confidently, then faced the door.

“What do you want?” she called, and
the notes of her clear contralto voice
stilled the clamor outside as if by magic.

Stucchi’s voice called out roughly:
“Open that door and let us in!”

“How can I open the door when it
is locked from the outside?” she called.
“And I have no key.”

A silence fell upon the group in the
hallway as Stucchi saw the reason in
this state of affairs. He said some-
thing in Chinese to the men about him,
and a babble of talk broke forth.

The two inside the door listened
breathlessly to the noise. Nelson could
hear some of them demanding that the
doors be broken down, while other voices
advised leaving the girl alone as it was
certain the man with the keys could be
found very shortly and they could then
search the room.

To Nelson’s heartfelt relief this ad-
vice finally prevailed, and with much
babbling and Chinese chatter, the group
moved away and down the hall, search-
ing elsewhere.

The girl started to say something,
and again Nelson cautioned silence,
fearing that some listener might have
been left on watch.
From the closet in which he had shoved the unconscious sentry, came the noise as of a pig rooting in clover, and Nelson opened the door to find the pile of curtains and cushions heaving with the struggles of the bound man attempting to free himself.

Nelson shook his head over this sight, realizing how futile it would be to attempt concealment, should the Chingamen decide to enter the room. He closed the closet door again and stepped noiselessly toward the window.

Once arrived there, he motioned the girl to turn out the light, which she did quickly, and he raised the curtain and looked out. But the window was high above the ground, and there was no escape from it without a ladder. He lowered the curtain again and called in a low tone through the darkness of the room.

"Get your clothes on," he ordered, "and I'll get you out of here."

"Very well," her voice came in a whisper from near by, and he heard her moving around in the darkness, collecting her wearing apparel.

From his post by the window, he could hear a careful search being made of the grounds. A faint murmur, as of many men talking together, came from below stairs and he listened apprehensively, fearing that the Chinese would return before he and the girl could make their way out of the room.

It did not seem more than two or three minutes before Sigrid turned the light on again and stood before him, clad in the dress she had worn at the Green Dragon Restaurant the first time he had seen her.

The admiration in his eyes must have been poorly concealed, for a faint color stole into her cheeks, and she dropped her eyes, not looking displeased, however. He strode toward the door and crouching, stared out through the keyhole.

He could see nothing but the balustrades of the staircase well, nor could he hear a sound directly outside—not thing but the distant voices of the searching party, which seemed now to come from the attic above.

Remembering the key he had used, he placed it in the lock and turned it.

In spite of all his precaution, the mechanism clicked as it disengaged, and the two stood breathless, wondering if the sound had been heard and what the reaction would be. They waited a minute or so, and, as all seemed as quiet as before, Nelson, his pistol in his left hand, slowly and cautiously turned the knob of the door, opening it with infinite care until the crack was wide enough for him to get a restricted view of the hallway.

There seemed no one in sight. Widening the opening still more, he brought more of the hall within range of his eyesight and becoming emboldened by the continued silence, he opened the door several inches and gazed out. He could hear men all over the house, but there was no one on this upper landing.

BECKONING the girl to follow, he stepped out into the hall. She pressed closely behind him, but came to a stop in the doorway. As he started down the hall, he looked back and saw that she was not following. He pointed to the door which gave upon the servants' stairway in the rear and motioned to her to hurry, as he was anxious to cross that length of hall before some wandering Chinese should stumble upon them and give the alarm. But she shook her head, and he hastily retraced his steps.

"Hurry!" he whispered tensely. "Our only chance is to get out of here before they return!"

"My father!" she whispered, her eyes concerned and full of worry.

"Where is he?" he asked, remembering her father for the first time in many minutes.
She shook her head. “I don’t know. “I think he’s in the house somewhere.”
“But it is better that we get out and bring help to rescue him than to remain here and all be helpless,” he explained, listening anxiously as he heard voices in the lower hallway at the foot of the stairs. Evidently she saw the reasoning in this, for she nodded and moved out.

Grasping her hand, he ran the length of the hall to the door which gave upon the servants’ staircase. Opening this, he pulled her along behind him and descended the steps quietly, his pistol ready to clear the way should they be halted. They arrived in the small hall below without seeing any one, and motioning her to remain at the foot of the staircase, he moved forward to the main hallway and gazed up and down its length.

The way was clear and he turned and beckoned to her, only to find her shrinking back against the wall, face upturned toward the stairway. He hurried to her side.

There was no need to question her because he heard the soft padding of felt-slippered feet coming down from above.

Waving her back, he took up a position against the wall at the foot of the stairs and waited. Nearer and nearer came the slow shuffling steps until a blue-clad Chinese stepped into the hallway.

With his pistol grasped by the muzzle, Nelson lunged forward and crashed it against the side of the man’s head. The Chinese flung out his hands and staggered forward, then pitched onto his face.

Turning, Nelson saw the girl half leaning against the wall, her hands covering her eyes. There was no time to comfort her. Gently seizing her by the elbow, he directed her along the corridor until they came to the rear hallway which led to the kitchen.

There were several ways now open to him—either to go out the front door or the kitchen door or to attempt to make his way out the way he had entered through the cellar.

From where he stood, he could hear the sound of voices at the front of the house, and he quickly gave up any idea of going in that direction.

There still remained the kitchen way, either out the rear door or through the cellar, for there seemed to be no one about at that end of the house.

Little time could be spent in making up one’s mind, and he moved toward the kitchen, his arm through her girl’s and his pistol in his right hand. There was a glass pane set in the kitchen door to facilitate the entrance and exit of tray-laden servants, and through this he gazed into the large kitchen.

There was no one in sight, except a very fat Chinese who lay stretched out on a bench with an opium pipe in his mouth. Even from where he stood, Nelson could see that the fellow was half stupid with the fumes of the narcotic, and he boldly pushed open the door, leading the girl in after him.

The Chinese looked up at them dully, then closed his eyes. To the left of the kitchen entrance along the wall was another door which, Nelson knew, led to the cellar. On the far side of the kitchen was the door leading out to a screened-in porch which housed a large refrigerator.

Just as he started for this rear door, Nelson heard voices and the scuffle of feet on the gravel outside. Hurrying the girl with him, he strode rapidly to the cellar door, opened it, went through and pulled her along, closing the door behind him.

The cellar was dark beneath them, without even the light before the furnace showing. They made their way cautiously down the stairs, stopping to listen every few steps.

All was silent below them, and pick-
ing his way carefully, he led her through the darkness toward the outside door by which he had entered the house.

When he came to approximately the place where he had seen the body of the first dead Chinese, he slowed up and carefully skirted around this point, reaching out cautiously with his foot to avoid stumbling over the gruesome object. He failed to find the body in the darkness. It had been removed since his arrival. A vague sense of foreboding assailed him, but he went ahead, nevertheless. Opening the outer door, he peered into the darkness, but could see nothing. The coast seemed to be clear, and he stepped out first, closely followed by the girl.

Suddenly the cold muzzle of a gun was jabbed into this face.

"Here he is!" cried an exultant voice in English.

It was Stucchi. Behind him several Chinese were massed.

CHAPTER XI.

CHIN LUNG TREATENS.

That cold muzzle shoved so rudely in his face had a peculiar effect upon Nelson. There were certain types of men, essentially of a peaceful and friendly nature, who are slow to rouse to anger. Nelson was of that temperament. Verbal insults and unpleasantness had little effect upon him, save to make him vaguely uncomfortable and unhappy. But let some one strike the first blow and he was immediately aroused to a frenzy of rage.

And the jabbing of that gun in his face had all the effect of a blow. It filled him with a sudden, red, insensate anger.

With no thought of the danger involved, his first motion was an instinctive upward jerk of his arm, which shoved the rifle barrel above his head.

There was the flash and roar of an explosion, the bullet shattered against the stone wall of the house, knocking down chips of stone and mortar in a tiny shower.

With a powerful heave, Nelson jerked the rifle from the hands of the man holding it. Swinging it around his head, he brought the butt down like a club in a smashing blow at his attacker. Stucchi screamed in pain and stumbled backward.

"Get back in the cellar!" Nelson hissed at the girl behind him, and she obeyed quickly, as he faced the oncoming rush of the Chinese massed behind Stucchi.

Swinging the rifle by its muzzle he drove at them, smashing vengefully. They gave back against this terrific onslaught, pressing around like a pack of wolves.

"Kill him!" Stucchi's voice called, in Chinese, and in the second's huzz Nelson heard another voice answer from the rear of the crowd.

"Fang Gow commands that he be not killed!" said the voice.

So intent was Nelson on the enemies in front of him that he did not notice the kitchen window above him and had no warning of danger in his rear until a sudden heavy weight descended with crushing force on his head, bearing him to the ground.

He felt as though he were falling—falling through illimitable depths—and knew no more.

The next thing he knew, he seemed to be struggling upward through black engulfing seas toward some distant light that became for the time being the goal of all his desires. As he struggled, the light grew gradually brighter and assumed shape and form. It was as though he were being raised on the crests of great waves and dropping down into their troughs, but each succeeding wave carried him nearer and nearer his goal.

At last he seemed to reach smoother
water and found himself staring curiously at an electric light bulb set in a wall bracket above his head. He tried to puzzle this out and to figure where he was and what had happened, but the effort was too great and he closed his eyes again. He quickly opened them, however, for he began to feel a return of that sinking sensation.

This time he saw a little more clearly and began to understand that he was in a small bedroom, sparsely furnished with a table and chair and washstand. He himself was stretched flat upon his back on a narrow cot.

He attempted to raise his head, but this resulted in such dizziness and nausea that he gave up the attempt for the moment. He tried to think back and reason out how he happened to be in this situation, but as is usual in such cases, he could not remember at first the events directly leading up to his being there.

As his brain began to function, more and more of the truth forced itself upon him until he realized that he must be a prisoner of the Chinese, and began actively to worry over the safety of the girl whom he had last seen, a dim shadow behind him, as she obeyed his instructions to retire into the shelter of the cellar.

What had happened to knock him out so completely he did not know. Lifting his arms with some effort, he felt himself, touching a large swelling on his head and finding the effort exceedingly painful.

By the exercise of his will power, he managed to raise himself to a sitting posture and placed his feet on the floor, a floor which rolled like the deck of a ship in a heavy sea.

As the floor began to steady down, he tried to rise and finally stood upright after one or two attempts.

Once he recovered a little of his control, he staggered toward the door and tried the knob. The door was locked from the outside, with the key remaining in the keyhole.

Another staggering progress across the room brought him to the window through which he looked. He found himself staring down into the grounds and garden of the country house by the shore. He was confined in what was evidently one of the servants' rooms in the attic.

It was not until then that he noticed that his gold ring with its jade setting of the seven-clawed dragon's foot was gone from his finger. He turned from the window when his ear detected the sound of padding footsteps at the door, and he watched as the key was turned, and the door slowly opened.

A tall Chinaman, one of the men who had been a waiter at the Green Dragon Restaurant, stepped into the room and beckoned to him, pointing to the door, with a heavy Luger pistol in his hand. Outside the door stood three more of the Chinese, each equally heavily armed.

The Chinese kept a respectful distance about him as he obeyed. The man in front led the way, and two others brought up the rear as they went down a narrow dusty staircase to the second floor. He glanced at the door of the room from which he had rescued the girl. It was closed and an armed Chinese stood before it. Sigrid von Holtzendorff was evidently a prisoner again, he reasoned dully, and wondered where they were keeping her father and what had become of him.

His captors led him down the broad staircase, and he noted that there were now two sentries before the front door.

Passing by these two, he was led along the main hallway until he arrived at the second drawing-room. Here he blinked his eyes a little at the interior of this room.

It might have been the room of a wealthy mandarin in Peking or Canton.
Although it was in the early hours of the morning, and the sun was up, the room was in darkness, save for the light cast from two intricately carved silver lamps, which burned some aromatic oil.

The light from these gleamed in the polished blackness of the floor, which mirrored as from deep water the darkness of black, carved furniture, the sheen of embroidered silk hangings, the cool translucence of carved jade, and the dull gleam of massive silver.

A heavy teakwood chair, writhing with carved dragons, occupied the space between the two windows. To one side of this was an ivory inlaid table before which in a smaller chair sat the tall Chinaman whom Nelson had seen with Shucchi in the library.

This man looked up impassively as the white man entered. The guards grouped themselves about the door, their hands on their pistols.

Nelson was of no mind to stand while this man sat, and calmly pulled a chair up and sat down.

"Well, Mr. Nelson, here we meet again," said the Chinaman in excellent English.

"This makes about the third time that our trails have crossed, Chin Lung," answered Nelson easily.

"We—ah—seem to have a habit of working in opposing camps," said Chin Lung blandly.

"Don't we, though!" agreed Nelson, his voice pleasant.

"When are you going to cease fighting us and join our forces? You know the reward that awaits you," the Chinaman said gravely.

Nelson laughed. "When you and your gang learn to play a straight game, Chin Lung, I'll join you. But that means never," he answered.

The face of the Chinaman did not change expression in the slightest, but his eyes grew hard. "There are ways of securing your cooperation," he said, his voice containing a subtle threat. "And you know from previous experience that Fang Gow is not a man to stand trifling."

Nelson stared into the eyes of the Chinaman. There was something hard and compelling about his glance.

"And Fang Gow knows from previous experience with me that I am not to be trifled with," he retorted, a steely tinkle in his voice, like the clink of a knife edge against glass. Then he smiled. "I notice your people went to the trouble of taking my ring."

A shadow of anger passed across the face of the Chinese. "It was only a copy," he growled.

"You don't suppose I would be fool enough to carry the original around with me, do you?" grinned Nelson.

The eyes of Chin Lung glittered angrily. He rose from his chair.

"I can see that you will not listen to reason." His voice was angry. "There is only one thing to do, and that is to turn you over to the tender mercies of Fang Gow, and may whatever gods you worship have mercy upon you." So saying, he called to the Chinese guards in the doorway: "Tell the honorable master that we respectfully await his presence," he directed.

One of the Chinese guards detached himself from the group and padded silently away.

They sat there, those two—the impassive Chinese and the indifferent American—waiting for the presence of the leader of silent men. Slow minutes dragged by, and Nelson studied the room about him indifferently, noting in passing the exceeding beauty of a carved red lacquer screen, and the exquisite perfection of detail on some sculptured silver cranes that guarded the door on either side, as well as the profusion of carved ivory which decorated the room.

In the silence he heard men approaching from the staircase with one or two subdued voices speaking in mandarin.
Above them came another voice, the deep rich, vibrant tones of that same voice he had heard while masquerading as sentry, and the three men passed into the library.

Nearer and nearer came the expected additions to the party. They were almost at the door, and Nelson looked up to watch their entry when some one called from the direction of the main entrance.

At the same instant a shout from some one out in the grounds came through the closed curtain of the windows. A shot followed hard upon this, succeeded in quick succession by the short cracks of several explosions.

From somewhere in the house that silver gong commenced its insistent warning note, and there was a quick rush of feet and the scurrying of many men outside.

"It looks as if the house is pinched," remarked Nelson calmly, as Chin Lung rose and strode to the door with a dry whir of his silken robes.

CHAPTER XII.
THE ULTIMATUM.

The guards at the door parted to allow Chin Lung to pass through and closed in again, some of them watching the white man and the others craning their necks down the hallway, where the excitement was momentarily increasing.

The shooting had stopped, but there was some sort of commotion going on outside, with a babble of many voices, punctured by an occasional shout.

The guards glanced at the white man, keeping him under their view as he started to pace back and forth across the floor. His pacing seemed purposeless enough, but had they observed closely, they might have seen that once on the far side of the room he shortened the orbit of his movement.

Had they observed still more closely they would have seen him pause more and more frequently by a small black teakwood stand set against the wall.

He stopped before this once, his hands behind him and stared absently at the guards, his gaze blank and unseeing. But his body screened the activities of his hands which hadswiftly reached down and disengaged a telephone receiver from its hook.

The guards gazed at him curiously as this strange white man began to walk back and forth again, talking aloud to himself. Again he passed the small stand and came to a stop, kneeling down and tying his shoe lace, still talking to himself in the incomprehensible language of these foreign devils.

To all outward seeming he was cursing at a refractory shoe lace, talking to it as though it was possessed of understanding. In the meantime his ears were keyed to a faint sound from the telephone.

"Hello, hello! Number please!" The faint sound came from the receiver.

Nelson was leaning over, his head not ten inches from the transmitter.

"Hello!" he said to his shoe lace. "For Heaven's sake, send police to this number. Hurry!"

"Hello, hello!" came the faint buzzing from the receiver. "Who are you?"

"Use your head, woman," he said to the shoe lace. "This is John Nelson speaking. Notify Lieutenant Casey, New York police headquarters, and send State policemen here—quick! Plenty of them."

"I've got you," came the faint buzzing from the receiver, followed by a faint click.

The shoe lace, at last tied, Nelson rose, strode back and forth once or twice and again, stopped in front of the black teakwood stand.

In a second the receiver was back on the hook and he resumed his striding back and forth just as Chin Lung reappeared in the doorway.
The tall Chinese said something to the guards. They beckoned to Nelson and he came toward them. Once in the hallway he saw signs of much activity. Men were hurrying with set and tense faces, busy at preparations for emergency.

Everything gave evidence of some grave danger facing these people. His guards stared about them anxiously as Chin Lung hurried to the front door and spoke to some one. The clamor died down and was succeeded by a tense stillness as the greater part of the men disappeared from the house.

Whatever was taking place in the grounds was taking place silently, and Nelson could not even gather from any remarks made by the guards what it was all about.

Soon Chin Lung returned, his bearing much calmer, and waved Nelson back into the drawing-room with its Oriental furnishings. The guards regrouped themselves about the door. The house resumed its habitual air of calm.

Chin Lung again took his seat at the table and drummed idly on its smooth surface with his long finger nails, as though waiting for some one. Soon there was a step in the outer hallway and two guards, one on either side, brought another white man to the door.

It was the black-bearded, powerful-shouldered Von Holtzendorff, his hands still fastened behind him with the handcuffs. He was ushered in and strode to the center of the room, nodding briefly at Nelson and staring at Chin Lung.

"Now that you two gentlemen are here, I wish to announce the decision of my master, Fang Gow." The Chinaman glanced at a jeweled wrist watch he carried. "It is now eight o'clock. My honorable master has graciously agreed to give you two gentlemen until ten o'clock to come to reason."

Nelson's eyes flickered for a moment to the telephone on the opposite side of the room and returned to stare quizzically at Chin Lung.

"Don't be silly, Chin Lung," he said, smiling.

Von Holtzendorff said only one word. "Swine!" It sounded like the report of a gun, the way he said it.

The Chinaman gazed at the two with impassive face. "But wait a moment, gentlemen," he went on suavely. "You have not heard the penalty. Under the circumstances my master is inclined to be a little brusque in his methods, and the innocent must suffer as well as the guilty. I regret to state that at ten o'clock sharp, Miss von Holtzendorff will be brought in to you—but she will not be alive." The Chinaman drummed idly on the table, inquisitive and aloof as though the matter were of no immediate interest to him.

The two white men glanced at each other, their faces set. Before they had a chance to say anything the sound of the silver gong broke on their ears. A man came to the door and entered, hurrying across the room to whisper something in Chin Lung's ear.

He rose quietly and beckoned the guards.

"You will have an opportunity to think this over for a short while," he said and gave some orders to the guards.

The two white men were taken out into the hall and led down the cellar steps. Here they were guided across the cellar to that room in which Nelson had seen the shelves heavily laden with empty glass jars. A section of these shelves opened outward on hinges, disclosing a low-arched passageway down which passed a short flight at stone steps. Behind them crowded ten or twelve of the Chinese, and Nelson reasoned that the upper floor and grounds must be nearly deserted.

His reasoning was correct, for at that moment a lone motor-cycle policeman
was knocking stridently at the main gate, demanding admission. He had been sent out in response to a call from the telephone bureau.

The gate was opened for him by a Chinese gardener in blue dungaree and straw hat, who still carried a spade with fresh loam upon it. The Chinaman couldn't speak much English, but waved the State trooper up to the house, where a butler in white coat came to the door, his face bound up in bandages, but otherwise seemingly a perfectly normal butler.

"What's going on here, anyways?" asked the policeman a trifle uncertainly, for, after all, this was a rich-looking estate and not the sort of place where one would expect the intercession of the police. The butler, no other than Stucchi, was very frankly surprised, but when informed of a telephone message, shook his head deprecatingly.

"It's just a prank of a couple of the young men home from college," he stated. "They're always up to something. Course I understand you haven't a search warrant, but you can come in and look around if you like."

To satisfy himself the policeman came inside the door and looked around, seeing nothing but a beautifully furnished home and a Chinese servant down on his knees polishing an already well-polished floor in one of the drawing-rooms.

He expressed himself as satisfied, then went out, mounted his motor cycle, and drove away. The gates were closed and locked behind him.

But the telephone girl had not rested content with notifying the nearest State police.

"Who was it, he said to call up? Lieutenant Murphy—some Irish name like that. It must have been Clancy." And she accordingly put through a call for that name. As it happened, there was a Lieutenant Clancy at headquarters whose work threw him into contact with many arson suspects in New York City.

"Who is this guy, Nelson?" he asked roughly over the telephone. "Never heard of him. Tell him to take a running jump at himself," he growled and hung up the receiver, feeling none too well that morning from a variety of reasons that had nothing to do with the arson squad. And that was that.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SEVEN HEAVENLY GATES.

It was damp and dark, and the air was stale in that long underground corridor where Nelson was held with Von Holtzendorff. The two men were separated, each of them being surrounded by a ring of Chinese.

What Von Holtzendorff's thoughts might be Nelson could not imagine, but his own thoughts were seething tumultuously enough to keep him busy. It was a terrible threat that the Chinese had made, and knowing the ruthless determination of this band and their leader, Nelson did not doubt for a second that they would do exactly as they had promised when the time came.

Nelson was certain at first that his telephone message would eventually result in the sending of police, but an element of doubt crept in as he thought it over, for there was only that one telephone girl to act as a not-too-intelligent link with the outside world. But he hoped for the best and in the meantime tried to puzzle out why no mention had been made of the disappearance of the green jade dragon plaque from its hiding place in the wall safe.

He had not been in the underground corridor more than twenty minutes when the door through which they had entered swung slowly open, a voice called some order and the Chinese ringed about the two white men began to hustle them out into the cellar, leading them up the stairs again.
Once arrived on the first floor, most of the Chinese resumed their regular posts of duty, leaving the two white men standing in the hallway outside the second drawing-room with its beautifully carved teakwood furniture.

Chin Lung appeared from somewhere, saying something in a low tone to two of the men, who immediately detached themselves from the group and disappeared toward the front of the house.

In a moment or two they reappeared, half carrying, half dragging the thoroughly terrified Stucchi. He babbled incoherently as he was borne past the group in the hallway and brought in before the ivory-inlaid table where Chin Lung sat awaiting him.

There was an interchange of questions and answers which Nelson at first could not understand until Stucchi's voice quavered in a high falsetto, its terror-stricken notes carrying out through the hallway.

"I tell you I did not take the green jade dragon!" Stucchi wailed.

Nelson heared this with quickened interest, listening tensely to what might follow. It was clear to him now why Chin Lung had mentioned nothing of the theft of the plaque, and it was also clear why he had accused Stucchi of it, for Stucchi was the one man to whom he had shown the parcel and who knew of its hiding place. It was natural that suspicion should fall upon him.

Nelson reflected swiftly that there was one other man who knew, that unknown and mysterious, wraithlike person who had flitted in and sought for the hiding place and had departed unsuccessful, thereafter killing the sentry.

It might possibly be, reasoned Nelson, that this flitting figure was Stucchi, and if so, he felt no qualms of pity for the cowardly and despicable murderer. He turned his attention again to the scene in the room.

Stucchi had fallen upon his knees and was begging for mercy. Chin Lung had risen and was giving an order to the two men who had brought Stucchi to him. They disappeared into the rear of the house somewhere, while Stucchi continued to whine for mercy as Chin Lung stood over him.

The two guards returned, carrying between them a peculiar-shaped bamboo and wire cage of about the length of a man's body. Two other men followed them, each carrying a stack of small steel cages, in each of which was a gaunt, lean and ferocious-looking rat.

EVEN Nelson, accustomed as he was to Chinese horrors, turned a little sick, for he knew what was to be the fate accorded to Stucchi. The punishment of the seven heavenly gates was one of the most terrible of the many ghastly Chinese tortures.

Stucchi screamed and sprang to his feet as the contraption was set on the floor. The two impassive guards quickly seized him however, and opening up the top of the contrivance, threw him inside. The man continued to scream, foaming at the mouth like a maniac, as the impassive guards strapped him in securely and then fixed into place a series of small gates, the first of which fitted over his feet just above the ankles. The second was fitted over his legs halfway to the knee, and so on up to the last, which fitted over his neck.

The seven heavenly gates were in place, dividing his body into eight sections, each section a complete cage. The lean and hungry rats fought and snarled and squealed, their greedy eyes fastened on the man in the cage.

Nelson grew more and more horrified as he watched, knowing full well that the hungry brutes would be turned into the first compartment to commence their feast on the helpless man's feet and ankles, moving forward as the gate was lifted to follow up their work in the second compartment, and so on until the victim's shrieks were stilled.
With all the dislike he felt for Stucchi, Nelson could not stand by and see this horrible cruelty take place. The Chinese guards carried over the rat cages.

One of them leaned down, opened the small door in the first of the cages and dropped the rat in. There was a howl of agony from Stucchi.

"Stop it! Chin Lung, I know where the jade plaque is! Stucchi is blameless!" shouted Nelson, just as the second rat was about to be dropped in.

The tall Chinaman gave an order. One of the guards, his hand covered by a heavy leather gauntlet, reached his arm in and hauled out the rat, cramming it into its cage.

Stucchi continued to scream as Chin Lung beckoned Nelson into the room. He went past the head of the contraption where Stucchi lay and caught a glimpse of the stark terror in the eyes of the man as he stepped up to Chin Lung.

"I took your jade dragon," stated Nelson quietly. "This man is innocent."

Chin Lung's face was impassive as he gave some order to the guards, and Nelson observed something like a look of disappointment on their faces as they opened up the bamboo arrangement, lifted up the seven gates, unbound the man, and lifted the trembling and tottering Stucchi to his feet.

"So?" Chin Lung turned to Nelson, and there was something about the cold beadiness of his eyes that reminded the white man very much of the eyes of the rats, glittering from their steel cages. "So it is you whom we have to thank for the theft of the green jade plaque?"

Nelson noticed that while Stucchi had been taken away, the bamboo contraption had not been removed, nor had the rats been taken out. The men in charge of the whole beastly arrangement waited, squatting on the floor. This in itself was not a comforting sight.

"I told you that I took the green jade dragon," said Nelson steadily. "And I am prepared to return it to you at a price."

The Chinaman looked at him blandly. A glint of a smile passed across his face. It was a cruel sort of smile which passed as quickly as it had come, and his countenance resumed its mask of impassivity.

"It of course remains to be seen whether you are in any position to make terms," he said smoothly. "But go on and let me hear what you have to say."

"I have only this to say, that I can find the jade dragon for you, and I will do so on one condition."

"And what is that?" asked Chin Lung, again flashing that hint of a mocking smile.

But Nelson, paying no attention, went on steadily: "I will give it back to you as soon as Miss von Holtzendorff is released and safely out of here."

"Very noble of you. I am sure, and exceedingly chivalrous," said Chin Lung. His smile was unmistakably mocking now. "As a matter of respect, I will bring your offer to the attention of Fang Gow, my honorable master, but I am quite certain what his answer will be. I will return with it in five minutes." And so saying, he made his way to the door and up the hallway out of sight, leaving Nelson standing there.

One minute after another dragged along. Nelson looked longingly at the small table where the telephone stood, but this time one of the Chinese guards squatted in front of it, and that chance was gone.

Five minutes passed. The rats squealed in their cages. The Chinese guards stared inquisitively at the white man. Then Nelson heard footsteps coming along the hallway, and Chin Lung reappeared.

"My honorable master has consented to appear in person," he said, and hur-
ry ing across the room, dusted off the huge carved teakwood chair with a silk handkerchief, and placed an ivory-inlaid foot stool below it, standing to one side respectfully when his task was done.

The guards came to their feet quickly, bowing the bamboo torture contraption to one side. The men in the hallway straightened out and stared in the direction of the front of the house. For several minutes there was a tense, expectant silence in the room.

Then Nelson heard slow footsteps coming along the hallway, saw the guards outside the door bow their heads respectfully, and heard the deep, rich, vibrant tones of that voice which rang so familiarly in his ears.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE IMPLACABLE FANG GOW.

THERE are certain figures of men in the world who personify some quality of spirit. Many Western types represent power incarnate—certain Eastern types could pose as statues of wisdom. But the man in the doorway typified something that was not peculiarly Eastern or Western, but containing elements of both.

Tall he was, and old, and there was about him an air of command so that authority rested on his shoulders like a mantle, with something imperious in his bearing that made men hasten to do his bidding.

Power and wisdom combined in his ascetic features, broad forehead and piercing eyes, but there was a third quality mixed in with these two—a peculiarly Oriental quality—a chilling impersonality, a lofty disregard of mortal sufferings, something coldly inhuman, a Mongol callousness to the pain of others, such as might be exhibited by a Frankenstein monster or some steel robot moved by purely mechanistic springs.

In other words, this man typified immense energy and strength untempered by humanitarian feelings—he was a man without a heart.

Without glancing at Nelson, who stared at him curiously, without seeming to see the humbly bent heads of the awed guards, and of the almost servile obeisance of the tall Chin Lung, he moved to the carved teakwood chair and seated himself in its capacious depths, resting his slender hands against the carved dragons which reared their snarling and malignant heads on either arm of the chair.

For a moment he sat there, a venerable figure of an elderly man clad in dark-hued Chinese robes of exceeding richness.

A silence fell on that room as he gazed about him, his eyes glitteringly impersonal and inhuman as the jeweled eyes of some Eastern snake god reared high on the altar of some sandalwood-scented temple. The silence was broken by his voice. It was that same vibrant, deeply melodious voice which Nelson had heard before, speaking English with smoothly rounded purity and clearly enunciated perfection.

"And so, Nelson, you cross my path again," he said, resting his eyes on the white man as though looking through him and beyond him to illimitable distance. "And as before, you are acting as an infinitely tiny stone, which lies on the road and checks the chariot wheel but a second on the onward passage to the pink-walled palace. And like that tiny pebble, you will be crushed in the dust and forgotten."

"The Emperor Chan lost a battle and his empire by stumbling over a stone. O venerable one, who calls himself Fang Gow," Nelson answered gravely.

The Chinese focused his gaze upon him for a second before speaking, then, surprisingly enough, he nodded in agreement.

"That also is known to me," he said.
"But what is not known is why you, who have entered into a truce with me, have again taken up arms against me?"

"When you take up arms against my friends you take up arms against me," returned Nelson shortly.

"Meaning——" The old Chinese raised his eyebrows.

"Meaning Von Holtzendorff and—— Miss von Holtzendorff," Nelson stated, flushing a little at the latter name.

Fang Gow regarded him gravely and thoughtfully.

"But this man has done me deep injury—he has killed my eldest son, the son and heir of the ancient Mongol emperors of China," he stated, raising his head, his eyes flashing like the eyes of an aged eagle.

Nelson looked up startled.

"It was Von Holtzendorff who killed your son at Peking during the Boxer uprising?"

"Von Holtzendorff and no other"—the face of the old man became terrible in its wrath—"and he must pay. He must see his daughter as I saw my eldest born die before he, too, meets the death he has incurred!"

Nelson was a little appalled at the implacable ferocity in the old man's face. This was more serious than he thought.

"And the green jade dragon?" he asked.

"It will be regained," answered Fang Gow confidently.

"But only as the price for the lives of Von Holtzendorff and his daughter," answered Nelson firmly.

The long slender fingers of the man calling himself Fang Gow, gripped the writhing dragons' heads convulsively as he fought for self-control. After a while he replied in a cooler and collected tone.

"You show impertinence of a high order in endeavoring a paltry bargain in a matter that concerns the future of four hundred million people," he stated, his voice taking on a sterner note. "Oh, fool!" he cried. "As a babe innocently plays with the hooded adder so do you trifle with death. Well do I know how you came by the fragment of the sacred imperial jade. Von Holtzendorff gave it to you in gratitude for saving his life in Canton that time he so nearly was in my power."

Fang Gow leaned forward, staring at the white man before him. "You have heard my decree. It is now nine o'clock. At ten o'clock Von Holtzendorff's daughter will pay the penalty of her father's misdeeds. Thereafter you two shall follow her into the kingdom of shadows quickly! But if the hiding place of the piece of sacred jade is not revealed, you shall both die the death of the seven heavenly gates. I have spoken!"

FANG GOW arose. "Bind this man securely, guard him with your lives," he commanded—and drawing his robes around him, he strode out of the room.

Nelson stood passively as the guards with drawn pistols closed around him, binding his hands securely behind his back. He was stunned at the sudden turn events had taken. He had but a short time to decide to return the jade and to agree to render up the fragment carried in his own ring—a fragment now buried in the secret recesses of a steel safe-deposit vault. But the remainder of the jade would not save Sigrid's life—it would only give her father or himself the right to kill her and end her suffering, with death for them both afterward.

It was a plan worthy of the ruthless and inhuman brain which had conceived it.

He could see the whole thing now. Stucchi, Von Holtzendorff's butler, had been in league with Fang Gow and suggested the restaurant eating place—already carefully prepared as a decoy by
He remembered now a lithographed card placed on his hotel dressing table—a card advertising the food and services of a Chinese restaurant called the Green Dragon. The name and address had remained in his subconscious mind, and his idle steps had directed him there unconsciously. Stucchi must have stage-managed the whole thing unknown to Fang Gow. Of course Stucchi was trying to get the jade plaque for himself. It was Stucchi who had returned to the library in the dark and who had killed the sentry, thinking the man had stolen it.

Nelson's visit to the restaurant came at an unpropitious time for Fang Gow's minions, who were primarily after Von Holtzendorff and his daughter.

These thoughts seethed in Nelson's head as he was led out of the room and up the broad stairway to the upper hall. His captors did not pause here, but continued on up to the attic above to the same tiny room he had before. Here he was inscribed in strong arms to the bed, where he was flung prone. Stout ropes were brought, his legs and arms were securely tied down, and he was bound firmly to the cot, and rendered as helpless as a man could be made.

In front of him, on a bureau, a cheap alarm clock was placed. The hands already pointed to twenty minutes after nine. There were only forty minutes left before he should be faced with the frightful ordeal of seeing Sigrid dead and torn of facing the terrible death of the seven heavenly gates with the girl's father. He could see no way of escape from the vengeance of the yellow fiend, Fang Gow.

He had never seen Sigrid before that evening at the Green Dragon Restaurant, although he knew that Von Holtzendorff had a daughter at school in Europe. He writhed helplessly in his bonds as he thought of her lovely comradely eyes and the beauty of soul and body that was hers.

A warning growl came from the doorway, and he turned his head slightly to see that a Chinese guard squatted there, half inside and half out of the entrance—a heavy automatic pistol on his knees.

The hands of the clock now pointed to twenty-five minutes after nine. In thirty-five minutes these callous brutes would come for Sigrid.

Nelson moved feverishly in an attempt to unloose the bindings of his arms, and another warning growl came from the doorway and the sentry rose, crossed the room and struck him heavily across the mouth with his open hand.

Nelson felt himself being lifted on waves of red rage that left him spent and weak, but he could not stir a finger.

With venomous eye he followed the sentry back to his post and saw the man squat down again.

The hands of the clock now pointed to the half hour. Black despair seized upon Nelson. He lay quiet, his whole body tense and strained. Because his senses were so acute and his hearing so attuned to slight sounds, he heard something that made him glance quickly toward the doorway.

The sentinel squatted there, stolidly gazing into space. Nelson again heard that sound, a faint scrape as of cloth against the wall and the creak of the wooden staircase. With dull despair engulfing him, he still listened intently. The hands of the clock moved around to twenty-five minutes of the hour.

Again he heard that creak on the stair, this time nearer and he watched the doorway curiously.

Suddenly he twitched and breathed hard. A yellow hand with its talonlike claws curved about the handle of a razor-sharp hatchet came into view from the corridor outside. There was a swift flash of polished steel, an almost
indistinguishable thudding sound, and the sentry leaned silently forward as though suddenly grown very weary.

A figure darkened the doorway, stepping daintily over the sentry’s body.

CHAPTER XV.
THE GREEN JADE SECRET.

SIGRID VON HOLTZENDORFF sat alone in her locked room, listening to the various sounds from below stairs. A tray containing tea and rice cakes lay untouched on the table beside her bed. Her face became suddenly paler as she heard footsteps come from the direction of the staircase and pause outside her door.

A key was inserted. Chin Lung strode in, followed by four other Chinese. Without a word, he beckoned her to rise. Concealing her fright as best she could, she followed her captors silently as they led her down the stairs to the exotically furnished drawing-room.

There were several Chinese about. Her eyes fell on the bamboo contraption behind which, stacked in two piles, were the small steel cages in which the voraciously hungry rats squealed and fought.

Her eyes widened at this sight and widened still more as they rested on a broad-bladed Chinese sword of the type used by executioners, which lay upon a taboret near the cages.

Chin Lung seated himself at his table, his face enigmatic. Filled with alarm and disquiet at the silent impassiveness of all these men, she looked about her anxiously.

She encountered nothing, however, but cruel, incurious eyes as lacking in warmth and feeling as the hard, bright, shoe-button eyes of lizards.

There was one Chinese whom she noticed particularly, a slight elderly, dry-as-dust individual who carried a silken-bound case. Very methodically he untied this and unrolled it upon a table top, disclosing to view many curious, glittering instruments of bright steel.

An old-fashioned clock, the only Occidental note in this Oriental room, gave the hour as ten minutes to ten.

The dry-as-dust old Chinese, who wore huge, horn-rimmed glasses, finished laying out his instruments, then stood before her.

Before she realized what he intended, he reached down and seized her left hand in his bony grasp—and held it in a grip of steel. Attempting to jerk away, she felt hands hard upon her. Silken cords were drawn about her body and in a second she was securely bound in the chair. She was overcome with fear and horror as realization began to dawn upon her.

She struggled helplessly, but only for a few seconds until she realized the futility of it.

There was a stir outside, and she looked up—her eyes suddenly lighting with happiness as she saw her father enter. But the happiness quickly faded as she saw that his left arm was strapped to his side and his feet hobble together, while a Chinese guard prodded him along with the point of a narrow-bladed spear. His eyes were haggard and his face pale as he encountered her glance. He shook his head helplessly as he was prodded to the table where the broad-bladed sword was placed in his hand.

The hands of the clock marked five minutes to the hour. Chin Lung looked up impatiently at the door as if expecting some one else. The old Chinaman who looked like a doctor, moved the small table containing his glittering instruments to a position directly in front of the white-faced girl. Rolling back his sleeves, he picked out and tested against his thumb a knife that looked not unlike a curved fang. The clock marked one minute to ten. Chin Lung raised his hand.
SIGRID screamed faintly and huddled backward in her chair as the bony claw of the old Chinese grasped her by the wrist. Chin Lung, his hand upraised, glanced impatiently at the doorway, the old Chinese, his curved knife in readiness, watched for the signal.

Von Holtzendorff glanced about him wildly and groaned when he saw the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun trained on him, not three feet from his ear.

Then every one froze into attention.

A pistol shot cracked through the hall outside. There was a rush of feet and a clamor of many excited voices. The guards at the door gave back before some danger. The excited notes of the silver gong began to fill the house with their insistent warning. Suddenly Nelson stood in the doorway, an automatic pistol in his hand.

Behind him pressed a crowd of grim-looking Chinese, smaller men these, in American clothing, automatons barking from their hands. Screams and shouts came from the hallway.

The Chinese guards in the room fought blindly to pull aside the wall hangings which concealed the windows and literally dived out into the open to the sound of breaking glass. The old wizened Chinaman with his curved knife was felled by a blow from a hatchet. Nelson leaped to Sigrid's side and cut the silken cords that bound her. In a second she had got to her feet and was sobbing in his arms. Some one untied the bindings of Von Holtzendorff. The two white men clasped hands over the shoulders of the sobbing and thoroughly unstrung girl.

The combined forces of the On Leong and Hip Sing gunmen swept the remnants of the Chinese band from the buildings, as rats are driven out of a burning stable.

As quickly as Sigrid recovered her poise, which she did pluckily enough in very short time, the three moved to the library where they awaited the finish of the fight. Nelson wasted no time in verifying the presence of the jade-dragon plaque. It was still concealed behind the heavy volumes in the bookcase near the fireplace. Looking about to see if anybody observed them, he slipped the precious plaque inside his coat, carrying it under his arm.

The leader of the tong men reported back very soon with the disappointing news that no trace could be found of old Fang Gow himself, nor of Stucchi, nor Chin Lung. Nelson remembered last having seen Chin Lung dive through the window in the drawing-room.

"I know where they are! Look after Sigrid a minute!" exclaimed Nelson, and nodded reassuringly at the worried look that came into her eyes as he went out, followed by the leader of the tong men.

Hurrying down to the cellar, he found as he expected, that the concealed door behind the swinging shelves had been left partly ajar. He plunged into the corridor, followed by the vengeful tong men. They hurried along the underground passage, coming at last to the place where he and Von Holtzendorff had been hidden during the visit of the lone motor-cycle policeman.

There was no one there. The tong men flashed electric torches over every inch of the floor and walls, without any other result than the finding of a cloth cap of the type worn by Fang Gow's henchmen. Further search disclosed a door at the opposite end, leading into a narrow passage which turned at right angles and went toward the shore. Like a pack of hounds in full cry they hurried along this, only to come out inside a small bathing house on the beach.

A few yards away a small floating wharf was moored. Far out in the water of the bay they saw a racing motor boat, lessening rapidly into the distance until at last it could only be seen as a faint dot, leaving a white wake.
THE three of them assembled at Von Holtzendorff’s apartment in the New York hotel that night, Sigrid glowing in a rose-pink dress, the two men refreshed and immaculate in clean linen and full evening dress.

The green jade plaque lay before them on the table.

“But what I can’t understand, Nelson”—Von Holtzendorff’s glance rested in kindly fashion on the young man—“is why Fang Gow and his gang should be so excited about this ancient piece of jade. I can understand his wanting revenge for the death of his son. My men accidentally killed him in a street riot during the Boxer rebellion, when I was a German officer. It was just one of those things that happen in war. And I am afraid that some of my men looted the Summer Palace. This plaque was brought to me by a soldier who had dropped it and broken off two pieces. These two pieces he had fortunately recovered and I placed them in my pocket. The plaque did not remain in my possession for more than twenty-four hours, for it was stolen almost immediately. This is the first time I have seen it since. What makes Fang Gow and his gang so crazy about it?”

“Well, in the first place,” Nelson answered, “Fang Gow is the lineal descendant of the old Mongol rulers of China. He stole the plaque from you, because it was the sacred piece of imperial jade. You know Fang Gow has a big following in China and Mongolia, and the possession of this piece of jade enormously enhanced his prestige with his followers who are anxious to see him placed upon the throne of China. That’s why the American Chinese and these New York tongs, who are all strong republicans, are down on him. But the piece is valueless to him unless he has it in its entirety. Just take a look at this!”

Nelson took the plaque and gently removed the jade dragon from its frame, turning it upside down, showing the back of it covered with clear, minutely drawn Chinese lettering in vermilion letters.

“This writing is a long and poetical description of the lost treasures of the Mings, the ancient imperial ruling house of China. Engraved on each of the feet is an essential part of the description of the hiding place of the treasure which is said to be still intact and of fabulous value.”

“And Fang Gow has my ring,” said Von Holtzendorff ruefully.

“Yes, we have the plaque complete, except for that missing part, without which the hiding place of the treasure is incomplete,” stated Nelson. Then in looking up, he smiled, “But we have Sigrid unharmed, and her smallest finger is worth more than tons of carved jade.”

They all smiled, but the look that Sigrid turned upon Nelson was almost a caress, and the eyes of the two met and clung for a breathless second.

Von Holtzendorff nodded to himself, his glance traveling from the happy faces of the two young people to the snarling malignancy of the face of the green jade dragon.

“Good old dragon,” whispered Sigrid, patting it affectionately.
They were tough guys from a great city. But old Moccasin Jim was a sheep-herder and knew how to handle

Black Sheep From Chicago

By Frank C. Robertson

They were two sturdy Chicago gangsters trying in their humble way to get along in the world. Just now they were taking a well-earned vacation from their accustomed haunts, and their sojourn had taken them into the wide open spaces where men are supposed to be men but are frequently easymarks.

"Dude" Carnak and "Babe" Hess were taking their vacation because the gang of which they were members had recently taken too many members of a rival gang for a ride. What with the
aroused police and the enraged rival gang on their trail, Dude and Babe had decided to make their carefree way out to the Pacific coast.

Thus far it had been almost too easy. They had obtained their transportation by stealing an automobile and driving it until there was some danger of the police being on the lookout for that particular car. Then they would abandon it and steal another. By holding up a dozen or so service stations along the route, they had earned their expenses.

Their path had been smooth until just west of Salt Lake City, when a huge country youth had unexpectedly arisen from behind a counter and socked Babe on the jaw, knocking him colder than a frozen fish. A little thing to be sure, and it had caused but a momentary delay, but it seemed to be the break in the good luck that had thus far accompanied the gentle tourists.

Dude Carnak was not the man to abandon a pal, and with true brotherly love, he had sprung out of the car and shot the fellow dead. The big boof had had no business interfering, anyway.

The two had driven up and honked for service. Babe had stepped out and shoved the end of his automatic into the attendant’s stomach, backed him into the service station, and ordered him to open the cash register.

Then the inconsiderate rube, who had been loafing with his friend, had arisen unseen and knocked the Babe loose from his senses.

Then Dude had got out and done his stuff. He had only shot the attendant in the leg, and had neglected to take a cent, and this forbearance, he felt, was sufficient.

They were twenty miles away before Babe revived and wanted to know what it was all about.

“If you hadn’t been blind as a bat you’d seen that rube all set to bean you.” Dude snarled. “They’ve got telegraph wires through this country, and chances are we’ll have to bump off a dozen or two sheriffs before we reach Frisco.”

It had been just after dark when the accident occurred, and for several hours the Lincoln Highway paralleled the railroad closely.

Train after train whizzed by and were constant reminders that messages about the murder could travel still faster.

“Hell of a place to be caught,” declared Babe who was something of a student of criminology. “We don’t know whether we’re in Utah or Nevada, but they got a funny way of giving you the works in either State. In Utah they shoot ‘em, and in Nevada they put ‘em in a air-tight cell and feed ‘em this lethal gas. Neither method appeals to me.”

The lights of a small town suddenly twinkled in the distance.

“We got to detour around that burg,” Dude declared. “And here’s where we do it,” he added a minute later. “Boy, look at that! Level as a floor on both sides the road as far as you can see and looks like pavement. Here’s where we say good-by to Lincoln.”

The smooth surface did indeed look like pavement, but it was salt. For a quarter of a mile, the car ran smoothly and then it suddenly dropped into a whitish ooze until the chassis touched ground and every spin of the hind wheels dug it deeper into the treacherous stuff.

The gangsters hastily got out and abandoned the car. There was nothing else to do. Dispiritedly they limped back to the highway.

“Bright time you picked to say by-by to Mr. Lincoln,” Babe snarled.

A car whizzed along the road, but the gangsters shrank back out of sight. It was going too fast to be stopped, and they didn’t want word to be carried to the town ahead that two men had been seen trying to stop automobiles.
“We’ve got to get away from this highway and railroad and lay low for a few days,” Dude declared, and headed out across the flat barrens in the other direction.

He was fifty feet away before Babe decided to follow. On the whole, Babe preferred the known perils of the highway to the unknown ones of the desert, but Dude was having acute visions of a firing squad, or a chamber filled with lethal gas.

Hour after hour the heroes of a hundred hold-ups and a dozen bung-offs toiled across the weary flats. At times they stepped up to their knees into a whitish, sticky substance from which they extricated themselves with the greatest difficulty. More than once Babe toyed with the automatic pistol in his shoulder holster and glared at the once immaculate figure ahead of him. He refrained from shooting his partner only because he was scared to death of the wilderness which Dude Carnak had led him into.

Before daylight the smooth barrens had become broken up by small hills and hollows. When a curtain of light appeared on the eastern horizon and spread itself over the entire landscape they looked in vain for the sight of a house.

“This is what we get by you losing your nerve,” Babe charged dolefully.

“If you say another word——” Dude snapped, whirling with his automatic in his palm ready to spit instant death.

His hand dropped to his side, and an expression of relief crossed his face. “There’s a tent!” he quavered.

A COUPLE of miles away on a small knoll was a dab of white. To the men from the East it looked to be not more than a quarter of a mile distant and they headed for it eagerly.

After they had covered a mile, Babe swore that it was a mirage, of which they had both heard. But now they could also see a small band of sheep leaving the bed ground below the tent, and they hurried on.

They didn’t know that there was anything unusual in a herd of sheep being there at that particular time of the year, nor did they know that sheep camps were usually on wagons. In fact, all they thought of was that there must be food close at hand.

As they dragged their lagging feet up the knoll, old “Moccasin Jim,” the herder, saw them and refrained from dashing out his fire by throwing upon it the water in which he had just washed his breakfast dishes.

He was a lean, gray old man with long hair and whiskers. His feet were incased in the moccasins from which he took his name. His clothes were liberally bespattered with dried sour dough and grease, and a pair of huge gold rings dangled from his ears. As the strangers approached, he set down his dish pan and deliberately worried off a corner from a plug of chewing tobacco.

“Hullo, gran’dad,” Dude greeted. “What’s the chance to get some breakfast?”

“Waalf, if yuh feel like cookin’ it, go ahead,” Moccasin Jim greeted. “Don’t expect me tuh do no chefin’ because I’ve gotta foller them sheep.”

“Oh, sure—go right ahead,” Dude said, and sank wearily upon the old man’s bed.

“That’s sour dough in that jug, an’ half a mutton in a sack rolled up in that bed yo’re settin’ on, an’ the rest o’ the truck is scattered about here an’ there,” the old man informed them, and, whistling to his dog, he strode down after the sheep.

They were relieved that he had asked them no questions.

“Say, did you notice the decorations?” Babe whispered. “Earrings, gold rings—and did you lamp the watch chain? Heavy as a log chain, and I’ll
bet that charm is one o' them solid gold nuggets. Bet he's got enough gold on him to start a mint."


"Neither did I, but you've got to learn now," Dude said implacably. "I'll build up the fire."

Babe looked into the sour-dough jug, but he had not the slightest idea what to do with it. And after one smell he declared that it could not be eaten anyway. He dragged the mutton out of the seamless sack and stood regarding it with crinkled nose and hands held far from his sides, with fingers wide apart. But at last he found a butcher knife and hacked off a few pieces which he threw into a frying pan.

In the meantime, Dude had found a coffeepot still warm and half full of coffee. He placed on the coals, added more water and half a pound of coffee.

The meat was soon burned black on the outside, while yet raw on the inside. They soon found that mutton, unlike beef, cannot be eaten rare, to say nothing of raw. And the coffee was too bitter to be drunk. The two gangsters glared at each other over their granite plates.

Finally Dude discovered a can of tomatoes, and upon this they made their frugal meal. Nor did they trouble to wash up the dishes.

"Well?" Babe demanded.

"It looks to me like we'd hit it lucky," Dude remarked. "I've heard about these sheep-herders. They don't see anybody for months at a time, and it makes 'em go crazy. We've gotta hide up somewhere till things blows over, and this is a good place. When old Methuselah comes in we'll give him his orders straight. We can't bump him off because we gotta have somebody to cook for us. But we'll stay here till we get ready to leave, and when we do, we'll find out just how much gold the old boy's got hid on him."

"If he's got as much hid as he has in sight, it'll be all the same as owning a mine," Babe declared. "But say, if these sheep-herders all go bugs, what's to keep the same thing from happening to us if we stick around here?"

"It's because they live alone, and we won't be alone," Dude answered. His eyes dwelt contemplatively upon the little herd of sheep—much smaller than the average, containing only about four or five hundred head. "Wonder if them sheep aren't worth quite a bunch o' jack. We might take the old man for a ride when we get ready to leave and dispose of the sheep."

"We'll pump a few facts out of him," Babe said.

The two youths from darkest Chicago did not know that old Moccasin Jim was, in his venerable way, as good a gunman as they.

True, it had been years since he had cut his last notch on his gun, but in a somewhat adventurous career as Indian fighter, Wells Fargo stage guard, professional gambler, and cow-puncher, he had frequently been obliged to have recourse to a six-gun to save his skin.

But had the gunmen of a newer and more scientific era known his history they still would not have worried. This talk about the bad men of the wild and woolly West gave them a pain.

On his part, old Moccasin Jim had given some casual consideration to his unexpected guests. He knew it was all of twenty miles to the highway, and there was no habitation nearer than that. The dried mud on their clothes told him they had waded across the mud flats.

If they had been lost, he reasoned simply, they would have made some inquiries as to their whereabouts. They had left the highway and struck into the
unknown for some good and powerful reason, and it could not have been an honest one.

The old man smiled grimly as he followed his little band of sheep around. He had just come from the little town of Andover, the one the two gangsters had sighted in the night, and he had supplies enough to last him for the next three months, mutton being the main part of his diet, sheep salt the main part of his pack.

If the two strangers chose to remain, there would still be enough to last all three of them a couple of months. And Moccasin Jim felt that he could feed a couple of men for that length of time quite nicely.

Finding his accustomed vocations closed, Indians and road agents having turned peaceable, prospecting petered out, his legs too stiff to ride easily, and his fingers too cramped to flutter the cards, there had seemed to be little left for the old man.

Outside of his personal adornments of gold and silver he had salvaged a few hundred dollars, and craving solitude in the declining years of his life he had purchased his little band of sheep, three pack mules and a saddle horse.

He did not care to hire a man, and so he could not trail great distances to summer range like other sheepmen did. But there were mountains in and adjoining the desert that had a few small springs, and the feed was fairly good even in summer.

The great disadvantage was that the distance between springs and mountains was too great to be traversed without water, by a herd of sheep when the weather was hot. But Moccasin Jim knew his country, and he had a way planned to meet that contingency. The presence of these strangers might not hurt at all.

A little before noon, he returned to camp, his sheep having settled themselves for several hours beside a pothole half full of water from a recent rain. His old .45 sagged low down on his hip, but in his hand he carried a stout stick which helped support his aged legs.

A scowl spread over his face as he saw the unwashed dishes. His visitors were standing by the door of the tent, and their expressions were not happy. He noted the burned pieces of mutton which his dog sniffed at, but would not eat, and also the empty tomato can. He strode over and looked into the sour-dough jug. Its contents had not been decreased.

Then, his frown deepening, he went over to the bed and pulled the mutton sack out. The mouth had been left untied, and it had not even been carefully rolled back in the blankets. There was an ominous buzz as he lifted the sack, and when he pulled the meat out a dozen big blue flies came out with it.

The two gangsters had watched him, waiting their time to give him his orders, and give them to him straight, but something in his face made them blanch. His expression accused them of a heinous crime for which there could be no possible excuse.

"Fly blessed!" he hissed. "Half a mutton wasted because yuh was too durned lazy tuh tie up the sack. Fine way tuh treat a man who feeds yuh."

Dude Carnak found himself apologizing before he realized what he was doing. "We never thought about the flies, Pop," he said. "To tell the truth neither of us ever cooked a thing, and we couldn't think of anything but how unsatisfying a can of cold tomatoes is for breakfast when you haven't eat for twenty-four hours."

"So yuh can't cook?" Moccasin Jim glared. "Well, will yuh be willin' tuh do my work while I do it?"

"Why—why, of course." Dude promised.
"Well, see them four black dots over there?" the sheep man demanded. "Them’s my three mules an’ a horse. You fellers go git ’em while I fix a bite. They’re all hobbled, so yuh won’t have no trouble ketchin’ ’em. The horse an’ one mule will ride, but either one o’ the other mules’ll throw ye so high the buzzards’ll pick yore eyes out before yuh can come down. The brown jenny is the one that’ll ride." He indicated the halters, and before the gangsters could get their breath, they were halfway down the knoll.

"I thought we was goin’ to tell that old bum where he got off!" Babe said bitterly. "And here we are goin’ out to play nursemaid to his mules."

"We got to humor him till he cooks a meal," Dude said with a hot flush. "He might turn stubborn an’ try to starve us out. I thought o’ that."

"Yeah," Babe said skeptically.

They had no idea of trying to identify the brown jenny that would ride. Neither of them had ever ridden any animal except the horses on a merry-go-round. They were afraid to get close enough to remove the hobbles, and so they drove the animals back to camp with them on; a laborious process for them and the beasts, and they received a cursing from Moccasin Jim when they arrived for leaving the hobbles on and skimming the animals’ legs.

But he had dinner ready, and when they spied the beautiful, flaky biscuits the old man drew from a Dutch oven, they forgot their resentment. There was good, strong coffee, fried potatoes, bacon, and canned corn fried in the bacon grease. They had never enjoyed a meal more.

"Gram’dad, you can sure cook," Babe said as he sank back with a sigh of repulsion.

"Yeah, an’ you birds kin wash dishes," Moccasin Jim retorted.

"Not much!" Babe flared angrily.

"But aplenty!" the old man said grimly. "This camp has gotta be moved, an’ you fellers can do the dishes while I saddle up an’ pack the camp. Then you can trail the herd slowly over tuh yon knoll while I take the camp over an’ set it. Or was yuh meanin’ tuh travel on?"

"Why, no," Dude said. "To tell the truth, we’re out here for our health. We must’ve missed the place we were headin’ for, but as long as you cook like you have to-day, we’ll get along fine."

"I ’magine yore health would be bad—in some localities," Moccasin Jim remarked.

"Do you ever have visitors out here?" Dude asked as he looked up from the dish pan a little later.

"Not this time o’ year. I don’t expect tuh see a soul fer the next two months."

The two gangsters looked at each other and winked.

But later, when they were trudging along in the dust of the herd with the nauseating odor of the sheep in their nostrils, Babe grew rebellious again.

"This looks like a good place to lay over a few weeks, but I’m not goin’ to stand for bein’ ordered around by that old relic," he declared. "If you won’t shove a gun in his guts an’ tell him where he gets off, I will."

"Hop to it," Dude said laconically.

It was not quite sundown when they reached the new camp site. "We got to kill a mutton," Moccasin Jim remarked. "You guys ever skin a sheep?"

"No, and we don’t intend—"" Babe began irascibly.

"I’ll do it this time because I’m afraid yuh’d let the wool touch the meat. That spoils it. But yuh kin watch me an’ see how it’s done," Moccasin Jim cut it.

He had put out a little salt, and as the sheep crowded around, he strolled among them until he picked out a fat wether. Then he took out the big Colt .45, juggled it a moment as the wether moved briskly about, but when the
critter quieted momentarily, the big gun roared, and the sheep dropped without a sound, the bullet hitting it straight between the eyes.

Moccasin Jim put the gun up and went methodically about his task of dressing the carcass, but the two gangsters eyed each other covertly.

It might have been a lucky shot, but they realized that neither one of them could have duplicated it. However, that cumbersome old Colt did not compare with their blunt-nosed automatics which could spit death half a dozen times while the old man was thinking about getting his weapon into action.

THAT night after supper, Moccasin Jim was almost genial.

"You boys comin' along just when yuh did has been a big help tuh me," he declared. "I sure was worried about how I was goin' tuh git over tuh where I was goin' tuh summer. With yore help it'll be easy."

Dude clamped a hand over his partner's knee to shut him up. "Anything we can do?" he volunteered.

"Waal, that's a plumb good summer range I knows of, but a cattle outfit has always kept sheep off it. They won't be watchin' now because they figure no hand o' sheep kin git on it on account o' no water. But my band is small. They can be traveled fast, an' I aim tuh pull one them cattlemen never thought of. I'm gonna take my water supply along with me."

"Yes?" Dude queried dubiously.

"There's a six-hundred-gallon water tank in Andover that I kin git, an' all my stock is broke tuh work. I can drive a day, give the sheep half the water, drive another day an' give 'em the rest, an' the next day they'll be on the range. We kin put the camp truck on top of the tank, an' you boys drive the sheep," the old man explained.

"Are those sheep worth all that trouble?" Dude asked.

"This herd's worth five thousand dollars," the old man said proudly.

"Yes, but where can you get it?" Dude asked cannily.

"That's easy," Moccasin Jim replied. "I'll have 'em fat by fall, an' I'll just trail 'em back tuh Andover an' sell 'em that if that's a buyer handy, or else ship 'em tuh Ogden."

"Well, we'll be glad to help you all we can," Dude offered.

"Then I reckon I'll go back tuh Andover to-morrer an' git that tank," Moccasin Jim said as he prepared to turn in.

"Suppose he hears about us when he goes to town?" Babe said suspiciously.

"He likely will, but he wants help too bad for him to give us away," Dude said. "We'll stay with him through the summer, an' when he gits ready to start back, we'll just polish him off an' take his sheep down there an' sell 'em. Five thousand dollars an' what he's got on him will pay for our trouble. By that time nobody will remember anything about us. We'll send for some range clothes an' let our whiskers grow. They'll take us for regular shepherds when we go in."

Nevertheless, the two gunmen spent a couple of uneasy days with the sheep before Moccasin Jim returned with the tank. He made no mention of having heard about the murder of the man in the service station, and as the days passed serenely they lost all anxiety. They wore overalls and khaki shirts, and their beards grew long and somewhat ragged. No one would have taken them for the two dapper gangsters who had robbed a long string of service stations and wound up by killing a man who offered them resistance.

They were learning to do things, too. They learned to cook and to pack and move the camp. They even learned to ride the horse, though neither of them had any luck with the mule the old man had told them was "broke to ride." Nor
could they learn to harness and drive a team. They found that they could not get the herd out to the railroad without old Moccasin Jim.

I THINK,” said the old man one day, “we’ll be startin’ outa here tomorrow. They’ll be buyin’ down there, an’ them cowmen is liable tuh be comin’ in here any time an’ makin’ trouble.”

“Suits us,” Dude agreed eagerly.

“What you boys figure on doin’?” Moccasin Jim asked.

“Figure we’ll buy a car an’ go home,” Dude said carelessly. It was the first time they had mentioned having funds.

“East?”

“Oh, sure.”

“I figure on goin’ into Ogden myself. Mobble I’ll ride in with yuh as fur as Sal’ Lake,” Moccasin Jim suggested.

Nothing could have suited them better. They intended to give the old man a ride anyway, and here he was asking for it himself.

It was ridiculously easy. If any one in Andover thought it strange for three men to be with such a little band of sheep, where two sufficed for a real herd, they said nothing about it.

The two gangsters worked willingly enough, but they allowed the old man to do all the business. The sheep brought a good price—a little over six thousand dollars with the camp thrown in. Moccasin Jim declined to sell his animals. He might need them again, he said.

When it came to buying the car, the gangsters had a happy thought. “See here, Moccasin Jim, you need a car the worst way. You buy one here an’ we’ll learn you to drive on the way to Salt Lake. We’ll get us one there to go on with.”

It was ridiculously easy to talk the old man into it, and it smoothed their own path completely. All they would have to do would be to dispose of the old man’s body, and that would be a snap on the barren desert. They would have not only his money but the papers showing ownership of the car. They could ride back to Chicago without having to work or dodge backwoods peace officers.

“We’d better make it a night drive,” Babe suggested. “There won’t be so much traffic and you can learn to drive better.”

“Suits me,” Moccasin Jim agreed.

By nine o’clock they were ready to start. Dude Carnak driving, Moccasin Jim by his side, and Babe Hess in the back seat.

“Lotta funny things has happened on this old road,” Moccasin Jim remarked conversationally soon after they were started. “There’s a lone grave along here, not a quarter of a mile from the road, but I’ll bet not three people have ever seen it. I’ll show it to yuh if yuh want to stop.”

“You bet,” Dude accepted eagerly.

The old man was not only accepting his ride, but he was going to conduct them to a place where his body would never be discovered.

It seemed a long time before they reached the hidden grave—or where Moccasin Jim claimed it was.

Babe grew impatient. It was his job to shoot the old man in the back when Dude gave the signal. He began making inquiries, and several times he rose in his seat with his hand on one of the automatics he carried under his shoulders.

“I’m getting tired of this,” he declared sullenly.

“Sit down,” Dude Carnak commanded. “It won’t be long now till it’s over.”

“No, it won’t be long now,” Moccasin Jim agreed.

They passed a signboard, but they did not notice that it recorded the fact that they had now passed from Nevada into Utah.
“Jist a little ways on now,” Moccasin Jim said gently. And indeed he soon hade Dude stop the car. It was a drear and desolate place; endless miles of rolling hills covered with sagebrush stretched away in the moonlight like an ocean of high waves.

“Fine place for a murder,” Dude laughed.

The car had been stopped by the side of the road, and the old man was the first one out. He stood back until both men were out and facing him.

“Were yuh figurin’ on havin’ one?” he queried gently.

“What?” Both men exclaimed in a breath.

“Yeah, good joke.” Dude said with a mirthless chuckle. “Lead on, old pal.” But both men had exposed their guilty intention by their first startled exclamation.

“I thought yuh might be figgerin’ on that coyote over yonder,” the old man went on, indicating a gray shape a few rods away.

In this instance, however, the coyote was only a bush that resembled a coyote.

“Where?” Babe snapped.

“Right thar. Watch me fetch him down.”

Moccasin Jim drew his gun slowly, but when it was out, there was no hesitation about the rest of his movements. He wheeled back, facing the two gangsters, and the barrel of his gun was in line with their stomachs.

“Up!” he rasped.

The bandits were caught flat-footed, but they hesitated to obey.

“Why, you old——” Dude began.

“Git ‘em up,” Moccasin Jim repeated.

Slowly they started to obey. Then, like the striking of a snake, Babe Hess reached for the automatics under his shoulders. They were half out when the old-timer’s big Colt spouted lead.

Babe was turned half around by the impact of the bullet, and he fell to the ground. The slug had broken his collar bone and rendered one arm useless, but a leaden stream was coming from the other gun.

Dude Carnak had leaped back at the crack of the first gun, and dropped behind the radiator of the car. In a moment his guns were in action, sending two streams of sudden death across the hood of the car.

Then one gun was silenced as a bullet from the Colt broke one of Dude’s wrists. Instinctively he threw up the other hand and got a bullet through the side of the palm. Both guns dropped to the ground, and the man whirled round and round in his anguish.

With remarkable agility, Moccasin Jim leaped forward and one mocassined foot shot out to kick Babe’s arm just below the elbow. His remaining automatic flew out of his hand.

“If yo’re gonna be gunmen, why don’t yuh git yuh some real guns?” the old man demanded. “They’re fine fer shootin’ a man in the back when he’s ridin’ in the front seat of a car, but no good when yuh have tuh shoot quick as well as good.”

“You old devil, I wish I had shot you,” Babe half cried. “If it hadn’t been for Dude wantin’ to play safe I would have.”

“So yuh did figger tuh bump me off—like yuh did that boy at the service station,” the old man said grimly. “I reckoned yuh did.”

The gangsters fell quiet suddenly. “You—knew about that?” Dude asked presently in a voice chilled by fear.

“I knew yuh’d been up tuh some devilmint when yuh come crawlin’ outa the desert that way,” the old man said. “I went in tuh Andover next day tuh find out. By that time they had yuh traced ’bout all the way from Chicago, an’ they knew yore names an’ that yuh was wanted fer murder back in Chicago.”

“Then—why did yuh hold off?” Dude asked.
“Fer two reasons. Fust, I wanted tuh find out if there was any good in ye. If there was, I meant tuh give ye a chance, an’ at first I thought there was, the way yuh buckled into the work. But one day when ye thought I was out with the sheep, I was a-sittin’ on the sunny side of a bush while you was talkin’ yore plans over in the shade. Yuh didn’t plan even tuh leave me my earrings tuh be buried with, yuh coyotes.

“An’ the other reason was that if ye did turn out bad I wanted tuh git ye into Utah before yuh was arrested.”

“Is this—Utah?” Dude faltered.

“It is. An’ it’s the State where yuh killed that poor he’less boy. If yuh’d been arrested in Nevada they’d ’a’ had prior claim on ye in Chicago, an’ back there among yore friends, yuh might ’a’ got off. That was the chance I was goin’ tuh give yuh if yuh hadn’t wanted tuh kill me. But there’ll be no gittin’ off now. Either one o’ yuh able tuh drive the car?”

“I can’t. Both arms are crippled,” Dude said.

“An’ I’m bleedin’ tuh death,” Babe declared.

“Yeah, yuh——” the old man said bitterly.

He wished that he had at least shot them in the legs. They were capable of walking, and they might, if anything happened to him, walk back into Nevada. And something was happen-ing to him. In that wild fusillade of bullets no less than three of them had taken effect in his tough old body.

He could feel the blood trickling down his legs, and there was a peculiar blackness that kept recurring before his eyes that was not caused by the night. But he had to hang on to his senses until somebody came along. It could not be long, he told himself. He leaned against the side of the car.

“I never miss, an’ I’ll save Utah from collectin’ a firin’ squad if yuh try tuh wander out o’ sight,” he warned them.

Gunman had met gunman, and both had been surprised.

A shaft of light shot out along the road, and presently a car stopped beside theirs. “What’s wrong?” a voice called.

“Got a coupla murderers here,” a trembly voice answered. “Hess an’ Carnak, who——”

“What? Them two? By George we’re lucky. Went out after a sheep thief an’ get these,” a man said.

“Who are yuh?” Moccasin Jim asked.

“Deputy sheriffs of Tooele County, Utah.”

“Fine.” Slowly Moccasin Jim sank toward the ground, and the two gang-sters started to run. “Come back,” he roared, “or off goes yore ears.” The men stopped.

“There they are, old boy,” an officer said as he handcuffed the prisoners.

But Moccasin Jim had fainted.

It was a month before Moccasin Jim was able to talk to the men who had brought him into a hospital.

“Jim, you cussed old fool, why did you keep those fellows around your camp so long?” Deputy Sheriff Hodge demanded. “Don’t you know they might have killed you any night for those gold trinkets you wear?”

“I thought about that,” the old man admitted, “but I knowed they’d never try crossin’ the desert again on foot. There was one o’ my mules that wouldn’t ride, an’ I told ‘em she was the only one that would. They tried tuh ride her once, an’ after that they jist had tuh stay till I got ready tuh come in.” The old man finished with a chuckle.

“But when yuh got back to Andover you could have wired ahead to us,” the officer remonstrated.

A grim look came into the old man’s eyes.

“They was too doggone conceited,” he declared. “Somebody had tuh take it outa ‘em.”
Ozar and the Plumed Serpent

By Valentine Wood

Author of the "Kroom" stories, etc.

Ten men crouched in the Circle of Death. And the snake would decide the man who was to die in the lost city of Karnux

CHAPTER I.

THE CIRCLE OF DEATH.

A FAT rattlesnake lay coiled in the bottom of the wooden jar which Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs, held in his arms. In a moment, Tarx would dump the thick coils of the reptile on the stone floor in the center of the ring of panting, wild-eyed men who squatted on thick mats about him.

The buzzing snake would attempt to escape that grim Circle of Death. And the man toward whom it would crawl on its way to freedom would be thus marked to die the following day on the altar of Mexliitl the Sun God.

The Circle of Death was an age-old custom of the Aztecs, and its use was still alive in the city of Karnux, where an unknown remnant of that mighty tribe had existed for four hundred years since Cortes, the Spaniard, had van-
quished Montezuma and the Aztec empire.

But to-day, the rites of the Plumed Serpent had a double meaning. And it was to explain the full significance of the horrible ceremony that Tarx was delaying the moment when the snub-

“Tarx well remembers the day this strange white person came to the Valley of the Navajadas,” the priest went on, his one good eye misted with the far-away look of memory. The other eye was dull and sightless in its socket, like a ball of frosted marble.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE IN THE ADVENTURES OF OZAR THE AZTEC

LARRY STARLING was captured as an infant by a lost tribe of Aztecs.

The barbarians killed his parents, who had wandered into an inaccessible part of mountainous Mexico with an American scientific expedition. They had been slaughtered to appease the wrath of Yaxob the Rain God, who had withheld his favors until the fertile fields that were once so green and lush were now withered and brown.

Just as the child was placed on the sacrificial block, thunder pealed and lightning flashed. Rain—merciful, life-saving rain—poured from the skies in torrents.

And Montezirka, aged king of the Aztecs, shouted to the high priest in charge of the sacrifice: “Spare him, O Tarx! It is written in the walls of the Golden Temple that a ruler shall come to Karnux—a fair god with skin like polished silver, named Ozar the Aztec. Who knows but this babe is Ozar?”

As the blood-thirsty Tarx scowled, the monarch continued: “He shall not be killed until twenty summers have passed—for then, if he be indeed Ozar the Aztec, he can prove his divinity by meeting the mightiest warrior in Karnux in the fabled Doom Duel. If victorious in that, stripping though he be, this ivory-skinned babe is indeed Ozar, sky king of the Aztecs!”

And Ozar, after twenty summers had passed, proved victorious in the fabled Doom Duel. But he had yet to fulfill the Five Sacred Commands of Mexlii the Sun God and redeem an afflicted people from the sinister influence of Tarx, the pagan high priest who ruled supreme now that the aged monarch was dead. “Ozar and the Plumed Serpent” is the second of the adventures of Ozar the Aztec.

headed reptile should be released from the jar.

“There has come to the city of Karnux a white man, who calls himself Ozar,” the high priest chanted, his words syllabic and slurred from the cloven tongue in his head—split like an adder’s, to symbolize his priestly standing. “This warrior, whose skin is like the lily petal, claims to be the fair god of whom our forefathers and their forefathers prophesied.”

The priest paused, pulling his gorgeous mantle of scarlet humming birds’ skins more securely about his scrawny shoulders. The raspy breathing of the ten sweating men who squatted on their fiber mats about him was the only sound.

“Tarx and his warriors captured him who calls himself Ozar when he was but a whimpering babe. His parents we slew on the altar atop our Temple of Gold. But King Montezirka, with his dying words, spared the silver-skinned child from being sacrificed on the altar of Yaxob, rain god of the Aztecs.”

The priest’s voice was rising, a shrill monotone that was pitched with hate and venom. And angry sizzles from the snake rattled ominously from the depths of the turquoise incrustcd jar in the priest’s arms, and struck a shudder through the frames of the men who squatted in a grim circle about the red-robed holy man.

“In the name of Mexlii, sun god of
the Aztecs, I banished the babe for twenty summers from the walls of Kar-
mux,” snarled the high priest, his filed, jade-inlaid teeth flashing. “Now, that
babe has returned, a stalwart young warrior of twenty summers. Is he
Ozar, the fair god of the Aztecs? Or is he a vile impostor, a mortal assum-
ing the robes of a god?”

THE tapestry-hung walls and low
ceiling of the sacred chamber
rang with the harsh voice of the
priest as he spun around to face each
man in the tense circle which rimmed
him about. The buzz of the rattlesnake
was now a continuous crackle as the
reptile lashed itself into a fury under
the swaying of the confining jar.

“That, O Aztecs, is for the Plumed
Serpent to decide!” screeched the high
priest in conclusion. “If Ozar is to die
on the morrow, die an impostor on the
sacrificial blocks of the god whom he
has defamed, the Plumed Serpent shall
crawl to him, as surely as the flies are
attracted to the honey pot!”

The ten men who crouched in the Cir-
cle of Death burst into an icy sweat as
they saw the high priest fling the wrig-
gling serpent from the jar, dropping
the scaly coils on the red stones. At the
same instant the priest sprang back
away from the reptile’s deadly fangs.

The fate of Ozar the Aztec was up
to the gods—and the snake.

About the thick neck of the reptile
was a collar of crimson plumes, to sym-
bolize the mythical figure of the Aztecs
since the dawn of time—the Plumed
Serpent.

Stretching its length on the cold
stones, the snake lifted its evil, triangu-
lar head, its beady eyes flashing as it
looked about as if searching for the
man in that panting circle of Aztecs
who was to die.

Only for a moment did the snake
hesitate. And then, with a sharp buzz
of its rattle-studded tail, it slithered
across the floor toward the spot where a
lone white man squatted, knees crossed
before his body, blue eyes held fasci-
nated by the wriggling messenger of
death which was sliding closer to him,
Y-shaped tongue fluttering ahead like
a black banner of doom.

NINE of the men in that stony-
face circle wore the dusky
skins and hatchet faces of the
native Aztecs. Alone in that group
was Ozar, whose skin was the golden
bronce of an American youth who had
been captured and reared primi-
tively, with the sun and wind for his com-
panions.

Clad only in a girdle of ocelot’s hide
was Ozar; tough sandals were tied to
his feet by leathern straps, while about
his brown, wavy locks was wrapped the
pliable leathern thongs of his only weapon
—a sling shot.

Only for an instant did Ozar squat
thus as the deadly serpent slid rapidly
over the floor toward the maguey-fiber
mat on which he rested. The next mo-
moment the muscular young white man
was on his feet, jaw protruding to make
a tight slit of his mouth.

And then the man who claimed the
name of Ozar the Aztec, shot forth a
sandal-bound toe and squashed the
weaving head of the sacred snake as a
younger smashes a walnut.

“Ya-ah! Thy Plumed Serpent is but
a devil’s invention of thy warped brain,
O Tarx!” snarled the white man, as
the nine Aztec priests leaped to their
feet, panting with relief, but also ex-
pecting the earth to open up and swal-
low them in punishment for Ozar’s rash
insult to the gods.

Ozar stooped, picking up the dead
snake with a brawny hand. He tore the
crimson plumes from the quivering
body, and hurled the remains of the
snake contemptuously aside.

“Seest thou? Priests of the Chal-
meca! Holy men of the Aztecs! Seest
how the scarlet plumes were tied to this serpent with fibers of the pulque plant? The Plumed Serpent! Otishe! A common viper of the maize fields, tied with scarlet feathers from the—"

"Ah-ye-e-e-ee!"

A scream of killing hate, like the snarl of a mad panther, rent the air as Tarx leaped forward, mowing aside the shocked priests who cowered, stunned, before the flaming-eyed American. With a darting motion of his hand, the high priest placed a yellow-stained whistle to his lips and blew lustily.

It was a signal for action, and the trembling pagan priests were ready with knife and knuckle. Before his bitter words were well out of his mouth, Ozar saw a coppery-faced Chalmeeca lunging at him with a keen-bladed knife swinging from a heavy fist.

Wok! The black-mantled priest found himself sprawled in a far corner with a cracked jawbone, and Ozar was sucking a pair of bruised knuckles as he swung back, getting a stone-walled corner to his back as the priests closed in, murder flashing from their beady eyes.

Another lashing fist knocked a sputter of filed teeth from a towering priest. Stone knives clattered to the floor. Two Aztecs went limp with sharp moans escaping their lips, doubled up by rib-cracking punches.

Then Ozar felt himself go down in a tangle of feathered robes, and a rain of hard-knuckled blows battered his face and neck and chest.

Plunging to his feet with snarls of rage, the white man shook off clinging priests with a vicious twist of his muscle-slabbed shoulders.

He was just charging forward after the ashen-faced Tarx when the tapestried curtains of the far end of the chamber parted, to reveal the lovely vision of a dark-eyed girl, clad in a glittering bodice of golden scales and a royal-green feathered skirt.

It was Esta, Queen of Karnux, and the only friend Ozar had in a city of barbaric Indians.

But it was not a look of friendship which blazed from the Indian queen's jet-black eyes as she took in the sprawled forms of the priests, the tense crouch of the white man, and the battered length of the sacred reptile at the foot of Tarx, chief magician of Karnux.

"What means this, a brawl like drunken old men, in the sacred chamber of the sun god?" demanded the pagan empress, her gem-incrusted crown of beaten gold flashing as she shot her fiery glance from Ozar to Tarx. "Dost thou want the sky gods to crush our palaces and level our temples in punishment for thus degrading his holy place?"

Ozar felt himself thrill as he returned the queen's gaze, his eyes feasting on the heart-shaped face which was dark and beautiful in its frame of clustering raven hair and jade ear pendants, in spite of the warm glow of anger which suffused her skin.

"Thou knowest that the god Mexliilt demanded the test of the Plumed Serpent for him who calls himself Ozar," came the sugared accents of the high priest. "The Serpent was released, and went straight to this man, thereby macking him for death. Thou seest, O Queen, what this offspring of a rat hath done to the holy room." He indicated the wreckage wrought by the infuriated Ozar with an expressive gesture.

Ozar stepped forward, hands outspread in supplication to the Aztec queen, whose beauty had so strangely stirred his heart, and who, he dared to think, possessed a similar passion for him.

"Mighty Queen, there has been treachery—"

Ozar never finished the sentence. Tarx, standing behind the white man,
had lifted a silver-hilted Aztec wooden sword from his girdle. Turning aside the sharp-cutting edge of razorlike obsidian, the wicked priest brought down the flat side of the sword in a crashing blow upon the back of Ozar’s skull.

Without even a gasp, the white man collapsed in a motionless heap at the queen’s gold-sandaled feet, knocked unconscious by the treacherous blow.

For an instant, flame blazed in the dark pools of Esta’s eyes; but the expression changed as she spoke:

“Hurl the body of this vile impostor into the royal dungeons, O Tarx!” she commanded. “On the morrow, he shall be sacrificed at the jaws of the Plumed Serpent’s altar.”

So saying, the queen stooped, and with jeweled fingers unwrapped the sling which circled Ozar’s head. Then she turned, and, parting the featherwork curtains, departed.

At her heels marched the black-robed Chalmecan priests, dragging the unconscious Ozar by the heels, a trail of crimson dribbling from the ugly welt on his head.

A leering smile split Tarx’s hideous features as the curtains dropped on the departing priests. And well might the high priest rejoice—for had the snake not chosen Ozar it would have marked the white man as the one who would replace Tarx as mightiest man of Karnux.

A week before, Ozar had come to the city from the distant mountain fastness of Claxitil, the lame Arrow-maker of the Navajadas; he met the mightiest warrior in Karnux in the fabled Doom Duel, and slew him before the assembled Aztecs in the Scarlet Arena.

And now the white youth who claimed the name of Ozar the Aztec must fulfill the Five Sacred Commands of the sun god—of which the first was that he satisfy the decree of the Plumed Serpent in the Circle of Death.

Chuckling low in his throat, like a wild beast who wols down the meat of his kill, Tarx turned to the ring of fiber mats upon which those chosen for the grim Circle had squatted.

Stooping, Tarx picked up the square mat upon which Ozar had been seated. The priest’s chuckle deepened as he ripped off the long, thick leaves of the snake-root plant which he had hidden under the coarse-woven mat before it had been assigned to Ozar.

Snake root is to a reptile what sugar is to a honey bee—attracting snakes as a magnet attracts iron filings.

CHAPTER II.

THE DUNGEON.

Ozar opened his eyes in almost total darkness. He was lying on the rough floor of a dungeon; it was the cold dampness of the stones which revived him. The white youth sat up, shaking his head like a mastiff to rid his senses of the raining shower of orange sparks which clouded the far rim of his consciousness.

The feel of fine locks of hair swishing over his eyes told him that his captors had removed the precious sling which he kept wound about his forehead like a bandage.

A rivulet of sticky crimson fluid was seeping down his neck and across his broad chest. Cautiously feeling the lump on his skull, Ozar determined that the wound was not serious.

“Foul dog, who would strike down a man from behind!” muttered the white man, his skin warming with fury as he recalled the hideous, leering features of the devilish high priest. Ozar had no doubt but that it was Tarx whose foul blow had floored him as he had faced the queen.

The queen! In a harsh flood of recollection, the memory of Esta’s lovely figure flashed before Ozar’s brain. It brought a pang to his heart, a lasting hurt that was more painful than the
welt which was making his head throb as if it were filled with molten metal.

How differently she had acted, facing him up there in the holy chamber of the Temple of Gold! So unlike the sweet, tender woman with whom he had whiled away hours of paradise in the flower-scented lawns of the palace gardens, idling through the aviaries with their thousands of multicolored birds, or strolling the palace arcades at night, with the light splashing down through the clouds from a white moon, to illumine the towering pyramids and flat roofs of the great Aztec city.

Suddenly, it seemed as if nothing else mattered except her smile; but even in his bitterness Ozar squared his shoulders resolutely and struggled to his feet in the darkness of the dungeon.

For over a thousand years, Kar-nux had lain hidden in the great crater of the Navajadas, shut off from the world by towering cliffs of red rock—a volcano; cone in the middle of an unmapped area of northern Mexico, where white men never trod, and only the rattlesnake and horned toad and zapilote hawk were able to survive the battle for existence.

But it was cool and fertile here in the crater where the magnificent city of Karnux had been built; maize fields laid out like a checkerboard, carefully attended as a garden, stretched for miles in all directions.

Ozar knew but little of the details of how the high priest Tarx, exploring the rugged malpais outside the crater years before, in search of a sacrifice to appease the rain god and end a drought which blighted the valley, had discovered his white parents and their geological expedition.

He did not know that he was Larry Starling, son of cultured American parents, who had been sent to Mexico on a scientific expedition outfitted by a great university and museum in California. He had heard, in a dim way from the lame arrow-maker who had raised him to manhood in a mountain cave, how his father and mother had been sacrificed on the jasper block atop the city's highest pyramid.

He knew that he owed his own life to a dying command of Montezirka, King of the Aztecs, and grandfather of Queen Esta; for Montezirka had predicted that he, Larry Starling, was the fair god Ozar, whom the Aztecs had praised in myth and legend since the dawn of time.

He also knew that death and pain and danger would be his lot until he should have proven his right to be known as Ozar the Aztec; but he had been well equipped for his struggle by Claxitl, the lame hermit who had raised him.

He was skillful in the use of bow and arrow and sling; no secrets of woodcraft had been withheld from him; his body was supple and strong from the rigors of swimming mountain torrents and scaling cliffs.

And now, clinging to the moist rocks which walled his prison, the vigor and strength of Ozar's muscular body were coming to his aid; he stood on his feet, a trifle dizzy, but with energy flowing through his veins and his head rapidly clearing of the cobwebs of pain.

His hand rumbled through his brown hair, as if hopeful of finding the sling; but it was gone. His body ached from countless bruises and cuts, received by his desperate struggle after being chosen for death by the snake in the sacred chamber, somewhere above him.

He looked about, eyes gleaming like polished buttons. A thin filter of light lanced the murky gloom; it came from a narrow opening twenty feet above him—indirect light, which followed a tube through the ground, providing slight illumination while bringing ventilation to the dungeons.

The walls sloped inward, overhanging him; there would be no possibility
of scaling them, even if his fingers could have clung to the wet rocks.

The churlish opening where his body had been dumped into the pit of the dungeon was a good ten feet from the floor; he could not hope to get his fingers on the wooden rungs of the ladder.

Ozar took stock of himself: no broken bones or severe wounds. A night of rest, and he would be able to deliver a few more death-dealing cracks of his good American fists, before the priest should drag him to his death.

If only the queen had not turned against him! His fate would be tinged with bitterness, knowing that—

"Greetings, brother in the Kindred of the Lost!"

A weird voice behind him startled Ozar, sounding hollow and ghostly as a broken horn in the heavy stillness of the dungeon. He whirled.

CHAPTER III.
THE INDIAN PRISONER.

THERE, standing in a slitlike doorway which was barred with twisted fiber latticework, stood a large man, naked save for the unkempt hair which fell in an ebon brush over his back and shoulders. The man distinctly Indian, his skin the dirty brown of unburnished copper.

"Who art thou?" demanded Ozar, eyes narrowed menacingly.

The black apparition across the cell floor pried his hawkish nose between two fiber bars and regarded Ozar with bulbous, darting eyes.

"A fellow prisoner, O Stranger—doomed like thyself to feed the wrath of the Plumed Serpent on the morrow."

Ozar relaxed. Another poor devil, doomed to a pagan fate, eh? The white man stepped forward.

"Dost thou know of any way to get out of this place, brother?"

The man was unquestionably fat—his neck was a series of overlapped folds, his stomach bulged through the lattice, his hard-chiseled Aztec face was moonshaped.

"What is thy name?" continued Ozar.
"How long hast thou been here? What was thine offense?"

The fat Indian seemed bewildered by the torrent of questions. He shook his head slowly.

"My name is Larxatun, O Stranger," he replied. "I was but a lowly underling in the apartments of Tarx, the high priest. I dropped a bowl of oceli liquor and incurred his wrath. They caged me here, fattening me for the ceremonies of the Plumed Serpent to-morrow morning. No—there is no possible way of escape. I have thought of all."

Ozar did not doubt Larxatun's words, as he peered into the prisoner's cell which adjoined his own. They were in the bottom of a stone-lined well; it would take wings to escape.

"Tarx is a one-eyed child of a snake," snarled Ozar bitterly, after introducing himself. "Would that I could crush his ugly skull between these two palms."

Larxatun drew back in horror, a whistle of breath drawing between his rows of yellow teeth.

"Thy talk is terrible, Lord Ozar!" panted the Aztec, trembling in awe before the white man he believed to be a god. "During the hours thou hast lain here unconscious on the rocks, thy words were troubled and tortuous—but the great god Mexitli would forgive them, for thou didst not know——"

A low cry interrupted them—the silver tones of a girl's voice, coming from overhead.

SPRINGING away from the door of Larxatun's cell, Ozar looked upward, heart pounding eagerly. There, leaning over the stone parapet which rimmed the dungeon, was the beautiful figure of Queen Esta!
He started to cry out, but the queen pressed a jeweled finger to her lips. She held out a shapely arm, and down through the gloom dropped a ball-shaped object which Ozar caught instinctively. It was his pliable leathern sling!

"Forgive me, Lord Ozar, for my cruel speech in the sacred chamber!" came the queen’s tense whisper. "Queen though I am, it is not for me to defy the priests in their holy rooms. Speak not, while I lower a fiber rope to you; for I must not linger. If I were caught here, I would be slain before they recognized me as the ruler of Karnux. The might of Tarx is terrible, and he spares none."

As her words faded, a length of tough maguey-fiber rope dangled over the wall. Knotted to the end of the rope was a stone knife with a beautiful turquoise-inlaid handle.

"Esta, my queen!"

Before the white man’s glad cry could reach her ears, the Aztec girl disappeared, like the vision of a goddess in a happy dream. Had it not been for the wadded sling in his hands, or the rope dangling there in the darkness, her visit would have been as unreal as a vanished sunbeam of yesterday.

"The gods have not deserted me!" whispered Ozar huskily, reaching out trembling fingers to untie the knife, almost afraid it would dissolve into nothingness in his grasp. "The way of escape is laid open before me!"

Ozar heard a throaty sigh from Larxatun, who leaned against the confining wall of his cell.

"May the gods bless thee as thou escapest from the dungeons of Tarx, Lord Ozar," breathed the prisoner.

The knife in his hand, the tight feel of the sling wound again about his brow, Ozar stood for a moment, life tingling through every fiber of his body.

"Thou shalt escape with me, Larxatun!" breathed the white man, leaping to the fiber-latticed door, and slashing the heavy ropes with the keen-bladed knife. "Together, we shall escape the dread Plumed Serpent!"

For a moment, a look of superstitious fear crossed the fat Indian’s features, as if this was defying the decrees of fate; but as the tough fibers fell away before Ozar’s knife, he assisted his rescuer in tearing away the door of his cell.

A moment later, they were scaling the tough rope ladder, Ozar with the knife in his teeth, his feet scouring the walls of masonry as he climbed the rope with the agility of a monkey.

Through Ozar’s brain ran one thought, again and again and again: "Queen Esta loves me! Queen Esta loves me!" Ozar knew it. What else than love could have made her eyes seem like stars as she peered down upon him?

Reaching the top of the parapet, Ozar pulled mightily on the rope, hoisting the clumsy Larxatun out of the dungeon.

Together, the prisoners stood panting on the floor of the gloomy corridor leading off underground to some unknown destination. No trace of the queen did they see.

Suddenly a shaft of brilliant light fell upon them, and the clang of footsteps resounded in their ears.

As the two men whirled, their veins froze in their bodies as they saw the forms of Tarx and two blue-feathered warriors descending a steep flight of stairs before them.

They were discovered!

CHAPTER IV.
THE PANTHER.

FOR an instant, the two trapped men felt the instinct to flee. Then Ozar realized they were cornered, with only the choice of plunging back into their dungeon pit at the cost of a broken leg or neck—or else dash-
ing down the corridor, a way already cut off by the advancing warriors.

The three Aztecs on the staircase were as surprised as the prisoners. For a moment, not one moved a muscle; and then the tableau broke as the foremost of the blue-feathered warriors shouted a warning and leaped forward.

They made dramatic figures, these blue-feathered warriors who lived in a hidden underground lair deep beneath the Temple of Gold, its entrance and exit known only to Tarx and his men.

Their heads were protected by wooden helmets shaped like the open mouths of wild animals, the lower jaw forming the chin strap, while a plume of blue feathers floated down their backs.

Quilted cotton armor under a cuirass of thin plates of gold and silver rendered their bodies invulnerable to the thrust of a stone knife or the jab of a sword; while their arms and legs were fantastically decorated with collars and bracelets incrusted with greenstone and pink quartz.

The warriors, who now sprang down the steps to cut off the escape of Ozar and Larxatun into the corridor, were without their usual javelins; but turquoise-hilted swords swung from their girdles, and already their hands were filled with itzli knives.

Ozar flung himself in front of the weaponless Larxatun, gripping the obsidian knife which the queen had given him.

With a scream of defiance on his lips, the white man ducked under the descending arm of the foremost warrior and shot out his knife for the Aztec's temple.

But the silver-mounted helmet saved the man's life; and before Ozar could withdraw his blade for a fresh stroke, he found himself grappling with the armored warrior.

Down to the floor they fell with a heavy thud, each striving to pinion down the knife wrist of the other; and Ozar, fighting with the ferocity of a young jaguar, was already clamping the warrior's arm under a bone-crushing grip.

Larxatun, out of physical condition because of his long imprisonment and fattening diet, leaped forward and jerked the sword from the wrestling warrior's girdle and swung it dangerously as the second warrior dived off the staircase and charged him, bawling lustily for murder.

The high priest Tarx slipped to the level of the floor in a flutter of scarlet robes; his single eye glittered fiendishly as he drew his own sworn and hovered over the struggling pairs of men, watchful for an opportunity to strike home a death blow.

Ozar was on his feet, still clinging to the warrior's knife wrist as the latter wrenched and jerked in his efforts to free himself. With his left hand wadded into a fist as hard as a lump of basalt, Ozar was pounding heavy blows which dented the soft gold plates of the Aztec's chest armor.

Larxatun layed right and left with his whizzing sword, fending off the dancing warrior who darted here and there, waiting for an opening to dart in and plunge his knife through Larxatun's fatty sides.

Tarx was sidling about, dodging Ozar and his assailant as he edged nearer and nearer the spot where Larxatun was wielding his wooden sword.

Out of a corner of his eye, the ex-slave caught his former master's purpose, and leaped backward, snarling desirously as he planted his thick body against the wall.

A scream of agony wrenched from the other warrior's lips, and Tarx spun about in time to see Ozar's flashing knife plunge deep into the unprotected throat of his foe, to jerk outward, stained with deep crimson.

Clinging to the white man with his
dying spasm, the blue-feathered warrior jerked Ozar off balance. At the same instant Tarx leaped toward Larxatun's side, and brought his sword down in a chopping blow.

_Crash!_ Wood splintered and blades of obsidian flew out from Larxatun's weapon, as the priest's sword cleft it in two, inches from the hilt.

Plunging forward with cries of savage hate, the blue-feathered warrior who had singled out Larxatun as his opponent lifted his knife for the death thrust.

_SUCH_ was the picture Ozar saw as he wrenched free from the dead warrior who had fallen beneath his knife. The unfortunate Larxatun was flattened against the wall, unable to defend himself; but there was on his round-cheeked face a resolute look of courage which struck admiration from the crimson-smeared Ozar.

The white man's arm went back, and in the flat of his palm lay the gory knife which had drained the life from the limp warrior at his feet.

The arm shot forward, and, like a flash of light, the keen-bladed knife whizzed through the air. There was a crunch of severing flesh and gristle, and Larxatun's opponent spun about in the act of driving a death stab toward the Indian's chest.

Jutting from the warrior's neck, its turquoise handle projecting beneath the ear, was Ozar's knife!

As Tarx saw his second warrior drop dead on the cold floor of the corridor, he sprang backward, dropping his heavy sword as he saw the white man leap forward, unwinding the sling from his forehead.

Tarx had seen that deadly sling in action, when it had drilled a pebble through the forehead of Uxchakiti the Terrible Giant, in the Doom Duel. He had no wish to be the second victim of Ozar's death-dealing sling.

Dropping his heavy sword with a scream of fear and hate, the red-robed priest fled into the gloom of the corridor.

Quick as he was in pressing a stone pellet out of the pouch in his girdle, Ozar knew Tarx would be vanished in the darkness before he could whirl the sling for a shot. He must keep Tarx in sight at all costs.

Flinging a cry to Larxatun, who was still wincing under the expected blow of the warrior's knife, Ozar the Aztec sped up the corridor on the heels of the sprinting priest.

Fleet as a deer was Ozar, for running had been part of his daily education up at the mountain grotto of Claxitl the Arrow-maker. The old hermit's teachings had been stern and rigorous, but more than once, even since he had come to Karnux, Ozar's life had been saved by Claxitl's teachings.

A glimmer of light showed in the darkness ahead, and Ozar, running by instinct more than by conscious direction, caught a glimpse of the fleeing high priest of the sun god as he skidded around a corner, his scarlet humming-bird cloak flapping behind him.

The sling droneéd a deadly whine over Ozar's head as he turned the elbow-bend in the corridor on the wings of the wind. An instant later there sounded the scrap of sandal leather on rock, as the startled white man slid to a full stop.

He was faced by a sheer height of white masonry—a limestone wall which showed no door or window. Boxed in a blind corridor! Yet Tarx, the evil high priest of Karnux, had completely vanished!

Ozar spun about, blue eyes probing the shadows, on guard for a treacherous attack from behind. But the bare walls revealed nothing.

Tarx, the bloodthirsty high priest, had disappeared as completely as if he had swallowed him up!
THE white man was still staring at the spot where he had seen Tarx skid around the corner, when Larxatun came lumbering up, his bare feet padding heavily on the stones.

Briefly, Ozar explained to the bulging-eyed Indian what had happened. As he finished speaking, a mask of gray fear pushed the color from the Indian’s cheeks.

“Tarx—he is magic, Lord Ozar!” babbled the prisoner, teeth clattering with fear. “Tarx is mightiest man in all Karnux! Perhaps he has changed himself to a fluttering bat—and escaped back down the corridor over our very heads!”

Ozar grunted. Raised up as an Aztec, he had been taught to believe in the divinity of the sun god, the rain god, and the various other deities of the Aztecs; but his sound American reasoning made him doubt the fabled ability of Tarx to change himself, at will, into any kind of an animal.


“If Tarx is a bat, he is even now summoning the rest of his warriors,” panted the white youth. “We are trapped. We must try to find a way out of this hole.”

Larxatun, who had faced death bravely when a knife was about to be plunged into his vitals, sank back against the stone wall, weak with superstitious fear.

As he did so, Ozar was startled to see that the huge stone against which the Indian had fallen was slowly revolving on hidden pivots!

Like a dash of cold water on his brain, the solution to the mystery of Tarx’s disappearance burst upon him. What had seemed to be a mortared slab in a heavy wall was in reality the door to a secret chamber!

Ozar cried out to the fat Indian to recover his balance, but he was too late. With stark fear stamped on his moonish features, Larxatun somersaulted backward, and his bare feet vanished from Ozar’s sight as the door, completely revolved on its axis, closed the passage.

Ordinarily, Ozar would have hesitated at plunging through the secret entrance, for fear of getting into another trap; but he could not see the man whom he had begun to look upon as his comrade go into danger alone.

Shoving his brawny weight against the revolving stone, Ozar felt the door give way beneath his shoulders, and an instant later he found himself in the secret chamber—with Larxatun clamoring to his feet with cries of relief and joy at seeing his friend and deliverer join him.

Heart thumping his ribs, Ozar sprang back, flattening himself against the door. His eyes shot about the tiny square room. Tarx had vanished again!

Larxatun sprang to Ozar’s side, his bravery restored.

“TARX must not have come in here—or else he has changed himself to a bat indeed, friend Larxatun!” grunted Ozar, with something of a laugh in his voice.

Suddenly a low, savage growl smote their eardrums, coming from a blot of shadow at the far end of the chamber. With their faces damp with icy sweat, Ozar and Larxatun twisted about.

There, in a corner that a moment before had been stark empty, crouched the form of a lean, full-grown panther, lashing its tail and bunching its tawny body to spring upon its helpless victims!

CHAPTER V.
THREE SECRET DOORS.

WITH a snarl which wilted poor Larxatun in a fainting heap on the stones, the panther’s lips peeled back from frothing fangs, and the air whined through its spread-out claws as the big cat, crazed with its
hunger for fresh meat, leaped toward Ozar as if shot from a catapult.

Quick as the dart of a snake's head was the movement of Ozar as he dived forward, his lithe body parallel to the floor and inches above the smooth stones as he felt the panther's body fly over him.

With the same motion, Ozar rolled aside and sprang to a squatting position, his bronzed skin unslashed by those razorlike claws.

The huge cat emitted a roar of baffled rage and pain as it smashed against the bare wall where Ozar's body had been. Then it whirled, its tail whipping a deep welt across Larxatun's heaving chest as it sprang for the darting body of its white prey.

But when it landed, Ozar was not there. He had learned the spiderlike art of darting sidewise and backward and forward from his life in the open. Once before, he had fought a wild animal of the cat family—but that time it had been a small lynx.

There is but one possible way for a man to quell a panther or a tiger with his bare hands—and one cut of a million could apply the knowledge and live to tell it. Only one place is there on a panther's body where it cannot reach with its needlelike fangs or horrible clawed feet—and that is squarely on the cat's shoulders, at the base of the neck.

For a split fragment of a second, the foiled panther was on the floor, taut as steel springs, its claws grating hard stone in the place of a soft, yielding body. And Ozar chose that instant to strike.

The panther reared on its hind legs and screamed as it felt the viselike grip of Ozar's mighty legs on its shoulders. And that was just what the young white man wanted—to get the beast's fang-studded jaws opened wide.

Larxatun, pulling himself out of his faint, caught one glimpse of Ozar astride the rearing panther, his teeth sunk in the tawny hide of the cat's skull. Then the sight became too blurred for the eye to follow as the raging animal went into convulsions of fury.

With a movement too swift for the eye, Ozar inserted in the animal's mouth the leathern pouch of his sling—and was pulling the tough thongs back to make a natural gag.

NOTHING is so fearful to a feline animal as to have its tongue caught by a foreign object. Even a common house cat will gag its jaws apart when one catches its tongue between thumb and forefinger, rather than close the jaws and thereby escape the grip on their tongue.

The same principle applies to lions, tigers, and other larger types of the cat family—and Ozar's panther was no exception. The instant it felt the cutting thongs tear the corners of its mouth it turned its attention to freeing itself of that gagging band of leather.

The panther rolled on its back—the movement which might have spelled death for a less skillful foe. But Ozar was dancing away, holding one end of the thong; during the split interval he had been atop the raging panther, he had securely knotted the sling about the cat's head.

Ducking its skull between its death-dealing front paws, the panther left its body unguarded for a tiny space. And Ozar took advantage of the moment to twist a loop of his sling thong about the crook in the panther's hind leg.

With one leg trussed to its neck, where every jerk meant a fresh pull on the gagging pouch, the panther turned into an explosion of flesh and bone.

Cringing backward, away from the lashing claws and widespread jaws, Ozar watched the animal bound and roll and twist, a blur of tawny color on the floor.

Larxatun got on his feet, fright forgotten in the never-to-be-forgotten spec-
tacle being enacted before his eyes. The
ears of the two men seemed shattered
by the horrible screams of the mad
panther, intensified by the boxlike struc-
ture of the tiny chamber.

The two men leaped away as the spin-
nung panther shot into their corner,
claw scratching deep furrows in the
limestone floor, jaws slinging pads of
white foam tinged with red onto the
bodies of the human beings.

Larxatun cringed in the farthest cor-
ner, but Ozar was out on the floor, his
hand gripping the pouch of sling-pebbles
he carried in his girdle—a crude black-
jack.

For a fleeting instant, the raging
panther reared up against the opposite
wall, its ridged backbone making a
knotted hump down its taut, sinewy
back; and before it could whirl in its
mad efforts to throw off the choking
gag, Ozar had flung in a sharp blow of
the stone bag.

_Bam!_ There was a hollow thud of
blackjack against bone, and with a final
ear-bursting scream, the panther de-
scribed a somersault in the air and
smashed to the rock floor, dazed by
Ozar’s vicious blow.

Not a second did the white youth
waste as the big cat’s quivering body
lay stretched out before him, one leg
tightly caught by the thong of the sling,
the slavering tongue hanging from the
wrenched-open mouth.

Again the blackjack rose and fell,
with a sickening crack on the base of
the panther’s skull; and then Ozar was
astraddle the quivering form, remov-
ing the thong from the animal’s leg and
mouth.

He wished he had snatched his knife
from the neck of the dead warrior be-
fore pursuing Tarx; one plunge now,
and the big cat would be dead. But the
sling would serve as effectively, if not
so easily.

Jerk ing the sling free, Ozar lifted
the panther’s body with a mighty effort,
and slipped the thongs about its tawny
neck. Then, drawing the straps tight,
he tied the animal’s front legs closely to
its belly, so that he would be safe from
the deadly front claws in case the pan-
ther recovered its senses.

That done, Ozar stood spread-legged
over the panting body of the animal,
and taking its great jaws in his hands,
started to twist the head. Around—
farther, farther, twisted the feline’s
great skull, while Larxatun watched,
fascinated.

Ozar’s muscles became steel
knots under the bronzed skin;
cords pulsed on his neck. Al-
most a complete revolution, he turned
the panther’s head on its shoulders;
while sweat poured in streams from his
purpled features, and great veins stood
out on his arms and hands.

There was a sharp snap, and Ozar
felt the animal’s neck break under the
terrific pressure. With a defiant laugh
twisting his lips, Ozar let the dead
body drop, and stood up, panting with
exhaustion.

While Ozar flung himself over the
soft, warm body of the dead panther,
Larxatun untied the white man’s pre-
cious sling, and wrapped it tenderly
about Ozar’s brow as he rested.

And while the white youth rested
from his rigorous battle, the big Aztec
attempted to reopen the door through
which they had tumbled. His face
turned chalky as he found that the door
could not be moved from the inside!

Disdaining the body of the dead an-
imal, Ozar and Larxatun started the
rounds, pressing each white stone with
their palms, searching for hidden lev-
ers. Almost simultaneously, the two
men cried out—for each had discovered
a revolving stone, revealing a tunnel
leading out of the chamber!

They looked at each other in wonde-
ment, then peered into the openings
which each had found. They were
three feet square, and waist-high above the level of the floor; and so cleverly had the Aztec engineers fitted the stones that they looked identical to the other masonry which walled and ceiled the tiny room.

As Ozar stepped forward to peer into Larxatun’s entrance, he felt a slab on the floor give slightly beneath his weight; and as he leaped back, the stone tilted to reveal a slanted runway leading into a deeper passage.

A nauseating stench of meat and panther scent assailed their nostrils; and as the tilting stone swung back into place, like a teeter: restoring itself to level, the two men knew they had solved the secret of the panther’s mysterious appearance. The sinking stone merely provided a runway for it to escape the den where it had been kept.

They were still confronted with the problem of which of the three openings to take. The foul smell of the animal den made them decide against trying their fortune through that route.

The door opened by Ozar went into inky blackness, from which came the musty odor of long-sealed passages. That found by Larxatun emitted a rush of damp, sweet air, which rippled the brown locks bound by Ozar’s sling as he bent to sniff the breath of wind from the opening.

“Perhaps this leads to the Crystal Lake which surrounds the city, Larxatun,” surmised Ozar, pointing to the wind channel. “Let us try this door.”

Larxatun’s swarthy, sweat-glistening face nodded assent; and with Ozar pushing his heavy body, the Indian wedged his form through the opening, and found himself in a four-foot conduit hewn through solid bed rock.

A moment later, Ozar, having closed his own door, had reentered the passage behind Larxatun, thereby making the most serious mistake of his sojourn in Karnux.

With a grinding of stone against stone, the door swung shut behind them, and they were forever prevented from attempting to get back into the grim room which had so nearly been the scene of their slaughter.

Weird chills coursed up and down their spines as they heard the stone door grate into place. What fate lay before them in this pitch-black tunnel? The roar of wind and water was now like a gigantic sea shell pressed to their ear-drums as, stooped nearly double, they began groping their way through the damp passage.

They found the floor of the tunnel was level; they were neither climbing, nor sloping downward. Foot by foot, they felt their way along the dripping bed rock.

No whit of light cast its silver bar into the gloom of the passage; they were as shut off from the sheen of heaven as if they had been sealed alive at the earth’s core.

Inch by inch, their breathing magnified in their straining ear-drums, the two made their way along the slimy passage. The draft of the wind throbbed against their temples; the scrape and slush of their sandaled feet caused weird echoes.

Suddenly, with harsh screams of fear, the two felt the stone floor drop away beneath their groping feet. Fluttering hands pitched forward, and found nothingness!

Scrambling for balance, they felt themselves hurtle forward into yawning space, into an abyss of whose depth they had no idea, so pitch-black was all space about them.

Ozar had the sensation of falling a long way. He felt the fat form of Larxatun press against him once or twice, as they plummeted down—down—down through sickening space.

And then they struck the surface of icy water, and plunged far—far under a swirling current!
CHAPTER VI.
TARX PLANS VENGEANCE.

WHEN Tarx had hurled himself into the secret chamber, with Ozar hot on his heels, he had dropped panting on the floor until he heard his pursuer slide to a baffled stop on the outside of the revolving stone door.

An evil gleam shone from the high priest’s single eye as he stood up, still bathed in sweat from his unaccustomed exertion, and padded silently across the tiny room.

Tarf had had previous experience with rebellious prisoners. It was for this reason that his engineers, years before, had built his elaborate underground system of passages and secret rooms, which literally honeycombed the bed rock on which the city of Karnux was built.

So it was that he had constructed, at convenient points, secret doors which enabled him to vanish, apparently through a stone wall. Many of these rooms had dens of wild animals adjoining, so that Tarx might, on occasion, create the illusion of having turned into a savage beast, as the superstitious Aztecs gave him credit of being able to do.

Outside, Tarx could hear Ozar and the panting Larxatun talking; and he knew Ozar would soon be searching for a secret door. Tarx realized that in his American adversary he had a foe far superior in brain and physical strength to any of the Aztecs in the Valley of the Navajadas.

Feeling along the smooth wall with the tips of his sensitive fingers, Tarx opened the door leading to the musty passage.

An instant before climbing into the opening, the high priest tipped the balancing rock on the floor which would release the savage, hunger-crazed panther in its den beneath. At the same time, the outside door swung on its axis, and Larxatun tumbled into the cubicle.

Had he not fallen upon his back, Larxatun could have caught the flutter of scarlet robes as Tarx vanished into the secret opening, the door closing noiselessly on its socket.

Tarf got to his feet—this passage was amply high for a tall man—and hastened along a rocky floor carpeted with thick fiber mats. Although the passage was completely dark, Tarx knew its every turn and flight of stairs from long familiarity with his complex system of subterranean tubes.

A few moments later, Tarx was revolving another secret door, which admitted him to a corridor leading outside the Temple of Gold.

Adjusting his helmet and straightening his humming-birds’ robes, the high priest of Karnux stalked majestically down the corridor and out into the square surrounding the base of the great temple. The air was ablaze with the first light of dawn.

ABOVE him, seeming to hold up the blue vault of the heavens, towered the snow-white pyramid, rising in lofty terraces toward the sky. At its summit, two alabaster sanctuaries were built, overlooking the jasper block on which, years before, the parents of Ozar had been slain in the name of Yaxob the Rain God.

Unquenchable fires burned on the top of the Temple of Gold, as they did on the other and smaller pyramids which rose above the common houses and palaces in various parts of the city.

To the south, the Palace of Montezirka, residence of Queen Esta, was surrounded by a wall of unburned bricks and cement. The royal apartments had walls incrusted with alabasters and richly tinted stucco. They led through long arcades, and through intricate labyrinths of shrubbery, into gardens where baths and sparkling fountains
were overshadowed by groves of cedar and cypress. It represented Aztec civilization at its height.

Clustered all about under the palaces and temples, the city of Karnux stretched, its red-paved streets radiating from the Temple of Gold like spokes from a hub.

Market places were beginning to teem with activity, as vendors arrived to begin their day's barter, selling chests of ground chocolate, reams of maguey paper, baskets of copal, loads of lime, jars of liquid amber and sacks of scarlet feathers.

It was a luxurious picture, surpassing in glory and wealth even the magnificent cities found and destroyed by Cortes in the Valley of Mexico more than four hundred years before.

The city was just beginning to bestir itself, arising with the sun which poised, like a copper globe, on the distant rim of the Navajadas. To-day was the day set aside every five years for the rites of the Plumed Serpent—and Tarx smiled evilly as he contemplated the victims he would soon be offering up for sacrifice.

Going to the eastern side of the great pyramid, bathed in the rosy glow of dawn, Tarx stood at the base of a huge stairway which sloped upward to the level of the second terrace.

At the top of the stairs, a great Plumed Serpent had been carved from volcanic rock; it was in front of this statue that the rites of the day were to be conducted.

Climbing the stairs with measured tread, Tarx arrived before the Plumed Serpent, with its grinning, fang-studded jaws and stone carved plumes, painted red and inlaid with gold and precious stones.

At either side of the statue's head, two black-robed priests decorated with the mystic symbols of their order worked out in beaten silver, stood like ebony figures, their button-black eyes staring straight ahead into the glare of the sun.

Tarx's gaze lifted beyond the open-jawed statue of the sacred serpent, traveling up the undulating humps of the snake's body, the tail ending in a spiral curve at the top of the Temple of Gold—serving as massive balustrades for the stairs which went to the very base of the tapering sanctuaries on the summit of the pyramid, from which burned the sacred fires of the altars.

The high priest's bony fingers clasped about the whistle which dangled from his neck by a leather string, and placing it to his lips, he blew a weird blast.

At the signal, the two black-mantled priests on either side of the Plumed Serpent came to life. Out of the black folds of their garments came trumpets of conch shell, which they placed to their lips for the first time in five years.

As the high priest turned to face the rising sun, the air trembled with the double blasts of the shells—the wild, uncanny call for the nobles and priesthood of Karnux to assemble at the worshiping space before the Plumed Serpent.

WHILE the last eerie echoes of the trumpet call died over the glittering white buildings and crystal waterways of the Aztec city, the high priest Tarx walked slowly down the staircase, to disappear in the corridor from which he came.

But from the red-stone palaces surrounding the pyramid, the nobles and lords among the Aztecs began to assemble. Gold and silver and precious gems mingled with gorgeous featherwork and skirts of the men and women; soon the tiered steps of the stairway were filling with tall, somber-faced Aztecs and their wives, in readiness for the holy ceremonies to begin.

A murmur of admiration and reverence swept through the gathering throng as Queen Esta made her appearance,
resting at ease on the embroidered pillows of her royal palanquin.

A canopy, blazing with burnished gold, shaded the regal carriage, which was borne on the backs of twelve attendants. Gaudy feathers and many-colored gems made the sight one of dazzling brilliance.

The queen looked darkly beautiful, clad in her bodice which resembled the scales of a goldfish, wearing her jeweled crown with its plumes of green feathers falling about her shoulders.

Her arms and ankles were decorated with bands of finely beaten gold inset with jade; she carried in her hand the golden arrow, scepter of authority, which her grandfather, the great King Montezirka, had held before her.

But a look of brooding, of nameless dread, shown through the dark eyes of the queen; and she averted her face as the royal palanquin was borne up the aisle between the throngs of nobility to take her position near the Plumed Serpent.

It was the first rites she had ever attended since blossoming into womanhood. Why should her face be sad?

The air was a din of sound, from the wooden gongs and turtle shells, which were being beaten by naked slaves, in keeping with the pagan ceremony.

In a few moments, the black-robed priests would begin their rituals—boresome affairs, which lasted until the sun was halfway to the zenith.

The climax of the rites of the Plumed Serpent would be when the statue of stone would talk—when words of wisdom would issue from its rocky throat, to startle and mystify the Aztecs. All eyes would be fixed on the dark cavern of the monster's throat; even the holy men would bow before the talking idol of the Aztecs.

And then, from the very maw of the statue itself, would tumble human sacrifices, bound tightly with leathern thongs. These would be seized upon by the priests, and in a few moments Tarx, resplendent in his scarlet robes, would come upon the scene by a rear door, to cut out their hearts and offer them to the lips of the Plumed Serpent.

Such were the ancient rites of the savage Aztecs.

TARX did not pause to watch the nobility assemble for the ceremony; his part of the mysterious rites was deep in the bowels of the Temple of Gold.

He descended through pitch-black underground passages to the lairs of his blue-feathered warriors, and chose two of his men to accompany him.

In a few moments, they arrived at the end of the corridor where lay the gory bodies of the warriors slain by Ozar.

"We will find our prisoners inside the panther chamber," explained the high priest in reply to the unspoken questions of the warriors, as they peered with startled eyes into the dungeon pits which held no prisoners. "They will be already slain, but their slashed and broken bodies will serve as a lesson to the populace, as evidence of the Plumed Serpent's wrath."

They made their way to the end of the corridor. A thrill coursed through the evil priest's body as he leaned against the revolving door. His warriors stood ready with leveled spears, prepared to prod the panther back into its den.

A startled cry burst from the lips of the blue-armored warriors as they stepped within the chamber, and an instant later Tarx saw them back out of the door, eyes popping.

"Look within, O Tarx!" they babbled, in reply to the high priest's alarmed questioning.

A pang of fear shot through Tarx's heart as he peered within the chamber. For there, its dead body laying limp and cold before them, was the panther!

It took but a glance to determine that
the animal's neck had been broken. Its head lay at a grotesque angle on its shoulders.

For a moment, Tarx's face was ashen as his eyes swept the cubicle for the prisoners. But as he did so, he saw smears of dried crimson on the wall where the secret doors permitted exit from the chamber.

"Ah!" breathed the high priest, turning to his warriors. "Ozar and the fat slave chose the wrong door. When our engineers were hewing through the rock to make a passage to the Temple of Gold, they were forced to quit when they reached a deep hole leading to the underground source of the Crystal Lake.

"They closed that passage and built another—the one which I took to escape from the panther's den."

Tарx chuckled evilly as he thought of the fate which awaited the white man and his companion.

Speaking in a whisper like the hiss of a viper, he briefly sketched his campaign of action. When he was finished, the two warriors nodded eagerly.

CHAPTER VII.
UNDER THE CITY.

Ozar thrashed his way to the surface of the inky water amid a drench of lather. Blowing the ice-cold fluid from his mouth, and shaking it out of his eyes, the white youth began treading water as he twisted about, searching for a trace of Larxatun.

A faint light came from somewhere, playing eerily off the dripping rock walls of the cavern. From the agitated condition of the greenish water, Ozar knew they had fallen into the underground fountain which was the source of the Crystal Lake that girdled the city of Karnux.

That they had plunged a great distance through a hole in the bed rock above them was evidenced by the aching muscles and throbbing ribs of his right side, where he had struck the water. His head still ached from the impact.

"Larxatun! Larxatun!" gasped the white man, swimming hard against the water which seemed to be spouting out of the earth beneath him, preventing him from sinking.

A cold fear gripped Ozar's heart as he failed to hear an answer to his cry. Was Larxatun killed by his fall into the icy water?

Suddenly a sound of tremendous blowing and puffing caught his ear, and Ozar turned in the water to see the dim light glistening off a pair of bulbous eyes, and puffing, dark-skinned cheeks. Larxatun, unskilled in the tricks of underwater swimming, had waited for the push of the underground fountain to propel him to the surface!

The slave's hair billowed about his roundish shoulders like a black parasol, as he paddled closer to Ozar in the gloom.

"Art thou safe, O Master?" gasped the Indian, ducking his face beneath the water to wash off the clinging foam. Ozar's teeth bared in a flashing smile of assurance.

"Would that we were, Larxatun," he replied, fighting the push of the water with well-timed strokes. "We're in a cavern under the city of Karnux, and how safe we are, Yaxob the Rain God alone knows."

But the swimmers could not stay indefinitely on the crest of the spouting water which gushed out of the earth. Soon a cruising eddy caught them, and they whirled out into the cavern, held in the teeth of a racing current.

Even Ozar, who had learned to be a human beaver in the water from his experience in the mountain streams and pools near the grotto of his foster father, Claxit the Arrow-maker, found difficulty in keeping his head above the
surface as they raced blindly between speeding rock walls.

Larxatun’s bulk, however, made up for his inferior swimming skill, he bobbed on the surface of the flooding torrent like a ball of grease.

With powerful strokes, Ozar fought to keep from being swirled against the rocky walls of the channel. Well he knew that the flesh could be scraped from his bones by one vicious swipe of the current against the shearing rocks.

Swimming side by side, the pair spun dizzily for a space in a gurgling vortex, then felt the undertow seize them, and they were once more heading toward the source of light which grew steadily brighter.

The underground channel plunged down a short rapids, blinding them with spray before dumping them into a churning backwash at the bottom of the rocky chute.

Miraculously escaping broken bones or split skulls, Ozar and Larxatun wallowed over a bed of rocks and splashed out from under the drenching spume which was hurled against the roof above to slide down upon them in dripping pads.

Now the water was more quiet, like a mountain torrent when it spreads out over a sandy, level bed; and ahead of them, at the end of a long, black conduit through the bed rock, the swimmers saw a blinding half circle of light—the outlet of the underground stream which fed the Crystal Lake.

Floating on their backs, sucking in great gasps of air, the two watched the corrugated surface of the cavern roof glide past, lights and shadows becoming more intense as they approached the mouth of the watercourse.

As they neared the opening, Ozar twisted over on his side, peering out through the blinding glare of sunlight until his pupils became adjusted from the coal-black of the interior channel.

He could see the shimmering waves of the lake; the reflection of the waving grasses of the bank painted on the foamy outflow of water from the underground cavern, which spread like a whitish-green veil over the surface.

"We are approaching the outdoor world, thanks to the gods," muttered Ozar, swimming closer to Larxatun. "Let us halt on your ledge of rock, to rest and watch."

Nodding assent to the wisdom of the white man’s plan, Larxatun cut through the water with powerful arms, until he pulled his chunky body up on a projecting bench of stone.

As Ozar followed him, he noticed for the first time the rippling muscles which padded Larxatun’s body.

The man was a perfect specimen of physical development, Ozar noticed; a season of brisk exercise, and he would have worked off the clinging rolls of fat which his imprisonment had caused. Although tubby and ill-proportioned now, Ozar knew that underlying the surplus meat were strong bones clad with powerful muscles.

Ozar was developing a real affection for the round-faced, humble Aztec who was to have died with him at the mouth of the Plumed Serpent.

As the two lay on the rock, glistening like a pair of seals, Larxatun swept the sliding millrace of water with keen eyes.

The moment they were outside, on the Crystal Lake, they would be confronted with perils of far more serious nature than swirling water or jagged rocks; for their very appearance in daylight would rouse the Aztecs like hunting dogs at the sight of game.

Suddenly, Larxatun’s ink-black eyes narrowed. He leaned forward, peering closely at the point where the black roof of the cavern met the blinding glare of the sky.

The image cast in the frothy water was fringed with the swaying grasses which grew on the arched bank overhanging the opening of the cavern.
“Look, my lord!” exclaimed the underling in a tense whisper, seizing the white man’s glistening shoulder with a trembling hand. “Dost thou see?”

Peering in the direction of his pointing finger, the white man gasped, eyes jutting with astonishment.

For, reflected in the torrent of water which slid out into the lake from the rocky hole in the earth, were the stern and terrible features of two warriors, leaning over the bank with beady eyes that peered downward, fixed on the outflow of water!

Clutched in their hands were long spears, whose obsidian heads reflected twin sparks of sunlight on the shimmering surface of the water below!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SLING OF OZAR.

Flattening themselves against the protruding shelf of stone in the damp recesses of the underground stream, Ozar and Larxatun felt bitterness flood over their souls as they realized their helpless situation.

No living creature, even the strongest fish of the sea, could hope to swim back up that sweeping current. Yet they could not remain long on the rock; the cold rush of air which followed the sliding water to the sunlight was numbing their bodies.

Muscles ached with countless wounds and scratches, throbbed with the pain of deep bruises caused by their concussion with the water after tumbling from the hidden passage so far above the underground fountain.

Worst of all, their very vitals cried for food; for neither fugitive had eaten for many hours, and the perils of the past night of horror had taxed their strength sorely.

“The great Tarx has triumphed over us at last, O Lord Ozar!” groaned Larxatun, his eyes glued to the leering reflection of the savage Aztecs who squatted on the grassy bank overlooking the cavern’s outlet.

“There is yet a chance, Larxatun,” whispered the white man. “The warriors who guard the outlet of this hidden river have not yet seen us; they are but awaiting the moment when our bodies shall be washed into view. Possibly they think us dead.”

Larxatun shuddered. “Would that we were, Lord Ozar,” the slave despaired. “Well do I know the skill of Tarx’s spearmen! They never miss their mark. We will be slaughtered like dogs.”

Ozar pressed the sling tighter about his forehead, and adjusted the sopping girdle of ocelot fur about his waist.

“I have a plan,” Ozar announced. “Wait thou here, Larxatun; thine eyes will tell thee when to come forth to join me. Perhaps we shall never see one another again, until we meet in the sky temple of the sun god.”

The two raised their hands in the mute, but expressive, gesture of farewell common among the Aztecs. With typical Indian stoicism, the slave did not reveal on his impassive features the grief which tore at his heart at the thought of seeing Ozar the Aztec, go to his death.

Cautiously plunging his feet into the icy water, so as to make no noise which might warn the ears of the waiting Aztecs outside, Ozar slid his body into the stream up to his shoulders.

Then, with a last glance at the slave, he let the tearing current snatch him away from the rock ledge, and disappeared in a foam-flecked swirl of water.

Straight to the bottom of the channel, Ozar forced his body, knifing downward through the water with the trained skill of a beaver. The current tugged at his skin, swashed at his thrashing legs as if to hurl his body off balance; but down the white man went.
He felt the current checking, saw the water suddenly turn gray, then a light shade of green. He knew that meant he had been rushed out into the blazing sunlight; he was no longer in the protection of the gushing cavern.

Had he been seen? Or was his body deep enough under the foaming torrent which swept from the underground channel, that he had escaped those watching eyes of the warriors who crouched on the bank, awaiting him?

Ozar felt the force of the current leave him, and the earth drop off sharply beneath his feet. He dived still deeper, until the increasing pressure of the water seemed to crush his ribs.

That meant he was out in the lake proper. He knew well how crystal clear the water was; he must veer to one side, keeping under the spreading veil of white, bubbly water caused by the gushing stream of the underground fountain, or else his sleek body would be magnified by the water.

The pressure slammed his eardrums. His lungs seemed to be swelling, like a balloon about to explode. He gasped, and a chain of bubble shot upwards. That was bad.

For a moment, the fatigue which racked his aching muscles tempted him to sink in a fatal lungful of water. Then the vision of Queen Esta seemed to blaze before his eyes, her face wistful and tender, her lips parted to reveal enchanting, pearl-white teeth—

Groaning inwardly, Ozar struck forth with powerful strokes, forcing his tired muscles to propel him closer to the bank. He felt the pebble bottom of the lake against his knees. The water pressure lessened.

His brain pounded, and he fought to keep unconsciousness from engulfing him. Then his senses cleared as his body followed the steep rise of the bank, and a moment later he was crawling, under four feet of water, on a sandy beach.

Struggling to his feet, Ozar's head and shoulders broke the surface of the lake. As he shook the water from his eyes and ears, he saw that he had swum some fifty yards from the mouth of the underground river.

His heart pounded and his blue eyes blazed fiercely as he saw the forms of the two blue-feathered warriors squatting on the bank, looking down into the torrent beneath them. They had not seen the body of Ozar as it glided silently beneath them, far under the foam-covered surface of the river!

Ozar shuddered. It seemed that in spite of his best efforts, the evil Tarx was always one step ahead of him. How quickly he had ordered his warriors to guard against the fugitives' escape from the river!

And then one of the warriors chanced to look up. He sprang to his feet with a war cry bursting from his lips as he pointed toward the sandy beach. There, sliding out of the water like some sleek white water animal, stood Ozar the Aztec!

It was too far for an accurate spear cast; but the warriors lost no time in dropping aside their javelins and picking up the bows which lay ready to their hands.

Ozar was smiling as he braced his legs upon the firm, yellow sand. Unhurriedly, with perfect calm, he unwound the leathern thongs which encircled his brow. His left hand slipped into the pouch at his girdle.

The warriors were jerking reed-shafted arrows from the basket-woven quivers on their shoulders, nocking the barb-tipped arrows to bowstrings. Their every movement was a study in expert precision, not a wasted effort.

The air was whining under Ozar's revolving sling as he spun it about his head with ever-increasing speed. And then the white youth released one thong, and a pebble sped through the air with the speed of a bullet.
Crack! Even as he released his bowstring, the foremost of the two warriors lurched backward, great hands clutching at his coppery-skinned neck. Crimson spurted between the warrior’s clutching fingers from the tiny wound in his throat. His face distorted with agony, he swayed, his knees buckled, and then the Aztec toppled forward and fell, limp as a wooden idol, into the swirling millrace below.

There was a geyser of splashing water; the body of the dead warrior rolled a second on the surface of the surging wash, and then sank, to be carried out into the deepest part of the Crystal Lake.

The arrow from the warrior’s bow bounced over the rubble to pierce a thicket by Ozar’s side; and then the white man fell flat on his stomach as the shaft from the remaining warrior’s bow sliced the air where his chest had been a split second before.

It was a dramatic picture, next—the sight of two polished fighters, reloading their weapons with cool skill, with the knowledge burning in the breast of each that he who shot first should live, and he who was a trifle late should die.

CHAPTER IX.

TRAPPED.

The Indian was fitting the notched end of his arrow to the bowstring with steady hands, even as Ozar thumbed a pebble into the pouch of his sling and whirled the droneing weapon about his head.

Again the sharp whine of the speeding pebble, and this time a long flash of light as the obsidian-headed shaft sped on its way; but the Indian was dead with a stone in his brain ere the arrow left the bowstring, so that the arrow went slightly amiss in its zipping flight.

Even so, Ozar’s body winced as the needle-pointed arrow burned his shoulder to embed itself in the heavy lump of muscle at the top of his arm, next the biceps.

No sign of pain crossed the white man’s face as he jerked the stone barb from his flesh; but a warm gush of red spurted from the wound, and flowed down his arm to dribble off the finger tips, as Ozar cast the arrow aside.

His ears registered a second splash as the body of Tarx’s remaining guard plunged to its watery grave below. And then Ozar slithered into the waving grass which furred the lake bank, to hide and rest.

His keen eyes saw the form of Larxatun ride like a chip on the surface of the sliding river; and then the fat slave came splashing toward the bank like some clumsy sea walrus flipping its way upon the rocks.

Rejoicing and gratitude beamed from every inch of Larxatun’s moonish face as he dragged his naked length up on the bank, and a second later wriggled through the tall water grass to throw himself by Ozar’s side.

“Now we have but to lie in the grasses until the sun god has disappeared beyond the western rim of the Navajadas,” panted Larxatun, combing the long hair from his face with outspread fingers. “I know of slaves in the mud-stray hovels outside the city who will feed us.”

For many minutes, the exhausted pair lay hidden in the tall reeds. But their rest was not to last for long. For there came to their ears the muffled pad of sandaled feet on the bank above them, and both men cringed deeper into the recesses of the spearlike grass.

Their breath caught sharply in their throats as they saw the shadow of Tarx fall along the bank.

There was something grim and terrible about the one-eyed priest’s face as he walked over the spot where Ozar and Larxatun lay flattened in the grass; he was muttering to himself.
Ozar’s hands itched to get his sling into action; but the tall reeds prevented his using the weapon.

The two men, from their hiding place, saw Tarx drag his scarlet humming-birds’ skin robe up a staircase leading into a door of the city walls. A moment later, the priest disappeared.

“Where goest the vile worm, Larxatun?” asked Ozar, knowing that the former slave was familiar with the city.

“It is a long corridor, leading to the Temple of Gold,” replied the underling.

“Only Tarx or his priests may tread upon it. Even Queen Estha herself fears to enter that door.”

Ozar’s eyes narrowed. Suddenly he turned to Larxatun, muscles aquiver with excitement.

“We will follow Tarx—overtake him in his holy passageway,” the white man hissed, closing his fingers over the sling which was still wrapped about his wrist. “No more will the evil high priest of Karnux hold the Aztecs in bondage and torture!”

Larxatun paled, as if fearing a bolt of lightning from the sky to cut down a person hold enough to utter such works of treason against the holy places of Karnux.

“But no—no, my lord!” babbled the slave, as he saw Ozar getting to his feet, resolute determination stamped on his finely chiseled features. “It is a sacred hall—death would await thy first step—”

But Ozar was already climbing the steep bank.

“Come with me—or hold thy tongue, as thou chooseth, Larxatun!” shot back Ozar the Aztec. He sprang over the brow of the slope and strode toward the forbidden door where Tarx had vanished, and as he pushed open the door which entered the corridor where only the holy men of Karnux might tread, he found the big slave close at his heels.

Swiftly, they went through the gloom of a long, tunnellike corridor. No trace of Tarx did they see; the passage led straight toward the Temple of Gold, where even now the multitudes of Aztecs were gathered to witness the rites of the Plumed Serpent.

They came to the base of a steep flight of stairs, which they knew led upward through the interior of the pyramid; but still no trace of the red-robed priest did they see.

Moving silently, like stalking panthers, the pair of fugitives climbed the stairs and headed down a level stretch of corridor. At the end, a door of polished wood stood open, revealing a small room whose walls were rich, feather-work tapestry.

With beating hearts, the two stood outside the doorway, scanning the interior carefully before entering.

The ceiling was paneled with rich, dark woods. The rare odor of incense wafted from a censer of polished jade in the center of the room; stools of highly colored wood covered with scarfs of priceless cloth rested on the mat-covered floor.

The light came from a series of windowlike openings on the opposite wall, and above the level of their heads; and as Ozar peered at the peculiar grating which covered the apertures, a burst of recognition flooded his brain.

This gorgeously appointed room was the interior of the head of the Plumed Serpent, whose statue writhed its way down the staircase of the great pyramid! No wonder the Plumed Serpent could “speak”—to terrify the primitive Aztecs on the steps outside! Tarx could stand within its stone head, and talk through the openings which were nothing more or less than the Plumed Serpent’s open jaws!

Once again, Ozar felt his belief in the pagan gods slipping at such evidence of deception and falsity.

A feeling of peril coursed through Ozar as he stepped forth cautiously into the room which was the throat of the
Plumed Serpent. Larxatun pushed close on his heels, eyes wide and fearful.

Ozar glanced about. No trace of a living thing did he see. The chamber was deserted. Outside, he could hear the chanting priests, going through the ritual of the Plumed Serpent ceremony; it occurred to him that that was where Tarx had gone.

Again that sixth sense warned Ozar of danger; but even as the foreboding thought flitted into his mind, he saw the heavy wooden door crash shut behind them, as if propelled by heavy springs.

A cry of desperation on his lips, the white man sprang to the door and pounded the lacquered panels with knotted fists. But the door was unyielding as a stone wall; they were trapped!

CHAPTER X.
THE PLUMED SERPENT SPEAKS.

A guttural chuckle, reminding Ozar of a wild animal snarling down the meat of its kill, issued from across the room behind the white man. Ozar whirled about—to face the leering features of Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs!

There he was, parting the heavy folds of the curtains of the opposite wall. He seemed without fear, as if knowing he held the situation in the hallow of his palm at last.

A wooden sword was suspended in the girdle under the scarlet robe; and beneath the priest’s bony palm was the mosaic-handled stone knife of sacrifice.

“Thou shouldst know thou hast no child’s chance of victory, against the mighty Tarx,” sneered the priest, a leering grin on his features. “He saw thee hiding like frogs in the grass, and knew thou wouldst follow him here, like fools.”

Ozar cursed himself for his foolhardy action.

“Now thou art in my clutches—without chance of escape, this time. Otske!

Thou escaped the stony dungeon; thou vanquished the Sacred Panther; thou and the fat toad thou rescued managed to escape the vengeance of my warriors.”

Tarx’s voice was sibilant as the hiss of a viper.

“But what are prison walls, and wild animals, and mighty warriors? Hurrah! They are nothing, beside the power of the mighty Tarx!”

Ozar’s eyes were flashing like live coals under slitted lids. He was watching Tarx’s black, skinny fingers, idly caressing the turquoise-hilted knife in his belt. Before the evil priest could snatch that weapon from his girdle, Ozar knew he could pounce upon him and sink throttling fingers in that leathery throat.

But the red-robed priest seemed to probe the thoughts which seethed in the white man’s brain.

“Thou art thinking how easy it would be to spring upon me, even as thou sprang upon the panther?” chuckled the priest. “Perhaps before thy brain becomes hot, it would be wise to look behind thee.”

A sudden rustle of sound caught his eardrums, as of curtains falling aside. At the same instant, a gasp of fear wrenched from the fat lips of Larxatun, by his side.

Turning, Ozar saw that Tarx spoke the truth. For standing along the wall behind him, the curtains still swaying behind them, stood three towering Aztec warriors with tensed bows pointing arrows toward the bodies of the two fugitives!

Ozar’s square shoulders drooped. Ten times more dangerous than a raging panther were those poison-tipped arrows which needed only a nod of Tarx’s head to pierce his body.

“What sayest thou now of the power of Tarx?” taunted the high priest, reveling in the despair he saw in Ozar’s eyes.
“Speak quickly, for in a moment thou shalt die. In a moment, the black-robed priests outside are going to ask, ‘What is offered the Plumed Serpent for sacrifice?’ And when the Serpent speaks—it will be to spit from its jaws the dead body of him who calls himself Ozar the Aztec.”

Ozar’s nostrils heaved in angry scorn.

“My dying words shall be that thou, Tarx, art the spawn of a devil!” snarled the white man, his knuckles clenching.

Livid fire blazed from Tarx’s single eye, but he turned to Larxatun.

“And what sayest thou, fat son of a toad?”

The quivering Larxatun started to speak, then gasped, as he saw a flash of white hurtle through the air. He saw Ozar’s flying leap upset the priest, saw Ozar hold Tarx off balance even as his powerful arms caught the wrist of his knife arm.

In the hat of an eye lash, Ozar had jerked Tarx’s body erect, and was prodding the high priest in the back with the point of his own knife, using Tarx’s body as a living shield against the arrows of the startled warriors.

“Release so much as one arrow, and this knife shall drink the life from Tarx’s body!” came the high-pitched snarl of Ozar, his eyes glittering like points of fire from behind the tangled screen of the high priest’s coarse black hair. “Kill Larxatun, and the life of thy priest and master is forfeit!”

Tarx’s face was a purple mask of rage, but the feel of that knife blade against his spine made him realize that his life was in Ozar’s hands. Two brief seconds—and the tables of fate had been turned!

One of the warriors shifted to one side, fingers tense on the bowstring. Then his muscles relaxed as he saw Tarx wince when Ozar applied pressure with his palm to the fatal knife which was sinking into Tarx’s flesh.

“Drop thy weapons at the feet of Larxatun!” commanded Tarx, his voice choked with killing rage.

With baffled murder lust making horrible cartoons of their cruel features, the three Aztec warriors reluctantly withdrew the tension from their bows, and laid the weapons at the feet of the big slave, who still stood transfixed at the unbelievable scene his eyes had witnessed.

FIVE seconds before, these warriors had awaited the nod which should fill him and Ozar full of poisoned barbs. Now Ozar was standing behind the priest, pinioning his arms in the bend of one powerfully muscled elbow—and the weapons of the warriors were clattering at his feet!

“Sever the cords from the bows, and bind the hands and feet of the warriors!” commanded Ozar, still holding the shielding body of the high priest before his own.

Tarx was panting heavily, and seemed on the verge of apoplexy; but the prodding knife blade kept him quiet.

Trembling with eagerness, Larxatun cut the tough strings from the bows at his feet, sawing them loose with the obsidian head of an arrow; and a moment later he was trussing up the three warriors, pulling the cords so that they bit into the flesh of their victims.

With the last warrior lying on his back, bound at knee and wrist and ankle, Larxatun got to his feet, a wide grin illuminating his features. He slapped his palms together in a gesture of finality.

Sweat glistened from Ozar’s brow as he grinned back at the slave. Their jubilance was interrupted by a thunder of sound outside as the ceremonies of the Plumed Serpent swept into their climax—the booming of drums, the harsh click-click-click of the carved-wood tepanaztli, or holy gongs.

Stepping across the room, Ozar peered out through the tooth-notched
jaws of the Plumed Serpent. Bathed in the mellow sunshine outside were groups of nobles of the city, watching the rites of the black-robed priests; and Ozar's heart leaped as he saw the beautiful vision of Queen Esta, sitting tensely on the cushions of her royal palanquin, awaiting the climax of the Plumed Serpent ceremonies.

Larrxatun leaned forward, reaching for the half-drawn sword in the priest's belt, his eyes shining with murder; but Ozar shook his head.

"Thou wouldst not sever this man's head from his body, Larrxatun, when he is down," smiled the white man. "We cannot kill a snake who is helpless."

Larrxatun relaxed obediently, amazed at this showing of justice on the part of Ozar. In the slave's heart, the visions of cruel beatings and fiendish torture at the hands of Tarx called out for retaliation; mercy was unknown to the Aztec. He craved only the death of the fiend who was now getting to his knees.

Ozar, too, was surprised at the demonstration of mercy which had come unsummoned from his heart. He did not know it was Larry Starling, the American, displaying his innate sense of fair play and sportsmanship which does not permit injuring an opponent when he is down.

OUTSIDE, the din of gongs and rattles and drums reached a savage crescendo. The sun glared hotly on the open-jawed statue of the great Plumed Serpent; in a few moments, that deity was to speak to his people.

The drumming ceased at a signal from the priests. The Aztec nobles leaned forward, expectantly. Queen Esta, a nameless dread gnawing at her heart, sat watching the black-robed pagan priests with fascinated eyes.

The priests stood back, before the convex altar of jasper upon which the sacrificial victims of the Plumed Serpent were to die. Then came the question which electrified the hearts of the listeners:

"What is offered the Plumed Serpent for sacrifice?"

The priest chanted the question, holding aloft his arms as he stood under the great statue of the reptile deity. A deathlike silence followed the question. Would the Serpent talk?

And then the priest found himself crushed to the floor of the terrace, as a flapping red bundle tumbled over the lip of the sacred serpent, to crash upon his shoulders. It was the trussed-up form of Tarx, the high priest of Mexliiht, the Sun God!

A glad cry sprang to Queen Esta's lips, ringing out like a silvery peal above the shocked gasp of hundreds of Aztec throats.

As the black-robed priest struggled to his feet to stand gaping open-mouthed at the bundle which was his high priest, writhing on the stones beneath him, a terrible voice issued from the throat of the Plumed Serpent—a voice with the chill of the tomb and the grave, a voice heard but once every five years:

"And now, Aztecs of the great city of Karnux—in the name of Mexliiht, god of the sun, the Plumed Serpent shall bring forth his favored son and his faithful slave. The Serpent hath spoken."

And through the jaws of the sacred statue, there came the graceful form of a tall white man, clad only in the golden fur of an ocelot! As he leaped to the floor below with the lightness of a cat, the form of a fat Indian slave pried through the narrow opening, and thumped heavily to the stones beside him.

Ozar threw up a bronzed arm in a gesture of greeting to Queen Esta, who came forward with inexpressible joy written on her beautiful features. A look of deep understanding flashed between the copper-skinned queen and
Ozar the Aztec; and the girl’s eyes were cups of mist before him.

The white man’s shoulders were erect, his neck pulsed with energy; only the bruises and cuts, and the arrow-wound which still leaked crimson from his shoulder bespoke of Ozar’s struggles.

As the fair queen advanced, Ozar dropped to one knee, his flushed, smiling face gazing unashamed into the eyes of the girl he loved. And the message Ozar read in Esta’s regal glance soothed the pain in his tortured muscles.

“The Plumed Serpent hath spoken, and it is well,” said Esta, her quiet voice ringing over the breathless multitude. “Ozar hath satisfied the first of the Five Sacred Commands of Mexlilitl, and it is well.”

She turned to the squirming body of Tarx, whose cloven tongue was slavering over taut lips as he gazed up from his undignified position with blazing hate in his single eye.

“Thou, O Tarx, hast witnessed the sanction of Ozar by the Plumed Serpent,” she said, forcing back a smile of triumph. “And while thy black-robed priests release thy bonds, thou mayest also witness the pardoning of Ozar the Aztec, for binding thee.”

So saying, the Indian girl touched Ozar’s bleeding shoulder with her golden arrow, scepter of the Monte-zirkas.

“Arise, a free man and noble Aztec,” she decreed. “Thy slave, Larxatun, likewise shall be free; he is thine, O Lord Ozar!”

Ozar arose, placing an arm about the grinning Larxatun.

“I thank thee, gracious queen,” he responded, feasting on the love he read in her eyes. “And Larxatun shall be my brother, not my slave. Huya! I shall need a brother, gracious queen—for the ordeal of the Plumed Serpent is but the first of the five tasks I must perform, ere I can stand before thee and the people of Karnux, in truth, as Ozar the Aztec!”

Larry Starling proved victorious in the fabled Doom Duel, fought with the mightiest warrior of the Aztecs, and thereby fulfilled the command of Mexliti the Sun God and proclaimed himself as Ozar the Aztec. But that contest in the Scarlet Arena was as child’s play compared to the tasks awaiting him. On the walls of the Holy Room were the Five Sacred Commands of Mexliti the Sun God. These Five Commands he must follow to the letter in order to redeem a suffering people from the devilish clutches of Tarx, the high priest of Karnux. He triumphed in the ordeal of the Plumed Serpent. Read of the next—the third—episode in the thrilling adventures of Ozar the Aztec to be found in the March issue of Street & Smith’s Top-Notch, on the stands February 17th. Its title will be “Ozar and the Jade Altar.”
Only by the flick of an ear that was ragged from old whip cuts did the gaunt black Husky betray his awareness of the sound. He was lying just within the open doorway of a solitary cabin that stood well back from the high bank of a winding deadwater. Motionless, he listened to the sound that was coming faintly through the golden hush of the late October afternoon, from somewhere up along the stream.

He knew it was not the sound of a beaver playing. Then he recognized it as the steady dipping of a paddle. For twelve summers that sound of paddling on the Northern rivers had been to him a familiar one.
He stirred uneasily and glanced back across his shoulder. He could not understand the strange and rigid stillness of the man on the bunk.

Seven suns had wheeled above the cabin and the frost-painted woods since the man had ceased to mutter or to move. His hand was hanging across the edge of the bunk. On the floor beneath were bright fragments of shattered glass that still held faint traces of that pungent smell which the Husky long ago had learned to associate with blows and curses. He could not comprehend the enduring immobility of that hand which had been always so ready with the whip.

But that man was the Husky's master. The other dogs of the string had taken to the woods to forage for themselves. Only the big black had remained faithful against loneliness and hunger.

That was the Mackenzie River strain in him—that strain which is capable of the fiercest prides and hatreds, and the stanchest loyalties, of all dogdom.

With unblinking eyes he watched the canoe appear from around a bend on the far side of the deadwater. There was a lone man in the stern, paddling steadily.

The man discovered the cabin and was for a long moment moveless, while the canoe lost headway. Then with a decisive twist of the paddle he swerved the craft and came angling across the deadwater. He made noise, under the high bank, getting out of the canoe.

The Husky got stiffly to his feet. He was old, and he was weary, and his belly was gaunt from hunger. But age had not dimmed the lambent green of his eye, nor starvation weakened his spirit. His dewlaps twitched as the head and shoulders of the climbing man appeared, and his black hackle lifted.

At the top of the bank the man paused. He was a big man, tall and lean and hard as nails. He glanced curiously at the odds and ends of gear lying carelessly about—a decrepit canoe; a toboggan with broken gee-handles; bits of dog harness; a tangle of traps on a log, a heavy ax rusting against a lopsided chopping block. Then he came purposefully toward the cabin.

The big Husky moved to the threshold, swaying a little on his legs. He showed his fangs and a growl of warning rumbled in his throat.

The man stopped short and a low whistle of astonishment broke from his lips. His eyes drew down a little at the outer corners and a crease appeared between them. For a moment he stood very still; then he turned abruptly and went back toward his canoe.

The Husky watched him sullenly. Men moved like that when going for the whip.

Shortly the man came back from his canoe with a generous chunk of red meat in his hand. There was no whip. He paused, not too close to the doorway, and held out the food invitingly. The Husky looked at the meat. In his fine eyes was an eloquence of hunger and of longing. But he didn't move; he had been tricked before.

The man spoke quietly. His voice was pleasant. The black nostrils of the Husky twitched, questing for those subtle emanations by which a dog may judge the worth and soundness of a man. There was about this one none of that pungent smell that meant violence. This one smelled clean and good.

Then came all at once the certain realization that this man meant him no harm—that he wanted to be friendly. And by slow degrees the flattened ears came up and the smoldering suspicion left his eyes. He lifted his tail and rapped a weary tattoo against the split planks of the in-swing door.

The man came forward confidently. The gaunt Husky started to meet him,
whining low with eagerness. But his hunger-weakened legs suddenly gave way and he fell outward, all aspawl upon the door log.

The man went swiftly to his knees and gathered him gently in strong arms and set him on his feet again. Beneath his nose was the sweet, strong smell of the meat that wears treelike horns and runs with amazing swiftness. But despite its tantalizing nearness, despite his ravenous hunger, he somehow could not yet touch it. Something, some strange new force stirring deep within him, made him first turn his head and lick the man’s hand.

When a few minutes later the man emerged from the cabin, he seemed lost in sober thought. He walked to the bank of the deadwater and stood there a long while, looking up and down the stream and across at the timbered benches. Finally he moved downstream and paused to examine a spot where the beavers had been at work.

When he returned he seemed animated by a definite purpose. He unloaded his canoe, piling his traps and duffle and supplies on the bank. Then he took a shovel and went to the edge of the clearing and began to dig a hole that was as long as a man.

The gold of October gave way to the gray veils of November; and these in turn to the white mantle of midwinter. Snow lay deep around the cabin. It blanketed the two-foot ice of the deadwater. It clung in mighty masses upon the slopes of the benches and upon the crowns of the uttermost hills. It was over all.

And more was coming. The gray January afternoon was filled with uneasy flurry, and wind was riding cold and wild among the naked trees.

It was on such days as this, when the man remained indoors from his trap lines, that the black Husky’s new-found happiness reached its peak. There was between the two a strong and enduring bond of affection.

The man would talk to him and scratch his ragged ears, and occasionally rub his nose with such a brisk hand that the tingling of it made him sneeze.

And sometimes the man would wrestle with him, but not too roughly, for he seemed to know that those days of starvation had taken heavy toll of vitality and that recovery of full strength had never come.

The stove was aglow with ruddy heat. Beside it lay the Husky, nose on paws, watching with a curiously attentive eye the drifting curls of smoke that were rising from the man’s pipe. And all at once he became aware of a sound outside that was not of the wind or snow. He pricked up his ragged ears.

The man heard it, too—the slither of snowshoes down the hard-packed incline leading to the door. A moment later there came a knocking on the planks. The Husky stood up, growling softly. The man put down his pipe and spoke a quiet word of command. The growl subsided to a low rumbling deep in the dog’s throat; and he remained obediently by the stove while the man lifted the heavy wooden latch of the door.

Once the Husky had come unexpectedly face to face with a half-grown bear at a bend of the trail. They both had stood stock-still, staring at each other, moveless with surprise. And that was the way the man and his visitor were looking at each other now across the sill.

The Husky’s twitching nose told him that the newcomer was one of those creatures that walk like men and talk like men, but with shorter strides and softer voices. And he backed nearer the wall with hackles slowly lifting. Once he had been unmercifully beaten by his old master. down at Fort Pierre, because he had snapped waringly at the too-presumptuous hand of one of them.
The man was the first to recover from surprise.

"I think," he said quietly, "that you had better come in."

The girl came in, snowshoes clattering woodenly against the floor. There was a wariness in her step that did not escape the man's eyes. He turned and peered searchingly out into the moving curtains of the storm. "You are alone?" he asked.

She nodded. He closed the door—had to push it hard to make the latch catch. She continued to stare at him. Her face within its frame of fur-trimmed parka hood wore an expression of mingled perplexity and dismay.

"I expected to find my brother here. Are you his partner, perhaps?"

"Your brother?"

"Yes. The Indian that brought me in from Fort Pierre refused to come any farther than the top of a hill back yonder. But we could see smoke from there and he assured me it marked the right place. He told me this would be Chris Petersen's cabin. I am Helga Petersen."

"Oh," said the man quietly. Here was the answer to the unknown identity of the man he'd buried. And he knew why the Indian had refused to come to the cabin. That name—Chris Petersen. Even over in the Moosehorn country, whence he himself had come, he had heard whispers of Petersen and his violence and hallucinations. "Crazy Chris," the Indians called him.

"You are tired," he said quickly. "Let's get those webs off, and your parka, and then I'll boil a pot of tea. After that we'll talk."

"You have something to tell me—about my brother?"—quickly.

"Tea first," he said firmly. "And a bite to eat."

He helped her out of the snowshoe thongs. She removed her mittens and parka, shook free the riot of her hair. It was yellow, like the frost-struck leaves of autumn birches. Yellow like the dead man's—only his had been streaked with gray.

He lit the lamp on the table. She sat down on a stool. The warmth of the fire had touched her cheeks, deepening by contrast the northern blue of her eyes. She looked curiously about the cabin. And suddenly she exclaimed:

"What a magnificent dog! What is his name?"

"I call him Skookum," the man said. "Skookum? What an odd name."

"It's Siwash. It means 'good'."

She laughed softly, held out her hand to Skookum and spoke enticingly his name.

Her voice was pleasant. And Skookum caught from her a faint scent that was like the springtime, when the little white-and-pink flowers are sweet among the mold of last year's fallen leaves. But he didn't stir from his position by the wall. His lip drew up in a soundless snarl—he hadn't forgotten that beating at Fort Pierre. And he hated these creatures with the soft voices that could scream like a caught rabbit when alarmed.

"I don't think he likes me," she said.

"He's Mackenzie River," said the man quietly, "and they're not very friendly brutes—but they're mighty loyal. I'll tell you something about him later." He picked up pail and ax. "I'll have to get water for the tea—and I think I'd better take him with me."

He called, and Skookum walked stiffly to the door, apparently ignoring the girl yet watching her with sidelong wariness.

Sedately he followed his master along the snowy path to the water hole just below the high, steep bank of the stream; and gravely he watched while the man cleared away the new snow with his ax and carefully chopped out the ice that had formed since noon.

They returned to the cabin—the dog and the bareheaded man—with hair full of driven particles of snow.
The man put down his pail and fed wood to the fire.

"It's stinging outside," he said. "The water hole started to skim over almost before I could dip the pail. That guide of yours was a fool."

The kettle was boiled and the meal was done. The time was here for the man to tell the girl what he had to tell. It was suddenly difficult matter. "Your brother—" he began, and paused.

The girl was eying him steadily. "You needn't say it. I think I know. My brother is—dead."

He nodded gravely. Her eyes widened and misted a little in the lamp-light. Otherwise she took it like a soldier.

"My name is Cardigan," he said. "Bill Cardigan. Last fall I came over here on the Sweetwater from the Moosehorn country, looking for new trapping territory. I struck the deadwater here, never dreaming there was a human habitation within fifty miles. But—"

And he went on to tell her of what he had discovered on that golden October afternoon. He made no reference, however, to the disorder, the squallor, the slovenliness in which Petersen had lived and died; for there was no evidence of such about the cabin now.

"He had been dead, I think, at least a week. I buried him at the edge of the clearing. And I stayed on here, with Skookum. The other dogs—five of them—had taken to the woods. But I managed to trap them, one by one, unhurt. They are kenneled in the thicket behind the cabin. I'm afraid I'm a trespasser."

"If you are, you have my thanks for that last service to my brother," said Helga earnestly. "And she went on softly. "Poor Chris—he was such a wonderful fellow. I was nine when he went away—and that was sixteen years ago, on the day when he was twenty-one. I never saw him again."

Cardigan, like most strong men, was at a loss for words to fit the occasion. Perhaps it was his sympathetic silence that led the girl to further talk.

"At first Chris wrote to us quite regularly—all about his trap lines and his prospecting. Once he sent a little bottle of gold dust that was worth sixteen dollars an ounce. Then his letters became fewer. Three years ago he wrote that he was right on the verge of striking it rich. We never heard from him again.

"We lived in Minneapolis. I taught school. But mother became an invalid and I had to give it up to care for her. My father was a blacksmith. He worked in lumber camps. Last winter a horse kicked him and he died. Mother lived three months longer."

"You know, when you're in trouble you turn to your own. Chris was all I had left. His last letter came from Fort Pierre. I determined to find him if possible. I managed to get this far, and—"

Her voice broke. She could not go on. And Cardigan said gently:

"I'm afraid your brother never did strike it rich. There was no evidence of it. This cabin, and the dogs and a trifling bit of gear, is all there was. It's yours of course. I'll vacate as soon as the storm clears and I can get my stuff together. All I ask is that you let me keep Skookum."

Helga smiled a little wanly. "What would I do with this place? I couldn't stay here."

Cardigan became thoughtfully silent. Then he asked abruptly:

"Have you got any money?"

"Just about enough to take me back to civilization," she confessed honestly.

Cardigan rose and went to his bunk. From beneath the pillow he took a narrow buckskin sack, small but compact and heavy. He placed it on the table.

"I worked a creek bed last summer.
CARDIGAN returned to the cabin door with arms piled high with firewood. With some difficulty he pulled the latch cord. Skookum crowded in past his legs—and stopped suddenly short just beyond the threshold, hackles bristling.

The girl was standing by the bunk. She had Cardigan’s rifle at her shoulder, its muzzle pointed steadily at him. Skookum sensed the hostility crackling along the barrel from her eyes. He growled, tensed himself, would have leaped for her, had not Cardigan spoken a sharp command.

“Steady, Skookum! Behave yourself!”

The lamp was flaring smokily in the wind. Cardigan closed the door with his heel, calmly walked to the stove, and dumped the wood. Skookum, sidling, remained close at his legs, throat rumbling. The barrel of the weapon followed Cardigan.

He smiled. “No need of that,” he said quietly. “You’re perfectly safe here alone with me.”

The girl made a little, quick gesture of impatience with her head.

“You’re not fooling me, Cardigan,” she said coldly. “I mean to—”

Her words were cut short by the sudden violent slam-back of the half-latched door. The savage gust that had loosed it tore into the cabin with a swirl of snow. The flame of the lamp leaped high and went out, leaving the place a pocket of heavy darkness.

The girl uttered a half-stifled cry of alarm. Skookum loosed a full-throated growl and leaped. Cardigan’s strong fingers caught him by the scruff and brought him down heavily. He struggled.

“I’ve got the dog,” said Cardigan. “Shut the door and make a light. You’ll find matches on the end of the table.”

The girl made no answer, no move in the darkness. And Cardigan said a little sharply:
"Don't be a fool! That rifle isn't loaded, anyway."

A smothered gasp came out of the blackness. Then the clattering thud of the rifle on the floor. A swiftly moving shadow cut the dim oblong of the doorway, and was gone. And a moment later there came back through the veils of the storm a scream.

Skookum struggled toward the doorway. Cardigan, clinging tightly to his black scruff, went with him at an awkward run across the silt.

That faint sweet scent of springtime was riding back on the wind. Skookum followed it, led Cardigan straight down the path across the steep bank of the deadwater.

The creature with the yellow hair was in the water hole, neck deep, clinging desperately to the shattered edges of the new-formed ice. And Skookum would have leaped upon her had not his master slung him back with such violence as he had never shown before.

Skookum got up from the snow and shook himself. He realized now, that for some strange reason this hostile being was not to be molested.

The girl's clothing had already stiffened a little before Cardigan could get her into the cabin. He stood her down beside the stove and groped for matches and lit the lamp. She was shaking. Her lips were blue, and her teeth were chattering. And there was something like terror in her eyes.

A few minutes later, the girl lay upon Cardigan's bunk, wrapped to the chin in Cardigan's four-point blankets. In her eyes was the look of a hunted thing—a creature caught, but not yet destroyed by the trap.

"You are afraid of me," said Cardigan quietly, "Why?"

She didn't answer. The fire roared. Outside, the storm wrenched at the cabin.

"Why did you put a gun on me?" persisted Cardigan. "Why did you try to run away?"

She looked at him. Her eyes—they were suddenly wide, their blueness darkening like a summer sky under the sweep of thunderheads. She gave him his answer in a burst of hysterical and reckless fury.

"You're not fooling me, Cardigan—if that is your name! That gold—your hesitation when I asked about Chris. Cardigan—you killed my brother!"

Cardigan's face went for a moment as white as any wind-browned countenance can ever go. Then a slow beat of dull red worked up from throat to temple. He stood as still as rock. And the only sound except the roaring of the stove and the raging of the storm, was a girl's terrified and hysterical sobbing.

Without retort, without words, Cardigan turned away from the bunk. Two white knots of muscle stood out upon the angles of his jaw. He put more wood upon the fire. He set upon the stove's hearth a can of deer tallow to soften; took down from pegs the team harness. Skookum pricked up his ragged ears.

Cardigan drew a stool to the fire, and sat down and began methodically to dress the harness straps. The girl's sobbing gradually quieted. Cardigan looked up to find her eyes upon him intently.

"You'd better sleep," he said briefly. "We're going out to Fort Pierre in the morning."

She said nothing; watched steadily Cardigan's grim profile as he kept on with his overhauling of the trail gear.

And Skookum, watching her as steadily as she was watching his master, was again aware of that same crackling suspicion and hostility that had come from her eyes when looking at Cardigan along the rifle barrel.

The roots of his hackles tingled, and he stirred uneasily. And at length he
moved out from behind the stove, and lay down quietly at Cardigan's feet, between Cardigan and the bunk. And he kept a watchful and a smoldering eye in that direction.

There were intervals during that long night when the creature with the yellow hair breathed softly, regularly, with eyes closed. And these were moments when Skookum saw the new hard lines of his master's face relax, and a curious softness come to dwell within his eyes.

It had been full two hours since the joyous yapping of the half-wild team had died away in morning distance. Skookum picked himself up from the snow bank, and, with a single backward glance at the wrecked cabin window, took up the trail of the departed toboggan.

His nose smarted where shattered glass had cut him on his wild plunge through the window. He was sullenly resentful. He could not understand why he had been left behind, when his rightful place was at the head of the string.

The storm was long done. The morning was clear and cold. The trail of the toboggan was a thin scar upon the face of the white and gleaming wilderness.

For the first hour Skookum ran easily, his black plume erect, and his ragged ears anxiously alert. But before the second hour was done, his tail was down, and his breath and stride had shortened. His old stamina was not there. But he kept on with steadfast determination.

Skookum overtook the team at the margin of the big river, where the snow lay broad and level between banks of somber evergreen.

Cardigan had halted here to boil the noon pot. He was busy at the fire. The dogs were tethered out. The girl was on the toboggan, shoulders comfortably resting against the gee-handles, secure in a cocoon of lashed blankets and tarpaulin.

Skookum approached with dragging tail waving a weary triumph. He skirted the toboggan warily, dewlaps twitching, and stood for a moment looking steadily up at Cardigan's impassive face. Then, satisfied, he lay down upon the snow, pink tongue lolling, a thin vapor rising from his fast and heavy breathing.

"Why—he looks as if he were actually grinning!" exclaimed Helga—and these were the first words she had spoken since the time she had hurled that hysterical and stinging accusation at Cardigan. "How in the world did he ever get out of the cabin?"

Cardigan stooped and examined Skookum's cut nose; plucked a splinter of bright wood that was tangled in the dog's heavy coat.

"Through the window, evidently—sash and all," he told her briefly. And he added: "I wish he hadn't. He's not fit to pull in the team. And I hate like thunder to see him break his old heart trying to keep up. He's about all in, now."

"Couldn't he ride?" suggested Helga. She held out a mittened hand and spoke to Skookum.

Skookum growled. And Cardigan said gravely:

"I'm afraid he might not take to the idea—not exactly."

Helga looked away; offered no comment.

Skookum lay where he was until Cardigan began to hitch up the team. Then he rose stiffly, and as Cardigan snapped the traces of the lead dog, he stalked over and placed himself at the head of the string.

The lead dog was a powerful gray brute with a torn ear and an ugly eye. Without so much as a growl of warning, he lunged out at Skookum. His white fangs opened a long gash in Skookum's black flank.
Cardigan, the butt of his coiled whip swinging in a mitten hand, plunged to intervene; and Skookum whirled and lunged sidewise to attack the gray. The move of each interfered with the intent of the other. Skookum tangled with Cardigan’s legs and snowshoes. They both fell sprawling.

Helga screamed. Snarling savagely, the gray brute lunged again—this time at the prostrate man. Helga screamed again. And by a desperate twist of his body, Skookum got between his master and the gray. The fangs that were meant for Cardigan’s throat ripped into Skookum’s shoulder, bowling him down. Then, like a gray flash, the lead dog wheeled away and tightened the traces.

When Skookum got his legs under him, the team was strung out in full runaway, headed straight across the level of the river. Cardigan, hampered by his long webs, was struggling to regain his feet.

Skookum’s eyes, fixed on the speeding toboggan, were blazing green. He had associated somehow that cry of the yellow-haired creature on the toboggan with that attack upon his beloved master. The way was clear. He plunged in pursuit.

Skookum kept his flaming eyes steadily on the toboggan. He was driving his tired legs with every ounce of energy that was in him. His blood was hot with unleashed fury. Slowly the gap began to close.

The creature on the toboggan was struggling. She seemed to be caught there. Far behind, Skookum heard Cardigan’s voice, shouting. The girl lunged desperately sidewise. The toboggan went over, dragging her in the crook of the gee-handles. Hampered, the team came to halt. A savage triumph burned in Skookum.

The gray lead dog swung, doubled, snarling back toward the toboggan. The creature with the yellow hair screamed. And as Skookum closed in, he heard Cardigan’s voice shouting, nearer, sharp with command.

And all at once there flashed upon Skookum vivid memory of that moment at the water hole, when Cardigan had spoken so, and flung him back upon the snow. That creature upon which the gray lead dog was about to leap with fangs agleam was not to be molested!

Skookum swept on like a black thunderbolt; and just short of the toboggan, he bunched his sinews and left the snow in a mighty leap that carried him across the gee-handles and full upon the advancing gray brute.

Within two seconds the entire team was a snarling, fighting tangle. Cardigan swiftly extricated the girl from the lashed blankets, carried her aside from the mêlée. She clung to him a brief moment as he put her down upon her feet. They both were trembling a bit. And Cardigan’s face was queerly gray beneath the tan.

Cardigan’s long whip now began to talk among the dogs; and sullen order was restored. The brutes of the string sat down to lick themselves.

But Skookum, eyes closed and breathing gaspingly, remained very still upon the red-flecked snow.

Cardigan gently picked him up, held him in his arms as tenderly as he would have held a stricken child. And Cardigan’s eyes blurred so that he couldn’t see the girl coming toward him through the snow.

“Cardigan.” Her mittened hand was on his arm, and her voice was very low and husky. “I hate myself for what I said to you last night. And all day I’ve been fighting against my plan to turn you over at Fort Pierre for investigation.”

“I intend to do that, myself,” said Cardigan steadily. “I couldn’t have you think—”

“I don’t,” she interrupted softly. “No man who can feel like this about an in-
SKOOKUM listened to the sliding grind of the toboggan under him, and to the joyous cracking of Cardigan's long whip urging the string along the homeward trail from Fort Pierre.

It was very comfortable under the tarpaulin. His numerous fang slashes still burned faintly from the evil-tasting stuff his master had washed them with at the Post—but he knew from old experience that wounds like these were soon forgotten.

He snuggled a little closer to the warmth of the legs outstretched under the blankets. The touch of the gentle fingers that had crept under the tarpaulin to fondle his scarred old muzzle was very pleasant.

Skookum knew—in those hidden ways by which a dog does comprehend such things—that the enduring love between himself and Cardigan now included another.

And he was content.

"I'LL BE SEE'N' YOU!"

By Cora Smith Gould

"I'll be see'nn' you!"—Oh, magical words!
His pet expression, whenever we part.
Homely this phrase, yet of musical trend,
For in his absence it sings in my heart.

"I'll be see'nn' you!"—His smile reaches me.
Life is made sweeter by some one who cares;
Some precious friend, or some mother's big boy.
One whom you love and whose love your love shares.

What does it matter if dark clouds appear,
If your horizon is rosy to view?
If a fair rainbow illumines your skies
Due to the talisman—"I'll be see'nn' you!"?
Some adventures furnish thrills enough for one entire lifetime. That was the case with
- Wilbur Stetson on

Fandango Island

By Fred MacIsaac

A Three-part Serial—Part III.

If you missed the previous installments of this thrilling serial, read the condensed version below. Then you can go right on with the story.

A STRANGE trick of Fate hurled Wilbur Stetson from a secure position in a small-town bank to a life of adventure of which he would not have dared even to dream a few weeks before. After having been rescued from the foundering British tramp steamer, Mermaid, New York to Trinidad, he saved the life of an American yachtsman, Frank Carson, and as a reward Carson gave him a job aboard his yacht.

It was not until the vessel was bound for an island, called Fandango Island by Carson, that Wilbur learned that Frank Carson and his associate, Captain Denis O'Malley, formerly of the Irish Republican army, were after a fortune
in Bank of England notes known to be buried on the island.

It wasn’t long before Wilbur discovered that a fortune, whether in gold, jewels, or bank notes, will attract any one who knows about it—and that most of them will not be too conscientious about what they have to do to recover the treasure.

The British gunboat Porpoise was also very much interested in the ex-

criminal, descended upon the island soon after, and captured the members of the Carson party—all except Wilbur Stetson. Bright had already started to torture the leaders of the yacht party to force information about the buried money when his vessel, out in the lagoon, was mysteriously blown up.

Only Wilbur Stetson suspected who had blown up that yacht—a demented man on the island who had already taken

petition, and Lieutenant Blake of that vessel called on Carson after the American’s yacht had anchored off the mystery island.

“My business,” said Lieutenant Blake, “is this: A band of Cuban malefactors recently broke jail, stole a fishing vessel, and are supposed to be in hiding on some of these islands. Several are convicted murderers. I strongly advise against your landing here on Fandango Island while these criminals are at large, particularly as you have your sister and Mr. O’Malley’s daughter aboard.”

“We can take care of ourselves, sir,” Carson said confidently.

But Carson was speaking without full knowledge of what there was still to face on the tropical island. Sir Alfred Bright, an English gentleman turned

Wilbur prisoner, and was holding him as an assistant in carrying out his weird plans.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DYNAMITE.

WILBUR STETSON looked up suddenly at the man he believed to be demented. “Then you did blow up the yacht?” he asked. “You did it with some sort of machine?”

“A most ingenious little mine of my invention,” said the self-styled Vulcan modestly. “I could have shattered it and its crew into atoms. There is no limit to my power.”

“Then for Heaven’s sake, save my friends,” pleaded Wilbur. “Mister—I don’t know your name—think of those two poor girls!”

CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY

Wilbur Stetson, a bookkeeper with the heart of an adventurer.
Harleigh Stetson, his uncle, a banker without the heart of an adventurer.
Captain Brown, skipper of the British tramp steamer, Mermaid.
Frank Carson, an American yachtsman.
Cora Carson, Frank’s sister, blond, pretty, and a trifle spoiled.
Denis O’Malley, ex-captain in the Irish Republican army.
Rose O’Malley, his attractive brunette daughter.
Lieutenant Blake, officer of H. M. S. Porpoise.
Sir Alfred Bright, born an English gentleman but reduced to making a living through crime and known in the English underworld as “Al the Toff.”
"I work in my own way, young man. Lately I have felt the need of an apprentice. When I have rid the island of these interlopers, I shall teach you many things. You will be useful."

He switched off the arc light, and they were again in impenetrable blackness.

The significance of the man's words had escaped Stetson at first, but now he understood them. The madman proposed to keep him a prisoner in this horrible cave—to lock him up in that huge cage, perhaps, and never let him see the light of day. Well, he would escape. He would even dare to go into that pool from which the gigantic crabs had crawled. He would risk sharks and whatever fearsome things inhabited the bottomless lake, but he would get out into the sunlight.

The old man had risen and was rummaging behind Wilbur. Presently he grasped him again, this time by the right forearm, and he jabbed something sharp into the boy's forearm.

"Sleep!" he commanded. "I have many important things to do that will some day rock the world!"

A hypodermic injection! Wilbur aimed a furious blow at his captor, but his wrist was seized in an iron grip. In a moment the bearded one laid his unconscious prisoner gently down upon the boards, rose, leaped lightly off the platform and was gone.

WILBUR came back to consciousness with his mental powers unimpaired. He had a violent headache, but there was nothing else the matter with him. There was a diffused, grayish illumination in the cave, and under other circumstances Wilbur would have been enthralled by the magnificence of the coral cavern.

It suggested a mighty cathedral with countless rows of white pillars and a floor of deep dark-blue with a yellow radiance in its depth.

The platform upon which he lay was erected upon a strip of beach a couple of hundred feet wide, which feathered out into a narrow path at the right, and ended abruptly about twenty yards to the left. In that direction, across a hundred yards of blue water, was an arch of dazzling brightness—the exit to the sea, but it was not that patch of sunlight reflected upon the water which lighted the cavern. Daylight was penetrating the place from above. Its source was invisible, but the cave was brightest at its farthest end.

Hours must have passed, many hours, since the madman had jabbed him with the needle and sent him into a drugged slumber. That meant that the fellow expected to return long before Wilbur awakened. Suppose something had happened to him. His prisoner would be entombed. Even the bearded one crossed that horrible pool in a boat. If Wilbur ventured into the water, the chances were that powerful jaws would drag him beneath the surface before he had swum a dozen yards.

As he gazed upon the blue pool, there was a great commotion in the water, and a huge glistening back broke the surface and sank immediately. What the thing was he couldn't guess, but the sight of it congealed his blood. He looked frantically about for his rifle, but the bearded man had removed it. There was nothing on the platform which would serve for a weapon. He gazed back at the cage on stilts, plainly visible in the diffused light. If he could get into that thing, he might find something—at any event the wire would protect him from footed or finny amphibians.

The stretch of beach was free of beasts, but what might be staring at him from beneath the surface of the water? That is, if things like the giant crabs could see through and out of the water.

He studied the cage and discerned a doorway, and he saw a huge padlock on
the wire door. The madman, who need fear no visitors in this place, did not neglect to lock up when he went away.

The dynamite! Wilbur pushed aside several boxes and found a case, the cover of which had been loosened. There were two sticks of blasting dynamite in the box, and he grasped them and thrust them into his pocket.

He knew enough about this sort of explosive to be aware that it is ordinarily set off by an electric spark, but a heavy blow might explode it, and one of the cannibal crabs had a shell hard enough to offer a lot of resistance.

Somewhat reassured, Wilbur squatted on the platform. Gradually it came to him that the bright light in the upper end of the cave must come through an opening above sea level, and it might be possible to get out without intrusting himself to the perilous pool. And the absence of the hermit was his opportunity.

It meant leaving his platform, descending upon the sands, and being practically at the mercy of things which might rush at him from the water. Who knew what might be lurking behind the bases of the giant stalagmites?

He hesitated, and then the lovely face of Cora Carson seemed to float before him, and its expression was piteously appealing. With an exclamation, Wilbur Stetson leaped off the platform and began to run along the sand parallel to the pool and toward the upper end of the cave. What must she think of him? And what must Frank think? He would seem to them to have fled like a coward at the first alarm.

The Carsons couldn't know that he had been ready to battle with the band of Sir Alfred Bright single-handed, but had been dragged away by the bearded man. He had to escape from this place, to show himself, to strike a blow for his friends.

He had judged the cave to be three or four hundred yards in extent, and its ceiling to be sixty or eighty feet above the water, but he soon discovered that it was a great deal larger than he had anticipated.

He came to the place where the beach narrowed to a few feet, and where it curved around a stalagmite pillar four feet thick. It gave him a footing for a couple of rods farther, and came to an end. The blue-black water lapped the base of another stalagmite.

It stretched in front of him for thirty or forty feet, beyond which was rising ground from which grew a forest of stout pillars formed by conjunction of stalagmites and stalactites, the latter which grew down from the roof of the cave while the stalagmites sprouted from the flooring. Beyond, the light seemed brighter.

He hesitated just a second, and then lowered himself into the water and struck out lustily for the opposite side.

The horror of that short swim would be with him always. Things splashed above and below him. At each stroke he imagined he felt the grip of a tentacle or the crunch of a jaw. He was weeping with terror and excitement when he crawled out and sank upon crumbled limestone, but his legs and arms were intact. No hero, but a coward would have forgotten his obligations to his friends and wandered hopelessly back to the platform, there to await the will of his mad master.

After a minute he got upon his feet and tried to take his bearings. He chose to move in a direction where the light seemed a little brighter.

How long Wilbur Stetson wandered he could never tell. A dozen times he found further progress blocked by a blank wall, and was forced to retrace his steps some distance, and strike through a new opening. As he encountered no
more pools, he was obviously above sea level. And though in his imagination he peopled the cave with hideous monsters, he actually encountered no living thing.

He wandered far astray from the source of the daylight, and turned back when he found shadows gathering. Usually he was ascending a gentle grade, tramping warily upon hard coral rock or very fine sand. And all of a sudden he turned and was dazzled by the brilliance of a great golden circle which confronted him. Its radiance partially blinded him, and he covered his eyes with his hands. When he had accustomed himself to its brilliancy, he realized that he was looking right into the sun through an opening a dozen feet in diameter, and he clambered upward and darted through it and fell with a sigh of thankfulness upon thick, lush grass. Free! In the open air! Out of the power of the madman!

The reaction was almost too much for Wilbur Stetson. He was weak in every limb, and his heart almost failed him. Several minutes passed before he rose and tried to discover where he was. It came upon him with a rush that, though he might be out of the cave, he was by no means out of the woods. The Carsons and their friends were in the hands of desperate characters who would either capture Wilbur Stetson or shoot him on sight. Save for the two sticks of dynamite, he was unarmed, and dynamite was useless against a man armed with a rifle.

There was a dense growth of bush about the hole from which he had emerged. When he finally succeeded in crawling through it, his face and hands were bleeding from contact with thorns and spiked plants.

He found himself, then, upon an elevation. The sun, almost at zenith, told him that it was noonday. A quarter of a mile away he saw the blackened top of the chimney of what had been the residence of the former owner of the island.

Down a steep slope and a quarter of a mile distant, was the lagoon. He had entered the cave a few hundred yards east of the camp through a water portal, and he had emerged at least half a mile away on the highest part of the island, and on the southeast side.

From his position he could not see the camp and, not being aware that there had been a schooner in the lagoon, he did not know that she was now at its bottom.

He was ravenously hungry, and without a plan of campaign. He had no intention of marching into camp and giving himself up, however. In some way, he must effect the release of his friends. That everything depended on him was the cause of his temerity in leaving the platform in the outer cave.

From his post of vantage he could see no evidence of life on the island, but he knew that there were too many people on Fandango for his good, and he must proceed with extreme caution.

Crack!

From the direction of the camp came a rifle shot. He saw a puff of white smoke, and he heard the whine of a bullet which did not miss him by much.

WILBUR did not stand upon the order of his going. He had been erect and in plain view of a pair of sharp eyes, and the bullet had been intended to kill. How could he be aware that Bright's band were searching the island for the unknown enemy who had sunk their schooner, and that the orders were to shoot him first and question him afterward, if still alive?

He ran down the slope toward the lagoon, plunged like a frightened fox into a dense growth which barred his path, crawled through on hands and knees, and found himself in a clearing which he crossed at a dead run, and
headed for a grove of coconut trees on the edge of the lagoon.

Apparently the marksman had lost sight of him, for no other shot was fired, and in four or five minutes he reached the grove, which was a hundred yards in extent, and ended at the water's edge.

He knew that the whole band would be on his heels in a few minutes, and he had to find thicker cover if he didn't want to fall into their hands. He crept along the water's edge in a westerly direction, and presently came in sight of the boathouse and landing.

There were two men with guns standing on the pier, and these were staring inland, having been alarmed by the shot and very eager to learn the cause of it.

Wilbur about-faced and sped back the way he had come. He had run about a quarter of a mile in the enervating heat; his heart was pumping violently, and he was almost exhausted when he was confronted by a depression filled with undergrowth and vines to suggest an African jungle, and extending for several hundred yards inland.

He stopped for breath, and heard shouting in the palm grove at his left. Without hesitation, he threw himself upon his stomach and crawled under the bushes, wriggling like a serpent for more than his length. The thicket was alive with insects, and too late it occurred to Wilbur that it was probably a lurking place for poisonous snakes.

He lay flat for several minutes. Apparently he had not been seen. Five minutes passed, and he could tolerate the heat and the insects no longer. He was about to push himself out feet first when he heard a groan near at hand and ahead of him. He listened, and it was repeated. Somebody was in agony not far away—perhaps Frank Carson. He crawled farther into the thicket, and suddenly came out upon the other side. A little stream joined the lagoon at that point; there were a few yards of coarse grass between it and the thick growth.

He glanced to right and left, and espied a man lying a little way upstream on the opposite bank. He was flat on his face, but he raised his head when Wilbur called softly to him. To the boy's dismay, it was the bearded lunatic.

The fellow's face was very white, and he smiled pitifully, groaned, and again buried his face in his outstretched arms. He was hurt. Wilbur rose, saw a log in the middle of the stream which was only a dozen feet wide, leaped, and had landed upon it, when the thing moved under him and lifted from the water the appalling head of the ugliest member of the crocodile family, the cayman.

With a gasp of mortal terror, Wilbur leaped again, and touched the opposite bank. The eight-foot cayman, apparently, was as frightened as he was, for it plunged for the shore Stetson had just vacated, and crawled upstream with surprising speed.

Stetson knelt beside his late captor, and touched him on the shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he asked softly.

With a moan, the big man rolled over on his back. "Dying," he muttered hoarsely. "Dying—and with my work unfinished!"

CHAPTER XIX.

DEATH IN THE JUNGLE.

THE bearded man pointed toward his lower extremities. Wilbur's gaze followed the finger, and he sucked in his breath in horror. The right leg was gone, torn off at the knee. A crimson-stained cloth covered the stump—part of the cotton undershirt the hermit had been wearing, held in place by a tightly drawn rope of vines. The maimed creature had made a heroic effort to check the flow of blood, and so had prolonged his agony.

"I'll go for help," cried Wilbur.
“Somebody may be able to do something.”

“Too late. I’m finished. No pain now. Don’t go. They’ll shoot you out of hand.” His voice was low, but clear.

“What happened?”

“Fish. Never attacked before. I was swimming back from the schooner at dawn. I’m very strong. Another man would have died in an hour.”

His tone was proud. It did not occur to him that another man would have escaped many hours of agony.

“If I could only do something!”

“Don’t deserve it. I was going to make you my slave. How did you get out of the cave?”

Wilbur told him briefly, and he smiled. “Nerve,” was his comment. “But you must go back.”

“I—I couldn’t,” protested Stetson, who turned pale at the thought.

“Only way to save your friends. My keys are fastened to my belt. One opens the cage door, the other opens a steel dispatch box. Do you understand anything of electricity?”

“I studied it. And I’m a wireless operator.”

“Good. Bright is a traitor. Kill him for me. Kill them all. Ah, I would have made them regret they followed me to Fandango Island!” He closed his eyes. His face was gray.

“I mined the yacht and the schooner,” he said after a minute. “They were all in my power. The shark—ah!” He moaned.

“When the yacht came, the naval launch left the island. For months they prowled and found nothing—nothing. My plans—boy, I would have overturned the world!”

“What’s your name? Who are your people?” asked Wilbur. “Don’t you want to send a message? Haven’t you some friends somewhere?”

“Everybody has betrayed me. Years ago Bright took my money and double-crossed me. How did he know I was hiding here?”

“He didn’t, sir. He followed Captain O’Malley, who was second officer of the Orrista, and who brought Walsingham’s portmanteau—”

The bearded man’s lips parted in a smile. “That fool!” he commented. “Let them destroy each other.”

“Please. There are two innocent girls. I know you found the money. We don’t want it. Help me. Tell me how to save my friends. Bright and his men are criminals. We are not.”

He gazed anxiously upon the face of the dying man, who relapsed into silence.

Finally the dying man spoke. “Dare you reenter the cave? To save your friends?”

“Yes,” said Wilbur firmly. “Put your ear close to my lips. I am very weak.”

He whispered, and Wilbur listened. And the end came so suddenly that the boy was not aware of it for several minutes.

He was alone in the patch of jungle with a maimed corpse, but he was not afraid. He was wondering if he had the courage and skill to do what the dying man had told him to do.

There was a splash in the water not far away. He saw the wicked red eyes of a partly submerged cayman. The creature would devour the dead man. Perhaps he might attack the living.

Regardless of his own peril, however, he found a sharp-edged stone, and began to dig at the soft earth. It was steaming hot, and the sun was intolerable, but he worked steadily for hours, and finally hollowed out a trench, into which he rolled the bearded man. He covered him up, and then traveled up and down the banking, looking for large stones, which he piled upon the shallow grave.

When he had finished, the day had done its worst, and he had done his
duty. He knelt, repeated the Lord's Prayer, and rose from his knees. It was time to think about himself.

The strange man had said that his boat was on the shore somewhere to the left. How could he reach it? It was only a few rods to the lagoon, but below him the undergrowth almost obliterated the bank. With the huge reptiles he knew were in the little stream, he dared not set foot in it. He had not known that alligators and such were found on small islands, but their wide distribution in the world is due to the fact that they occasionally swim far out to sea, and are carried long distances by ocean currents, though they usually prefer rivers, marshes, and tidal estuaries.

And he dreaded what he might meet if he again crawled through the brush beside the bank. In the end he worked his way through the undergrowth, and waited close to the shore until it grew dark. After that he followed the beach for two hundred yards, and found the rowboat pulled up on the shore, and well masked by rocks from casual observation.

In the bottom of the boat lay his rifle, and cotton wrappings around the rowlocks muffled the sound of the oars. He put out at once into the lagoon, and rowed toward the opening at the opposite end of the island.

He calculated that he had a six or eight-mile row ahead of him before he reached the sea opening into the cave, and he was very doubtful whether he could effect an entrance. And he feared very much to try. However, he was starving, and he knew there was food on the hermit's platform, and he didn't dread the cave as much as he had. The flashlight had been resting beside his rifle in the bottom of the boat. He was now armed, and he no longer had the hermit to fear.

As he rowed, he wondered about the weird man who had passed away that day. That he was well educated was obvious, and it was equally certain that he had not been in his right mind.

Evidently he had had no fear of the savage things which infested the ocean, the cave, and the lagoon. He had swum out into the bay and fastened an infernal machine to the stern of the yacht. And he had spoken of a schooner, which must have been the vessel that brought the Englishman to the island. He had blown that up, also, and, while swimming back to his boat, something—Wilbur shuddered to think of it—a shark or a crocodile, had bitten off his right leg.

What endurance had enabled the miserable man to reach the shore, to crawl up the little river, and on the bank, to endeavor to stem the flow of blood! And what a physique to have enabled him to live for hours!

Two hours of rowing brought Stetson off the camp where three fires were brightly burning. The moon was up, and he passed the settlement far out in the bay, and finally arrived at the cliff which contained the entrance to the cave.

Aided by the moonlight, he did not have much trouble in locating the entrance, and he lay on his oars and watched it for a few moments, to discover the method of ingress.

When the swell rose there was only a narrow slit about one foot in depth and three or four feet in width visible, but when the sea dropped, it left an opening at least three feet above the surface of the water. The thing to do was to time it exactly. The poor old hermit had known how to do it.

Wilbur counted off seconds carefully, decided he would chance it, and drove for the hole. He almost smashed in his bow against solid rock, for he had forgotten to take into consideration the time it took to row the boat fifteen or twenty feet.
He got back into position and waited. The thing to do was to start in while the sea almost covered the opening. He timed it again. The moment! He gave way. Ah, the bow was in! He stroked vigorously, plunged into darkness, and then received a blow in the head which knocked him over backward and unconscious.

He came to in total darkness, with a horrid pain in his head. At first he didn't know where he was or what had happened to him; but in a moment his head had cleared. He hadn't allowed for the length of the tunnel. The rising sea had lifted the boat, and he had forgotten to drop flat. But his last stroke had given the little craft sufficient momentum to carry it through the tunnel in the nick of time. Otherwise he would have drowned, and the things in the water would have eaten him.

Somehow, this narrow escape gave Wilbur confidence. Having survived such a calamity, he was destined to win out. He retrieved the flashlight and threw a beam into the Stygian darkness. It revealed nothing.

Picking up his oars, he rowed a few hundred feet, recalling that, from the platform, the sea opening seemed to be a couple of hundred yards distant. Resting on his oars, he again flashed his light, and discerned dimly the shelf of beach some distance to the right.

A couple of minutes later the bow of the boat grounded. Wilbur leaped out, pulled it up on the sand, and immediately jumped in again. He remembered what crawled about on those sands. He hesitated, and his resolution trembled. To turn on the light would attract them. To make a rush in the dark might cause him to precipitate himself onto one of the giant claws.

It was a momentous decision that the young man had to make—to risk being devoured by the denizens of the cave, or depart as he had entered and walk into the hands of the scoundrels who were holding his friends prisoners.

He turned on the flash, located the platform, switched the light off, and, without further indecision, leaped out of the boat and ran as he had never run before for the platform.

He had forgotten the rifle, he dared not use the flash, and he almost missed the platform in the dark, but collided with one corner of it. He felt for the ladder, but could not locate it, and risked the flashlight to discover that it was on the opposite side of the platform. A second later he fell, breathless, upon the boards.

Fearing to draw the giant crabs from their lurking places by turning on the electric bulb, he carefully screened the flashlight and began to rummage among the stores. He found a can of biscuits and a can of salmon, which he broke open with a hammer and chisel from the box of tools, and for several minutes he ate voraciously.

He was still hungry when he had consumed the contents of the two cans, but he desisted reluctantly from the business of eating, though there was a plentiful supply of foodstuffs at hand.

For some minutes he sat in the dark, mustering his courage to attack the job which had brought him into the cave, and then he consumed more minutes in search of the switch which turned on the arc light in the steel cage beyond.

It was more by accident than anything else that he located it in the disorder of the household arrangements on the platform, but finally the arc light sputtered and burst into brilliant illumination.

Wilbur immediately leaped off the platform and sped across the sand toward the cage on stilts.

He dared not look to right or left, but he knew that the things were com-
ing. There was a scratching of huge claws on sand behind him and at either side. His legs moved even faster, and with a sigh of thankfulness he grasped at the ladder, and ran up half a dozen rungs, and was confronted by the big padlock.

And shuffling into the circle of illumination came two, four, six of the mammoth crabs.

Though he knew that they couldn't reach him five feet above the sand, his hand trembled, and his heart was in his mouth as he tried to insert in the lock the key he had taken from the hermit.

It finally entered, and turned, and the lock of the padlock snapped open. He took it off, pushed open the steel wire door, rushed into the laboratory, slammed the door shut, and shook his fist at the congregation below which now numbered a dozen. These proceeded to approach and set to work industriously, if futilely, upon the sheet iron, which protected the post and the ladder, with their great claws.

Safe within the cage, he tried to dismiss their presence from his mind, with indifferent success.

Wilbur knew something about a laboratory, and he had studied electricity in high school, while his training at the radio school had improved his knowledge of the subject. He looked around. For half an hour he inspected the machines, read the titles on the rows of bottles, and poked gingerly into packing cases which held curious objects, the utility of which he had to find out.

CHAPTER XX.
PREDICAMENT OF A PIRATE.

Sir Alfred Bright, after the destruction of his means of escape from Fandango Island, returned to the camp in a black mood. He was perplexed and chagrined at what had happened. His first thought had been that the missing sentry, the youth he had seen on the Cora Carson in Nassau Harbor, was responsible for the destruction of the schooner, but he dismissed that because it was most unlikely that the fugitive had a torpedo in his possession when the Carson camp had been surprised.

He had questioned the two survivors of the schooner closely, but they swore that they had kept careful watch, and that nobody had approached the vessel at any time. Bright himself had seen the explosion, and knew that no boat had been afloat on the lagoon at the time.

It meant that Carson's tale of the explosion which had wrecked the yacht was true, and that, on the island, was a powerful unknown whose intentions were hostile to both parties. And it was possible that this unknown person was already in possession of the treasure.

Sir Alfred Bright was a cold-blooded scoundrel. There is no criminal so brutal, so vicious, and so totally without scruples as a gentleman gone wrong, and Bright had landed on this island ready to cut the throats of Carson and O'Malley and the young women, if it proved to be necessary, in order to put him into possession of the millions of Sir Herbert Walsingham.

The fact that Walsingham had sailed on the Orvista with the purchase price, in cash, of a Brazilian cruiser, and had perished when the Orvista was sunk by a German submarine, had never been a secret.

In 1915, Alfred Bright had been a clerk in the exchequer office, when the admiralty notified the chancellor that the purchase price of the cruiser had been lost, and another million and three quarters must be turned over to secure the Brazilian ship for the British navy. And he was doing time in Dartmoor when Captain O'Malley was incarcerated there.

By the grapevine telegraphy of the
prison, he had learned that O'Malley was sole survivor of the Orvista, and was suspected by Scotland Yard of having brought the portmanteau ashore with him on Fandango Island.

Having been turned loose some time before O'Malley, he was careful to be informed when the Irishman was released, and he had followed him to America.

O'Malley had broached the subject to several persons in New York before he came into contact with Frank Carson; and Bright, as well as the British secret service, had little trouble in deducing that Carson's trip to Fandango, after purchasing the island from its owner, Jeffrey Johnstone, who hadn't visited the place for five years, was for the purpose of recovering the fortune in British money.

Accordingly, he had preceded Carson to Nassau, made connections with bootleggers and other hard characters, and had a schooner ready to depart when Carson reached port.

Matters would be simplified if Carson could be eliminated, and a chart showing the hiding place of the portmanteau found on his person. Bright, of course, could not suspect that the young ex-millionaire would engage upon such an enterprise without knowing exactly where to lay his hand upon the Walsingham treasure.

Accordingly, he had sent one of his confidants from his schooner with a mulatto handy with his knife, who landed him at the foot of the New Colonial Gardens, where the lieutenant had given the killer his instructions. Sir Alfred Bright himself was concealed in one of the booths at the Bucket of Blood, ready to possess himself of Carson's papers during the confusion following the killing.

That plan having failed, he had presented himself on board the yacht with an offer to buy the island. His purpose was to look the situation over. If Frank had accepted his offer, he would have been embarrassed.

The arrival of O'Malley and his daughter caused Bright to think that the Irishman was withholding from his partner the exact location of the hoard of cash, and made it evident that the thing to do was pounce upon the two adventurers on Fandango.

Having learned that the Porpoise was headed also for Fandango, he had delayed arrival until the lookout at the masthead of the schooner, anchored in the lagoon of a coral key fifteen miles north of Fandango, had seen the smoke of the gunboat heading toward Nassau, and then he had set forth for the island.

His plan was one of extreme simplicity. He would capture the unsuspecting yachtmen, choke their secret out of them, secure the treasure, and be away. While the gunboat would lay in wait for the yacht Cora Carson, and search her from stem to stern, she would pay no attention to a two-masted schooner going about her presumably innocent business. Until this calamity, everything had worked out as he had hoped.

At the moment the mine exploded under the schooner, Bright had anticipated that O'Malley would supply him with the desired information.

While the Irishman and Carson were still in his hands, and could be forced to lead him to the treasure, if the unknown wasn't yet in possession of it, the other miscreant had made escape with it impossible.

Obviously the first thing to be done was to run down the person or persons who had sunk the schooner. The other business could wait.

When he reached the camp, he ordered a guard left over the Carson party, and a thorough search of the island by the rest of the band. It was while the search was in progress that Wilbur Stetson was sighted by one of
Bright's ruffians, who fired a shot at him.

For the remainder of the day, Bright and his men beat the bush of the island, and made every effort to run down the fugitive who had been seen. Knowing that coral islands often contain caves, Bright ordered that every hole and opening be investigated. He returned to the camp at nightfall in a black mood and unsuccessful.

Within a few days, the Porpoise or some other government vessel would put in at Fandango Island to see what the new owner was about, and whatever the navy men's suspicion of Frank Carson's purpose in purchasing the place, they would quickly set him and his companions at liberty, and carry Bright and his merry men back to Nassau in chains. Therefore, Bright realized that he must achieve his purpose and get away as soon as possible.

He went down to the beach, and made a careful inspection of the yacht's launch. With fair weather it would be possible for him and half a dozen of his men to reach the north shore of Cuba in her, but she wouldn't last very long in one of the fierce tropic gales, which were not infrequent. Nevertheless, if he secured the portmanteau, he would risk the trip with a few chosen companions, and leave the remainder of his gang to whatever fate might be in store for them.

He would stand for no nonsense from Carson and O'Malley. If they resisted stern measures personally, he would try maltreating their women, and see how they liked it.

Both girls were extraordinarily beautiful, but the British jailbird was a man with a single-track mind, and it was set, just now, upon the capture of a fortune. The only use he had for the two women was to make them instruments in securing for him the treasure of the island. Carson and O'Malley had refused to tell what they knew, with ropes around their necks, but they would weaken to save the girls from violent treatment.

"Get Carson out of that cabin," he said gruffly to one of the men who was loafing near a camp fire. "I want to talk to him."

DRAWING a heavy navy revolver from his belt, he walked a little distance down the beach, and motioned to his men to conduct Carson to him.

"Go on back," he commanded when the young man confronted him. "I'll take care of him very nicely indeed."

Frank laughed scornfully. "Sort of in a fix, Mr. Buccaneer," he observed. "Not so eager to string people up since you've lost your chance to make a getaway."

"I will do anything which may be necessary to get that money, and I'll stop at nothing," replied Bright.

"Don't you see that you can't get away with it, Bright?" demanded Frank. "You're marooned here with us on this island. That gunboat has orders to keep an eye on us. You'd have trouble enough explaining why you captured us, and you'll not get out of your punishment for half hanging O'Malley and myself. You're in one hell of a fix, Sir Alfred Bright."

"Very well," replied the Englishman. "You've lost your yacht. You can't escape with the money, because the first thing the warship's officers will do will be to confiscate it. Turn it over to me, and let me take my chances. Do that, and I'll see that no harm comes to any of you."

"I'd tell you to go to the devil if it weren't for the girls," replied Frank. "As far as I'm concerned, a hair on my sister's head is worth Walsingham's millions. I don't know where the money is, Bright. O'Malley doesn't know. He remembers hiding it somewhere on the island before he went up to Johnstone's house on the night he floated ashore.
here. He was in delirium, that night. He was sick for days. When he recovered, he couldn’t remember where he hid it. Otherwise he would have taken it with him when he left here. Don’t you realize that?”

“I realize that he knows now,” declared Bright.

“That’s it. He doesn’t.”

“And you spent your money and outfitted this expedition without knowing exactly where to find the portmanteau? Do you expect me to believe you as big a fool as that?”

“Well,” confessed Carson, “I knew it wasn’t a very big island, and I thought if we hunted for a few months we would be sure to find it.”

“You’re a blasted liar!” roared Bright. “If you’re not lying, then O’Malley is holding out on you.”

“Listen,” said Carson earnestly. “To get out of prison, O’Malley would have revealed his secret to the British police years ago. He doesn’t remember, I tell you.”

“Who blew up my schooner?”

“I don’t know. I presume whoever put a mine under my yacht.”

“Well, I was in a hurry this morning, but it looks as though I would have several days to spend on the damned island. I’ll find a way to get the truth out of you and the Irishman. I say, some of you men, put this fellow back where you got him.”

He returned to the fires, and presently was dining sumptuously upon the delicacies taken from the stores of the Cora Carson, but he observed with growing uneasiness the freedom with which his mob of rogues were helping themselves to the wines and liquors which Carson had purchased at Nassau.

Bright was by no means a pirate chief who had won his post by great personal prowess. He had hired these fellows with promises of high pay for a job which would take only a few days, and he sensed an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with his leadership because of the loss of the schooner. If this mob got drunk, they might get out of hand, yet he doubted whether they would obey him if he ordered them to stop. Such a command might infuriate them.

A black at one of the other fires began to sing in a harsh, strident voice, and others joined in chorus with him. Bright inspected them speculatively, and decided whom he would take with him in the launch when he secured the portmanteau.

There were two cockneys, an American crook, and a Cuban black who knew how to navigate around the islands. Bright thought he could depend upon these. He would speak to the Negro, and have him put stores and water in the launch in the morning, after he had ordered the rest of the crew out of camp to continue the hunt for the person or persons who had blown up the schooner.

When they were gone, he would see what a knife at his throat would do for O’Malley. The portmanteau in the launch, he would shove off and streak it at top speed for Cuba. What happened on the island when his abandoned followers learned that he had left them didn’t interest him. Probably they would take their anger out on the prisoners. Well, he couldn’t do anything about that.

Bright was careful to drink nothing, and he was quick to protest when the man posted on the pile of rocks where Wilbur Stetson had recently been on watch came down and demanded liquor.

“Get back there, you fool!” he roared.

“Don’t you know we’ve enemies abroad?”

“I want drinks,” declared the sentry, a big mulatto, sullenly.

“Here you are, old top,” said a genial cockney, and he thrust a bottle of whisky into the man’s hand.
“Drop that,” shouted Bright. “You can have a drink when you come off duty.”

“Say, master,” retorted the mulatto. “You captain of the ship. We ashore now, and no ship any more. So now we have much drink.”

With an oath Bright drew his revolver and aimed it at the man. If he had had nerve enough to shoot, he might have secured control of the situation. But Al the Toff saw his ruffians leaping to their feet and rushing in from all directions, and he was by no means confident that his shot would not be answered by a dozen.

He put up his gun, shrugged his shoulders, and dropped on the sand. The sentry went off with his bottle. A black fellow offered the leader a drink from a half-empty bottle, with an imbecile laugh, and when refused, put the bottle to his own lips.

The buccaneers were still good-natured, and they returned to their food and their drink. Bright realized bitterly that he had missed his opportunity.

Every day on the island would weaken his influence. If they knew, as he did, that the gunboat would put in there on her next trip south, they would be on his neck now. He would have to let them do as they pleased to-night. In the morning, when they were sober, they would probably obey his order to spread over the island, and he must be away in the launch with the portmanteau before they came back.

CHAPTER XXI.
WINE AND WOMEN.

Some of the men were rummaging the stores in search of more liquor, but the supply was limited, because Carson had sailed from Nassau without waiting for stores he had ordered on the morning of his departure. One of the Negroes had a banjo, and began to strum on it. The mob gathered round him, roaring out songs which soon became ribald.

Cora and Rose sat in the dark in their cabin, silent and trying to conceal from each other the terror each felt. In the other cabin, their men huddled, talking in low tones, discussing and discarding one plan after another for turning the tables on their captors.

There was a brute armed to the teeth at the door of each cabin, and another on post in the rear of the two little houses. While they might make a concerted rush, burst open the frail door, and attack the enemy with their bare hands, it was only too clear what the result would be.

Hours passed, with the revelry on the beach growing in intensity, and increasing the apprehension of the captives. A case of wine, overlooked in the first search, was discovered and consumed by men who had already tossed into their hardened stomachs whisky, brandy, gin, and cordials. A sinister note crept into the revel. They had had food and wine and song, and now some of them wanted women.

One of the cockneys approached Sir Alfred Bright, who sat apart from the merrymakers, and tapped him on the shoulder. The man was very drunk.

“Wot say, chief?” he demanded.

“Let’s have the gals out, eh?”

“Certainly not,” replied Bright. “Do you want to spoil my plans?”

“We want to dance, we does,” retorted the cockney.

“Don’t be a fool,” pleaded Bright. “Dance with one another. Those young women stay where they are.”

“We only want to dance with ’em, chief.”

“No!” roared the leader of the expedition. “I say no!”

The rat-faced Londoner sneered at his chief. “Yes!” he challenged. “Come on, lads,” he bellowed. “We need dancin’ partners, we does. Let’s ’ave the dames out.”
There was a bellow of approval, and a concerted rush for the cabin in which the girls were confined. Bright rose, drew his gun, gazed at the savage drunkards, who were completely out of hand, lost his nerve, and sat down again. He was not taking a bullet or knife blade for any woman.

The man in front of the cabin had no intention of quarreling with his shipmates. He stepped aside and permitted them to push open the door and rush into the house. Piercing shrieks fell upon the ears of Sir Alfred Bright and upon those of the men of the Cora Carson. These rushed for the door of their cabin, pounded upon it, and tried to force it from its hinges. A rifle bullet fired point-blank at the door drove them back, and one of the prisoners, the engineer, went down with a sharp cry, and a slug of lead in his shoulder. He lay there groaning.

O'Malley turned to the window on the right side of the cabin, drove his big fist against the wooden shutter, which the buccaneers had closed and fastened on the outside, and shattered it.

He was about to crawl through when Frank Carson grasped him by the shoulder, pulled him back, and plunged through the opening headfirst. O'Malley was upon his heels.

They picked themselves up, and rushed like crazy men upon the crew of the schooner. These had dragged Rose and Cora into the firelight, and were squabbling for the privilege of dancing with them. Rose was scratching and clawing and kicking at her captors. Cora was pale, frozen, and scornful, and making no resistance.

"Damn you!" cried the Irishman, and felled a big Negro with a terrific blow to the side of the head. A pistol barked, and O'Malley dropped and lay senseless upon the ground.

Bright's voice rose high above the tumult.

"The prisoners are escaping," he thundered. "What's the matter with you? Look alive! Drive them back, you swine!"

For a moment, discipline was restored, and the schooner's men charged the unarmed prisoners who were climbing through the window, and beat them back with rifle butts, while Frank Carson was pulled down and beaten into unconsciousness.

"Rush the girls back into the cabin," bellowed the leader. "Do what I say, damn you. We've enemies outside the camp as well as in."

His order was obeyed. Rose and Cora were pushed violently through the entrance, and the door slammed behind them while the rest of the gang finished the suppression of the rebellion.

In a couple of minutes, all the prisoners, with the exception of O'Malley and Carson, who both were still unconscious, were back in the cabin, sullen, bruised, and bleeding.

Bright knelt by O'Malley in an agony of apprehension. If they had slain the Irishman, the prospects of laying hands on Walsingham's millions were slight in the extreme. But O'Malley was not dead. The bullet had grazed the top of his head and stunned him.

He sat up, dazed and bewildered, and at that moment the moon broke through a mass of clouds, and shone in full splendor.

It was low in the sky, and its silver visage was just above the pile of rocks upon which Wilbur Stetson had been posted the night he had disappeared, while a young coconut tree, with its feathered crown, arched above it.

The moon had shone like that on another night. When? O'Malley recalled now that he had been lying on the beach; he had pulled himself up on his haunches. He had looked into the moon, and had seen the huge pile of loose rocks. And it was there that he had buried the portmanteau of Sir Herbert Walsingham!
“Frank!” he shouted. “Where are you, Frank? I remember!”

CARSON, a dozen feet away, was being held on the ground by two men, and still very groggy. He didn’t answer, but Bright did.

“Where?” he demanded. “I’ll cut you into small pieces, I’ll burn you at the stake, unless you tell me.”

“I’m out of me head,” replied O’Malley. “I’m all mixed up. Sure, I don’t remember anything.”

“Jones,” shouted Bright, rising. “Stick a carving knife in the fire. Get it white-hot.”

“You murderin’ divil!” murmured O’Malley.

“Let Carson up,” shouted the pirate chief. “Come here, Carson. You men put a double watch on both those cabins, and the rest of you turn in.”

The men obeyed him, but, like curious children, they clustered around the camp fire and speculated what Bright might want of a white-hot carving knife.

Carson approached the Englishman. His head was clearing rapidly.

“What do you want, you crook?” he said scornfully.

“O’Malley suddenly remembers where he hid the portmanteau,” said Bright. “I offer you a chance. I’m going to run for Cuba in the launch at dawn, and I’ll have to leave most of the men behind me. I’ll take you two and your two young women with me, and give you half the treasure. I’ll send the rest of my crew out to beat the bush for the fellow who blew up my schooner, and I’ll carry with me only the two men who are left to guard the camp. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

“How about the rest of my men?” asked Carson.

“I’ll turn them loose, give them weapons. Let them take care of themselves. If you refuse my offer, I’ll leave anyway. You know what will probably happen to all of you.”

“You mean to say you’d leave without the treasure?”

“I’ll have it. O’Malley will lead me to it.”

“Divil a bit of it,” replied the captain. “If I knew where it was, I’d have taken it meself years ago.”

“I heard you when you came back to consciousness,” said Bright. “Something caused you to remember, if you ever forgot. You were looking in that direction.”

“Sure, it was the moon I was looking at.”

“I’m having a knife heated white-hot,” said Bright, with a set countenance. Having once been a gentleman, the man’s purpose horrified even himself. “I’m going to hold the white-hot knife against your eyes, O’Malley. You will be blind, O’Malley, and you owe it to your own stubbornness.”

“For God’s sake, old man,” exclaimed Carson. “Tell him if you remember. He means what he says. He’s going to do it.”

“Knife’s all ready, chief,” sang out the man who was heating it at the fire.

O’Malley was very white, but he thrust out his jaw.

“For the sake of the girls,” pleaded Carson, who was shaking with apprehension. “The devil with the money. For Heaven’s sake, tell him.”

O’Malley shrugged his shoulders. “All right,” he said dully. “I hid it under that pile of rocks over there. Pull up a dozen of the big ones on top, and you’ll find it. Frank, if it was for myself, I’d never tell the spalpeen.”

“A couple of you take these men back to the main cabin,” shouted Bright, rubbing his hands in satisfaction. “Never mind the knife, Jones. I told you men to turn in. Kick out that fire——”

Boom!

A terrific explosion in the rear of the cabins, a great burst of flame, momentary illumination like daylight, and then darkness.
WHITE-FACED, the buccaneers turned in the direction of the explosion.

"Man that machine gun," shrieked Bright. They had unboxed the Carson weapon, and set it up in a position to command the cabins and the slope beyond.

Two men rushed at top speed for the gun.

"On your stomachs," shouted Bright. "Look out for a rush!"

Boom!

A second explosion, even more violent than the first, rocked the shore, and a great burst of flame rose on the beach to the west of the camp.

The rifles of the schooner's crew cracked. They were firing wildly at an unseen foe.

Boom!

A third terrific blast went off from the rock pile to the east of the camp, and a shower of coral rock bombarded the defenders.

Crack! Crack!

Two rifle shots, and one of the men who had reached the machine gun fell over.

As the roar of the last explosion died away, a shrill voice was heard:

"We surrender!"

The cockney who had been knocked down by Bright was standing with his arms above his head.

"Stand up, all of you," commanded a tremendous human voice. "Walk to the camp fires. Throw your weapons down. You are surrounded. Quick! If one man fails to obey, you will all be slain."

There was a scramble from all sides, and the buccaneers stepped on one another in their eagerness to do what they were told. And the first man to stand with uplifted arms at the camp fire was Sir Alfred Bright.

"One of you release the prisoners," bellowed the big voice. "Bright, you do it."

The baronet left his trembling companions, pushed open the door of the cabin, and stepped aside to permit the inmates to rush into the open.

"Arm yourselves and capture those fellows," commanded the unknown.

In a couple of minutes the entire band from the schooner had been driven into the cabin, and the Cora Carson expedition was again in command of its camp.

And then, a rifle over his shoulder, Wilbur Stetson came out of the darkness into the light.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE ONE-MAN BAND.

FRANK CARSON fell upon him and embraced him. O'Malley grasped his left hand and shook it like a pump handle. Cora and Rose and Captain Smith and the others crowded around.

"Wilbur Stetson! Where are the others?" demanded Carson.

"There isn't anybody else," said the hero, not too modestly.

"But the bombardment! The man who gave the orders?"

"That was myself talking through a loud-speaker. And I wired up a lot of bombs and touched them off from behind the rocks over there."

Frank released him and gazed upon him incredulously.

"Where in the devil did you get a loud-speaker?" he demanded. "And where did you get bombs and wires? Snap out of it, Wilbur. Are we in any more danger? You must give us all the facts. Is there another gang on the island?"

"As far as I know, we're all present and accounted for," stated Wilbur calmly. "I don't have to snap out of anything. I got all the stuff in the cave."

"What cave?"

"The hermit's cave."

Realizing the total lack of compre-
hension among his friends, he laid down his rifle and cleared his throat.

"I guess I better tell you everything, from the beginning," he said. "Sit down, folks. Miss Carson, I hope you're all right, and nothing happened to you and Miss O'Malley."

"Wilbur!" cried Cora. "You're not lying when you say you did all this singe-handed?"

"Well, if I hadn't found the hermit's stuff, I couldn't have done anything."

"But there was nobody with you? Nobody hiding out there?"

"Not a soul, Miss Carson."

To his astonishment, Cora leaped upon his neck and pressed warm lips against his mouth.

"You are the most marvelous person that ever lived, I think," she declared.

"Isn't he, Rose?"

"I—guess so," admitted Rose, with a shy glance at Frank.

For an hour he held them enthralled while he told of his capture by the mad hermit, his experiences in the cave, the death of the bearded one, and the return to the cave.

"How could you ever go into that awful place again?" demanded Cora.

"I had to. I knew he had explosives there. I was the only one of us who was free, so I had to make an effort to rescue you folks, didn't I?"

"Well," remarked Cora, "ninety-nine men out of a hundred wouldn't have thought so. I think you are the one in a hundred."

"You're a better man than I am," declared O'Malley. "I wouldn't have gone back into that cave to save my own soul."

"It's a pity you didn't learn more about him," said Frank. "Why on earth did he set up a laboratory in the depths of a cave? And why the explosives? He couldn't know that we were coming when he built this wire cage."

"He told me he was Vulcan," said Wilbur. "And he talked about blowing up the capitol in Washington. He was crazy, all right."

"Never mind all that," ordered Cora impatiently. "How did you manage it all, Wilbur? Please tell us. You were simply wonderful."

"Well, he had stores of TNT and nitroglycerin, and a lot of bombs already made, but I was afraid they might kill some of you, so I took sticks of dynamite. When I had them wired up, I tried one out on the big crabs, and cleared that beach so I could get back to the boat. When I crept up in the rear of the camp they were shouting and yelling, and, before I was ready, they dragged you girls out, and then Frank and the captain broke out of their cabin and fought with them. I wanted to rush to your assistance, but I knew that they'd knock me out in a jiffy, and we'd be as bad off as before, so I went on placing my dynamite and laying the wire, until I was ready, and then I set up the loud-speaker and hooked up the battery—well, I guess that's all there was to it."

He told his story so simply, and was obviously totally unaware of the genius and the heroism he had displayed, that his listeners sat silent and awed when he stopped talking. But there were tears in the eyes of Frank Carson, and tears were streaming down the cheeks of the two girls.

"I could use some hot coffee," said the hero.

Cora leaped to her feet. "I'll make it for you, Wilbur," she said eagerly.

For a couple of minutes, Carson and O'Malley questioned him eagerly about the strange being who had died so horribly.

"You don't even know his name," said Frank. "It's a pity."

"Yes, I do," replied Stetson. "It was Donald Dobson. I found empty envelopes addressed to him, and inscriptions on packing cases in the cage. I—"
want to talk to you privately, Mr. Carson, but—I—I'm so tired."

"Here you are, Wilbur," cried Cora solicitously. In her hand was a tin cup filled with fresh coffee.

But Wilbur's head had sunk on his breast. The terrible exertions of the day and night, the excitement and the reaction, had been too much for him. He was sound asleep.

"I'll drink the coffee," said O'Malley with a laugh. "Frank, you and I have work to do. The crack on the head with a bullet did me the greatest favor of my life. Make the boy comfortable, children. He deserves it."

"I'll take care of Wilbur," declared Cora. "No, Rose, I want to."

The Irishman drew Carson to one side. "I remember where I buried it," he said excitedly. "I told that spalpeen Bright just before Wilbur set off his fireworks. We've got to get the portmanteau and find another hiding place in case Bright should turn the tables on us again."

They left the camp in haste, but they returned in half an hour slowly and dolefully.

One of Wilbur's bombs had torn the top off the pile of rocks, and slain a drunken sentinel, who, unknown to Wilbur, had been sleeping on them. And it seemed highly probable that it had torn and consumed a leather case containing a million and three quarters in English bank notes.

"It's the end of everything," Frank said sadly. "I suppose we'll have to stay here and live on coconuts and breadfruit and bananas. We'll certainly starve if we return to New York."

"If he had only selected some other place for his dynamite," mourned O'Malley, "though we have no right to complain about that. What the devil are we going to do with those scoundrels? Sure, they'll eat us out of house and home in a few days."

"I know. And half of us will have to be on watch all the time. Even unarmed, the brutes are dangerous."

Wilbur Stetson lifted his head five or six hours later, and threw off the blanket which covered him. He was lying upon a bed of palm leaves in the open, and the sun had lifted above the horizon, and the birds were singing, and morning had come. In the front of one of the cabins he saw O'Malley leaning on his rifle, head bowed, a picture of dejection.

From the rear of the cabins an armed man walked into view—Frank Carson.

The camp was silent. Even the buccaneers were sleeping.

Wilbur had a sensation of tremendous well-being. He had had a glorious dream. Looking back, it didn't seem possible that he could have accomplished a dozen miracles in twenty-four hours. But he had.

Single-handed, he had rescued his friends. And Cora Carson was impressed. He had seen her watching him when he told the story of his adventures, and there was no mistaking the admiration in her eyes. She even had wept with the stress of her emotion.

He sat up. Upon the grass beside him was a sheet of paper with writing on it. He picked it up and read it.

Please, please, Wilbur, forgive me for all the unkind things I said to you. I never did mean them. I wish very much to be your friend.

CORA.

"Ha!" exclaimed Wilbur. "Ha! I guess that can be arranged. She can be my friend, all right!"

He stood up and gazed far out to sea. There was a black speck on the horizon, from which a thin thread of smoke was rising. Fascinated, he watched it. It grew. It was a steamer approaching, which presently turned into the British gunboat Porpoise.
CHAPTER XXIII.

WILBUR’S LAST BOMBSHELL.

In Frank Carson’s stateroom on the American steamer Munago, Frank, Captain O’Malley, and the girls were assembled. Wilbur Stetson had asked for a conference when the ship was an hour out of Nassau. It was a glum, disheartened quartet which greeted him. Distress at the failure of their enterprise caused them to be only mildly interested in what the young man from Stoutsville wished to say to them.

“You remember, Frank,” he began, “that the night before the Porpoise came in, I told you I wanted to talk to you privately. Well, I fell asleep, and when I woke up the gunboat was coming. I thought then that maybe I had better wait until I saw what was going to happen. I was glad I did, because the captain didn’t treat us any too well. You remember that he wouldn’t take us aboard until he searched us all. And he said that we would be treated as common malefactors—”

“For Heaven’s sake, Wilbur, get to the point,” said Frank testily. “I would like never to hear of or see that island again.”

“You let Wilbur tell us what he wants to in his own way,” said Cora sharply. “I think he has demonstrated that he always knows what he is about.”

She threw a glance at Wilbur which caused him to beam. It was fine to have a girl like that think that Wilbur Stetson was wonderful.

“I told you I’d tell you later why I asked you not to speak of the hermit, and what was in the cave, and to say that the dynamite I discharged was from our own stores.”

“I didn’t see the reason for that—”

“It’s what I’m going to tell you about. We’re on an American ship, and we’re out of British waters. I didn’t dare say anything on the gunboat.”

“If Bright hadn’t had a bad reputa-

tion, you’d be in trouble for pretending that you blew up his schooner,” said O’Malley. “Fortunately, they had to admit that we were justified in taking any steps against obvious criminals.”

“Well,” said Wilbur, “I think it’s all right now to give you this.”

He drew a folded slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to Carson, who opened it curiously.

“What’s the idea of this?” he demanded. “It is an order, admitting bearer to Box 5545 in the vaults of the National City Bank of New York. Signed Donald Dobson.”

“I’m not certain,” replied Wilbur, “but I think it’s Sir Herbert Walsingham’s money which we shall find in that vault.”

The sensation his statement created far surpassed his anticipation. They sat stunned.

“What—what makes you think so?” asked Frank excitedly, after he had recovered.

“Because I found the empty portmanteau upon the platform the first time he left me alone, and I found this slip in a dispatch box, the key of which he gave me when he was dying. But he didn’t say the money was there. I sort of deduced it.”

“Pray God, lad, your deduction is right,” exclaimed O’Malley. “It’s logical, Frank. This fellow had the cave full of tremendously expensive equipment. That cost a whale of a lot of money. He probably took the cash to New York years ago, when he found the portmanteau, and put it in a vault and made a trip to New York, like any tourist, when he needed money. Only, how much did he spend? That part is rather important.”

“Comparatively little, if that’s all he did with it,” replied Frank. “If this proves to be the case, I think we all agree that the money belongs to Wilbur Stetson.”

“Of course it does,” said Cora. Rose
noded. O'Malley agreed with a sad smile.

"I don't see it that way," replied Stetson. "I was on Fandango as your employee. If I had found the portmanteau full of cash, it would have been my duty to turn it over to you, and this is practically the same thing. If you want to give me the bonus you spoke of, after you have established your legal right to a portion of the money——"

"Assuming that this slip of paper represents the cash," cut in Frank, smiling, "we share and share alike, Wilbur."

"Of course," asserted Cora. "It's all in the family, isn't it, Wilbur?"

"What?" shouted her brother.

She smiled proudly. "Last night," she explained, "I practically had to propose to him."

Wilbur grew as red as a tomato when Frank pumped his hand.

"Well," said Carson, "Rose and I sort of arrived at an understanding last night. Of course, we expected to be poverty-stricken for years——"

"Maybe we all shall," said Wilbur. "After all, I'm only guessing."

"It's a hundred to one the money's there," declared O'Malley, and then he began to chuckle.

"What a joke on the navy!" he added. "For months they had an ensign and a launch crew quartered on the island without authority from the owner. They poked about all over the place, and all the time the hermit was floating in his cave, and making his damned bombs. They ramosed the night we arrived in the hope that we would pull the chestnuts out of the fire for them. And all the time the money was in a vault in a bank in New York."

"Please don't be too sure," pleaded Wilbur anxiously. O'Malley thumped him on the back. "Rose and I were going to get ball," he stated. "We take forty per cent, so do Frank and Cora, and that will give you a full fifth, my lad."

"I don't want any money if I haven't a legal right to it."

O'Malley guffawed loudly. "The chancellor of the exchequer will take any terms that we care to offer him," he predicted.

In the bank's safe-deposit box they found four million one hundred thousand dollars in United States government bonds and in bank notes of high denomination, and not a scrap of paper to explain its presence. Nevertheless, the fact that Wilbur had discovered the empty portmanteau of Sir Herbert in the hermit's cave made it reasonable to assume that this was the balance of the million and three quarters of English pound notes which Walsingham had taken on board the Orvista.

Under the circumstances, the British government accepted an offer in compromise of fifty per cent of the hoard to which a legal claim could not be established.

As it was evident that the dying man had desired that his possessions go to the youth who had comforted his last moments, the quimer of adventurers felt justified in sharing it among one another; and liberally rewarding the crew of the Cora Carson.

Cautious inquiry revealed considerable about Donald Dobson. There was a price on his head in England for sabotage during the War. He was a notorious pacifist with violent methods. He fled to the United States, and was suspected of being connected with bomb outrages at big manufacturing plants in this country.

About five years back, he had disappeared, but the United States secret service was confident that he had been the instigator of numerous acts of violence which had occurred in America during the past few years.

Frank Carson and O'Malley concluded that he must have made use of
Bright in some of his enterprises in England, and had been betrayed by him, which accounted for his plan to destroy the Englishman's means of escape from Fandango and revenge himself upon him at leisure.

How Dobson happened to find the treasure on Fandango Island probably will never be known. Frank's theory is that he fled to the remote isles of the Bahamas when things in the United States got too hot for him, discovered the portmanteau, and, armed with the millions it contained, evolved a mad plan to revolutionize the world.

As it happened, because of the confusion prevailing in British government circles during War time, the numbers of the notes taken on the Oriësta by Walsingham had not been recorded, so when Dobson used them to purchase United States bonds, the British authority was not aware that it was Walsingham's thousand-pound notes which were being put into circulation.

SIR ALFRED BRIGHT and the members of his crew were sentenced to penal servitude by the Bahama government.

When the tidy sum of four hundred thousand dollars came into the hands of Wilbur Stetson, he was guilty of an act of bombast. He wrote a letter to the First National Bank of Stoutsville, requesting that an account be opened in his name, and inclosing a check for one hundred thousand dollars to be credited to his account.

"And we'll send your Uncle Harleigh an invitation to our wedding," Cora suggested. "Since he knows you're wealthy, he'll probably send us a wedding present."

"Marvelous!" replied Wilbur. "And how he will hate to spend the money for it! Well, we'll spend our honeymoon on the Cora Carson, but I'm telling you something—Fandango Island was generous with us, but it won't be one of our ports of call!"

THE END.

NEXT ISSUE!
(March Number—Published February 17th)
A Long Complete Novel of Adventure and Intrigue

Shadow of the Wolf
By R. E. DUPUY

Ozar and the Jade Altar
The Third Episode in the Adventures of "OZAR THE AZTEC," by VALENTINE WOOD

ALSO A NEW "KID BUCKAROO" NOVELETTE AND GOOD SHORT AND SHORT SHORT STORIES
10 Cents a Copy at Your News Dealer's
Better Order Yours in Advance
Heat
By Bert Cooksley

The skipper's in the rumdums an' the mate is in his bunk,
And Panama's a fat toad on the bay;
The jungle fern is steamin' like a stick o' heathen punk—
And it's heat from break o' dawn till end o' day.

It spirals and it whirls,
It flattens and it curls.
It bakes your heart and boils your hands and feet;
 Doesn't matter where you turn,
You must feel the lash and burn
Of the everlastin' fierceness of the heat!

The crew is sprawlin' deadlike in the shadows of the deck,
The galley's like an oven blazin' red;
The hos'n's wrappin' grease around the blisters on his neck,
And the oilin' crew are wishin' they were dead.

For it's heat, heat, heat,
Boilin' down the human meat—
'While the mercury's a-climbin' like a fly;
Heat that settles in your bones
Till th' very marrow groans,
And the hair upon your head begins to fry!

The mate is singin' crazy an' the Chief's stript to the waist,
The fo'e'sle's too miserable to talk;
The water laps the ship-side like a slough o' boilin' paste,
An' the sky has burned its blueness into chalk.

Oh, it spirals, whirls an' curls,
Slithers out an' furls an' twirls,
It boils your brain an' bakes your heart away;
Heat that settles in your bones,
Till the very marrow groans—
An' the dreams of vagabondage learn to pray!
How short can a story be—and still be a story? This is the question which the Editor of Top-Notch is trying to answer in this section of the magazine.

The highest art of story-telling is to be brief, and yet to present in that brief compass, a whole act of drama, comedy, tragedy, or melodrama.

It is the purpose of this Corner of Top-Notch to present a group of short short stories of outstanding merit—one-act tales that will grip, thrill, or amuse.

The Beast Behind The Wall

By Dabney Horton

Seemingly, all India lay basking peacefully in the sun. In Bombay, twenty miles away, American street cars clanged through the Chauq, and bloated Parsees in red hats tooted up and down in nickel-plated Rolls-Royces. Sikh policemen directed traffic.

But out in the bush, three white men hugged the dirt under the mud-brick Temple of Kali, and wondered whether the flies or the snakes would be the first to drive them out screaming into the daylight, where the poisoned arrows of the bush-dwellers awaited them.

Four days without food. Two days without water, and vengeful natives poking in every niche and doghole in the village for the cursed Europeans.

Cursed, because the three had stumbled upon the newly-built Temple of Kali in a district where the worship of the Goddess of Unpleasant Death had been forbidden by the British raj for sixty years. Rebellion threatened the life of every European in the district.

It was a shrewd trick, hiding under the very temple itself. The escaping fox does not ordinarily hide in the hound’s kennel. But one of the three was regretting it.

The Portuguese Delawayda was cursing, with his mouth full of dust.

“Let me out of here.” He breathed like a trapped animal. “I’d rather die out in the open than under here, I’m telling you I can’t stick it any longer. Damn you both!”

“Shut up, Del.”

Rand, the tall American was speaking, scarcely audible six feet away.

“It’s just as tough on us. We let you have the last drop in the canteen yesterday. You’re better able to stand it than Holton and I.”

Holton grunted disgustedly at the Portuguese, too. “And don’t talk about doing the hero turn and dashing out
there to sell your life dearly, like a giddy cinema hero. Remember that Rand and I are still here. You——”

Rand hissed a low, warning note that closed Holton’s mouth immediately. “S—sh!” he breathed. “Some of the village brats are hunting rats just outside the wall here. I spotted ‘em through a chink.”

Three pairs of ears were strained to catch the murmur of piping voices just a few inches from them. One of the brown, naked children was telling his comrades something interesting about the very wall that sheltered the three.

“And behind this wall,” the horrified white men heard him declaim, “lives a great beast. Last night I heard him growling to himself. He creeps out and feasts upon the bodies of those sacrificed to Kali.”

But his dusky companions had heard too much already. With tiny screams they broke away and fled. The storyteller sped after them.

LONG ago the sun had set. Rand and Holton slept, their legs tied up in their puggarees to keep them from twitching in their sleep. The sound of movement under the temple might be heard by the packs of half-wild dogs that went about their scavenging duties by night, gorging themselves on refuse and carrion that abound in an Indian village.

Delawayda, the Portuguese, stirred softly, listening for sounds of movement without. There was only the faraway snuffling of hungry dogs at the other end of the single mud street, and the eternal clatter of tree insects.

From his belt he drew out a stout knife and began slicing at the mud bricks of the wall. Above his head was the trapdoor in the temple floor by which they had entered, but it operated like the door of a rat trap, and could not be opened from below.

The bricks came apart like cheese. Rand and Holton still slept when the snakelike figure of the Portuguese slipped through the narrow opening.

Perhaps the hole made by the fallen bricks let in a breath of air, or a larger volume of the jungle chorus of tree toads, for Rand stirred uneasily in his sleep, and suddenly awoke.

Horror-stricken, the American saw the bright full moon blazing through the pierced wall. In feverish haste, he replaced the bricks, and prayed that none had fallen down outside.

A scream broke the night, a white man’s scream, and Portuguese curses and incoherent threats. Then silence.

“The fool!” groaned Holton. “He thought he could make his get-away on a moonlit night, when half the village is awakened and guards the rice fields to keep the deer away.”

A grotesque procession moved down the mud street.

At its head stumbled the broken figure of the Portuguese, a stout bamboo split with cruelly cutting, sharp edges twisted around his neck like a stock whip, and one of the devotees of Kali held either end. The ghastly device could have severed his jugular vein with a twist of the fingers. Behind him followed the bowmen with poisoned arrows trained on his spine.

Every now and then the procession paused. One of the leaders spoke softly to Delawayda, who each time shook his head in negation, and the procession moved along slowly. At each shake of the head, the bamboo thong received a jerk. Blood shone dark in the moonlight down his neck and shoulders. The bamboo was working into the flesh.

Obviously, he was being made to show the hiding place of the remaining two white men. Squarely in front of the temple the next halt was made. The whole village was awake now. The Portuguese was the color of a toad’s belly. Rand and Holton heard him address the leaders in Hindustanti.
"I do not know where the two white men are hidden," he told them.

"Then tell us where you were hidden," came the implacable answer.

"What do I gain if I tell?" he asked, as the bamboo cut him.

"Liberty to walk the road from here to the Chadni Chauk, alive," they promised.

The Portuguese eyed them craftily. "But how do I know you will keep your promise? You will kill me, too."

"We can let you go free," they assured him, "and with no danger to our village."

"But how?" he insisted. "You will kill me because you believe I will send back soldiers against you and against Kali."

They leered at him in horrible amusement.

"You will never send soldiers against us if we send you free. For we should tell the white officers how you sold the lives of your two friends for your own life. It is a fine bargain, but not one to boast of in the bazaars."

The point struck home, and the man was craven enough to be pleased. Yet his answer in Hindustani seemed still to refuse them. But this time they did not twist the bamboo splint around his neck.

He had added some words in another dialect, one which they seemed to understand. They crowded around him in a small mob. In the middle of the throng his voice sank to a murmur.

Presently one of the leaders snatched at the breechclout of a brat on the edge of the throng and pulled him closer to him. Then he whispered and pointed toward the Temple of Kali.

All this the two remaining white men saw in the white moonlight. The boy advanced timidly to the wall, and pointed.

"Back of there," he told them. "I heard a beast moving behind the wall." And a great shout of hatred went up.

Rand pulled aside the bricks and set his muscles for a sprint or a fight, a brick in each hand. A dozen poisoned arrows struck him at once, and a shower of stones followed, battering him to earth again like a prostrate oak. The arrows were mere pin pricks. The stones felled him.

Down the mud street other followers of Kali were bringing bundles of dry wood and torches. They were going to drive out the beast behind the wall.

TIME heals all wounds, they say. Time can heal the tiny wounds left by the bush dwellers’ poisoned arrows, and those left by fire and by stones. The wound on the soul takes longer to heal.

Twenty miles away from the bush dwellers’ jungle, the nickel-plated Rolls-Royces of the Parsees still tooted up and down the Chadni Chauk.

Down the Chauk limped the Portuguese, Delawayda. He limped because the bamboo ribbon that had embraced his neck some three months earlier had done something to the ganglia in the upper part of his backbone.

Delawayda was seeking something he had noticed in previous walks as he glanced down the side streets. A man who feels that he is hunted must always glance down the side streets in an Indian city, for they offer admirable hiding places for enemies and a quick escape.

The Portuguese remembered seeing a small black image of six-armed Kali in front of a hole-in-the-wall that was evidently a temple door. And now he was trying to find it again. He didn’t know that in all Bombay there wasn’t a single temple of Kali. Kali means “murder worship,” and you can’t make murder ritual openly under the British raj.

Yet there was the little, frowning, snarling image again, and the little temple door. Obviously a temple, to the Portuguese’s rather small knowledge of
Hindu worship. Just now he needed what Kali had to sell.

A long-legged brown man, wearing Kali's god-mark in ocher on his forehead, was the first obstacle to Delawayda's entrance inside. For the Hindu's squatting figure filled the narrow door.

"Whom do you seek, European?"

"Kali's temple and her priests," and the Portuguese's voice faltered a little.

"Do you bring gifts for Kali?"

That was the test question the white man expected. Only true worshipers bring gifts. And all worshipers seek favors. The bigger the favor, the bigger the gift.

Delawayda's coat pocket jingled with gold coin. He thought he saw the long brown man's eyes brighten as he passed him in.

Inside, he found himself alone with the priest, and the gloom, and the heavy perfume of sandalwood and the unpleasant reek of rhinoceros horn.

The Portuguese's gift was bountiful, and he was not at all surprised at the priest's matter-of-fact acceptance of it. Any large offering to Kali, outside of Bombay is simply the beginning of a negotiation for a killing, only pay is exacted in advance.

Then the two, priest of Kali and Portuguese settled down to plain talk in ordinary Hindustani.

"There is some one who has offended holy Kali by offending one of her worshipers?" the priest inquired politely.

Delawayda drew a letter from his pocket and read it again for the hundredth time. It was of few words, and bore no superscription.

Several moons ago we parted under melancholy circumstances. Hopes are high for a satisfactory meeting very soon.

The Beast Behind the Wall.

The Portuguese shuddered as he remembered the wall, and the trapped beasts behind it.

"Does the bringer-of-the-gift wish life, or death, for the offender of Kali?"

The Portuguese hesitated. Was this a ritual question, or was the priest coming to the business in hand? The priest himself helped him out of his doubt.

"Death is cheap," he explained. "Life is a dearer gift."

Delawayda's creased brow showed his perplexity. The priest continued.

"All men are bound upon the wheel of life by three things only—gold, honor and love. Destroying one of these does not destroy life. But if neatly done, life becomes worse than death."

"No, I do not wish to purchase life for this offender. Death suits my purpose better," said the Portuguese.

The priest made signs that an agreement had been reached.

"Now all that remains is to learn the marks by which the offender may be known."

Delawayda decided that the American, Rand, should be the first victim. If both Rand and Holton had escaped the insane fury of the bush-dwellers, Rand had probably written the letter. It sounded like a piece of Yankee impudence.

"His name is Rand," said the Portuguese. "And his trail may be picked up at the Officers' Club on the Chauk, or the more fashionable drink shops. He frequently hunts alone, and his servant loves him."

"R-ra-a-nd?" the priest prolonged the syllable with a questioning air, as if making sure of it.

"Rand," repeated Delawayda.

"He is known to Kali," said the priest shortly.

"I should think he would be," blurted out the Portuguese. "This Rand and another European were caught spying upon a Temple of Kali in the bush-dwellers' village. Somehow they escaped."

The priest made a strange gesture of finality. "Rand is known to Kali. And
you—you are then De-la-way-da?" He pronounced the name as if it were a short and filthy curse.

The Portuguese stepped back as the priest advanced upon him as if to strike him. In the gloom he thought he saw an ax in his hand, but it was the bag of gold coin that smote him heavily on the chest. By mere instinct he seized it, and it was his again.

The priest stepped back with a satisfied air.

"Kali gives back the gift when there is no service. You are free to go. De-la-way-da."

Sudden, inexplicable fear shook the Portuguese, as if he had stepped bare-footed upon some cold and scaly reptile in the dark.

"You may go, when and how you will," coldly repeated Kali’s priest. "Kali gives back your gift, for she is an honest goddess. R-r-a-a-n-d has also given gifts to Kali already, larger gifts. And the gifts are in your behalf. R-r-a-a-n-d buys you the gift of life. Kali has accepted the bargain."

As if agitated by a great electric shock, the Portuguese’s body became one tremendous shudder. In short, spasmodic jerks, his right arm fumbled with a pocket, produced something small, black and metallic, and raised it.

Smoke and flame and a barking explosion awoke the still gloom of the Temple of Kali. Then the almost headless body of the Portuguese collapsed with a crash on the stone floor. Golden coins clinked into far corners.

Kali, and the threat of the gift of life, had shaken his soul’s foundations. Delawayda had discarded the gift of life with a single fatal gesture, and seized the infinitely less bitter gift of death.

A strange voice rang through the smoke; at least it was a strange voice to be coming from the throat of a Hindu murder-ritual priest. It was the voice of Rand, the American, calling to the guardian of the gate.

"Holton! Holton! Close the outer gate before the police come. The silly fool has shot himself. I told you he wouldn’t stand another dose of Kali. He must’ve been yellow all the way through."

**Air Ride**

*By George J. Brenn*

Funny how families get broken up and scattered. The Holmes family of Kentucky, for instance. Ma Holmes up in East Aurora attending church “socials” and living an eminently respectable middle-aged life in that community. Ben Holmes, her good boy, in River City, New Jersey and payroll cashier for a big public utility. Jake Holmes, her bad boy, down in Charleston, West Virginia, mine owner and oil promoter, and fabulously wealthy.

Good boy and bad boy—they always had been that to Ma. It started back in the days when Ben went to Sunday school while Jake went fishing. Ben never missed a day at the mountain grade school; Jake frequently played hookey. Ben went through High School, but Jake quit after a year and started at the bottom in the oil business. Jake sent Ben through college but was too lazy to go himself.

Ma found herself in Aunt Elsie’s little white cottage surrounded by roses up in East Aurora, by virtue of inheritance. Jake sent her a hundred a month. It was more than enough, and when her good boy came to see her, Ma always
had a ten or twenty or more that she could spare.

Ben worked hard, but seemed to get nowhere in that big corporation. He wasn’t lucky, like Jake. Jake scarcely ever came to see her, and seldom wrote her a letter. Just a brief note with the monthly check. Too busy flying around in that fool trimotor plane, his one big hobby. He even had a transport pilot’s license.

But when Ben was shot dead by gangsters who stole the company’s payroll money, Jake made the eighteen-hour trip to River City by train and brought his brother’s body up to East Aurora for burial.

Jake tried to comfort Ma in his rough, hesitant sort of way, and promised her he would visit her more often.

“Not goin’ back to Charleston, Jake, be you?” she asked anxiously.

He set his jaws grimly and was stern-faced as he shook his head.

“Nope, Ma. River City.”

She nodded, secure in the knowledge that she and her dead boy were in accord as to what the occasion demanded. The blood of Kentucky feudists ran in the veins of the Holmes family.

“Be right sure to be keerful, won’t ye, Jake?”

“A leetle, Ma, but not too keerful,” and he kissed her good-bye.

Jake didn’t tell Ma what he learned down in River City. There a lot of things to tell. How “Fink” Barrone had induced Ben to submit to the hold-up by promising half of the sixty thousand involved. How Fink had double-crossed Ben by shooting him dead instead of knocking him gently over the head as he had promised.

Fink Barrone, drunk with wealth, attempted to separate a lieutenant from his girl. Not only attempted it, but accomplished his purpose. So Charlie Wagner, enraged by the loss of his woman, spied the story. The authorities had no choice but to arrest Bar-}

rone, although there were vague rumors of reluctance about interfering with one so powerful politically.

Jersey justice, like its applejack, strikes like lightning. The grand jury indicted. The trial started almost immediately. Jake didn’t attend it. He engaged a private detective who kept him in touch with developments both in and out of court.

“They’re going to prove an alibi for Barrone and charge Wagner with perjury,” warned the detective. “The whole thing’s in the bag. The State’s case will be so thin that the jury will have to acquit. Barrone’s going to leave town right after the trial. He’s got a brother down in Washington, and he’s going to fly down as soon as he’s acquitted. Dutch Billy, his right-hand man, is going to charter a plane for him.”

“How much longer will the trial last?” Jake asked.

“Two days.”

Jake lowered his voice and the private detective listened. When Jake finished, the sleuth nodded and said: “Sure.”

J

AKE telephoned Charleston and ordered his mechanic to bring the big trimotor plane to River City Airport. It arrived that afternoon, and was pronounced the strongest, speediest and safest at the field. Dutch Billy at the suggestion of a local private detective, chartered it for use at some indefinite hour within the next few days.

The next move was to visit a not-too-conscientious lawyer named Sidney Green. Jake talked, the lawyer listened.

“Sure,” said the lawyer, and Jake retained him.

Barrone was acquitted. His friends were jubilant, but refrained from staging a demonstration. They whisked him away to the airport, five miles from the Court House, in an expensive limousine. Barrone immediately donned an overall
suit, a helmet and goggles. His pilot, waiting for him, was similarly garbed. Barrone took the seat in the rear cockpit and the plane took off like a frightened blue teal.

The folks at Curtis Field were surprised when it landed less than half an hour later. In the rear cockpit they found Barrone, shot through the head. There was no weapon to be found. Jake Holmes, the pilot, refused to talk. He got busy at once and sent for Sidney Green, his lawyer.

The lawyer said: "It looks like suicide to me."

The police didn’t agree with him. They thought it looked like murder.

Lawyer Green disputed this. "But," he argued, "even if it is murder, what then? You must establish where it was committed. New York or New Jersey? Which State would have jurisdiction? You can’t compel the pilot to testify against himself, and there’s no other way to find out. It is just as important to establish the venue of the crime as the crime itself. If Mr. Holmes is brought to trial in either New York or New Jersey, I shall demand dismissal on the grounds of no jurisdiction."

"But the Federal courts——" suggested an officer of the law.

"—have no jurisdiction," objected Green. "Murder is an offense against the common law, and Federal laws do not take cognizance of it unless it is obviously a Federal matter."

Since practically all the legal experts agreed with these conclusions, the authorities decided that Barrone had committed suicide. It was the least troublesome solution.

Jake flew to East Aurora—alone.

"I’ll do all my flying solo," he declared, "until they git that little point of law straightened out."

Ma Holmes greeted him at East Aurora.

She had already been advised of the decision that Barrone had committed suicide.

She took Jake into her arms and embraced him, hungrily.

"Jake!" she cried. "My good boy!"

Dead Beat

By David Redstone

Mrs. Judson had grown careful after many years of keeping furnished rooms in the West Fifties. These days she advertised her musty old house to "refined gentlemen only."

Yes, she was quite aware of the redundancy. The mere "gentlemen" would not do, she had long since found out, for in the meaning of that term all types had felt themselves included: rich man, poor man, beggar man—well, all but the Indian chief. And even that noble might yet come, impose upon her trusting nature, and beat her out of a week’s rent. As what gentleman had not?

She distrusted, for instance, her latest lodger, a Mr. Drew, who had rented a room less than a week ago. Drew’s voice was husky, and he had pale, mean, blinking eyes that never rested on an object for a second. His manner was shifty, as if he were looking for something he had lost, or was being looked for.

A glance had decided Mrs. Judson to collect her rent on the dot, or out he would go. Some she might trust a day,
a week even; not Mr. Drew, however. And who will say she had not made a shrewd estimate in his case?

Mr. Drew was, in fact, not the man's name at all. He had dozen of such spurious monikers, and he changed them as often as he changed residences. At certain of these places he had not paid his rent, notably at Elmira, Auburn, and—no, not at Sing Sing. Not yet. Unless they caught him. He had evaded that jolt by a dash out of an up-State courthouse, where a jury had found him guilty of robbery in the first degree. It was hardly two weeks ago that he had made the break.

It was a thief in a million who could get away with it. But for Drew, desperation, nerve, opportunity, and luck had combined marvelously to aid him in the beating of that rap.

Drew let no friend know his whereabouts. He seldom left his third-floor room except for hurried meals. He would kill, rather than be taken. He kept his pistol ready, with safety catch off.

Mrs. Judson, pursuing her intention, called for the rent on the dot of the week's expiration.

She got the money. But Drew's scowl made her feel justified in her distrust of him.

Her attitude toward Mr. Horatio Jones, however, to whom she rented a room adjoining Drew's, was more lenient. But then Mr. Jones was not the scowling, shifty sort. He was affable, smiling, boyish, though in his late thirties, with frank, ingenuous eyes.

He was a large man, a little clumsy of movement, and profoundly apologetic when he tripped twice on Mrs. Judson's frayed hallway carpet. She surmised he was new to the great city, and warmed toward him, and felt sorry for him, too. She lopped fifty cents off his rent.

“Nice, pleasant little room,” said he delightedly.

“Yes,” she agreed, “and we have nice people in the house.”

“Fine and dandy! Fella gets lonely all alone in this old burg, eh? I'm a fella always makin' friends. You know.”

“Well, next door is a Mr. Drew.” Mrs. Judson began dubiously. “But there's other nice people,” she offered. Then, after a moment's hesitation: “It's—customary to pay in advance.”

“Oh! I beg your pardon. I didn't know.” How green he was!—thought Mrs. Judson. “I'm a little short,” he went on. “But I can scrape the rent together, I guess.” He laughed rather heartily.

Jones and Drew were bound to meet; though, due to the latter's habit of hermitism, that meeting did not occur until almost a week later. However, a fleeting glance at his neighbor's face as Jones was coming up to the third-floor landing, made Drew start. He turned on his heel suddenly, as if he had forgotten something.

“Howdy!” Jones called boisterously.

“Evenin’,” Drew muttered, and locked himself up in his room.

Where, he wondered, had he seen that face before? In a court? Police headquarters? In a prison office? He racked his memory. He found his pistol, and satisfied himself that the clip was full, and thus he waited, ready. Was he, after all, becoming rap-simple? He was the same way out in the street. A stranger's too long glance sent him into a panic.

He wished now that he had chosen a room with a fire escape. Jones's was so equipped, he knew.

During the following days he strived vainly to gain victory over his fears. He clawed at his memory for recollection of a past meeting with his neighbor. Finding none, he grew the more apprehensive.

One night, his restlessness drove him
to venture into the street. Before long, however, the same old fears drove him back.

There was a note under his door when he returned. It was from Mrs. Judson, reminding him that the rent for his rooms was due.

Drew cursed. That note decided him. He'd clear out to-morrow.

In the morning, just as he had finished dressing, he heard gruff voices on the stairs. He dashed to the hall, every fear in him awakened. He heard Mrs. Judson's voice calling up:

"Third floor—that's it. On your right. But I'm telling you that ain't his name."

A glance below gave Drew swift vision of a blue uniform, brass buttons, a shield. A man in plain clothes was leading the way. Drew leaped back, his brain in a whirl! One way out was left him—the fire escape leading from Jones's room. Snatching his pistol from his pocket, and finding Jones's door unlocked, he burst into the room.

The room was empty, and he dashed across to the window. Already the men's feet pounded on the landing.

"Maybe he's got a cannon," one warned. "Watch yourself!"

"Damn right!" Drew grunted, struggling with the stubborn window sash. At first it would not yield to his frantic endeavor. It had to be coaxed, and Drew was in no state of coaxing. By the time he had raised it an inch, the door knob turned and he was trapped.

"Crack! Crack!" He sent a hasty volley at the panel. The next second he smashed the pane with the butt of his gun.

"Drop your gat and come out, you," a voice commanded, "if you don't want to be brought in dead."

"Get me!" challenged Drew, as he prepared to swing his leg over the sill.

A .38 Colt's bullet came plowing for him through the door. Another. And another. His arm was stung as if a hot rivet had been driven through it. He dropped his gun. He stooped for it, and as he did so, the men burst in upon him.

"Leave that——"

The uniformed man was quick. He made a flying tackle, pinning Drew to the floor. The pistol he swept out of reach.

"Lay off," panted Drew weakly. He had ceased struggling. "You—got me, ain't you?"

"Maybe," said the plain-clothes man, bearing down upon Drew's arms. "But we'll make sure." Then, catching the policeman's eye: "See who it is coming up the stairs."

"The landlady," he was informed.

"Listen," Drew said heavily. "There's dough in my pocket. I owe her a day's rent. Pay her for the week—to hell with it."

The detective grunted cynically. "That's a swell line—from a dead beat, too!"

"Dead beat!" Drew said furiously. "What the hell kind of a punk d'you take me for? I've done lots of things for an easy dollar, you dumb bull, but I never beat a woman out of her rent!"

The policeman found occasion to laugh at this. Then Mrs. Judson entered, and stood at the door in trembling consternation.

"That—that's not the man," she said. "No? Well, he's coming with us, anyway. He's got a few things to explain, whether he's Cooper or not."

Cooper! That's who the dirty skunk was. No wonder his face was familiar. They had met one day at the Raymond Street Jail over three years ago. Cooper—professional hotel beat and general crook. And the bulls had come after Cooper, alias Jones. Drew groaned aloud.

"Jones—he's gone!" Mrs. Judson exclaimed. "His things are gone! His bed's not been slept in. And he owed me a week's rent!"
At The Top-Notch Mike

AGAIN we present the Top-Notch Hour, ladies and gentlemen. Top-Notch Mike announcing from Station WTN, located on the fifth floor of Street & Smith's building, at 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

Plenty of letters before me this evening, folks, but first I am going to announce the program for the next issue of Top-Notch. Also, I think that by the time the date for the next Top-Notch broadcast rolls around, I will have plenty of letters from fans commenting on the new adventures of Ozar the Aztec, written by Valentine Wood, author of the "Kroom" stories.

The editor of Top-Notch has never launched a series of stories with more enthusiasm than in the case of "Ozar the Aztec," and if you have not already written in your impressions of these stories, I wish you would do so at your earliest convenience.

You will find a new adventure of the "Ozar" series, by the way, in the next issue of Top-Notch—the March number, on the stands February 17th. Its title is "Ozar and the Jade Altar."

Every issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch now leads off with a long, complete novel written by some author who tops his particular division in the field of fiction, and this long feature of the March issue of Top-Notch will be considerable of a novelty.

Most of the stories in Top-Notch have their scenes within the borders of the United States, or Alaska, or Canada, or the West Indies, or in tropical jungles, but a change now and then is always refreshing, and in the long novel for the March number, the reader will be whisked about the various capitals of Europe.

The story is called "Shadow of the Wolf," and it is the work of R. E.
Dupuy, already a favorite with Top-Notch readers for his authentic stories of the Foreign Legion.

“Shadow of the Wolf” tells of the adventures of a young American who clashes with the efficient spy system of Soviet Russia. He is actually hurled into scenes of high drama while he is taking a quiet vacation in the north of France.

From that moment on, his life is a succession of wild airplane flights, battles with gun and fists and wits, with death always lurking just around the corner, but with life, somehow, all the more intense and engaging for that.

The story will fill about fifty pages of the next Top-Notch, but you will find that it will not be one paragraph too long, and probably—as I did—you will know a feeling of mingled regret and satisfaction when you reach the dramatic conclusion.

Plenty of other good stories in the next Top-Notch—the return of Kid Buckaroo and his roly-poly friend, Tucky Williams, varied short stories, and that increasingly popular feature of the new Top-Notch, the Short Short Story Corner.

Out February 17th. Ten cents a copy. Better than ever. And now I just have time to read you some of the more recent letters received from Top-Notch fans:


—Dover, New Jersey.

Carl De Roche writes from Water-town, New York:

No, Mr. Editor, you are not running enough stories about Lazy Lucas, O. K. Polter, the Hawk, Zip Sawyer, and the other characters of the Top-Notch. They’re always good; at least I have not come across any bad ones. I hope you see the advantage of running and continuing serials, especially like “Rubies of Wreckers’ Reef.” “Lazy Lucas” is a particular friend of mine.

To save time, I am going to group three letters from Thomas Ivery, of South Boston, Massachusetts; August Barthelmy, of Jersey City, New Jersey; and Grover Kosky, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, all of whom ask for more stories by J. Allan Dunn, Ben Conlon, Allan R. Bosworth, and—in the case of

HELP EDIT YOUR TOP-NOTCH!
READERS’ BALLOT

Best story in this issue

Next best

Best “short short” story

Who are your favorite Top-Notch authors?

Remarks and suggestions

Name and address
Mr. Barthelmy—stories by Chart Pitt, Galen C. Colin, Ralph Boston, and Legare Davis.

Mr. Ivery adds: "I have no kick at all on the present Top-Notch, except that I really do think your old Top-Notch Talk was better than your present phony broadcast, or anyhow just as good. However, I won't fight over a little thing like that. What do others say on the subject?"

Here are a couple of letters from Top-Notch readers who are enthusiastic Valentine Wood fans. The first is from Celia M. Parks, of St. Paul, Minnesota, who writes in part: "I was glad to learn that Valentine Wood would be back with a new fantastic yarn. I thought the first few installments of the Kroom stories were about the most interesting I had ever read, but I think that the author didn't bring them to the logical conclusion always, but dragged them out in the hope that the readers would want more and more. I wanted to see Kroom reunited with his mother, but before that time ever came there had been too many yarns of his adventures, which were so much alike."

And the second is from Ward E. Healey, of San Francisco, California, who writes: "As I liked the Kroom stories very much, it was a pleasure to read your announcement that the author of them, Valentine Wood, was to write a new series for Top-Notch—something different. Stories like these, well done, are fine now and then. I am eager to read them. I know I'll enjoy them, just as I know I'll get bored if you give us too many of them. The 'different' story should not be run too often, while most of us can stand a steady diet of yarns like 'Rubies of Wreckers' Reef,' by Ben Conlon, the Zip Sawyer stories, by Vance Richardson, and your detective stories dealing with the same main characters who have various adventures, each one complete. Another such story is 'Fandango Island,' by Fred MacIsaac. This looks like a good one, and I feel that I want to go ahead with the remaining installments."

It is obvious that Top-Notch readers like the Reader's Ballot, which is always run at the back of the magazine, for sheafs of these ballots, properly filled out, are coming in regularly. Here are some reports recently received:


JERRY DEVEREAUX.—Best story in this issue, "Fandango Island." Next best, "Web of the Spider." Best short short story, "Gunman's Gesture." You have no space for third best story, but in my opinion it was "The Suspension of Corporal Geary." Give us some more stories like "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef" and "Tiger Shark." Best authors, MacIsaac, Boston, McFarlane, Conlon, Trenor, Gilbert.—Omaha, Nebraska.


CLARE E. JOHNS.—Best story in your latest issue, "The Suspension of Corporal Geary." Give us more Mounty stories. Also, where are your detective stories, the long ones you used to have about O. K. Polter and the Hawk? I am glad to see from your announcement that you are giving us Valentine Wood again. You never should have stopped him.—Los Angeles, California.

Time's up, folks. Listen in again on February 17th. And don't fail to write in to this station telling of your impressions of the "Ozar" adventures. And now your announcer wishes you all a very pleasant Good Night!