ARGOSY

ALL STORY WEEKLY

DEC. 1st.

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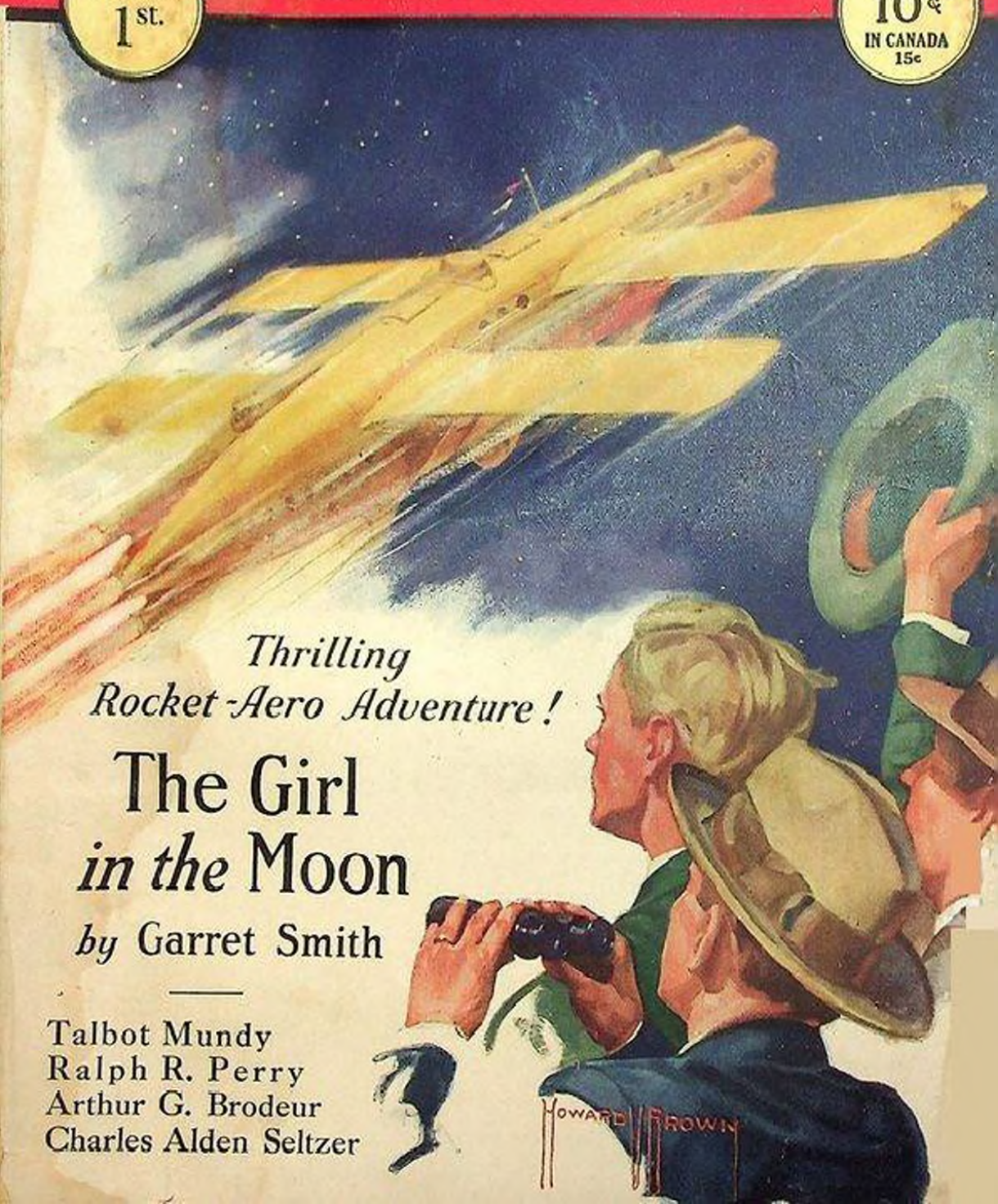

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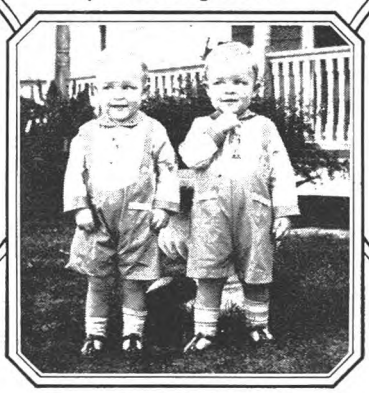

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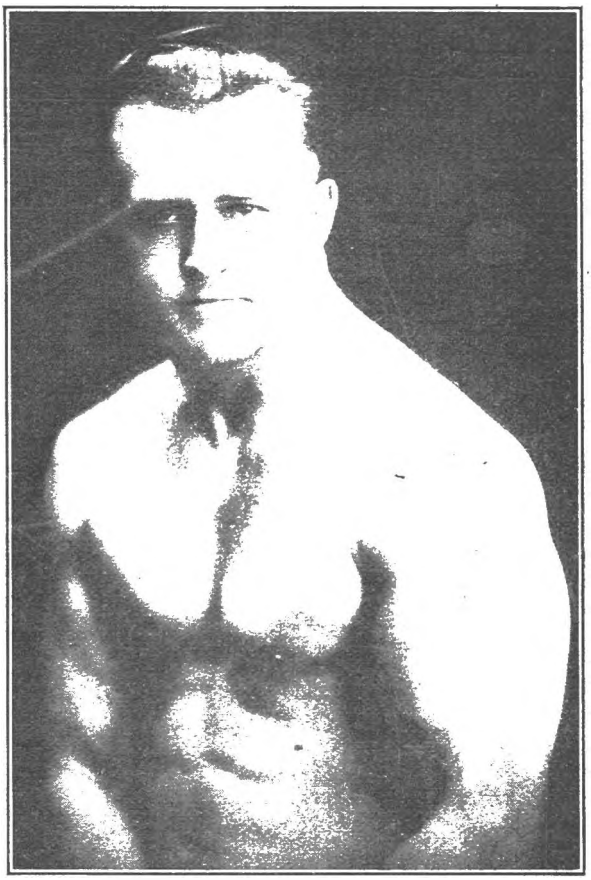

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ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 199 CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 1, 1928 NUMBER 5

SERIALS

COMPLETE STORIES

OTHER FEATURES

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday throughout the United States and Canada

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Classified Advertising

The Purpose of this Department is to put the reader in touch immediately with the newest needfuls for the home, office, farm, or person; to offer, or seek, an unusual business opportunity, or to suggest a service that may be performed satisfactorily through correspondence. It will pay a housewife or business man equally well to read these advertisements carefully.

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Classified Advertising continued on page 6.

Classified Advertising continued from page 4.

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HELP WANTED—FEMALE

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ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 199 SATURDAY, DECEMBER 1, 1928 NUMBER 5

Anne strained her eyes for a further glimpse of the monster

The Girl in the Moon

Out of the sky it came, a flaming meteor with a strange cargo—bringing in its fiery train a startling adventure and oddly tangled destinies

By GARRET SMITH

Author of "You've Killed Privacy," "Thirty Years Late," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE BLAZING METEOR.

FROM the dark bungalow porch silently slipped a dim shadow form and sped across the grassy slope toward the brink of the low bluff overlooking the sea. A moment this eerie spirit of midnight paused on the rocky verge. The white graceful outline of a slender girl's figure was silhouetted against the star-lit sky.

At her feet the slumbering Atlantic gurgled drowsily as the flood tide swept around the islet. Somewhere over the water a bell buoy tolled monotonous warning. Then, just before the beam of the lighthouse on the mainland threw its spotlight upon her, she swayed forward and dived.

Sea fowl, roused from slumber by the sound of her clean-cut plunge, squawked raucously. There was a rustle of wavelets against the rocks, followed by the rhythmic splash of a strong swimmer, as the young woman bobbed to the surface and struck boldly out into open water.

"Tom! What's that?" came a startled feminine voice from the bungalow. "Tom, wake up!"

There was a rumble of protest in slumberous masculine tones.

"Tom Medridge! Wake up, I tell you!" the first voice repeated, a voice middle-aged and wifely, a voice of one having authority. "There's some one landing on the island."

A light flashed on. From the bungalow emerged a second figure and headed toward the rock point, followed a moment later by a third. Mrs. Medridge overtook her spouse as he reached the edge of the little bluff and clung to his arm shivering.

"Sounds like a man swimming," he whispered. "Who's that?" he demanded in a loud tone.

The swimming ceased. There came to them a mellow gurgle of mirth from that direction.

"Why, hello, dad!" called the girl. "Don't be alarmed, old dear. This is your only child, naked and unashamed."

"Anne Medridge!" gasped her mother. "You shameless girl! What are you up to now? You come right in this instant."

The wifely voice had turned maternal and lost a little of its authority. It was echoed by a fresh gurgle of glee out of the sea. A swish, a swirl and Anne turned over on her back. Secure under her plush mantle of darkness, she floated dreamily up and down on the swells.

"No, momsy, I can't come till I've had my swim out," she replied coolly when she had herself adjusted to her satisfaction.

"You needn't worry, though. It's quite safe and frightfully decent. I've done it nearly every night since we've been here while you were sleeping the sleep of a righteous chaperon.

"I've got to have a little freedom and privacy once in awhile, something to wash out the taste of those deadly afternoons and evenings over at the Club. Trying to horn into a bunch of snobs where I'm not wanted! I'm hoping some hi-jacker will come along and kidnap me. I'd like to be a lady pirate. Wouldn't that give the rocking chair fleet an objective! Dear! Dear!"

"You terrible girl!" wailed her mother. "That's all the thanks I get for trying to arrange advantages for you! If you don't come in at once we'll go back to town to-morrow."

"Is that a promise, darling?" the imperturbable young woman asked. "Back to the apartment and the Y. W. tank! Well, it couldn't be more stupid than this. You know it wasn't I who kidded the Brewsters into letting us be glorified caretakers of their cottage. I'm no little sister of the rich. I—oh, look! Look! In the sky back of you! A perfectly wonderful meteor!"

ANNE swung upright treading water to get a better view of the fiery apparition that had suddenly invaded the midnight sky. It was halfway between the eastern horizon and the zenith when Anne caught sight of it, a long tail of light in its wake, and mounting with almost lightning speed. It was a giant among shooting stars, seemingly almost a comet in size and many times as brilliant, like a comet about to collide with earth.

But as it neared the zenith it became evident that its nearness to earth was no mere illusion. The roar of its passage reached their ears, first a remote hissing, increasing to a snoring rumble, till it passed over their heads in a thunderous tumult like a mountain cataract.

Under the light of it the little island

stood out clearly as at noonday, the man and woman on the bluff looking up half paralyzed with terror, forgetting their extreme dishabille. The girl lay back inert on the surface of the water, lost in the wonder of the spectacle.

Then suddenly the mammoth rocket did a strange thing, belying all recorded history of the habits of meteors. A little beyond the island it seemed to slow down in its swift straight course toward the mainland. The next instant it veered sharply to the left and swooped back and down toward them in a wide curve. Three times it spiraled about the little ridge of rocks, dropping lower with each circuit and drawing in closer to the breathless watchers.

With the last circuit it passed directly over the roof of the bungalow and barely missed the wooded summit beyond. Mrs. Medridge screamed and went limp in her husband's arms. There was an echoing scream in the bungalow from the Medridge's maid of all work, who had evidently just awakened.

Anne again swung upright in the water, straining her eyes for a further glimpse of the monster.

She had just made up her mind that it had dived into the sea beyond her range of vision when she was blinded for an instant by a great glaring eye flashing out from behind the point of rock and coming directly toward her, almost on the surface of the sea. Instinctively she whirled and dived. She was not an instant too quick. She felt rather than heard a terrific impact on the water where her head had been a moment before.

A giant hand seemed to seize her and toss her out into the open air. She fell back into the heaving waves and righted herself just in time to see the flashing light, a long shadowy form behind it, bounce twice over the surface of the water and then finally sink.

"Anne! Anne!"

Her father's terrified voice aroused her from her daze of amazement.

"All right, dad! Coming."

Her own voice was tremulous now. With the peril over, she realized she was frightened herself.

"Hurry," called her father. "Your mother has fainted."

"Yes, dad. Be there in a second."

She pulled herself together and struck out for the shore. Then suddenly she stopped and listened. Had her overwrought nerves tricked her imagination? No. She heard it distinctly this time, only a few rods away, seemingly from the very spot where the meteor had at last disappeared, the faint voice of a man in pain.

"Help! Help! Quick!"

ONLY an instant Anne hesitated, while she got the bearings of the voice.

"All right!" she called. "Coming. Dad, somebody's hit out there. I'm going to help them," she added.

She took a dozen swift overhand strokes, then paused again.

"Where are you?" she called.

"Right here," the voice came back to her again. Now it was only a few yards away. She could hear the sound of some one struggling in the water. A moment later she bumped against a squirming body and sheered off just in time to escape the frantic clutch of a heavy hand that barely grazed her shoulder yet jarred her whole sensitive body and filled her with a momentary chill of horror.

But she recovered instantly and whirled about. There was a choking gurgle immediately in front of her. She reached out cautiously and her fingers closed in a shaggy mat of hair. Again a thrashing arm beat against her. She slipped out of its reach and, treading water behind the struggling body, drew the head to the surface.

"You're all right now. Lie still," she commanded.

Her voice reached the man's panic-stricken senses and he obeyed, becoming inert in the water, and after a

moment of choking effort finding his voice.

"Broke an arm when we fell," he gasped. "Two more in there."

Without stopping to puzzle over this mysterious thing, Anne went into swift action. If there were two other victims she had no time to waste. She could count on no assistance from her ineffective, half invalid father or her hysterical mother. She guided the man's uncrippled hand to her shoulder.

"Just lie quiet in the water and hang on," she ordered, and struck out for the shore.

A few minutes later she pulled the half-limp figure out on the beach.

"I've got one," she called to her father, who had turned his wife over to the maid and was returning to the shore with a flash light. "There are two more out there. You look out for this one," she added, and plunged in again.

"Hello, out there!" she hailed as she swam hesitantly in the direction of her previous course as nearly as she could guess it. But there was no answer. She pushed out for several rods, calling as she went, then paused and listened.

There was no sound in reply but the soft lapping of the water and the distant tolling of the bell buoy. Again and again she hailed without results. She had lost her bearings completely now, except as the dim outline of the little island bulked against the sky behind her in the periodical flash from the distant lighthouse. She had probably drifted far away from the spot where the men had been hit.

It occurred to her now to wonder just what had happened. Probably three men prowling about the island in a boat and hit or capsized by the meteor. Bootleggers or hi-jackers or worse, perhaps. She recalled now the hairy, sinewy arm of the man she had rescued and his unkempt mat of hair, her only clear impressions of him. His choking words had been too few and indistinct to add anything.

She thought of her helpless father and mother back there on the island with him. Perhaps he was not as far gone as he seemed. She might have done better to let him drown. But the distant rumble of her father's voice on the shore partially reassured her. He had something important to do now and was alternately issuing orders to the maid and shouting inquiries to Anne as to her safety.

But where were the other two victims? "In there," the first man had said. In what? The boat perhaps. She swam around slowly in a wide circle, calling in vain.

Finally she gave it up reluctantly and turned back toward the shore. She realized suddenly that she had been exhausting her strength and that further effort might be dangerous as well as useless. Then she bumped sharply against some hard, bulky object just awash of the surface.

Anne knew the waters around the island well. There were no outlying rocks on this side of the island, only a low sandbar some two hundred feet offshore, partially exposed at low tide. Her next thought was that this might be the bottom of an overturned boat resting on the bar. If so it had a metal hull, as her exploring touch told her. This was what the first victim had meant by "in there."

SHE let herself down in the water beside it, hoping to get footing on the bar, but it was high tide and too deep for her. The heavy metal mass resisted her feeble efforts to right it. Possibly, she thought, a little air had been imprisoned under the overturned hull. The shipwrecked men might still be alive.

Next she tried pulling herself down under water in an attempt to reach up under the gunwale. To her bewilderment, she found no gunwale, only a smooth continuation of metal casing. It gave her the impression of being a small submarine.

Now, completely exhausted for the moment, she drew herself up on the wreck in despair. There seemed to be nothing she could do but rest till she dared risk the swim back to the island.

But at that it occurred to her, for the first time, to try tapping signals on the metal. She beat on the surface beside her with all the force she could put back of her knuckles, then listened.

There was an answering tap!

Anne's heart leaped with relief. She gave a final reassuring signal.

"All right," she called, "I'm getting help."

And as she did so, she realized how futile it was. Of course they could not hear her voice. And by the time she sailed the dinghy over to the mainland and brought men back they would be smothered. But she would make every possible effort. Then as she started to slip off into the water, she gave a startled scream and clutched at the slippery surface for support.

A section of the metal on which she sat had thrust upward and a hand reached out and clutched her arm.

"That you, Sutton?" demanded a man's voice. "Just in time. Colby's all in. Help me with him. I'm pretty groggy myself."

In the momentary flash from the lighthouse she saw dimly a man standing beside her, dragging a limp figure through a hole in the wreck.

Sutton must be the man she had rescued and Colby the helpless one. The face of the speaker, she judged, was that of a young man. Both face and voice belied her momentary fear of hijackers.

"No, I'm not Sutton," she told him. "I took him ashore. Can you swim?"

"Good Lord! A woman!" he exclaimed. "I'm afraid I can't swim far. I got a bad welt on the head, and this man's insensible."

"You'll have to hold him there then till I can get a boat out here," she told him. "I won't be long."

Anne swam swiftly ashore and slipped into her room by way of the window without exposing herself. She pulled on a dress and shoes and presented herself to her family in the living room, where her father, with the dubious assistance of the maid, was applying his idea of first aid to a big, swarthy, ill-favored man, evidently Sutton, while her mother fluttered about hysterically.

"Oh, there you are, young woman," she squealed, pouncing on Anne. "It's a wonder you had the grace to cover yourself! Pretty mess you've got us into! Help your father now. He has no more idea of setting an arm than a pussycat, and I can't get any sense into his head."

Anne ignored her.

"Dad, we'll have to take the boat out to the wreck. There are two men there badly injured."

The invalid was eying her intently.

"So you are the young woman who pulled me in? Thanks," he said with an effort to make a gruff voice sound gracious. Instinctively Anne disliked him, but she saw that he was not the uncouth ruffian of her first snap judgment.

"Don't mention it," she replied briefly, and hurried out to that wharf followed by her agitated father.

It was the work of only a few minutes to row over to the wreck and bring in the other two survivors. The man called Colby came to his senses a few moments after he was deposited on the divan in the bungalow living room. Anne gave a little gasp of admiration as she looked at him. He was as handsome as Sutton was ugly, a blond giant of a man, but with an aristocratic face suggesting something of the scholar. He was not much over thirty, she would judge.

"Gage, are you there?" were his first words.

"Right here, sir."

The third member of the party came forward. He was the man Anne had first seen emerging from the wreck,

dragging Colby after him. Nice but nondescript, Anne classified him, a man slightly younger than the other two, and of a modest, retiring manner. He had quietly bandaged his own head and kept out of the way till now.

"Where are we and what time is it?" Colby asked, eagerly trying to rise.

"You're about thirty miles north of Portland on a little island two miles offshore," Anne told him. "It's just two o'clock now. It was about one when you landed."

"Do you mean Portland, Maine?" he asked. "You see, our instruments went bad and we had to go by guess the last hour."

"Portland, Maine, of course," Anne told him wonderingly.

"Do you hear that, Gage, Sutton? I told you we were making the North American coast. And one o'clock, eh? Let's see. Allowing for difference in time that would be just three hours since we left. Hear that, you fellows? Made exactly the time we calculated on. Now will they call me a mad dreamer?" Colby was wildly elated.

The Medridges listened wonderingly to this talk. It sounded a little rambling to them, but the man's companions seemed to be taking him seriously.

"Have you come far?" Anne asked politely.

"As far as one can on earth," Colby said. "From the Plain of Irquits in Central Asia. Halfway round the earth in three hours."

CHAPTER II.

THE METEOR'S FLIGHT.

AT this startling announcement of their uninvited guest, Mrs. Medridge snorted indignantly and her husband blinked with surprise, then chuckled feebly at what he evidently took to be a display of ill-chosen humor. But Colby had addressed Anne and she paid him the courtesy of giving him the benefit of the doubt. She studied his face for a moment. There was enthusiasm, but there was intelligent sanity as well.

In the eyes of his companions was the same look, that of men who risked their lives in a great cause and had won gloriously. The other two caught something of her questioning look. Sutton nodded agreement with Colby.

"That's right," he said. "Made a little better than four thousand miles an hour for three hours straight."

"And we could have kept right on around the world if our powder hadn't given out. Could have gone to the moon and back, for that matter," Colby spoke up. "We were well out of the earth's atmosphere a good half the way. Our instruments will prove that if they're not broken."

"Perhaps you don't realize that this is Mr. Morton Colby," Gage suggested.

"Oh!" Anne exclaimed, suddenly understanding why there had been something familiar about that handsome face. She had seen it many times in the papers, of course.

"What! Morton Colby, the aviator?" shouted Tom Medridge, suddenly dropping his deprecatory smile.

"Exactly," said Gage, "and the inventor of the greatest flier yet, the one that lies wrecked out there in the sea at the present moment."

Mrs. Medridge's skeptical indignation turned to bewilderment again. Her knowledge of current aviation history was very vague, but she had a suspicion that she was entertaining a lion unawares and was not quite certain whether a flying lion was *au fait* in the social world.

"Oh, we're so glad to have you here, Mr. Colby," she chanced. "So sorry for your accident. You and your men must rest here till you're quite well. Tom, you must arrange to get a doctor and nurse here at once. Mary, get the guest rooms ready for the gentlemen."

"Thanks a lot," Colby told her.

"But, if you don't mind, the first thing is to get the news through to the papers. What are our chances to-night? We don't have to consider cost at all."

At that Anne took matters in hand again.

"It will cost only the price of a motor boat for an hour or so and the telegraph tolls," she said. "I happen to be a stenographer by trade, though not working at it at present. Suppose you dictate your story to me while father rows over to the village on the mainland, arranges for a wire at the railroad station where I know they have a night man, and brings a doctor back in a hired launch. Then I'll take my notes back in the launch and dictate direct to the wire. We can have it off to the papers by three thirty if you can dictate your story rapidly."

Colby gratefully accepted the suggestion and Tom Medridge, adding a collar and tie to his hasty toilet, bustled off importantly in the only craft the islet afforded. Anne got a pad of note paper and pencil and proceeded to business.

From the speed and fluency with which Colby dictated his story of invention and air adventure, his own biography included, it would appear that he had his publicity pretty well in mind beforehand and was no novice in the art. His two companions sat by and listened intently as the story unfolded, ready with suggestions, but were seldom called upon.

Anne, as she transcribed, was increasingly conscious that the eyes of Colby and Sutton rested on her face almost continuously. In Colby's gaze she read respectful admiration, but the burning black eyes of the other man were inscrutable.

She was first baffled, then annoyed by them. It was a relief to steal an occasional glance at the shy countenance of Gage who kept his gaze averted except for an occasional look in her direction, purely impersonal, almost uninterested, it seemed. She decided that he was a comfortable young man, though not at all thrilling.

Anne Medridge was not unused to masculine admiration which her fresh beauty highly merited. So far she had not proved susceptible to any man in particular. Her mother's numerous matrimonial campaigns in her behalf, and the ardent pursuit of several young eligibles, had left her unmoved.

But now she found herself unusually thrilled by the personality of Morton Colby, as well as by the astounding story he unfolded. Even the touch of egotism he displayed in his account was robbed of offensiveness by the merit of his achievements.

COLBY had just graduated from an engineering school when the World War broke out. He had enlisted in the French army as an aviator and there had met Gage and Sutton. The three had become fast friends. All had distinguished themselves in the service, and after the war took up commercial aviation together. Colby had kept himself more or less in the limelight ever since, both by his inventions and the establishment of several new flying records.

A year before this he had created a fresh sensation by setting a new altitude record in a machine of his own devising, the secret of which he had not revealed. Shortly after that he and his two partners had disappeared from sight.

Now, for the first time, Colby was revealing the secret of that year. They had sought out a remote spot in the interior of Asia with tools and material, where they could experiment in privacy, perfecting this new type of plane without danger of having their unpatented devices stolen or their work discredited by premature publicity.

The basic principle was not new. It was the rocket idea, on which inventors had been working for some years, but so far without practical success,

though the German experiments in 1928 with the rocket device attached to an automobile had attracted wide attention. But popular faith had been considerably shaken by the explosion of the car during a test.

At last Colby and his fellow-workers had completed the big rocket in which they had just landed in a stream of fire from halfway around the world and had nearly lost their lives. After a few successful short flights they had been ready for the big spectacle and the announcement of their achievement to the world.

"We took pains to have our start properly witnessed and reported," Colby paused in his dictation to explain here. "That is why I am anxious to get off to-night the story of our arrival. By now every news agency in the world will have the wires hot with inquiries at to our whereabouts.

"I brought the nearest American consul and an intelligent native official over to our field in a plane to watch the start and take the news to the outside world. Just before we took off they signed an affidavit which I have with me, certifying to the time and place of our departure."

The flight itself, however, had been practically devoid of incident until a half hour before their drop into the sea at its end. Comfortably inclosed in the hermetically sealed cylinder body of the plane, well heated and supplied with air from an oxygen tank, they might have been taking a brief ride in a closed automobile during the first two-thirds of the trip; a ride over a perfect roadbed at that. Hydraulic shock-absorbers between the rocket-tubes and the sealed fusilage protected them from the shock and roar of the propelling explosions.

"The crucial moment, both from the standpoint of comfort and safety, is at the start of the flight." Colby explained. "You see, our plane has no motor and propeller aboard. It is driven by a succession of powder explosions in gunlike tubes projecting from the stern, like a giant rocket.

"Without my special starting device it would start with a jerk, almost like a shell from a cannon. The shock might kill the occupants. On my first successful test before I invented the starter, I recorded our speed at the end of seventeen seconds from a standing start. We were making thirteen hundred and twelve feet a second or nine hundred miles an hour. Thirty-five seconds later I took it again and we had doubled that speed, doing almost two thousand miles an hour. Then I had to quit and volplane back to earth. I was all in from the shock. Took me two days to get over it.

"But when we took off to-night we did the first mile on a track on the top of a fast motor truck. That gave us a gradual and easy pick-up, but a swift one. We left the truck and the track at the end of the mile going at two hundred miles an hour. At that speed we took the impulse of the first explosion easily. We shot up at an angle of seventy degrees. Ninety seconds later our altimeter recorded a height of thirty-one miles. Fortunately the air below us was clear. I took sights on the earth's surface and found we were making forty-four hundred and seventy-one miles an hour, and were already over fifty miles from the starting point."

Anne Medridge thrilled to the tips of her swift-moving fingers as the narrative unfolded. Her mother sat breathless. Even Sutton who had been pacing the floor nursing the pain in his broken arm paused at length and listened intently to his associate's vivid description of the experience they had shared together. Only the shy Gage seemed unmoved. He sat by himself in a corner of the room studying his chief's face at intervals, his own countenance immobile.

Once Anne glanced his way and wondered briefly at his seeming lack of interest. But Colby's next words tore

her away again and she forgot Gage's very presence till the end of the story.

AND Colby himself forgot his audience as he lived over again the momentous experience. First the map of Asia, then of Europe, unfolded swiftly below him. The plane had continued on up and passed out over the Atlantic at fifty miles altitude, maintaining that height till a half hour before the descent.

They had left the opposite side of the earth in mid-Asia at ten o'clock in the morning. That would be ten o'clock at night on the coast of Maine. He had intended putting off at dawn, arriving over New York City three hours later, at what would be early evening there when he could attract the most attention. But there had been innumerable small delays at the start.

Over mid-Europe, they passed through a brief sunset and into darkness of night. Low clouds obscured the Atlantic when they reached it and they had to take their course purely by the stars and the gyroscopic compass. They began descending preparatory to landing. In a little over half an hour more, they expected to be across the ocean.

Then they found themselves in a fog bank and almost at the same instant the compass went out of commission. From there on they steered by dead reckoning. At their terrific speed it was possible to get far off the course in a few minutes. They found, too, that their powder supply had been exhausted much faster than they had calculated and it would be necessary to make a safe landing soon.

When they sighted the light on the Maine coast soon after emerging from the fog bank, they could only guess that it was somewhere on the American continent. But their search light revealed a narrow strip of high rocky coast and seemingly endless miles of unbroken forest, no safe place to land.

So they swung sharply about, preparatory to dropping in shoal water. At that they sighted the Medridges' island and made for it, believing that it would be safer. Then something seemed to have gone wrong.

"We were making the last spiral before landing," Colby went on. "I ordered Sutton to fire the forward tube. That is intended, by back-firing, to slow down the speed of the plane so that it will land easily. It didn't go off for some reason. The machine pitched violently just before we struck. I was hit on the head and wasn't conscious again until I found myself here. You gentlemen can supply the rest."

Gage and Sutton looked at each other inquiringly. Some secret communication seemed to pass between them, Anne thought. Finally it was Gage, the silent, who spoke first:

"I was knocked out about the same time," he said. "I barely knew when we struck. The next thing I knew Sutton was opening the hatchway. I saw one of his arms was hanging limp and I helped him a little. A lot of water rushed in and I thought we might be sunk deep. I yelled to him to go for help if he escaped and then I pushed him through and slammed down the hatch.

"The ship was half full of water then. I held Captain Colby's head above water till I heard the young lady's signals, then I pushed the hatch open again. That's all I know."

He paused and regarded Sutton once more. It seemed to Anne that the latter was reluctant to speak.

"I don't know much more," he said finally. "I was thrown against something and broke my arm. I saw Colby and Gage were senseless, so I decided to make a try to get help. I slipped off into deep water when I got out and with my broken arm couldn't seem to get back to the wreck again. I got confused as to direction then and was nearly all in when the young lady caught me."

Colby was studying him intently.

Gage's eyes were on the floor now. It seemed to Anne that there was almost a glare of defiance in the look that Sutton gave back to the captain.

She was puzzling over it as her fingers automatically took down Colby's concluding statement. Without knowing just why, she felt little chills of horror pass through her. Several times the sensation recurred as she glanced up now and then at the men around her.

Sutton and Colby were no longer looking at her, but stared at each other in a steady, unwavering gaze. Only once again did she look in Gage's direction. This time her eye caught his. And for a fleeting instant she fancied she saw in his face a look of mute suffering and appeal.

What had really happened aboard the rocket plane in that last few minutes before the nearly fatal plunge? She was still puzzling over it as she gathered up her notes and went out into the night to take the hired motor boat for the mainland.

Sutton stood by the door staring intently after her vanishing form. At the other end Colby and Gage sat close together, watching Sutton.

"What had we better do about it?" Gage whispered, nodding toward Sutton.

Colby was silent for a moment.

"Nothing at present," he said finally. "He knows too much. Just let him think we know nothing. A remarkably fine young woman, that little Miss Medridge," he added, abruptly changing the subject.

CHAPTER III.

GAGE'S ULTIMATUM.

ANNE returned at dawn with a wrecking tug which she had chartered at Colby's directions, after getting his story on the wire and making sure it was in time for extra editions of the morning papers.

The castaways were waiting for her at the little dock. Sutton had suffered even greater pain after the process of setting his arm and had not slept, but he insisted on watching the work of rescuing the plane from the sandbar. Colby and Gage had slept almost as little, but they seemed no worse for their temporary knockouts.

The tide was out now and the wreck was entirely exposed. At a little distance it looked not much different from an ordinary flying boat, except that there was no propeller in evidence and a series of tubes like large rifles protruded from under her rudder.

Closer inspection showed other marked differences. In place of the propeller shaft in the nose there was another of the powder tubes, the one Colby had spoken of as being used to slow down the speed of the plane while landing by firing a reverse charge.

The metal wings were hollow and served as tanks for liquid oxygen. Radiators connected with the firing-tubes kept the fusilage warm. There was a powerful little storage battery for light and auxiliary heat when necessary.

The fusilage had a tight inner shell separated by three inches from the outer skin, with the hydraulic shock absorbers in between. The little cabin was comfortably fitted with collapsible chairs, tables, and bunks. Half a dozen passengers could have ridden comfortably.

The pilot was protected by a glass dome over his head and could look out below through a plate glass window in the floor at his feet. The tubes were fired automatically by a contrivance which fed cartridges into them as if it were an ordinary machine gun.

Anne watched the work of salvage with intense and intelligent interest. She had a mind for mechanics and her pertinent questions steadily increased Colby's respect and admiration for her. He took pleasure in giving her extensive explanations.

Anne was still puzzling over the mystery of what had happened in the plane as it fell. The attitude of the three men toward each other continued to baffle her. Gage and Sutton seemed to ignore each other almost studiously. Gage's attitude toward Colby was respectfully deferential and the pair conferred together frequently.

Colby seemed to value the judgment of the other man highly. He was equally careful to consult Sutton, but his manner toward the latter was quite different. It was more that of a man seeking to conciliate another whom he feared. Sutton in his turn answered mostly in gruff monosyllables and contributed nothing valuable in the way of advice.

Anne found her admiration for Colby growing, but there was something about him, too, that baffled her. She was unable to analyze her feelings, but she found herself intuitively on her guard.

The plane had barely been lifted to the deck of the barge when a launch full of newspaper men arrived. At last Mrs. Medridge awakened fully to the fact that she had a real lion in tow. Also, after listening to a few questions from the young news hounds, she gathered that Colby was not merely an aviation hero, but a member of a highly eligible family of eminent financial standing. Thereupon she at once launched a new matrimonial campaign.

She called Anne in from the barge where the reporters were still examining the plane and bullied her into a new morning gown, then started the maid to preparing refreshments and dressed herself most elaborately. Tom Medridge was routed out of his comfortable togs into flannels and sent to invite the visitors in.

Anne felt a sick sensation at these manifestations. Ordinarily she would have rebelled. But she left the float readily enough to escape the embarrassment of listening to Colby's eulogy of her heroism in saving him and his companions. Furthermore, she thought it wiser to stay on hand and prevent her mother from making too great a fool of the family.

But rescue came from an unexpected source. As the party approached from the wharf, Anne and her mother were standing on the porch to greet them. She caught the eyes of Gage upon her. He must have read her distress in her face. He stepped forward quickly to her mother's side.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Medridge," he apologized, "but Mr. Colby wanted me to get some information from you about your family, while he is completing his statement to the newspaper reporters."

He drew her back to the porch and held her there until the refreshments had been served and Colby was launched in a statement of his future plans.

"BEFORE sailing for Asia last year," Colby said, "I secured options on materials for the building of a large ship on the model of the rocket plane you have just examined. I shall begin work immediately on grounds I have leased near Newark, New Jersey. There is a stretch of open reclaimed meadows there which will give me suitable starting room. It will take about six months to complete the ship. Then we will make a nonstop flight around the world for a trial run.

"This ship will carry a hundred passengers and ten tons useful load besides. Such a ship in regular service might tour the earth regularly once a day, taking six hours for actual running time and making stops at such points as London, Berlin, Constantinople, Tokyo, Honolulu, San Francisco, and Chicago, thus connecting New York with the farthest possible point on earth by a three-hour run. With several such ships leaving at different hours in both directions and over different routes, the world, for practical

purposes, will be reduced to the present size of the State of Maine.

"Think of it. A man in New York gets a radio at breakfast demanding his presence in Tokyo or Peking for a luncheon conference. He hops the circum-globe express, reaches his destination in ample time, and at three or four in the afternoon of the same day ships again for home, arriving in time for dinner.

"If Paris or London called him, he could run over in less than an hour, do a forenoon's business and be back for luncheon. A man could commute between San Francisco and New York. All proved possible now by this flight of mine.

"But think of what it will mean for science. As I have shown you, this type of ship is not dependent for its progress upon the presence of an atmosphere. It is driven by the recoil of the firing tubes. It will fly even more easily in a vacuum where there is no air resistance.

"We flew to the height of over fifty miles in our present plane. If we had carried enough powder we could have gone on to the moon and returned safely. With the bigger ship I propose to build, I could carry a limited number of persons and enough powder to go to the moon easily.

"I will tell you frankly, I intend to do so some day, and it is not impossible that I may make a trip to the nearer planets, though even at four thousand miles an hour, that means a long voyage, but not relatively more formidable than the one Columbus took."

As he finished his statement there was an awed hush for a moment, then a rapid fire of terse questions from the reporters, which kept up till Colby announced he must go. He was going to return to the mainland with his plane and proceed immediately to New York and start work on the new ship. Before Mrs. Medridge fully realized that her golden chance was slipping away from her, the party was off.

As Anne stood on the wharf with her family demurely bidding them good-by, Colby held a whispered consultation with Gage for a moment, then turned to Anne.

"Miss Medridge," he said, "I can't tell you how much I appreciate all you have done and won't try. There is one thing I would like very much, though, if it isn't presumptuous to ask it. If you are open for such an engagement I would like to offer you a permanent position as my private secretary."

"Mr. Colby!" Anne's mother exclaimed in horror. "You are making a mistake. My daughter is not a working girl."

"Don't be silly, momsy!" Anne interrupted. "It's the chance of a lifetime. If you will wait a second till I get some extra duds, I'll be with you."

And Anne sped joyfully up to the bungalow.

As Anne disappeared in the bungalow Sam Gage gazed after her with a mixture of surprise, chagrin and some alarm in his countenance. He had not expected Anne to accept Colby's offer or he would not have advised him to make it. He had taken it for granted that here was a newly-rich girl, who, though a good sport, would never dream of working for a living. And he avoided disagreeing with Colby whenever possible.

"Shows how much I know about women!" he growled to himself. "Maybe then she'd like to have that dope printed after all. But I don't like this a little bit."

Sam Gage had his reasons for not wanting Anne Medridge to become an employee of Morton Colby. He pulled out of his pocket a photograph of Anne that her mother had eagerly given him for use in the papers, together with copious notes of an interview with that lady. He had purposely not turned them over to the reporters yet. They had been too busy with Colby to get at the Medridges and had been grateful

for his suggestion that he would look after that end for them.

ANNE returned in a few minutes and after a half defiant, half regretful good-by to her parents, went aboard the tug.

"Remember, momsy, I'm free, white and twenty-one," was her parting shot as the boat pulled out. "I'll see you every day as soon's you're back in town."

Sam Gage had thrust his publicity material hastily back in his pocket when Anne appeared. Now he watched for an opportunity to speak to her alone, as the boat plowed away toward Portland, dragging after it the barge containing the wrecked plane. A half hour later he saw her standing by herself on the after deck and approached her shyly.

"Pardon me, Miss Medridge," he said, "but I took the liberty to try to save you and your people a little annoyance by the reporters. I thought you would like to be pretty careful about what was put in the papers. Your mother gave me this to use at my discretion. I somehow got the idea that you wouldn't care for it."

He handed the material to the girl, who looked it over with a mixture of mirth and indignation.

"I should say I wouldn't care for it," she exclaimed. Then she studied Gage's face for a moment and seemed really to see it for the first time.

"Mr. Gage," she said, "it was mighty fine of you to do that for us. Mother was naturally pretty excited and I'm sure wouldn't for the world have this printed, particularly the picture, after she calmed down. Mr. Colby has already been too generous in his praise of what we did. It wasn't anything that could be called heroic, just common courtesy to unlucky strangers. You would have got ashore by yourselves at low tide."

"I appreciate how you feel about publicity," Gage told her. "I thought you'd feel that way. I'll just tell the boys you people had nothing to say except that you were glad to be of service and thought Captain Colby was overgenerous in his praise. Is that all right?"

"Quite, thank you."

"I want to say myself, though, Miss Medridge, that I know and so do Colby and Sutton, that you saved the lives of all three of us, and I for one will never forget it. If I can ever repay you by any service at any time, please let me know."

And Sam Gage, blushing furiously after such an unwonted speech, backed awkwardly away.

But the Sam Gage who confronted Colby that night in the latter's stateroom on the train bound for New York was a different sort of being. There was no hint of shyness or hesitancy now.

"Captain Colby," he began evenly, "I've got something to say that you won't like, but I'm going to say it just the same. I want to know why you decided so suddenly to hire a woman secretary. You've told me more than once you would never hire a woman for such a job. You've been keeping up the salary of your old secretary, George True, during your absence, with the understanding that he'd renew his duties when you got back. Don't tell me it's none of my business. I'm making it my business."

Colby stared at his usually subservient lieutenant in amazement. Never before in the eleven years of their association had Gage ventured to talk to him like that.

"What in hell's got into you, Gage?" he demanded. "After all, just what business is it of yours whether I choose to change my mind, or whom I hire for my own personal secretary?"

"Colby, you saved my life over the German lines eleven years ago at the risk of your own life. I pledged myself then to repay you as far as possible even if I spent my life doing it.

It was an easy promise to make and it would have been easy to keep if you had been what I thought you were, if you had remained what I still think you really were then.

"I was a shy, romantic youngster; you were my ideal hero. Well, Colby, I'm not much on hot air and it sounds silly—but for years I came pretty near worshiping you.

"You took advantage of it, full advantage, fair and foul. It took me years to wake up to what a slave you had made of me. Why, before I realized it, you had taken my ideas and made them your own without credit to me. I never protested even after I got wise to what you were doing. I'm not protesting now—just telling you I wasn't such a boob as I seemed. I felt that I owed it all and more to you. And I did, till now.

"But last night, Colby, changed everything between us. I saved your life at the risk of mine last night, and paid the score in full. Mind you, I'm not quitting yet—just serving you notice. I pledged myself to see you through this experiment and to grant you full credit for everything up to date; and I'll keep my promise. But when the new ship's done and the trial trip over I'm through. I'll be on my own from then on.

"And last night, Colby, I had a new obligation thrust on me. That little girl who's going to work for you, God help her, saved my life as well as yours and Sutton's. She's not only a brave youngster, but she's a fine little straight-shooter, if I'm any judge. You're not going to hurt her if I can help it."

AS Gage went on, Colby's face had first turned chalk white, then suddenly became livid with impotent rage. He started to speak when Gage paused, but the younger man stopped him with an abrupt gesture of impatience:

"Don't try any bullying now, Colby. I'm not Sutton. You haven't any club to hang over my head as you have over his. I've nothing to fear from you and you know it. And by the way, you know now that your control over Sutton is slipping. He'd have got you last night if it hadn't been for me. He will yet if you don't watch your step. You'd better not let your attention be diverted by an affair with a woman."

Colby controlled his rage with an effort.

"But why should my hiring a young woman as secretary start this tirade?" he asked.

"Colby, I know your reputation with women. I know all about that little French girl, dead now because you played with her till you found a new toy, then threw her away. It isn't her skill as a typist that made you hire little Miss Medridge. I don't insist that you change your arrangement with her immediately. That would be embarrassing and disappointing to her. But if you don't play fair with her, Colby, I swear I'll kill you."

And Gage turned on his heel and left the stateroom. He hurried down to the smoking compartment and sat all night burning up one cigarette after another, dozing at intervals and each time waking with the merry-eyed, sun-browned little face of Anne Medridge dancing before his eyes.

Was he falling in love with a woman at last, but for the first time in his life? Instantly he dismissed the thought with contempt. Nothing to it. He was simply standing by, ready to repay, with life-long service if need be, another human being who had saved his life. He'd do the same if she were a man. Hadn't he done it in the case of Colby until the debt was cancelled? It was Gage's way.

But all through the days that followed, during the long series of ovations that accompanied their tour of triumph, Gage, in the background, watched the radiant Anne and daily found the watching more and more a

necessary part of his life. And his hurt grew as he saw in her face and manner her admiration for the new air-hero whenever Colby was about.

Gage tried to tell himself that it was nothing but hero worship. Anne had been taken by storm by Colby's personality, just as he had been. There was certainly nothing flirtatious about her; she simply did her work efficiently and quietly, and seemed to be content with his unfailing praise of her work.

And Gage could find nothing alarming in Colby's manner toward her. It was simply the impersonal attitude of an appreciative employer, as far as appeared on the surface. Nevertheless, as time went on, Gage suffered more and more from jealousy—and continued ignorant of what really ailed him. He deceived himself consistently with the belief that he was impelled by chivalry and gratitude only.

Anne, having discovered something of the real Gage behind his barrier of shyness, started out to get acquainted in a spirit of boyish comradery. She was discouraged by his lack of response—he seemed to be always avoiding her. So she made up her mind he didn't like her, and left him alone.

That threw Gage into an inner panic.

He in his turn decided she didn't like him, and was more miserable than ever. He wanted her to like him, but he was afraid to talk to her, except in the way of business. As long as he kept on business topics he was fluent enough.

His relations with Colby remained outwardly the same. Their conversation on the train that night was never referred to again. Between Sutton and the other two there was tacitly a state of armed truce. But under the surface of Colby's calm, Gage repeatedly saw signs that their chief lived in constant fear of the indispensable Sutton, who was slated to be the engineer in charge of the new ship on its trial flight. Sutton's own dour countenance told nothing.

Sutton was the engineering genius of the partnership. While Gage had supplied the general ideas, it was Sutton whose expert brain had worked out the details and made the thing practical. Gage had lacked the technical education for that, and Colby's own knowledge was superficial. But Gage had foreseen the possibility of a break between Sutton and Colby, and had been applying himself closely to technical study at every opportunity ever since the project was started. He had pledged himself to see this thing through, and was working now as faithfully to that end as though no crisis had occurred between him and Colby.

Only once since the nearly tragic termination of their first great flight had Colby mentioned his fears to Gage.

"I dread the idea of trusting Sutton with the new ship," he said one day shortly before the great flier was completed, "but I don't see any way out of it. Neither of us could manage it alone if anything went wrong. It needs all three of us anyhow, for safety."

So, with this state of acute tension in the minds of the prime movers, the first of the Circum-Globe Liners reached completion.

"What are you going to name it?" Anne asked one day at the close of a conference between the three. "Seems funny to have a ship almost done and no name for it. I'm getting tired of having the reporters ask me and having to tell them you haven't decided yet."

"Why, I haven't been able to hit on anything yet that seems dignified enough and yet has the right snap to it for publicity purposes," Colby admitted. "I'd thought of calling it Rocket II, after the first one, but this big fellow ought to have a name all its own."

"Of course it had," Anne agreed. "And don't call it a fellow. It's a lady. Why not call her Diana? Diana

was the goddess of the moon, and you intend to sail to the moon some day. Besides, she's going to sail around and around the earth, just like a second moon. She'll really be a little man-made moon when she gets going."

"Why, that's an idea, Anne. Diana it is!" Colby exclaimed enthusiastically, and neither of them seemed to notice that he had called her by her first name, a thing Colby had hitherto scrupulously avoided, in Gage's hearing at least.

But Gage did not fail to note it, and he left the conference with a feeling of panic in his heart.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROCKET LINER TAKES OFF.

AS it turned out, it fell to Gage's lot to show Anne about the ship on her final visit to the completed work, the day before sailing. She had been so busy at the office for the last month that she had not kept in personal touch with the progress of the building.

Colby had intended to act as her escort, but just as they arrived he had suddenly been called away on an important errand connected with the next day's ceremonies.

"Mr. Gage," she said after Colby left them, "I want to ask your advice. You were of great help once before when a publicity problem came up. And you and I have the same ideas about this publicity bunk. Captain Colby has been at me for a week insisting that I be the one to christen the ship to-morrow, stand beside the runway under a battery of movie cameras and break a bottle of near-champagne or spring water or something over her bow. I tell him a bottle of hot air would be more appropriate.

"But seriously, it seems to me to be very bad taste. There's no excuse for it, except that I happened to suggest a name he liked, and he seems to feel still that he owes me something. Some prominent woman like the wife of the President ought to do the christening, not a little stenographer. What a time I'd have trying to laugh that off! And what a nuisance being pestered by reporters and pointed at on the street. I barely escaped that before, thanks to you. But how'll I get out of it? I can't make Captain Colby understand my viewpoint. I suppose a lot of people wouldn't understand it."

"Why, I can't advise you in that," Gage stammered, trying hard to control his inner tumult. "Captain Colby is my superior officer. It would not be loyal to advise against his wishes, whatever I think."

"Oh, bother!" Anne exclaimed. "You're second in command, aren't you? In the captain's absence you have authority to decide things."

But Gage couldn't see the humor of it, and Anne gave it up.

"I suppose I could be sick to-morrow and not able to be here," she said. "I can't bear not to see Diana sail, though. Do you know, Mr. Gage—of course you do, but you won't tell me—there's something very mysterious about this sailing. There are a lot more provisions going aboard than are needed for a six-hour trip around the earth. I have a hunch Captain Colby is secretly planning to take that trip to the moon before he comes back."

"That's simply making wise provision against accident," Gage told her. "We might be forced down in an isolated spot, like one of the polar seas, and would need emergency provisions."

"You're so good at keeping secrets," Anne replied, "that I'm almost tempted to trust you with one of mine. Come on, let's look Diana over."

Gage led the way, puzzling over this last cryptic remark as he pointed out the wonders of the finished flying ship. The principle and general form of the Diana were the same as of her prototype, the Rocket. She was five hun-

dred feet long over all, and cigar shaped like a Zeppelin, but with no gas bags to make her lighter than air.

She had two sets of huge planes fore and aft, measuring five hundred feet from tip to tip. These were to give her lifting power like an ordinary airplane in starting, and to help slow her down when volplaning to a stop. In addition to an ordinary rudder one of her firing tubes in the rear was swung on a pivot to steer her when she went beyond the effective reach of the atmosphere.

She was equipped with a wireless, a heating plant, an ample supply of liquid oxygen, a plant for neutralizing carbonic acid gas, and all the ordinary conveniences of a first-class ocean liner.

"Anybody could live comfortably aboard for months and have plenty of room for exercising," Anne remarked. "You see, I'm still thinking about that trip to the moon."

"It would take only a little over two days to reach the moon," Gage told her, "going at her estimated maximum speed. The trouble would be in landing and taking off again. We have a series of pneumatic-tired wheels under her keel, and she can float on water, but the rough rock surface of the moon would bother her a lot.

"I guess we'll have to be content with just flying up around the moon and coming back again after an exploratory cruise over its surface without landing. We couldn't see much, at that. There's no atmosphere on the moon for her wings to take hold of and buoy her up. If we got very near the moon we'd fall on its surface."

"Well, it's a complete little habitable moon all in itself, as I said when I named her Diana," Anne concluded.

A FEATURE of the new ship was the cabins to be used as living quarters of the passengers and crew. They were a series of independent structures inclosed in spherical cases that took the places of the gondolas on a dirigible. These cases were hung in spherical frames on ball bearings so that they could turn freely through a quarter arc in every direction, thereby keeping the cabin floors horizontal, no matter what slope the main body of the ship took in ascending or descending at a sharp angle. They were connected with each other and with the keel deck by flexible ladder bridges.

"You see," Gage explained to Anne. "We could point the Diana straight up in the air suddenly without so much as spilling a cup of coffee in the dining saloon."

"I still think you're planning that trip to the moon," Anne laughed as she departed. "Wish I was going. But if I were I'd get still more publicity. I don't know yet what to do about that christening. I'll see you here to-morrow night unless I decide to play sick at the last moment."

Anne was very much in Gage's troubled thoughts all the rest of the day. She was still there when he awoke next morning. But where her literal physical presence was that morning proved presently to be a mystery that spoiled the thrill of sailing day for at least two people. Gage went direct to the hangar that morning without stopping at Colby's office. A half hour later Colby rang up and asked if Anne was there. She was not.

"That's strange," Colby said. "She hasn't reached here, and they say at her home she left there more than an hour ago."

But Anne Medridge remained among the missing all that day. Neither at her home, the office, or the hangar was any word received from her. Gage smiled to himself and concluded that Anne had taken this method of avoiding the embarrassment of presiding at the christening of the Diana. She would probably show up at the last moment after some other sponsor had been selected.

Sailing time—and still no word of Anne. Her parents were frantic, and Gage could see that the missing girl was uppermost in Colby's mind in spite of all the distractions of the eventful day. Gage himself caught the infection before night. It didn't seem like Anne to frighten every one so thoughtlessly. He began to think something had actually happened to her. And yet he half expected up to the last moment to see her standing somewhere in the throng of invited guests on the big platform beside the ship's body.

The Diana was due to leave her hangar on her giant electric car at nine o'clock. At half past eight Colby made the last round of the ship to see that every one was stationed properly, and that all was in readiness. Gage was on the bridge. He was to take the helm till the Diana was under way, as Colby was needed to superintend the starting below. Sutton was in the machine cabin in the stern in charge of the firing tubes.

On the promenade decks ranging beside the cabins were fifty passengers, sailing as invited guests. These included, besides newspaper men, several prominent aviators and scientists, among them Professor Henry Mildrum, the famous astronomer. A small but powerful telescope had been mounted aboard, and the professor was expecting great results from observations taken at an altitude of fifty miles above sea level, with no atmosphere obscuring the pictures.

Nine o'clock came. Gage stood on the bridge with his hands on the control levers, waiting for the warning gong, immediately after which the ship would begin to move out on her carriage. He had just taken one last look through the windows on each side in hope of seeing Anne's face among the spectators. The wife of the mayor of New York had been selected at the last moment to act as sponsor, and now stood at the end of the platform with her christening bottle upraised. Somewhere near by Colby would be stationed, ready to give the starting order and then leap aboard. Gage thought that if Anne arrived at the last moment she might be near Colby. He was not able to locate either of them, however.

A minute passed, then five, and Gage began to wonder why the starting was being delayed. Another five minutes and still no signal. At a quarter past nine he was about to order the watch stationed with him on the bridge to go and find out what was the trouble, when the hoarse voice of the siren sounded the belated starting signal at last. Instantly the big carriage began to move, smoothly, almost imperceptibly at first. Without a jar it began to accelerate. The bow of the ship emerged into the open. By the time the stern left the hangar, the speedometer in front of Gage registered fifty miles an hour.

AHEAD of him lay a two-mile straightaway track. Gage had nothing to do until half that distance was covered but look out for irregularities. At the halfway point they were moving at two hundred miles an hour, the acceleration planned beforehand. Then Gage began ringing on the firing tubes, one after another. He felt the ship leap forward under him. Twenty seconds later they struck the sharp rise at the end of the runway, at four hundred miles an hour.

Gage threw down the controls. All the stern tubes fired at once. The nose of the ship shot up at an angle of seventy degrees and leaped into the air. With his hands tensely holding the controls he watched the altimeter and the speedometer. They were making an automatic record of height and speed.

In less than a minute the ship struck the twelve-mile level at two thousand miles an hour. At the end of two minutes Gage threw the controls back again. The Diana took an even keel at a height of thirty miles above sea level

and began zooming along in its trail of flame toward San Francisco at forty-five hundred miles an hour.

Gage's nerves relaxed and he looked around at the watch with a grin of relief. The ship had performed perfectly.

He felt a little limp now after the intense nervous strain of the start. It would be a relief to have Colby take the bridge as he had agreed to do as soon as the ship was in the air. Colby had his own ideas as to the details of the course. Pending his arrival, therefore, Gage merely kept the ship on a general westerly course.

But minutes passed, and Colby did not appear. Gage called Sutton in the machine room over telephone.

"Is Colby in there?" he asked.

"Nope. Haven't seen him since just before we started. Are we all right?"

"O. K., but I wondered why Colby didn't take the bridge as he said he would. All right down there?"

"O. K."

"Go find Captain Colby and ask him what his orders are," he told the watch.

Then, holding the ship to its course, he began enjoying the thrill of the spectacle below. Cities, seen at this height as little clusters of light from which puny rockets shot up in greeting, passed under him with the swiftness and regularity of telegraph poles beside a railroad track when seen from an express train. It was a clear night, as they had hoped, and all the nation was watching their flight, directly or indirectly.

Fifteen minutes after they took the air he saw a larger cluster of lights off at the right. Chicago, probably; and far to the left an illumination he took to be St. Louis. Then the vast black plains, dotted here and there with pinpoint flecks of light. Then the jagged outlines of the Rockies.

They were halfway to San Francisco now, and still no word from Colby, and the watch had not returned. He waited a few minutes longer, and was just beginning to feel a foreboding that something was wrong when the man appeared, an expression of bewilderment and alarm on his face.

"Captain Colby is not aboard, sir," the fellow stammered.

"What! You're crazy! Where did you look?"

"Everywhere, sir. And everybody else had been looking. Nobody has seen him since before we started. He's certainly not aboard."

MEANWHILE, in the company of privileged guests who thronged the great hangar on the Jersey meadows, as well as in the crowds about the city and in a wide belt all around the world along the line of the Diana's proposed route, intense excitement prevailed. It had begun to seethe at starting time early in the evening when the crowds started to gather in the open. As the announced hour of flight approached it reached fever heat. Then, when nine o'clock came and went and nothing happened, the rumor spread that something had gone wrong aboard the big flier.

The guests in the hangar stirred restlessly. "Where is Captain Colby?" ran the whisper through the crowd. At the end of the platform by the starboard bow of the Diana, the electrician who controlled the mechanism of the big automatic electric carriage that was to start the ship on its way, stood at the switch, ready, at Colby's word, to sound the warning siren and pull the starting switch. In the bow of the ship opposite was an open hatchway, through which Colby was to appear, give the signal, and retreat again when the carriage started.

In front of the switchboard were ranged the committee of honor, including the mayor's wife with her poised christening bottle. The band which had been helping pass away the time fell silent. There was an air of breathless waiting which broke into an uneasy rustle as the minutes passed.

At length, just when Gage, up on the bridge, was about to investigate the delay, a quartermaster appeared in the hatchway.

"Captain Colby is detained inside," he called to the electrician. "He says to go ahead," and the quartermaster disappeared behind the closing hatchway.

In the thrill of elation over the prospect of the immediate start, the visitors quickly swallowed their disappointment at not getting a last glimpse of the master genius. The siren sounded; the Diana began to move. The mayor's wife duly broke her bottle on the bow, and, amid wild cheers and a blare of trumpets from the band, the epoch-making flight began.

The guests poured onto the field beyond the hangar and watched the mammoth rocket until it disappeared in the distant sky. Then they returned to an entertainment to be given on an improvised platform at the other end of the hangar to while away the six-hour watch-meeting until the Diana reappeared in the eastern sky after her twenty-five-thousand-mile journey around the globe.

There would be a banquet for the guests at midnight, followed by more entertainment. All through the night they would be kept in constant touch with the progress of the flight by radio messages both from the great ship itself and from cities all along the route.

The guests were barely seated when the first message came in from Rochester, New York:

> Circum-Globe Liner Diana passed over Rochester at nine twenty headed due west.

The messages followed thick and fast, breaking into the entertainment which was postponed for the time being while the guests listened breathlessly.

She was sighted at Buffalo at nine twenty-one, and at intervals of a minute or two at Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago and other points during the next fifteen minutes.

Then a whisper passed through the group.

"We haven't heard from her own wireless yet."

A few minutes later the local announcer broke in:

"The wireless on board the Diana seems to be out of order at present. Efforts by this and several other eastern stations to get in touch with her have failed. She makes no answer to our signals."

This caused momentary anxiety, increased when western stations began to report failure to get any direct word from the flier. But worry over her safety was considerably allayed by the steady stream of reports from cities that had sighted her on the way to the coast, true to her announced course, flying at an estimated height of from thirty to fifty miles, and the advertised speed of from four thousand to four thousand five hundred miles an hour.

San Francisco sighted her at nine fifty-three, Eastern Standard time, and then the Diana passed out of the range of earth vision above the fog banks of the Pacific. There was an interval of waiting for possible reports from ships at sea, then, when none came, the guests settled down to listen half-heartedly to the entertainment.

During the next hour and a half no word was received. It was now definitely decided that the Diana's wireless had failed to work. Honolulu reported cloudy skies, so the absence of news from there or from ships at sea was discounted. Nevertheless the company stirred uneasily in their seats and took little interest in the entertainment provided for them. In the streets of the watching cities rumors began to spread that the Diana had been wrecked.

If all went well the ship should be over the Asiatic coast by eleven thirty, Eastern Standard time. Stations in Manila, in Japan and on the China

coast reported a clear sky. The watchers waited hopefully for good news from those quarters. But eleven thirty, then midnight, came and went, and still the Diana had not been sighted anywhere over Eastern Asia.

Perhaps the ship had got off her course over the Pacific, it was reasoned. But the hours passed and no word came from any point on the globe. At three o'clock, barring accidents, the flying ship should have returned to her hangar from the other side of the world. Hope persisted until then that somehow she had escaped observation in the upper atmosphere and would come in true to her schedule.

But three o'clock, four o'clock and five o'clock came without sight of her or any encouraging news, beyond wild, unverifiable rumors. By daylight the conviction had become fixed that the ill-fated Diana had plunged to destruction somewhere in the lone reaches of the Pacific.

Relief planes were sent out to scour the sea. The wireless was kept busy. Optimists with glasses ranging all the way from small binoculars to astronomical telescopes scoured the sky. All that day and the following days and nights for a week the search was kept up. Cruisers and aircraft scoured the seas for trace of wreckage. Incoming ships were questioned. All in vain. Like those daring earlier adventurers lost in the polar seas, these pioneers of the sky seemed to have passed into the realm of fathomless mystery.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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The Phantom Ships of Dead Man's Cove

THE fishing smack Audacious with a crew of seven men, including the captain, while cruising for herring off the Maine coast anchored for the night in Dead Man's Cove.

A thick fog lifted at dawn and revealed to the fishermen's eyes a strange ship at anchor in the mouth of the Cove; a boatful of men was making trips between ship and shore, several men remaining on the beach each trip and digging in the sand. The men wore gold hoops in their ears, gaudy handkerchiefs bound on their heads, and sashes from which knives and pistols protruded.

At first the captain of the Audacious supposed they were sailors from a foreign ship digging for clams, until he noticed they were too far up the beach for that. Then he observed something peculiar about the ship—she was all a misty gray, like fog. Bringing his glasses to bear on her, he uttered a cry of horror, which was echoed by his crew—a gull flew through the ship as if she was not there.

All the smack's crew fell on their knees and began to pray. Presently the captain cried: "Get up, she's gone."

Another sea specter that has haunted the Cove for a century appears only before a storm, a full-rigged ship, its decks swarming with men, all sails drawing, though there may not be a breath of wind. Suddenly she is seen running down the ship that sights her, there is a clap of thunder, her masts go by the board, and she sinks.

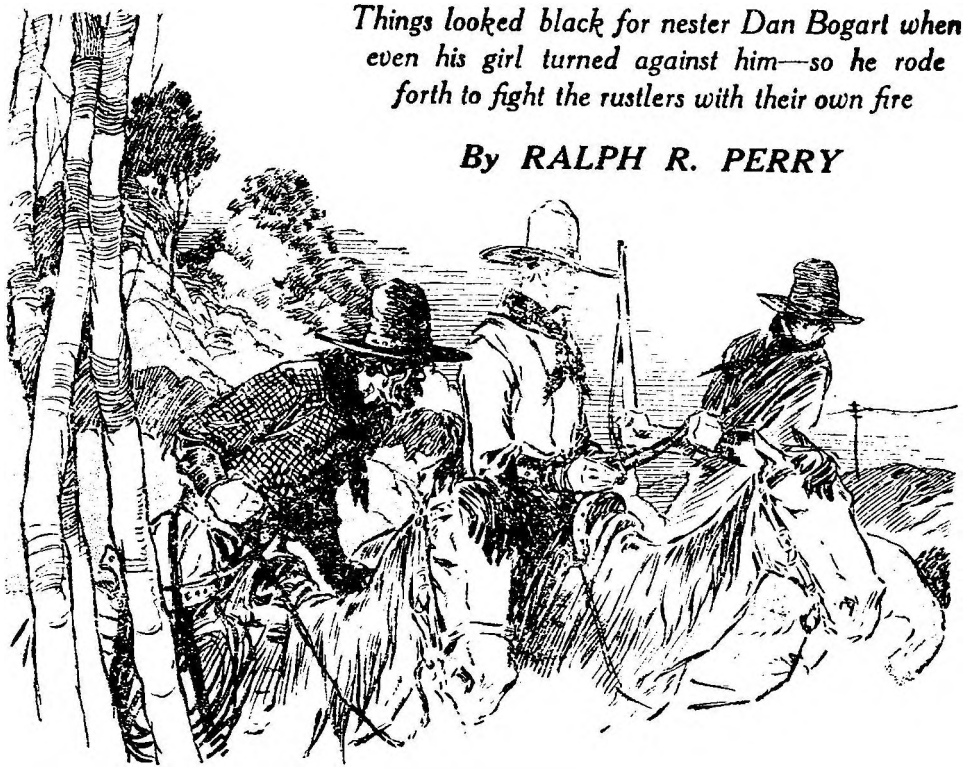
Maine fishermen believe she is the ghost of a ship that foundered with all on board when she was speeding for the Cove to ride out a storm more than a hundred years ago, and that she appears to warn them when a storm of unusual violence is approaching.

Minna Irving.

Men's Business

Things looked black for nester Dan Bogart when even his girl turned against him—so he rode forth to fight the rustlers with their own fire

By RALPH R. PERRY



Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

THE CUT FENCE.

CLING-TCHUNG! Tchung-tchung-tchung! The snarling, discordant ring of taut barbed wire suddenly cut, many times repeated as panel after panel of his fence was severed, awakened Dan Bogart from the sound sleep which comes with the dawn.

Several men must be plying wire cutters in furious haste—ruining his little ranch. If he didn't stop them quickly they'd run him off the range, and yet, though the nester's ears told him he was being attacked, his amazement and his inability to understand any reason for such an assault held him paralyzed in his blankets until the last wire *tchunged* apart.

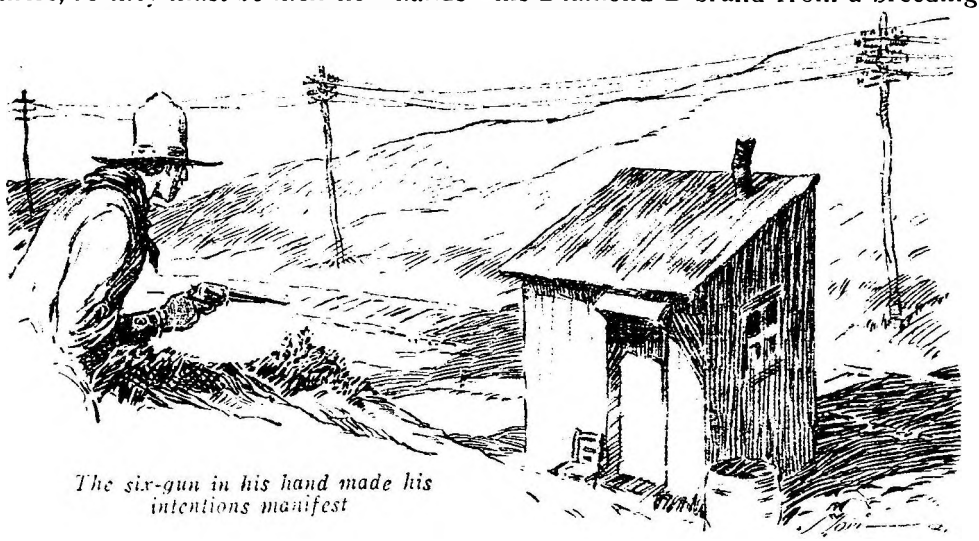
Even then Dan lost more precious seconds staring through the window at the three punchers who had done the damage, so that by the time he had located his Winchester he had nothing much to shoot at.

The fifty yards of fence which closed the mouth of the tiny valley he had homesteaded in the Idaho hills was all that made it possible for him to care for his little bunch of cattle single-handed. Now that fence lay in tangled ruin. The three men, each flattened to the back of his pony, were galloping off. From Dan's shack to the fence was a hundred yards, and the three had opened a gap of an additional hundred

between themselves and the nester's carbine.

Dan wasn't the sort of man to shoot just for the sake of making a noise. He was expert with a rifle, but in the dim, tricky light of dawn he doubted if he could make a clean hit. He didn't want to kill a Rafter L puncher unless he downright had to, anyway.

"All from the Rafter L," the nester muttered to himself. "The tall, thin hombre was sure Forty Mile Thomas, the foreman. I ain't positive about the others, so they must be their new hands



The six-gun in his hand made his intentions manifest

—Wolf Miller an' that feller Dusty. Which means—"

Dan set his carbine against the wall. He was thinking of other matters, and yet instinctively he placed the Winchester where it would be convenient in case he were attacked again. "Which means," he repeated more positively, "that Forty Mile figures he's got an excuse to do me dirt at last, and this is his way of lettin' me know I'm plumb undesired on this range!"

At once the nester began to dress. Dan Bogart was a strikingly handsome man, a little more than six feet in height, weighing a trifle less than two hundred pounds, every ounce muscle, sinew and bone. The breadth of his shoulders was accentuated by the narrowness of his hips, and although he was twenty-five, in the prime of his strength, the deft sureness of every movement made strangers remember Dan's quickness rather than his size.

A woman would have noticed curly brown hair and brown eyes with long lashes; men didn't observe such details —their attention lingered over the firm chin and the determined set of his lips.

Nester, Dan called himself. Nester he had been for two years, working alone in his little valley, building up his Diamond B brand from a breeding bunch to a herd of a hundred head in order that he might be a cattleman dependent on no man's pay roll when he asked a certain girl a certain question.

He was alone, but he was no weak nester who could be crowded without starting trouble in return—lively trouble, even for an outfit as big as the Rafter L, with its two thousand head of cattle, and ten punchers.

Dan knew it. Forty Mile Thomas knew it—as he had admitted by the way he had hightailed it away from Dan's ruined fence. And because this was no casual assault of a big outfit on a nester, because Dan could guess exactly what lay behind it, his face became more coldly angry with every garment he put on his back.

So the Rafter L foreman had decided that Dan might be treated like a rustler, a thief, and a cold killer, had he? Dan was none of the three—and, besides, the indignation of an honest man falsely accused he felt the deeper, bitterer anger of one who has been judged and condemned without the opportunity to say a word in his own defense.

That foreman had always hated him, but if the Rafter L shared the belief that because he was a nester he must also be a thief, Dan intended to get that idea out of their heads—or rather out of the heads of Sudden Bill Coleman and his daughter Bess—if he had to tangle with the entire outfit in their own ranch yard to accomplish it.

NEVERTHELESS, Dan had to admit to himself that their suspicions were not illogical. In May, just one month before, the Rafter L had begun to lose stock. Not in large bunches at any one time, but steadily; and at a rate which would eventually steal the big outfit down to a milk-bunch.

Sudden Bill Coleman, the owner, who hated a cow thief with the deep-seated fury of the old-time cattleman, had scouted over his range night and day. Chiefly by accident the old ranchman had stumbled at last upon a fresh trail.

It was nightfall of a cold, rainy day. Sudden Bill had only two punchers with him, and the rustlers' tracks showed there were three in the gang, but, with characteristic impetuousness, the old man went in pursuit without sending to the ranch for more men to help him.

He came up with the rustlers—came up with them in the dense timber cañon five miles to the north of Dan's ranch—crashed headlong through a thicket of scrub pines into the ambush the rustlers prepared for any one who would follow their trail recklessly.

A storm of lead fired from the shelter of the trees swept the old man from his saddle. The two punchers with him were killed on the spot. Sudden Bill himself was found there the next morning. His clothing was drenched with the rain; he was half dead of cold and loss of blood from two body wounds.

The searching party, led by his daughter, managed to carry him back to the ranch alive, but pneumonia set in as the result of exposure, and only Bess Coleman's nursing kept life in his wounded body. He had passed the crisis now, but he was still convalescent and in danger of a relapse.

All this had happened two weeks before. Dan had realized then that he would be suspected of having had a hand in the killing. It occurred near his place; he was building up a herd, and he was the only nester within twenty miles. Yet when nothing was done Dan prided himself that his reputation was good enough to set suspicion at rest.

In any event, the disaster to old Sudden Bill temporarily put a stop to active pursuit of the rustlers. While the owner lay wounded and sick the direction of the Rafter L fell into the hands of the foreman, Forty Mile Thomas. The stealing had continued. It even increased, but this raid in the dawn on Dan Bogart's place was the first move the foreman had made.

Forty Mile was a lean, vulpine-faced man with close-set calculating gray eyes. He was cunning rather than impetuous, and instead of chasing the rustlers in the open, with excellent chances of being dry gulched, it was characteristic that he should seek to stop the stealing by indirect means—and that he should select Dan, whom he hated, for his victim.

It does no good to steal cattle if they cannot be hidden while the brands are altered, and marketed afterward. Nine times out of ten when persistent thieving is going on, it means there is a nester somewhere in the hills taking

care of the cattle after the rustlers have driven them off the range. If the nester can be driven out, the rustlers will stop their raids.

Therefore, or so Dan Bogart figured, crafty Forty Mile had decided that the Diamond B nest couldn't be tolerated any longer. Dan Bogart was the only nester in that district. His Diamond B would cover the Rafter L brand. Therefore, he was a thief, and should be run out. So thought the Rafter L.

Logical the conclusion might be, yet it made Dan furious. He didn't waste thought or profanity on his fence, or stop to count the odds. He stamped on his boots, buckled on his gun, and saddled a pony. He was riding for the Rafter L before the foreman and his wire cutters were much more than out of sight, and he rode so swiftly that he came storming up to the ranch house before the three had had time to unsaddle.

AT the sight of the nester Forty Mile shouted a warning and came running forward. The Rafter L punchers surged out of the bunk house after him. There was a Colt or two clear of the holster in that crowd. Dan had his back to the gang, but all the angry muttering didn't make him turn. He drew rein in front of an open window on the ground floor of the ranch house. That was Sudden Bill's window, and Bess would be there taking care of her father.

"Coleman—oh, Coleman!" Dan called out.

Instantly Bess thrust out her blond head. Her finger was on her lips.

"Shut up, Dan! Yuh'all wake daddy," she protested indignantly. "Light down an' rest yore saddle."

"Can't. What I got to say comes fitter from the back of a broncho," the nester refused, yet he lowered his voice. Even at such a time Dan couldn't deny blue-eyed, smiling Bess Coleman almost anything she wanted. She was twenty and the kind of girl men love at sight, and to that rule the nester was no exception.

"I ain't here in friendship," Dan went on. "Yuh've got to wake Sudden Bill, 'cause I ain't talkin' to no hired coyote, either!"

The foreman had reached Dan's bridle hand, and the nester flung that last insult square into Forty Mile's foxy face. Cold hostility rose in the close set gray eyes, and grimly Dan gave back stare for stare.

Inside, the creak of a bedspring, a cough, told that the ranchman was awake.

"The next Rafter L puncher to touch my wire I'm goin' to shoot, then or later, without no more warnin' than I'd give a hydrophoby skunk," called out Dan. "Let's understand one another plain; I ain't tough, nor huntin' trouble. But I started my own brand for a damn special reason. I've always run the Diamond B square, an' the hombre that treats me like a thief without havin' proof stops lead."

No answer from the window; unless a cough and the faint mutter of a sick man were a reply.

"You tryin' to bluff this outfit?" demanded Forty Mile belligerently.

"Not any," Dan snapped. "Yo're welcome to act onery any time yuh crave war. I had a bead on yore back this mornin'. I just want it understood that I wasn't killin' no man over a measly bit of fence. Any hombre that wants war with me personal I'll accommodate."

The nester turned toward the window. "I'd rather help yuh get the coyotes that dry gulched yuh than fight yuh myself, Bill," he called. The sincerity of that offer made the nester's voice husky; he hoped that Bess would understand.

Still no reply from the house.

Forty Mile's close-set eyes narrowed.

"Mebbe yuh'll tell us yore 'special reason for startin' yore brand," he sneered. But before he could force a

quarrel on the nester, Bess Coleman stuck her blond head out of the window.

"Daddy'll do the talkin' for this ranch. Forty Mile, take yore men back to the bunk house," she commanded.

"An' leave yuh to be insulted by this damn—nester?" A stronger word had been on the tip of the foreman's tongue.

"That's daddy's orders," retorted the girl, and waited imperiously until the foreman withdrew. "Yuh ought to be ashamed of yoreself for disturbin' daddy when he's sick," she went on when the foreman was out of earshot.

The big nester blushed like a schoolboy, and seeing his confusion, a smile tugged at the corner of Bess Coleman's lips.

"First off, he said you could go—well, he 'lowed he didn't need no help, an' that when he got off his bed he'd foller the rustlers right into yore shack if the trail led that way," she quoted mischievously. "For the rest—" Bess dropped her voice. She became utterly serious, even a little worried. "Daddy didn't know about cuttin' yore wire, an' he never set yuh down for a thief."

"Thought it was Forty Mile's doin'. Like him," the nester grunted.

BESS bit her lip; frowned as though the words that had risen to her lips were unpleasant, and then changed her mind. She was no longer quoting her father; she leaned out of the window and spoke in a whisper too low to reach the sick man's ears.

"Daddy's frettin' constant, Dan," she whispered. "He keeps wantin' to get up, an' ride. Yuh know it would kill him! Yuh—yuh ain't no notion who plugged him?"

"No, except it wasn't me," said Dan. He wanted to tell the girl he'd ride every thicket in the hills to discover the killer, that while old Sudden Bill was helpless he'd protect her interests more zealously than her father could; he wanted to tell Bess she was beautiful, that he'd undergo any risk, do anything to remove the cloud of worry and trouble which shadowed her eyes and turned down the corners of her mouth.

But Bess was motioning him to leave, and men don't say such things, out loud, with a father within earshot and a jealous foreman scowling in the background.

"I—I sure want to help yuh, Bess, not fight," Dan whispered, and swung his pony around. As straight and as fast as he had come, he rode away.

That day, back on the Diamond B, he repaired his fence. On the whole he was pleased with his morning's work. He had set his motives straight in the eyes of the girl he loved, and he believed Bess understood; but the undisguised hostility of the foreman bothered him.

Sudden Bill and Bess might trust him, but one was sick, and the other didn't give the orders. There was a cold, calculating determination about Forty Mile which made him a dangerous enemy, and if the fox-faced foreman had decided to use the rustling as a means to satisfy his grudge against Dan, he was not the sort of man to change his mind.

Dan didn't want war. He hoped he had avoided it, but that night when he turned in he left the Winchester leaning against the wall near his bunk. Though the next seven days passed quietly, Dan did not relax his precautions. When a ranch is being stolen blind, men lose their heads. He had declared himself frankly, but the topography of the Rafter L range was such that his reputation would not be freed of suspicion entirely until the rustlers were actually caught.

The Rafter L and one other ranch equally large controlled the whole of an extensive valley surrounded on three sides by high hills. The grass land was reserved for winter range. In summer the cattle were thrown into the timber, where big trees, underbrush, and a tangle of cañons made it impos-

sible for a puncher to see more than fifty yards.

In such country a steer could be roped, a fire kindled, and the brand blotted on the spot without one chance of discovery in a thousand. Any man in the district could do it. The thief might even drive the stolen steer to the railroad running across the mouth of the valley without once going out into the open, and be back at his own ranch soon after sundown. For from the railroad to the valley's end, where Dan's ranch was located, was only ten miles.

Nor was shipping very difficult. At the foot of the hills the railroad maintained a water tank, a siding, a loading chute, and a tiny station where a one-legged, red-nosed, irascible old-timer calling himself Pegleg Sampson acted as agent. East-bound trains stopped at Piute Crossing to take on water before the long pull up the grade.

In the fall a good many cattle were shipped, but during the rest of the year Pegleg led a lonely existence. He was there to watch the tank. No one came to Piute Crossing except to ship cattle, and during the summer the one-legged old man might not see a soul in weeks. Steers could be brought to his lonely siding through the woods, concealed near by till a train stopped, and then be driven up the loading chute onto the cars while the engine was taking on water.

At least that was how Dan figured the rustlers were working. The cows could not be shipped except at Piute Crossing. The mountains were too high and steep and the markets too distant to drive stock across country.

But if the thieves were shipping by rail they would be compelled to use a brand which was registered in the district. That was going to be difficult. There weren't very many of them, and the cattle inspectors knew just about how many cows each brand ought to ship, and when they usually put their stock on the cars.

Dan set the brands down. Coleman's Rafter L, the Bar XD which shared the valley, his own Diamond B, then, on the other side of the railroad, the Mashed O, the Quarter Circle 4, the Fishhook, and the Windowsash.

It made quite a list; but the only chance to do any brand blotting, as far as he could see—and Dan had studied those brands for a month—was to work the Rafter L over into a Diamond B.

Therefore, Dan slept lightly. More than one honest nester has been shot mighty dead because of just such circumstantial evidence as that.

"Sudden Bill said he didn't set me down for a thief," Dan told himself over and over. But the premonition that trouble was coming made him uneasy.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLOTTED BRAND.

IT was on the eighth day, in the thick darkness an hour before dawn, that he was awakened by the sound he dreaded. The faint *tchung* of barbed wire cautiously severed near the post by some one anxious to make little noise. A very slight sound, which would not have disturbed Dan's slumber if his ears had not been tuned for it.

In one swift, premeditated bound he was out of bed. The Winchester leaped into his hand. He had the sights lined on the dimly seen figure at the fence before the sleep was out of his eyes. Almost he pulled trigger.

But as firmly as he had resolved to shoot, now that the moment had come the deed was too coldly murderous for Dan's stomach. There was only one person at the fence this time. A little chap who crouched low on the ground and worked with nervous haste. With the utmost care to make no noise he severed one panel of Dan's fence and moved on to the next.

When the little fellow straightened up, something about the figure and the manner of walking startled Dan. The nester rubbed his eyes. He could not believe he had seen truly—and yet he had. The person cutting his fence wore skirts!

Dan dropped the Winchester. His fingers trembled as he flung on his clothes. It couldn't be any one else but Bess Coleman; and what madness brought her here he could not imagine. Why, he'd nearly shot her!

The narrow margin by which the tragedy had been averted made Dan gasp; the horror of it, now that Bess was safe, made him of a sudden furiously angry at the girl. Mix in men's business? Make a murderer of him, would she? He'd show her!

Springing through the doorway he threw his carbine to his shoulder when the girl uttered a faint cry of alarm and ran toward her horse.

"None of that, now!" he called menacingly.

She stopped. "It's me, Dan—don't shoot," she cried out.

"Ain't there no men on the Rafter L?" he shouted in reply, and crossed the hundred yards of range between his shack and the fence with angry strides.

"Forty Mile wouldn't come! He 'lowed there wasn't no hurry to run yuh out!" the girl retorted as he came to a standstill beside her.

"Why'd I have to be run out?"

"Because daddy swore he'd git out of bed to do it himself. I knew he meant it, if Forty Mile didn't!" Bess answered vehemently. "I told Forty Mile the ride would kill daddy, an' when he just laughed I sneaked away thinkin' I could cut yore wire without wakin' yuh. Then there wouldn't be no one hurt—"

"That ain't no answer!"

Bess hesitated. "'Tain't a thing I like to tell yuh to yore face, Dan," she went on. She was reluctant to speak, but her eyes defied him to deny what she had to say.

"Yo're to be run out because the stockyards wired us sixty-nine of yore Diamond B's had been shipped in the last week. Knowing there was rustlin' goin' on here they looked at the hides. Every one of yore sixty-nine was rebranded from a Rafter L. That's why!"

Dan stared at her. In the first shock of that accusation his anger vanished like something which had never been; he found himself thinking more of Sudden Bill Coleman than himself. Sixty-nine head—in a week!

No wonder the old ranchman was loco; no wonder he was ready to drag himself off a sick bed to get square with one who had not only stolen him blind, but lied to him and bluffed him. It was true enough that if Forty Mile had refused to act, Bess had been compelled to, even at such risk. But sixty-nine head, and branded Diamond B!

"I THOUGHT yuh talked like a man, too, that day yuh sassed us," said Bess with sad finality. "Yuh look like a man. I—I sort of figured yuh were better than most. But underneath, Dan Bogart, yo're just plain coyote, so onery yuh'd steal from a sick man an' sling a gun on a girl."

Bess turned toward her pony. She had a foot in the stirrup when Dan sprang forward and caught the bridle.

"Wait!" he commanded. "Yuh must know I love yuh. Am I goin' to let yuh ride off thinkin' me a liar an' worse?"

The girl shrugged and shook the nester's hand from her rein.

"Funny time yuh pick for yo're courtin'," she responded, and her withering indifference was hard for Dan to endure. His face grew bleak, and when he spoke he was as cold, almost as impersonal as the girl herself.

"Ain't courtin'. I been hopin' to, two years—an' yuh call me onery coyote at the end of it," he said. "I'm just tellin' yuh the real facts so's yuh kin understand what I'm goin' to do—

if yuh care to take that much trouble. Hand me the wire cutters."

Speechless Bess passed over the tool. Dan walked to the panel of the fence where she had stopped work and severed the topmost wire. Its snarling *cling-tchung* might have been his comment on the whole affair. Working swiftly, in silence, he cut every wire from the post.

A Diamond B heifer, which had been grazing near the shack, commenced to drift toward him. Dan had never had money to grade up his stock. This cow was a throw-back to the old long-horn type—what used to be called a "line-back," with red sides and a white stripe down the backbone. It snuffed at the snarl of wire on the ground, snatched a mouthful of the longer grass that grew outside the fence, and with a flirt of its tail passed out into the open range. Other cows of Dan's little herd began to drift after the leader.

Bess remained motionless in the saddle. At the end of the fence Dan cut a ten foot length of wire from the pile at his feet and twisted it into a compact bundle about an inch in diameter and eighteen inches long.

"Go tell Sudden Bill my fence is cut an' the Diamond B scattered. That ought to show yuh whether I'm onery or not. Anyway, it will keep him in his bed," he called out.

"What yuh goin' to do with the wire?" Bess faltered.

"Show whether I'm a coyote an' a thief—an' prove it quick; so damn sudden yuh won't have time to get set in yore crazy idea," snapped the nester savagely.

"I've been thinkin' all this was just a grudge, Bess, but with yuh bein' dragged in this way it must be somethin' a sight meaner. There's a quick way to find out. I've been waitin' an' studyin' for a week. Now," Dan's chin set, "I'm on the prod. Ride back an' nurse yore daddy, Bess. From now on this is men's business most emphatic!"

Bess Coleman was range bred. A bunch of wire is used to blot a brand, and for no other purpose of which she had ever heard. Every line of Dan's face showed desperation, and whatever the evidence against him might be, a friendship of two years' standing can't be blasted by one telegram, even from inspectors at the stockyards. Moreover, Dan had cut his own fence. Range bred, Bess knew what that meant, too.

"Last night Forty Mile said he'd ride this way with Wolf an' Dusty. He'll be lookin' out sharp," she warned.

"I said this was men's business," Dan retorted harshly. "Git home, Bess—if yuh got to think at all, chew on this: how come that yuh could saddle a broncho this mornin' without waking Forty Mile? Why didn't he stop yuh—or come himself?"

DAN turned his back and went, almost at a run, for his corral. He'd said more than he intended; he didn't want Bess to answer that open accusation of the Rafter L foreman, and, in his haste, he missed Bess's sudden frown of concentrated thought.

The girl was moved to ride after him and speak, but he was throwing his saddle on the back of a strawberry roan, and the impulse passed. She rode off, glancing once at the ruined fence, once at Dan's line-back heifer grazing slowly out into the range.

Her thoughts must have been bitter. She lashed her pony with the quirt, and streaked away toward the Rafter L.

Once the girl had started Dan abandoned his pretense of haste. He cinched up slowly, and delayed over the examination of his carbine. He wanted Bess to be far from the scene before he made his next move. He was pretty sure he was going to get action, but not certain at all as to its nature, and his plans were more hazy than he had led Bess to believe.

The idea that Forty Mile was mak-

ing the rustling an excuse to settle his old grudge remained fixed in Dan's mind, but now that the foreman had got bitter enough to risk the lives of Sudden Bill and Bess, the nester was going to give him a chance to satisfy that grudge once and for all. If Forty Mile didn't take it, the fault would not be Dan's—and it would go far to confirm Dan's sudden suspicion of the rustlers' real identity.

Therefore, it happened that the nester took no pains to conceal his movements. He waited until the first flush of sunrise gave plenty of light, then rode ostentatiously out of his valley onto the open range. Within a mile of his valley was a shallow wash. Here he momentarily reined in his pony. Cattle were grazing all about, Rafter L's most of them, though a few of Dan's own stock had drifted through the broken fence to this point.

The nester rose in his stirrups and scanned the rolling stretch of sage. Far in the distance a tiny dot showed where Bess was loping back toward the ranch. Elsewhere the range seemed deserted to a casual eye. Dan, however, was far from casual—his attention centered on the wooded hills rising near his valley, and not on the woods, either, but on the birds beginning to fly above them. A crow, flapping lazily along over the tree tops near the edge of the timber suddenly veered, cawed harshly, and went scooting off at an angle.

Dan smiled to himself, shook out a loop, whirled it over his head long enough to attract the attention of a blind man.

"Somebody hiding in the woods for sure," he muttered. "Well, look close, hombre! There's only one thing I don't want yuh to see: an' yuh won't!"

Three cows were standing on the edge of the wash. Dan spurred his pony, and his rush sent all three lumbering down the sloping sides. His rope shot out, but when the loop snaked around a rear hoof the heifer he threw was hidden from the view of any one in the woods.

Two cows lumbered out and escaped, but Dan, leaping from his pony, hogtied his own old line-back heifer with red sides and a white streak down the back-bone, which had been thrown by his noose.

Carelessly he pulled the rolls of wire from the cantle—very carelessly, considering that the pony was still standing in plain sight on the edge of the wash; and with even greater carelessness the nester kindled a very smoky fire. He took pains, however, that it burned up quickly.

His rolls of wire were red hot in half a dozen minutes, and in a minute more the line-back heifer was bellowing in agony as Dan drew a Diamond B on her left hip. He had to stop frequently to reheat his wire. Each time he scanned the edge of the woods, but the brand had been reworked and the line-back heifer released before he discerned any movement there.

"I ain't stolen anything. But that fresh brand makes it look like I had," Dan muttered, watching the edge of the woods anxiously.

NOW an old brand is nothing but a scar, covered with hair which grows in every direction instead of lying smooth with the rest of the coat. Rough red hair on a background of smooth red hair isn't easy to distinguish a mile away. A raw, fresh burn is easier to see. Dan's rebranding stood out on the heifer's hip as clearly as the daub of a paint brush; and when the animal scampered into sight three men promptly charged out of the woods.

The same three—Forty Mile Thomas, Wolf Miller, and Dusty.

Like a rustler caught red-handed and resolved to shoot his way out, Dan vaulted onto his pony and spurred after the cow he had "stolen." Roping it, he dragged it back into the wash and hogtied it; then caught up his Winches-

ter and set the sights for three hundred yards.

Here was a show-down. Forty Mile couldn't know that the nester had rebranded his own cow; all he could possibly see was that his enemy was alone and discovered in a guilty act. If he had a grudge to settle, he could do it; on the other hand, if he simply suspected Dan was in league with the thieves, he would make every effort to capture both the nester and the cow. For since the rustlers were using Dan's brand, the stealing would have to stop as soon and as long as the nester was in jail.

At three hundred yards Dan sent a warning shot whistling by the foreman's ear, and grinned sourly to himself, when Forty Mile flinched, swung his pony to the left, and commenced to gallop Indian fashion in a wide circle around the wash. At the second circuit the three punchers began to edge in.

"Movie stuff," Dan grunted. He aimed carefully, and his bullet, ricocheting from the hard ground under the nose of the leading pony, changed the foreman's tactics very abruptly. The attackers loped out of range, and began a heated discussion.

The argument was protracted long enough to make Dan's eyes narrow suspiciously. Wolf and Dusty were having entirely too much to say. The three *talked*. Forty Mile should have given orders at once, but it was fully five minutes before he got around to it.

The nester watched the foreman's head wag; saw Wolf, a big, black-browed, surly man, wearing a checkered red and black shirt and a gray sombrero, shrug his shoulders in disapproval.

Dusty, who was lean and hard-bitten and dressed in gray from hat to pants, save for a vest of violent black and white checks, disagreed also, but at last the two punchers rode off together in the general direction of the Rafter L, while Forty Mile remained where he was, with his Winchester poised across his saddlehorn.

"Which is fair enough," the nester interpreted. "Punchers go for help; foreman rides herd on me till it gits here. Either that, or Forty Mile is gittin' rid of witnesses. Now, is he goin' to fight, or just keep me from ridin' off with this heifer?"

Patiently Dan waited until the two punchers were out of sight, a matter of more than half an hour, during which the fox-faced foreman sat on his pony like a statue, a quarter of a mile away from the wash. So far, so good. Once the two had the range to themselves, however, the nester set his sights to the highest notch and rode deliberately into the open.

Forty Mile whipped up his carbine and fired. The bullet fell short and was fully twenty feet out of line.

"Wants me personal, huh?" said Dan aloud. "Well, he ought to've tried where he could use a Colt. Never saw a six-gun slinger yet who was worth a damn over fifty yards."

There was a strong breeze blowing across the sage that would make a bullet drift a yard or two, but Dan lined his sights directly on the foreman's chest. Except for that intentional oversight he shot as well as he could. At the crack of his carbine Forty Mile flung himself out of the saddle.

"Heard it buzz, huh?" the nester grunted. "Here's one to show I did not shoot wide by no accident." This time Dan allowed for the wind. He drew a coarse bead, but his bullet must have sung within a yard of the foreman's head. Forty Mile's pony shied, and trotted a yard away.

"Could plug yore pony any time, an' damn well yuh know it," Dan growled.

THE foreman was shooting steadily. Not an especially good rifle shot, his bullets were wide of the target, but he was burning ammunition as though he intended to keep up the

battle all day. Firing, Dan saw at once, entirely too fast, and also remaining at long range where the advantage lay all with the better shot. It was very poor tactics, and even worse strategy. Not in the least what Dan had expected from a man as experienced and cool-headed as Forty Mile.

If the foreman had retreated to the edge of the woods, where he could shelter himself and keep Dan and the rebranded heifer in the open till the punchers got back with overwhelming reënforcements, his strategy would have made sense. If he had charged, so that rapid movement and short range would have compensated for the nester's superiority with a Winchester, his tactics would have been understandable.

Forty Mile's courage was unquestioned. Dan didn't doubt the intensity of his hate, either; the foreman would not have hesitated to take such a risk in order to dispose of an enemy. But for him to blaze away like an excited tenderfoot was puzzling.

And was it excitement? To test his suspicion Dan retreated to the shelter of the wash. Nevertheless, Forty Mile kept pumping his Winchester; he must have fired forty rounds before his hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Dan watched him fumbling through the loops of his belt.

Twice Forty Mile snapped his rifle, adding proof to proof that it was empty; then he vaulted to the saddle and dusted away toward the Rafter L; though the nester, as yet, had made no move to take advantage of his helplessness.

Instead, Dan spat in disgust.

"Bluffin'," he said. "Bluffin' from first to last. There yuh go, with an empty belt to show yuh fought me down to yore last cartridge, when the real facts is yuh didn't want me killed or caught!"

Slowly Dan released the line-back heifer. The excitement of the fight had passed. He was weary and discouraged; he had hoped to clear himself by one bold stroke, only to discover that the attack on him sprung from motives more complicated than personal hatred.

Only one fact was self-evident. Forty Mile wanted the rustling to continue. Whether the foreman desired it because he was involved in the stealing himself Dan had no means of knowing as yet; it was probable, but the nester had to have definite proof.

Slowly Dan headed the heifer toward the timber. The trick of the blotted brand had worked once, and if he acted swiftly he thought he could use it again. He would go to Piute Crossing and make old Pegleg Sampson think he was a rustler too.

If the strategem worked, the old-timer would blab secrets Dan would never learn while the others thought of him as an honest man.

For range thieves must work in concert or be caught, and the one-legged old man who was shipping their cattle must know them every one.

CHAPTER III.

THIEVES' TREATMENT.

ALL that day, therefore, Dan spent in herding the heifer through the timber which skirted the foot of the hills. The cow was allowed to browse along at its own pace; the big nester was satisfied to keep in motion. He had from sunrise until sunset to cover ten miles, and there was neither a choice of route nor any danger of discovery in that thick timber to keep his faculties alert.

The fact that there was but one destination for a man who stole a cow in that valley would give both Bess and Forty Mile a very clear idea as to his probable movements; but it did not seem at all important to Dan. The Rafter L punchers had been watching Piute Crossing for a month, and if they hadn't got any clew to the thieves

Dan didn't see how they were going to be able to pin anything on him. Certain simple and obvious precautions he would have to take.

To be on the safe side Dan drove the heifer into a thicket of young pine trees when he neared his destination, and scouted forward cautiously on foot to the edge of the timber. He was within fifty yards of old Pegleg's shack.

The oil light shone yellow through the uncurtained window and gleamed on the old man's bald head. Pegleg was dozing by the window with his chin on his breast, and his attitude indicated that he was too fed up with his own company to remain awake much longer.

Dan didn't want to hail the house or identify himself too soon. Instead, he whistled, making no more sound than was necessary to reach the old man's ears.

The response was electric in its suddenness, and quite surprising. Pegleg's head snapped erect. He turned toward the sound with a vicious grimace that bared his stubs of teeth—and blew out the light.

Before Dan could decide what was the next move, the old-timer slipped out of the door and came stumping across the open with irritation displayed in every move of his maimed body.

Pegleg's left leg had been amputated just above the knee. The stump fitted into a socket of sole leather, with a metal plate running up the outside of the thigh, to which the artificial leg was fastened by padded straps three inches wide.

The shaft of the leg was made of hardwood, unusually thick; and at about the height of a normal man's ankle Pegleg wore a strong steel spur, or hook.

By sticking his wooden leg through a stirrup and catching the cross piece with this spur he could ride a pony fairly well—rather better than he could walk, for at every step he had to swing his wooden leg awkwardly from the hip.

The accident which had deprived him of his left leg occurred many years ago, but Pegleg had never learned to regard his disability with philosophy.

His temper was always ugly, and at slight provocation he flew into violent rages, during which his dirty white beard bristled and curled with anger, and his red-rimmed blue eyes became suffused with blood, while he damned the man who provoked him through clenched teeth so that he hissed rather than spoke.

In that country every one swore, and meant nothing by it. But when Pegleg said "Hell" he meant flames that crackled blue and stank of sulphur; he saw his enemies writhing and screaming as the fire curled around them; and cowboys who could have broken the old man in their hands or shot him in two before he could have dragged out his huge, rusty old Colt cringed before the sheer malevolence of his hissing, tight-lipped vituperation.

He was furious now, and gave his tongue free rein.

"Why in the red-hot blisterin' hell don't yuh hail the house, cowboy?" he demanded.

"It's Dan," answered the nester, stepping into the open. "Don't git hydrophoby because I busted into yore rest. I got a cow to ship."

"After sundown?"

"Might be simpler," the big nester insinuated.

"Can't ship no sech way." Pegleg's determined refusal hissed between his set teeth, but Dan's answer was a chuckle.

He went on in a slower, milder drawl.

"There's been plenty of unusual shipments," he insinuated more pointedly. "Hell, Pegleg, don't git uppity. Sudden Bill ain't kept the facts secret, an' the whole range is blamin' me an'

you. I left the cow back in the brush a ways."

"TRYIN' to git me hung?" sneered the old man. "Sudden Bill has been watchin'. May his wound fester same as mine did and another triple damned doctor start curin' him with a saw—"

"Rope an' throw that," Dan interrupted roughly. "I ain't here to listen to none of yore meanness, nor ask no questions, either, Pegleg. Sudden Bill cut my wire this mornin', an' I ain't standin' for that none whatever. He's been stole out, an' yuh know who's doin' it. I want my share." Dan's hand gripped the old man's shoulder.

"Yuh don't run no risk," he continued roughly. "What I ship is branded Diamond B, and I kept all my cattle on the ranch for two years. For all the inspectors know I could ship sixty or a hundred head—an' suppose Sudden Bill is watchin'? He has not seen anything yet, has he. Git yuh hung, hell, hombre? They wouldn't waste rope on yuh!"

"All that might be so. Real fact is, yo're too late," said the old man waspishly. "I ain't been uppity, Dan. I'm riled, an' by the devil's dirty claws I got reason! Two locoed fools have gone hog wild an' spoiled the easiest, safest bit of rustlin' that ever happened in Idaho! They've spoiled it, hombre, an' I'm tellin' yuh for yore own good, turn that cow loose an' *git!*

"I ain't shippin' no more. I'd stop any more bein' shipped if I could, but I can't. I'm just keepin' myself out of trouble, an' tellin' yuh to do the same. Not that I give a damn what happens to yuh. I jest want to see a—" Pegleg shut his teeth on the name, and went on savagely—"a certain blind, jealous, locoed fool git what's comin' to him for spoiling my game permanent!"

"Meaning Forty Mile?" the nester interrupted.

"Includin' Forty Mile, since yuh've named him," the old man whipped back. "But yuh come to my shack, Dan. Ferget about that cow, an' picket yore pony close to the door. I'm goin' to give yuh the facts. I've been helpin' the rustlers, but not half as much as I'm tryin' to stop them now. An' you've got twice as much reason to stop them as me!"

Pegleg stumped back to his shack, but when they were inside he did not light the lamp. The two men seated themselves in darkness, and for a moment or two the old man swore viciously to himself under his breath.

"Yuh range waddies can't see nothin' that ain't under yore nose," he broke out. "Because Piute Crossin' is the only station hereabout yuh figger that's where the cows have got to be shipped. Which ain't so. Trains can stop anywheres, an' it ain't hard to rig up a loadin' chute with a couple of planks.

"I seen that freights was stoppin' constant on the grades east of here. I got friendly with a conductor. Then I waited for some feller to handle the range end. Bein' as you was a nester, I thought fust of you."

"Thanks," said Dan dryly.

"But yuh was moonin' over that Bess Coleman—for which I don't blame yuh none—an' wouldn't start nothin' against her pappy," the old man continued with a half sneer at such softness. "It happened, though, there was a feller right sore about that. He come to me, an' we started."

"I savvy well enough how he could get the cows," said Dan. "But how'd yuh ship, if not from here?"

"We shipped from the track," grunted Pegleg. "Yuh know where that steep grade is at the top of the hill? Engines are liable to stop there to give the fireman a chance to get up more steam. While they were stopped, we loaded on the cows we had in the brush thereabouts.

"The whole train crew was in on it. They split fifteen dollars on each cow. I got two dollars for fixin' the

bill of ladin' with the conductor, an' the rustlers got the rest. Provided we didn't ship too many or too often, we could 'a' kept it up for years."

"Seems probable," Dan conceded.

"ONLY them triple-damned waddies an' brakemen got greedy," Pegleg hissed through his teeth. "They figgered to clean up an' git—but where could I git to, with railroad detectives and Pinkertons after an old fellow fair branded with a wooden leg?" The old man's voice rose to a falsetto squeak and cracked. "I hadn't got but a few measly hundred dollars. They were gettin' thousands.

"They stole so fast the inspectors got wise that the brand they was using didn't have that many. I told 'em so, but they didn't give a damn. Said they was going to have one big clean-up, steal the range blind, and quit. An' they made me the goat. My name's on all them forged bills of ladin'. The train crew kin swear the cattle was loaded regular, by me, an'—"

"An' that I was the hombre that stole them," the big nester half shouted, springing to his feet. "That damned Forty Mile was pickin' on me, tryin' to force me to steal to git even, figgerin' to hang the whole damn steal on me neck!"

The nester jumped for the door.

"Set down," snapped Pegleg. "That's just what he done, and what yuh done, young feller. But don't go hightailin' it out of here to smoke him up with a Colt—because there's two Rafter L punchers been hangin' around here since early this afternoon. I wondered what Dusty an' that eternally blasted Wolf Miller was waitin' for. After yuh whistled it wasn't no secret. That was why I turned off the light. They've got that cow yuh was fool enough to steal. If they can get yuh—"

Pegleg stamped on the floor with his wooden leg. "But triple damn them, we'll hold them off till sunrise if they try to rush us, and come mornin' we'll hightail it for Mexico or Canada—whichever yuh like."

The big nester reseated himself slowly. He had started for the door in a spasm of rage when he learned how he had been tricked. This, then, was the reason Forty Mile had only made a bluff at capturing him on the open range. The rustler's purpose would be served better by catching him in the act of trying to ship the stolen cow through Pegleg.

Yet he had not needed the old man's warning to keep him inside. Under other circumstances Dan would have asked nothing better than to open the door and shoot the matter out with the two rustlers who had cornered him, but this, he saw in a flash, was not a question a six-gun could settle.

Shooting the two punchers and Forty Mile as well would not prove to Bess that Dan was not a thief. If anything, it would confirm her suspicion to the contrary, and he also suspected that old Pegleg would find himself another gang of riders and resume the thefts on a safer, more cautious scale.

"What 'll happen if we do hightail it in the morning?" he asked the old man.

"They'll steal the Rafter L blind—an' be damned to it an' them. Who cares?" Pegleg grated.

"Me," said Dan. "Furthermore, I didn't steal that cow I brought. I blotted the brand on one of my own—to find out who the thieves were."

Pegleg uttered a profane ejaculation of amazement. His wooden leg scraped back and forward across the floor as he weighed this information, but at last he grunted derisively.

"They kin show a few others that was rustled for shore," he declared positively. "No, young feller. Framin' yuh is easy. They could have done it any time—the whole range suspects yuh. No, the thing they had to do was to prove yuh an' me was in cahoots, and they'll do it plenty if they can catch yuh here, with me. Only," the beard-

ed old man gritted through clenched teeth, "may I be triple damned an' dragged over forty miles of broken glass with every cuttin' edge of it red hot if any two cowpokes is goin' to take me!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE ARREST.

"THERE'S a feller comin' to try. I hear his pony," said Dan, who was anxious to interrupt. Old Pegleg had just drawn breath for another virulent tirade, but he stopped and craned his bald head out of the window. His breath hissed between his clenched teeth as he listened; then he sprang to the door, caught Dan's Winchester out of the saddle boot, and leveled it over the window sill.

"There'll be fresh meat sizzlin' in hell in another half second," he swore.

At the same instant the big nester caught sight of the man riding toward them through the darkness. A tall, lean man on a white pony. Dan threw himself at Pegleg. His shoulder knocked the old man sidewise, he caught the carbine and twisted the barrel into the air as it exploded, then wrenched the weapon from Pegleg's hands.

"Murder's worse than rustlin', yuh damned old fool," he snapped, and leaning from the window, shouted, "Accident, stranger! We ain't warlike none till we know who yuh are!"

"Faith, 'twas an accident near parted me hair, Dan Bogart!" retorted a ringing tenor voice. "'Tis yerself I was lookin' for, me bhoy, not lead from yer rifle."

Pegleg wrestled in the big nester's grip. "Sheriff Larry Connors that is," he panted. "Lemme plug him—he's come for us!"

Dan pushed the old man into a corner. "Come on in, Larry!" he called, and added in an undertone to Pegleg. "Sheriff, yes—but a square, white hombre besides. "I'm goin' to light a lamp."

Sheriff Larry Connors stepped through the door as the light flickered up. About forty-five, tall and lean, with dark red hair, a long upper lip and light blue, twinkling eyes, he bore himself like a man who is not even uneasy, much less nervous. In those circumstances his attitude was a testimonial to the Irishman's courage.

Dan stood frowning by the lamp, his shoulders squared and his jaw set. His hand was tensed close to his gun; if he was not warlike he was primed to start. Pegleg, on the contrary, crouched with bared teeth in the corner. His rusty Colt was lined on the sheriff's stomach; he held the hammer thumbed back.

"The divil an' the hangman will both be busy if yer thumb slips," said the sheriff. "Put it up, Pegleg. 'Tis Dan I've come for."

"For what?" snapped the nester.

Connors seated himself on the filthy bunk and pushed his hat back from his red hair. His eyes began to twinkle. "For why is what ye should be askin', Dan, me bhoy?" he replied. "The answer would be, because if there's an Irishman alive who can say 'no' to a girl when there's a tear in her blue eyes, his name's not Larry Connors. As for what—the charge will have to be rustlin'."

The nester and Pegleg exchanged glances. The old man half lifted the rusty Colt.

"Be aisy, now!" the sheriff commanded. "Ye can go on livin' in yer accustomed sinful way, Pegleg. 'Tis Dan I'm speakin' to." Still with the same quizzical smile, the sheriff addressed the nester. "I was told that this morning ye talked wildlike, and started out with a bundle of barbed wire to blot ye a few brands. That by nightfall I'd likely find ye here. Did ye rustle anything, Dan?"

"That's my business!"

"Faith, 'tis the business of plenty

more than ye," Connors retorted. "If ye were older, or Irish, ye'd know that what seems to be man's business is liable to be some woman's, too. Bess was in town by noon to-day. She near killed her pony gettin' there, an' when she was talkin' to me she could not keep the tears out of her eyes.

"She said ye were takin' some kind of wild chance, Dan, and she was afraid ye'd get what overtook Sudden Bill. She said she was sure ye hadn't done any rustlin' up to now, but that ye was goin' to, and she asked me, as a personal favor, to arrest ye and keep ye in jail till ye came to yer senses."

"B-Bess done that?" said the nester. He was stammering, but his eyes shone.

CONNORS nodded. "And I don't care if it's regular or not, or how much of a fool I may look," he declared. "To jail ye go, if I have to git ye there with a Colt, and in jail ye stay till we find out who is stealin' the Rafter L cattle, if it takes us a year. I own I've suspected ye, bhoy—but Bess is too sweet a colleen to love a thief. So, will ye come peaceable?"

Dan's willingness was plain on his face. He rose, even started toward the door, but as the sheriff started to follow the big nester hesitated. Even in the exultation of this knowledge that the girl he loved cared for him enough to take this public step in his behalf, even when he wanted to carry out her wishes as he had never wanted anything in his life, the probable consequences of his act stopped him with his hand on the latch.

While he lay safe in jail Forty Mile's gang would steal the ranch blind, and moreover, if he were jailed on a rustling charge he would never clear his name of the stigma.

"Don't yuh go!" rasped Pegleg in that moment of indecision. Dan knew the old man was thinking that once he were in jail it would be a simple matter for the rustlers to frame up a charge against him, but he shrugged that possibility aside.

Had that been all, he would have led the sheriff to the line-back heifer. The hide of the cow would prove he was innocent, and that Forty Mile was trying to frame him; but it would not prove Forty Mile's guilt nor protect the Rafter L range while the case was coming to trial.

"Pegleg's right, Connors," the big nester replied at last. "I started out to git those rustlers, an' I ain't stoppin' till I do—not even for Bess. I'd like to submit to arrest, but I can't."

"Catchin' rustlers is my business," argued the sheriff.

"Not these. The case is peculiar," Dan contradicted. "I've got some ideas, but no proof shore enough to go to yuh with. Only thing is, on my range word, I ain't done nothing but blot-brand a line-back heifer that was my own cow in order to make the crooks think I was stealin'. However, there's two Rafter L punchers got me bottled up here, and I'd take it kindly if yuh'd ride away with me till I get clear of them."

Slowly the sheriff's red head nodded assent. "Glad to," he answered, and finishing his thought aloud, answered, "Making a crook think yer another thief works quick, Dan. But it's risky. If ye pile up evidence against yerself, I might have to act on it official, whatever I think personal. Well, if ye don't, ye don't, that's all! Suppose we leave Pegleg to stew in his own bile."

"Damn yuh to hell!" screamed the old man; but Larry Connors had stepped out of the doorway, with Dan hard on his heels. The two swung into their saddles together and headed toward the mouth of the valley and the open range.

The sheriff rode in advance. Not that Larry desired to. Starting out at a lope, he slackened pace until his pony was moving at a walk, but Dan steadfastly refused to be drawn abreast. The sheriff had a reputation for bringing in

his man, and he had relinquished his purpose so quickly that the big nester doubted whether it was actually abandoned.

When Connors took a quick look over his shoulder, therefore, it was to find himself covered by Dan's six-gun.

"We part company here," said the nester curtly.

The sheriff raised both hands in a mock gesture of surrender, dropping them instantly to the saddle horn.

"Ye read my mind like print—but must ye play a lone hand when Larry Connors asks ye as a favor to bank yer play?" he whispered tensely. "Dan, bhoy, ye and Pegleg know something—something damn strong and direct. 'Twas writ large on the sinful face of him, an' why must ye see me riding empty-handed into the dark, me that came in friendship to Bess and yerself? Are there not two men hereabout gunnin' for ye—or was that a lie?"

"I won't know till yuh leave me," the nester retorted. "Sheriff, this is a man's game and yo're playin' the hand of a woman. I wish yuh'd tell Bess I'm right grateful. I never knowed she cared that much."

DAN stopped. When he went on, his tone changed from the deep fervency of a man in love to the clipped accents of a foreman giving orders.

"A woman's play in this game will gum it complete. I can't tell yuh nothin' except that the thieves are tryin' to frame Pegleg an' me. I'm goin' to let them, 'cause that's the quickest way of bringin' them into the open. Then yuh can use yore head an' yore six-gun, Larry. Right now I'm goin' to escape—leavin' yuh disarmed and afoot."

"Hell ye say!" began the sheriff in vigorous protest, but the big nester acted as the words left his lips. He lunged forward, throwing his left arm about Connors's waist, and bore him from the saddle. As they fell Dan's gun blazed harmlessly into the air. On the ground he pinned the sheriff to the earth with a leg scissors and a half Nelson while he pulled the Colt from Connors's holster.

"I'm droppin' yore gun on the ground an' turnin' yore pony loose inside of a hundred yards," he panted into the sheriff's ear. Connors was wrestling to free himself, and since he was nearly as strong as Dan, the nester's double grip gave him no more advantage than he needed. "But don't—yuh—follow! Gimme twenty-four hours—then think faster than hell when somethin' queer breaks."

"A' right. Quit bear-huggin' me," Connors grunted.

Dan unlocked his legs and leaped to the saddle, dropping the sheriff's gun into the grass, but snatching the reins of the white pony. For half a mile he went at a gallop, plying quirt and spurs.

Then, slowing down so that the led pony would not trip, he dropped the reins onto the ground and galloped on, heading toward his own shack. He figured that Connors's pony would not stray far. He hoped not, anyway. Nothing angers a man quite so much as being left afoot, and he did not wish to try Larry's good will too severely.

The noises of his escape, however, must have sounded genuine in case Wolf Miller and Dusty were in the vicinity. Of course, Pegleg might have lied; and to test his story Dan eased his pony's gait to a lope and went on with his chin on his shoulder, alert for any movement on the open plain.

A rifle shot fired from the left, between himself and the timber, was the first evidence of pursuit. It was answered by a second shot directly from the rear, and far behind. Dan didn't hear the second bullet at all; the first hummed five yards behind him. He fired at random in the general direction of the timber, and increased his pace somewhat—though not as yet using quirt or spurs. He could see nothing,

and had complete confidence in his ability to hold his own in a running fight at long range.

Within a hundred yards a third shot, fired by the rider on his left from a position abreast of the nester, showed that he was losing ground. Again it was answered immediately from the rear. That rider had closed in also; the position of the three had become a right angled triangle, the sides of which were some three hundred yards in length.

"Wolf an' Dusty are keepin' us out of the timber, pony. Stretch yore legs!" Dan commanded. His quirt cracked like a rifle shot, but he refrained from wasting powder. His enemies were shooting wide, and he did not care to have the flash of his rifle advertise his position.

For five miles the chase swept at a headlong gallop through the star-lit darkness, and in those twenty-odd minutes of flight Dan learned two facts. First, that both pursuers feared his Winchester. On the open plain a mounted man could be seen, perhaps, at a distance of a hundred and fifty yards, but neither enemy cared to close in to that range.

On the other hand, he could not shake them off. Occasional shots from the left showed that the rider guarding the woods was falling a little behind, but not enough to permit the nester to make a dash for the shelter of the timber.

The enemy in the rear had the fastest pony of all—he worked forward and somewhat to the right until he was in position to intercept a dash across the open in the direction of the Rafter L.

"YO'RE runnin' me a long way from the evidence, hombres," Dan chuckled grimly, thinking of the blot-branded heifer back in the thicket by Pegleg's.

"Back to the Diamond B is jest where I want to go. Unless, maybe—" Dan spurred his pony. There was a catch in this cautious pursuit. Perhaps they figured the sheriff was after him, and wanted to force him by his shack and compel him to take to the hills without bedding or grub. He had nothing but a slicker on his saddle, and had eaten all the food he had at midday.

If that was the idea, however, the ponies ridden by Wolf and Dusty were not quite fast enough. In the second half of the race Dan forged steadily ahead of the man riding along the edge of the timber, until when he neared the mouth of his own valley he was able to edge in. As he turned into the defile he glimpsed his pursuer dimly, spurring and quirting a jaded pony.

Dan sent a shot singing by the fellow's head, and grinned when the man emptied his Winchester in answer. A fellow shooting from the saddle isn't going to get the best speed out of his mount, and Dan was content to let the bullets hum around him for the sake of an extra second or two when he dismounted. He doubted if either of his enemies had guts enough to try to rush his shack.

At his own doorway he vaulted to the ground, dropped the reins over his pony's head to keep it standing, and, flinging open the door, leaped across the room to the window. Dimly he could see the two men galloping up the valley; he poked his Winchester across the sill—

A terrific blow on the back of his head, a million stars, blue, white and red like a rocket bursting inside his brain, a wild thought that the roof had fallen in, then blackness.

There followed the slow, painful climb back to consciousness. He realized first that he had been hurt; then that men were talking near by. He had been hit too hard to distinguish words at first, although he could sense the coarse triumph in the tones. A dipper of water was flung in his face. Dan shuddered and opened his eyes.

He was lying on his back on the floor. His hands were bound together with two turns of rawhide. Over him stood Forty Mile Thomas. Evil triumph gleamed in the close-set gray eyes and twisted the foreman's thin lips; he stooped to use Dan's vest to wipe the blood off the butt of the Colt with which he had struck the nester down.

"—came running across the room an' was goin' to shoot through the winder, never thinking I was standing behind the door," the foreman went on gloatingly. "Thought for a second I'd hit too hard an' broke his damned head!"

"Wouldn't have made no odds," Wolf Miller growled sullenly. "Sheriff had him arrested at Pegleg's—"

"Hell it wouldn't!" said the foreman viciously. "We got to plug him, but it's got to be at Pegleg's, an' we got to drop that triple-damnin' old chuckwalla right acrosst him, too! Did yuh git that heifer he stole?"

"Sure enough," growled Wolf.

"Then we're set," gloated Forty Mile. "Come, take this damn girl-snatchin' jasper's feet. We'll git him to the Crossing an' round up the old man—an' by breakfast Sudden Bill will be congratulatin' yuh for findin' the thieves an' savin' the county the expense of a trial!"

The foreman laughed harshly. "I want to see Bess Coleman's face when she hears yo're good an' dam' dead!" he sneered at the nester. "She told me I wasn't fit to marry a squaw, damn her; and by sunup"—the foreman's eyes glared insanely—"I'll be square with her an' her pa an' yuh. Yuh most of all, because I'm goin' to plug yuh through the belly an' let yuh die slow!"

Wolf Miller had hold of Dan's feet. The foreman grasped him roughly by the shoulders, and the two carried him outside and swung him into the saddle again, tying his feet together under the pony's belly.

"Now to git Pegleg," snapped Forty Mile. "We'll be there before midnight. Catch him asleep."

CHAPTER V.

PEGLEG FINDS A DUTY.

AT the Rafter L ranch house the afternoon had dragged interminably. From before dawn till noontime Bess had been keyed to the highest pitch of her life. The resolve to cut Dan's fence herself, the excitement of leaving the ranch unobserved, the near disaster at the Diamond B, followed by the nester's first outright declaration of love, had raised the blond-haired girl into a state of mind in which it seemed natural to ride to the sheriff and force him, by the sheer strength of her beauty and personality, to arrest Dan before the latter could get himself into trouble.

The return, however, was an anti-climax. Bess did not regret what she had done, but she was appalled by its possible consequences. All that afternoon, trying to sew, walking through empty rooms whose emptiness mocked her because she must stay in them while terrible things might be happening out on the range, trying to nurse her father when it seemed to her she must scream her secrets at the top of her lungs, the strain and uncertainty mounted higher and higher.

Shortly after sunset she could endure it no longer. Rising abruptly from the chair at her father's bedside she took a seat on the bed itself and ran her fingers gently through Sudden Bill's hair.

Her father had been half asleep. His eyes snapped open.

"Who's worryin' my girl?" he whispered harshly. Sudden Bill couldn't be gentle if he tried. His voice and temper weren't built that way.

"Things," said Bess enigmatically. "Daddy, jest what does a man mean when he talks about man's business?"

"Why, dirty work, mostly," an-

swered the old ranchman. He pulled himself half erect on the pillow. "Shootin', an' stealin' an' lynchin'. Maybe a cattle deal o' the kind where one feller has to leave town pronto. Nothin' yuh've any call to mix into a-tall," added the old man, bristling.

"Yo're jest swell-headed, like all men," retorted Bess forcibly. "I have mixed into some men's business, daddy. Only thing is, I don't reckon I've mixed far enough. Yuh knowed," Bess colored slightly, "yuh knowed Dan was sweet on me?"

Her father nodded.

"So was Forty Mile," said the girl quietly. "I mind yuh told me once, when I wasn't no more than fifteen, that a man wouldn't treat his woman no better than his horses. Reckon that turned me against Forty Mile. He uses a Spanish bit—an' uses it."

"Yuh didn't need to ruffle my hair to tell me that," Sudden Bill retorted. "What have yuh done I wouldn't have liked?"

"I think I started Dan Bogart to rustlin'. I know I rode to get the sheriff to arrest him," Bess answered. In swift sentences, every one stating a fact without a word of comment, she outlined the events of the morning.

"Dan told me to git," she ended. "He said the rest of it was men's business." Bess looked her father squarely in the eye and declared evenly: "It ain't nothin' of the sort. I don't mean because Dan said he was in love with me. I've knowed that a considerable spell. I was just waitin' to hear him tell me.

"But the rustlin' an' the fence cuttin' an' all of it ain't men's business. I've disliked to tell yuh before, but I can't keep the secret no more. The hunch is ridin' me too hard. Awhile ago Forty Mile asked me to marry him. I said no. I told him why, when he asked me, an' I made it right sharp. It wasn't two weeks before hell started to pop around this ranch.

"I can't give yuh no reason except a woman's, but I tell yuh, daddy, I know! Either Forty Mile's trying to force me into marryin' him, or he's tryin' to hurt everything I do love every way he kin. I want yuh to stop him!"

FOR a long minute Sudden Bill thought the matter over. "I'd have fired him if yuh'd told me," he growled at last.

"That's why I didn't tell yuh."

"Well, send him in an' I'll fire him now!"

"But he ain't at the ranch!" Bess exclaimed. "He an' the two new men left a half hour after I rode off this mornin'. The Chink cook was up, an' he told me. They ain't come back yet, an' I'm shore they're spying on Dan. He as good as told me he was goin' to rustle our cows!"

Sudden Bill made an effort to rise. He was able to swing both feet to the floor, but when he tried to stand on his feet he toppled back on the blankets, and Bess, with a little cry, flung herself upon him.

"Yuh can't do it yoreself, daddy!" she cried. "I—I was hopin' yuh'd let me ride to Pegleg's. That's the likeliest place for things to bust loose, an' there won't be no shootin' if I'm about."

"No!" swore Sudden Bill violently, and though Bess begged and stormed, she could not move him from that decision. She had done too much already, he insisted. Going for the sheriff was the trick of a fool girl. She wasn't going to do any more. Dan was all right anyhow, and he'd fire Forty Mile when the foreman came back—what more did she want?

Darkness fell while the argument went on; they were shouting at one another when some one outside hailed the house in a clear tenor.

"Hello! Have ye room inside for a human an' a hell-spittin' tarantula?"

"There's Larry Connors, with Dan most like," grunted old Sudden Bill in exasperation. "Tell him to come in—

but don't yuh tell him no more. Send him in to me!"

But it was not Dan whom the sheriff had with him when he stepped into the ranchman's sick-room. It was Pegleg.

"I'd like to bathe yuh in blue splutterin' brimstone," hissed the old man. "You, too, Coleman, stuck on the spines of a white-hot pitchfork. What are yuh takin' me for—when I've a train comin' at two in the mornin' an' will lose my hell-sprinkled job if I ain't there to report it?"

"'Twill be the county then that gives ye chow and blankets," retorted the sheriff in exasperation. Connors's good nature was worn thin. A ten-mile ride under the lash of Pegleg's tongue would have been enough to wear the hide of a rhinoceros to the quick, and beneath Larry's smile there lurked at all times an impulsive, fiery Irish temper. He pushed the old man somewhat roughly to the side of Sudden Bill's bed, nodding curtly to Bess.

"Dan flung a gun on me an' rode off," he explained briefly, "but this brimstone-spoutin' grandpop knows somethin'. I brought him here so's we can fork it out of his hide."

"Mebbe yuh kin talk the heat out of boilin' pitch," sneered Pegleg. He sat himself abruptly on the floor, glaring, and closed his lips forcibly.

It was an unpromising beginning, but Connors cleared his throat and began his argument with Irish persuasiveness.

"Rustlers always bust up in the end and double cross each other, old-timer," he said. "Ye ain't nowise the principal in this steal. If ye turn State's evidence, right here an' now—no need of ye to go into court—ye kin ride free. Them pardners o' yers are goin' to be caught anyhow. Bet if I was talkin' to, say," Connors hesitated and his eyes wandered as he searched his mind for a likely suspect.

"Forty Mile Thomas!" roared old Sudden Bill.

"Forty Mile Thomas," the sheriff continued emphatically, though his eyes widened in surprise, "he wouldn't think of nothing but his own hide!"

"Forty Mile is a triple damned coyote an' hog. I ain't," Pegleg flared. "Think I'm a milkfed calf enough to trust yore promises?" The bearded jaws shut like a trap.

"There's plenty o' rope here if yuh crave to swing from it!" bellowed Sudden Bill.

PEGLEG only sneered, and the ranchman and the sheriff stared at one another. They couldn't hang Pegleg. They could scarcely go as far as to keep him in jail, with no grounds for their action but their suspicions. The old-timer knew it as well as they. He wasn't going to be bluffed.

For a moment there was silence, while Pegleg glared triumphantly at his two inquisitors. In that pause Bess, who had been standing in the background, moved forward and seated herself on the floor at the old man's side. She touched his arm gently, and when he shrugged and jerked away, she caught his wrist so that he could not pull himself free without using force.

"I'm not threatening you, Pegleg. I think yo're doing right in standing by yore pardners," said the girl softly. "Look at me, Pegleg—would yuh let any one double cross me?"

"Triple damn—" began the old man automatically, but snapped the oath off short. His beard bristled and his shoulders moved irritably. Pegleg was accustomed to threats and force, but the great power of gentleness had never been used against him in all his sinful life. Guessing at its power, he foresaw dimly that he was going to yield, little as he wished to.

"Ain't no one double crossin' yuh," he grumbled.

Bess smiled. "Shouldn't yuh be as fair to me as to the others, Pegleg?" she persisted. "I ain't askin' yuh to turn coyote toward those men. I ain't

askin' yuh to name names or nothing, but just to keep them from usin' coyote tricks to hurt me. I think a power of Dan, Pegleg. He's fightin' the thieves alone, an' if he got shot, wouldn't that hurt me?

"There's Forty Mile that's asked me to marry him," Bess hesitated. She didn't like to lie, yet the circumstances justified a little diplomacy. Pegleg was weakening. She shot a glance of warning at her father before she continued.

"Dad don't like him, but I ain't said yes or no yet," she continued confidentially. "I don't know what to tell him—if it should be him or Dan doin' the stealin', I'm shore headed for one big mistake. 'Tain't square for yuh to let me go foggin' ahead, Pegleg."

"Triple damn it, can't yuh make her stop talkin'?" growled the old-timer to Sudden Bill. "I never been pestered by women that couldn't look after themselves. It ain't fair!"

"Is it, Pegleg?" Bess whispered.

"Dunno!" snapped the old man. To put a stop to her pleading he jumped to his feet and confronted the sheriff. "Take me outside where we kin talk man-fashion!" he demanded. "Yuh kin rub me in gunpowder an' touch a match to my clothes before I name any hombre, but if yuh'll ride back to my shack I'll give yuh one tip—an' may I be triple damned if I know who I'm double crossin'!

"The rustlers ain't shippin' at my place. Go to the foot of the steep grade halfway up the mountain after yuh've left me at my shack, an' yuh might find out something! But git me out o' here—'cause I'd rather be sawed crosswise along ten miles of barbed wire than have to be guardeen to any female whatsoever!"

"Suits me," said Connors briskly, and moved toward the door before the old-timer could change his mind. "Sure ye want to go to yer shack alone?" he demanded as they passed out into the night. "Them gunmen might be back."

"Burn me in hell if I ain't sure!" Pegleg rasped. "What I crave principal is quiet, an' to deal with men!" But of a sudden the irascibility left the old man's voice.

In a tone that had been strange to his lips for years, a tone he had not used since the days when he had been young, with two strong legs to walk on, when for him the future had been full of hope and promise; the days before the accident, old age, and disappointment had embittered him, he added:

"Yuh don't suppose Bess would really marry Forty Mile, do yuh, sheriff? 'Cause triple damn me if it ain't men's business first of all to look after the womenfolk!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DARK SHACK.

IT was considerably before midnight when Forty Mile, Wolf, and Dusty, with Dan riding bound in their midst, halted just out of earshot of Pegleg's shack at Piute Crossing. The windows were dark, and with a grunt of satisfaction the foreman swung from the saddle and walked forward alone. The six-gun in his hand made his intentions manifest.

Dan strained at the bonds on his wrists. He believed it would be no more than minutes before he would be led helpless to slaughter; he would have taken any chance for a dash into the darkness merely for the sake of dying in hot blood, doing something for himself.

But the rawhide pigging string that secured his wrists only cut into the flesh. His hands were tied in front, but though he was able to use all his strength, the thin cords would not stretch in the slightest. Wolf held the reins of his pony, and with his feet bound under the animal's belly, he was robbed of the long chance of leaping to the ground and dodging the armed

horsemen who could certainly cut him off from the timber.

He waited for the sound of a shot from the shack. Instead, he heard the slam of a door and saw the starlight gleam on the foreman's six-gun as Forty Mile came striding back.

"Vamosed. Blankets ain't been slept in," rasped the gray-eyed man. His breath whistled angrily through his nose. "Couldn't one of yuh hombres kept him there? Did it need both of yuh to sashay a nester back where he was goin' anyhow. Blue thunderin' blazes, if I jest had some pardners with some savvy an' guts—"

"Can that," growled Wolf roughly. "Told yuh the sheriff was hangin' around, didn't I? When Dan here got away the sheriff arrested the old skunk." The puncher chuckled. "All the info Connors gits out of Pegleg I'll put in my eye," he jeered, "but it sure knocks yore scheme into a cocked hat, Forty Mile!"

"Don't either!" the foreman snapped. He mounted and led the way to the shack. At the door he cut the cord binding Dan's legs, pulled him from the saddle, and threw him inside. "Take the ponies into the woods an' picket them, all but mine," he growled. "I'm ridin'. If Connors has gone off with the old rat we'll jest get Connors and Pegleg both."

While the horses were being led away Forty Mile paced back and forth in the dark shack, kicking at Dan each time he passed. Once he stopped at the water bucket and drank greedily.

The gurgle of the water in his throat, the sound of the gourd striking the rim of the bucket, reminded the big nester of his own thirst.

"Givin' me a drink?" Dan requested.

"What for? Yuh ain't got long to be thirsty," snapped the foreman. He refilled the gourd, drank, and tossed the drops that remained into the nester's face. The act was meant as an insult, but from the touch of cool water on Dan's cheek was born an idea.

It was true that Forty Mile might lure Pegleg back, but he could not possibly do it quickly. He must ride to the Rafter L, if not to town. The nester drew a long breath; he almost whistled aloud. If he could just get the foreman mad enough now, he might forget the gourd—

"Figured yuh was scared of me," Dan sneered. "Yuh run like a sheep this mornin'! Hombre, I'm tied—and I'll promise not to bite yore pretty little tootsie wootsies when yuh pass me the gourd."

He succeeded in angering Forty Mile, but not in the way that he hoped. The foreman kicked him in the ribs.

"Probably that's why Bess Coleman ain't got no use for yuh," the nester went on, stifling an almost involuntary ejaculation of pain. "Knows yo're a coward."

OUTSIDE, Wolf and Dusty were returning. Forty Mile refilled the gourd, and squatted on the floor so close to Dan that the nester could distinguish his features. They were contorted with half insane rage; the foreman's close-set eyes gleamed in the dark.

"Feller," Forty Mile answered, his voice hoarse with passion, "before sun-up I'm goin' to plug yuh. Yuh ain't goin' to come into the Rafter L no more, grinnin' an' braggin' an' settin' that gal against better men. Yuh ain't never goin' to need no more water, but yo're goin' to get this—so."

Savagely Forty Mile flung dipper and all into Dan's face, cutting his lip and drenching the front of his flannel shirt. "But while yo're sittin' in the dark waitin' for me to ride back an' drill yuh," the hoarse voice growled on, "I'm goin' to tell yuh why I'm goin'—'cause I reckon it 'll be worse than bein' shot.

"Bess did turn me down. Probably the whole damn range knows it," rasped the foreman, his voice rising insanely. "I told her right then I'd

make her regret it. I asked if it was yuh she liked. She never said nothing, but I knowed."

"Wish I had," Dan muttered. In the darkness he was rubbing his bound wrists back and forth across his sodden shirt, forcing the water into the rawhide. Once it was thoroughly wet it would stretch—just a little. If he could tug long and hard enough.

"Think of that, while yo're waitin'," Forty Mile snarled. "I made up my mind I'd fix yuh. Reckon I have—an' I squared accounts with Sudden Bill while doin' so. He an' that daughter of his thought I'd work on fer them for wages, did they?"

The foreman snorted. "Not one day after she told me I wasn't fit to marry. I've made more money an' had more fun the last three months than ever in the five years I been workin' for them. An' the cream of it will be to-morrow," Forty Mile ended in a savage whisper, "when I tell Bess I caught yuh rustlin', but that before we could git yuh, yuh shot old Pegleg an' the sheriff. When she finds she's fallen in love with a thief an' a killer maybe she'll look at things different. I don't reckon a woman's 'no' is permanent."

"Yuh tarantula!" Dan panted. He would have given his chance at liberty at that instant if the rawhide had stretched enough for him to have got a fist loose to smash into the foreman's sneering face. Even bound, he swung his two hands awkwardly at the foreman's head. Forty Mile dodged, and kicked the nester again.

"Think it over fast, hombre—because I won't be gone long," he jeered, and rose to his feet to give his last instructions to his punchers.

"Pegleg bein' away don't change our plans more than a mite," he pointed out crisply. "Yuh two wait here, in the dark, with this jasper. I'm goin' back to the ranch. Won't be gone, altogether, more than two hours.

"Be a long ride to take a prisoner to town—sheriff must have stopped at the Rafter L for the night. I'll tell him I saw a rustler drivin' cattle here. Connors 'll come to git the thief, an' I'll want Pegleg along to flag the train down the line. That way, if I *had* seen rustlers, they'd still be here waitin' for the train in case we was late."

"Yeah, but that Connors is a catamount with a six-gun," Dusty demurred.

"So was Billy the Kid—an' Connors won't have no more chance," the foreman snapped. "Sit here, in the dark. Yuh'll hear us comin'. We'll scout around an' finally we'll open the door. Shoot the first feller to open the door. If they's two of them, git them both. That 'll be Connors an' Pegleg. Don't stop to recognize faces. I ain't goin' to be nowhere near the door—but if yuh should miss, I'll crack down on the jaspers from behind. Savvy?"

Wolf grunted assent. "Only we better gag this hombre," he growled. "It would spoil the play for him to sing out while yuh was sashayin' around."

"Knock him on the head, if yuh've a mind to," Forty Mile snapped. "But don't be in no hurry, Wolf. I sure hate that feller, and I want him to set there thinkin' in the dark. So long."

Impatiently the foreman flung open the door and vaulted into the saddle. At a gallop he departed for the Rafter L.

WOLF gave his leader time to get out of sight, then lit a cigarette —so unexpectedly that Dan, who had been too busy rubbing his bonds against his wet shirt and tugging, tugging, tugging to stretch them as rapidly as possible had a moment of nervousness lest his action had been observed. But it had been too dark in the shack for him to see Wolf fumbling with Durham and papers.

"Sure hate to quit this rustlin'. Never stole 'em faster nor easier," grumbled the burly puncher.

Dusty stirred restlessly. "Forty

Mile is too set on gittin' square," he complained. "What say we strike out for ourselves, Wolf. We can easy square Pegleg."

The big puncher's answer was a dubious grunt, but Dusty rose and prodded Dan with his toe. "S'posin' I was to cut yuh loose, hombre," he proposed. "We three kin skip out an' hide in the timber. Forty Mile will have to high-tail it then. He's shore poked his arm too far down a wolf's den! We lay low awhile, then start operatin' again the same way—only takin' it easy?"

The moistened rawhide had stretched the least bit. Dan had worked the cords from his wrists as far as his knuckles. He could not pull them over the bones, though he had tugged hard enough to break the skin on the back of his hands. Forty Mile meant business, Dan knew; Dan could join the rustlers, though taking to the hills under the conditions Dusty proposed would blacken his reputation for life, even if he refused later to steal Bess's cattle.

"Yuh can go to hell," he said quietly.

"But looka here!" Dusty began, only to be silenced by his partner.

"I ain't trustin' this jasper none whatever," Wolf growled. "Yo're talkin' loco, Dusty. This racket is played out, an' nothin' will cover our tracks like a nice fresh corpse. We're goin' to play the deck like Forty Mile stacked it."

"But if he'd join us," whined Dusty.

"Shut up. I ain't," Dan snapped. He had found a little puddle of water, no more than a couple of tablespoons, collected in a hollow in the uneven dirt floor of the shack. He pressed his wrists into the mud.

"Which will be all from yuh," said Wolf harshly, and fumbling on Pegleg's bunk found a rag and a bit of scrap. With these he gagged Dan till the nester could hardly breathe, felt the bonds, and found them still in place, then, shoving the nester prone on the floor, Wolf ground his cigarette out under his heel and settled back to wait.

Dan twisted on the floor to find the moist spot in the dirt.

"Shut up!" snapped Dusty. "I hear a pony!"

"Hell, it's too soon—but yo're right!" whispered the bigger outlaw. He drew his six-gun and moved to one side of the door; here he could fire the instant it opened. Dusty, after a second's hesitation, took his position on the other side.

The pony swept up to the shack at a gallop. At the door the rider jumped to the ground.

"*Psst!* Wolf! Dusty! Don't shoot! It's Forty Mile!" he whispered. "Hell's popped an' damned if it ain't popped straight into our hands! I hadn't gone two miles when I skylined two fellers comin' over a rise—Pegleg an' Connors. I goes to the edge of the timber. They stop near me, and damned if they don't separate. Connors goes on up the tracks, an' Pegleg heads this-away. He ain't five minutes behind me."

"Sheriff followin'?" Wolf growled.

"He ain't!" crowed Forty Mile. "'Shore yuh don't want me to go to yore shack?" he sings out. 'Triple damn it, no,' says Pegleg. 'Yuh watch the railroad—I'm old enough to go home in the dark!'

"Git ready, now, hombres! That calf Dan branded this mornin' is all the evidence we need. I'll put my pony in the brush an' be ready behind the house in case the old skunk gits suspicious."

AS he spoke the foreman galloped off. Almost instantly, it seemed to Dan, he came running back. The thump of his boot heels on the ground stopped at the rear door—stopped just as the faint *thump-thump—thump-thump* of a loping pony warned of Pegleg's approach. There was a double click as both the outlaws ambushed behind the doors cocked their six-guns. Then utter silence.

The rawhide on Dan's wrists was stretching—but it still held.

In desperation the big nester curled up and lowered his bound hands over his left knee and down to the foot, until the sprocket of the spurs caught in the rawhide. The spurs were old, yet he doubted if the wheel had been worn sharp enough to cut—what he wanted was to add the strength of his leg to that of his arms. Careless of the way the spur was lacerating his wrists he ground his hands into the dirt with his heel while all his strength went into one last wrench.

Loud in the silence sounded the snap of a broken strap. Dan had broken the buckle of his spurs, but just as it broke, his hands pulled clear of the rawhide. His shoulders thumped back against Pegleg's bunk.

"What the molten, gold-runnin' hell! *That* ain't no pack rat!" exclaimed Pegleg suspiciously from outside the door. "Whoa, pony! Yore back's the best place for a cripple!"

"Slug the nester, Dusty," Wolf growled under his breath.

The rustler dropped to hands and knees and came crawling across the floor; Dan had rolled against the bunk, and his head was hard to locate in the darkness.

Dan could not see his enemy clearly, either, but he doubled up his legs, and when Dusty's breathing sounded close, kicked out viciously with both feet. His left boot missed the rustler's shoulder, but his right heel smashed into Dusty's throat, flinging him half across the narrow shack. The Colt clattered to the floor, but even if Dan could have seen it he had no time for gun-play. He shoved himself feet first across the floor toward Wolf.

Just once the burly rustler fired into darkness, and fired too high, thinking Dan was on his feet. The revolver flash revealed the position of both men, but as Wolf raised his gun again Dan kicked his feet from beneath him, and the big man fell heavily into the nester's arms, his gun roaring harmlessly in mid-air.

With a smothered oath Wolf went for the nester's throat, found it, and dug sinewy fingers into the windpipe. Flashes of red and black danced before Dan's eyes as his breath was shut off, but he resisted the impulse to defend himself. Let Wolf choke him! He had caught the rustler's gunhand by the wrist; Dan wanted to attack, to kill.

Thrusting his left arm across his body Dan seized the Colt by the barrel and twisted it upward, then struck with his right fist at the under side of Wolf's wrist. Not a very hard blow—Dan was lying on his back and his fist did not travel six inches. Yet his knuckles raked crosswise against the muscles and tendons of the rustler's forearm. It does not need a heavy blow in that spot to paralyze a man's grip.

Wolf released the gun, and Dan, already holding it by the barrel, smashed it once into the rustler's face, and, as Wolf toppled backward, reversed the butt and brought it crashing down on his head. The big puncher stiffened convulsively and went limp. Dan flung his body aside and sprang to the door. Four shots left, and Forty Mile still to attend to. The nester wished he could shout to warn old Pegleg, but the gag was still tight.

The salty old-timer, however, needed no warning in words. The fight in the cabin had not taken ten seconds; Pegleg didn't know who'd shot or why, and didn't stop to figure out. To be in the open was unhealthy. He spurred his pony for the edge of the woods so promptly that Forty Mile, who was thunderstruck by the sudden gun-play inside the shack, had only time for a shot at a swift-moving figure already thirty yards away in the darkness.

The foreman's bullet *zupped* by Pegleg's head. The old-timer flung himself out of the saddle at the edge of the brush, fired once in the direction of the cabin on general principles, and flat-

tened himself on the ground where he could be safe until he could find out what was what.

"There's a triple damned hellion outside! Sing out, yuh in the shack, whoever yuh are!" he shouted.

DAN wasn't able to sing out just then, but nevertheless he'd never heard a more welcome sound than old Pegleg's voice. Dan wanted to settle with Forty Mile, and if the old-timer was still unhurt he could insure them an even break. The nester squatted on the floor, where he wouldn't be too much exposed to a shot in the back through one of the windows, until he had loosened the knots of his gag.

"It's Dan inside, Pegleg! Stay in the brush," he shouted when his mouth was free, and added in a penetrating whisper. "Forty Mile—hey, Forty Mile, yuh tarantula!"

"Yeah?" rasped the foreman.

"Connors is comin' an' yore two men are dead. I can't hear either of them breathin' none, so yore busted like a flush, feller."

The foreman swore. "How'd yuh git loose," he wanted to know.

"By thinkin'—like yuh said," answered the nester grimly. "Now, feller, are yuh the plumb coyote an' coward I called yuh, or will yuh shoot it out with me, with Pegleg only seein' fair play. I set out to make this valley a place where a man could live honest an' a girl could ride alone safe, which it 'll never be while yo're livin', even in jail," Dan went on grimly.

Outside the foreman laughed softly. "I'd admire to send yuh to hell. How'll we fix it?"

Dan raised his voice. "Pegleg!" he shouted. "Forty Mile's goin' to walk straight toward yuh. Git him to the edge of the brush, an' see his gun is holstered. Then I'm comin' out, an' we'll walk together, shootin' when we please. Don't yuh cut down on him yoreself, 'cause he's said and done some things I crave to settle personal."

"Yo're a triple damned fool—but all right!" old Pegleg howled back, and a minute later added, "He's ready, Dan!"

The nester shoved the gun he had taken from Wolf into the waistband of his trousers and stepped through the door. Though his eyes were accustomed to the darkness he could not see Forty Mile at once. He walked forward slowly with perfect confidence.

Forty Mile was vicious, but he was not yellow. He was quick and accurate with a six-gun; but it seemed to Dan, with the memory of Bess at the cut fence and the cold-blooded shooting of Sudden Bill vividly before his mind, that he could not fail. His hatred was so intense he would be able to shoot with Forty Mile's bullet in his heart.

In the starlit darkness the foreman's figure materialized, walking forward slowly and erect like Dan himself—but with his six-gun drawn in his hand.

"Coyote to the end, ain't yuh?" The nester jeered. He gripped his gun without drawing it. He wasn't going to shoot first.

Forty Mile walked onward without reply. Confident in his advantage he was seeking point-blank range. Less than twenty feet separated the two when the foreman jerked up his gun and fired. Something tugged at the open flap of Dan's vest; something hot burned along his ribs. Like a live thing his gun swung up and outward in a cross-arm draw, leaped and flamed in his hand as it swung in line with Forty Mile, one fractional second before the foreman's gun blazed the second time.

The nester fired again, not realizing his enemy was tottering—Forty Mile had staggered back, his gun falling from relaxed fingers as he crumpled up, shot through the body.

He raised a white face as Dan reached him.

"Yuh got me through the stomach, Dan," he gasped. "I'd die slow—only—yore second shot's in my chest."

"Didn't aim, particular," said the nester. "It was what yuh was promisin' me!"

"An' wish—to hell—I'd done it—damn yuh!" gasped the dying man viciously. Blood from the wound in his chest choked him; he fell backward, shivered convulsively, and lay still.

Pegleg came stumping out of the brush. "Sheriff's comin', Dan," he said briefly. "I'll tell him everything; now yuh hightail it to the Rafter L."

"Why?" Dan demanded. "I've done nothin' to run for!"

"Because, damn me to hell an' boil me in vitriol 'stead of brimstone," swore the old man violently, "there's a girl worryin' about what's happened to yuh! When I think Bess was figurin' she might marry this onery cuss," hissed Pegleg, with a jerk of his thumb toward the dead foreman, "may I be triple damned if I ain't glad I started this rustlin'.

"Go back, Dan. Take Bess in yore arms quick an' *hard*. Tell her the rustlin's ended an' old Pegleg's goin' to prove yuh never stole nothing, but don't say a word about this shootin'. Bess ain't interested none as long as yo're back whole an' safe, yuh lucky hombre."

"She'll want to hear all about it first," Dan muttered. But old Pegleg only thrust the reins into his hand.

Late that night, with Bess's head on his shoulder and Sudden Bill beaming at them both, the nester found that the old-timer had judged correctly. For it was the ranchman who asked at last, "How come yuh done it all in twenty-four hours, Dan?"

The big nester looked gravely into Bess's radiant eyes. "I didn't. Things have been brewin' for months, an' I've been workin' toward it two years," he answered slowly. "To-day I just took chances like a man should."

"Like a man should when he's *single*," retorted the girl.

THE END

"Fly Poker"

THE wily Chinese had nothing on the American Indian when it came to inventing weird games of chance and then discovering dark and devious ways of "sanding the deck."

"Fly poker" was, and still is, a favorite gambling game among the Indians of Oklahoma, coming down from the old Indian Territorial days and still going merrily on. The game is played with anything from pennies to fifty-dollar gold pieces and the humble house fly is the Goddess of Fortune.

Sitting down in a circle on the bare ground, each Indian places his coin on the ground in front of him. Then the whole circle sits like graven images, only the eyes moving as the players' glances sweep around the circle, watching the coins. Suddenly there will be a shout, a laugh, and one of the players will gather up all the money. A fly has just lighted on the lucky man's coin—and the first man to have a fly perch on his money wins the pot.

"Yeah," says the suspicious white man, looking on. "It looks honest, but what's to prevent them fellers puttin' molasses er somethin' on their fingers and smearin' their money so's a fly is jest bound to light on it pronto?"

"Feller," retorts the old-timer scornfully, "if you think them Indians ain't onto all them tricks you just go take a look at their hands!"

Foster-Harris.

"Ha! It is thou, brawler! Dost thou challenge my right to give orders here?"

He Rules Who Can

Snatched from prison to command the Emperor's Varangian Guard, Harald the Viking prince strides forth to hold all Constantinople in his mighty grasp

By ARTHUR GILCHRIST BRODEUR

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

HARALD SIGURDSSON, exiled Norwegian prince, arrives in Constantinople — which the Norse call Mikligard—in 1038, in his Viking ships with five hundred trained fighters, planning to take service in the emperor's Varangian Guard, Norse mercenaries. But every one tells him that Norsemen are no longer welcome since the old emperor's death; John the Eunuch has made the Empress Zoe marry his brother Michael the Money-Changer; John rules the land, cutting down the number of Varangians, exalting the Immortals—Greek nobles who form the other part of the emperor's guard. Their commander, Georgios Maniakes, is Prefect of Police.

Harald leaves his house-carles in the Frankish Hospice, where he has made a friend of the Englishman Aldhelm. Harald and Thiodolf, the old skald—bard—of his house, who has long been in Constantinople, start for the palace and an audience with John. In a tavern en route, Harald defends a Persian slave girl, Cyra, against some Immortals, and ends up with a fight with Georgios Maniakes himself, while Harald's men defeat the Immortals.

Harald hurries to the palace, but Georgios is there first, and Harald is

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arrested. Summoned before the Eunuch, Harald boldly conducts himself as a Viking king's son should; the suave and clever John speaks with disarming frankness, paints a convincing picture of the empire's difficulties amid widespread treachery, and says he even distrusts Georgios. Then, to Harald's amazement, John offers him supreme command of the Varangian Guard within the city!

Harald almost believes in John's honesty; but boldly telling the Eunuch that he will serve the emperor and him alone, accepts the post of Prefect of Varangians.

CHAPTER V (*Continued*).

HE RULES WHO CAN.

WHEN the Northmen had gone, John the Eunuch sat alone for a space, his full lips touched with the ghost of a smile. His right hand played with the ends of the cord about his monk's robe; the fingers of his left stroked his chin thoughtfully. At last he rose, and stepped softly to the rear wall of his chamber, listening with his ear close to its alabaster surface. His hands fumbled at the juncture of the wall with a huge inset book cabinet; and suddenly the entire case swung inward, leaving a passageway. Into this he stepped, revolving the cabinet till it closed the entrance.

He had to stoop to avoid striking his head against the low ceiling of the hidden passage; but familiarity enabled him to slip through it with catlike swiftness. A door at the farther end admitted him into a second chamber, much like his own, but smaller.

The room was square and austere. No window opened from it; only an airshaft above gave access to the light and air of day. With flint and steel John lighted a candle. Its rays showed a desk littered with manuscripts in Greek; cases of books; and in one corner a row of flasks, a chemical alembic, and jars sealed with wax. Along one wall stood a low couch, on which slept a young man.

John bent over him, holding the light high. Under his scrutiny the other awoke, blinked, and smiled up at him. John smiled back, his eyes warm with affection.

"I did not mean to wake you, Constantine," he said. "But it is better; I am glad of a chance to talk to you. The time will soon be ripe."

Constantine sat up in bed, and took John's hand. He was of about thirty years, very handsome, with an almost womanish beauty and large, cunning eyes.

"The time cannot come too soon," he answered in a soft, musical voice. "The studies you have assigned me are fascinating, but I long for action."

"You shall have it. My plans grow clearer. I have found a man to play off against Georgios, though it may be hard to keep Georgios from murdering him before I am ready to pit them against each other. Now that my way becomes plain, I can use you in a higher capacity than that of my clerk."

"Why have you not told me what you mean to do with me?" Constantine questioned. "More than a year has passed since you summoned me from Paphlagonia. I came hither with high hopes. With one brother wearing the imperial crown, and another his chief minister, had I not the right to dream that I, too, might become great? Yet you have kept me hidden here, copying records and dispatches, and studying the things you bade me learn. And for all your promises, I have seen no more of the city or palace than this secret chamber."

John frowned. "It would have ruined all to let men know of you too soon. You are too like Michael in feature not to be recognized as his brother. In a few days I shall have Georgios out of the way; then it will not matter if all men know you.

"Moreover, I did not wish Michael to know you were here, lest he guess I meant you for his successor. Now he is too sick to care. Zoe loved Michael once, but her treatment at his hands and mine has quenched her ardor. She is almost ready to recognize another emperor when he dies."

Constantine glanced up quickly. "Is it so near, then?"

John shrugged. "I cannot tell. He is very weak; he had another seizure yesterday. He may linger a year, or he may die to-morrow."

THE pallid, delicate face of Constantine grew sullen. "It is wearisome here," he complained. "Give me my freedom now!"

John stroked the young man's cheek solicitously. "Soon, very soon. I have need of your cunning, which I sometimes think is as great as mine. But you must wait till I can send Georgios away, and till Harald the Northman has sapped the earth under his feet."

"A Northman? But you have told me that the Northmen hate you, and regard Zoe as their true ruler."

"Even so," John agreed. "But this Northman is in the hollow of my hand. I have saved his life from Georgios; I have given him rank and opportunity. A king's son himself, new to our service, he has little use for an empress whom he has never seen. He is the best of tools: strong enough not to break in my hand, shrewd enough to know that I can make him great or ruin him. He has all to hope for from me, nothing from our enemies."

Constantine pondered. "This is very well," he answered, "but you have won to power by knowing men. You saw this Northman, and knew he would serve your purpose. How am I to become worthy to succeed our brother if you keep me here, away from the world? How am I to learn to read men, unless I move among them?"

John's smile caressed him. "Patience, little brother! He must be patient who would rule.

"For five and thirty long and bitter years I bore the scorn of men: a slave, a eunuch, a thing to order about. Now all men fear and obey me.

"So shall you be great, if you but school yourself in my teachings. You are young, strong, handsome—you will not need to wait for power to come with age. And you will have me by your side, to counsel you if your own wisdom fails."

Searchingly Constantine looked at his elder brother; and something in that look made John drop his eyes, lest the youth know he had read his thoughts.

"Farewell now; I must sleep," he said.

As he entered his own chamber, and closed the secret entrance again, he scowled savagely.

"The young snake will bite me, if I watch him not." he muttered. "After all I have planned for him! He sees too clearly that I mean to rule through him when Michael is gone; and he purposes to rule without me. Truly this Northman has come to me as a gift from Heaven!"

He glanced about, as if to make sure that the room was indeed empty. It was the furtive glance of a man who has weaknesses to conceal. Then, from a cabinet with wooden doors, he drew a tall flask of fine Venetian glass, and a golden goblet. Filling the cup, he drank off the wine in one great gulp.

Many times he filled and drained the cup, his white cheeks flushing more and more. Not till the flask was empty did he put it away again, with the goblet. Then he flung himself on his bed.

A THUNDERING in his ears, his temples throbbing with his surfeit of wine, the Eunuch struggled from his couch. A moment he listened; then, rising, he tiptoed to an

onyx stand, poured water into a silver basin, and laved his eyes and cheeks. Not till his face was dry did he call his servant.

The slave, at his gesture, flung wide the door. Daylight flooded into the room from its two glazed windows, and reflected dazzlingly from the mail of him who entered.

If John was startled, none might know it.

"Welcome, noble Georgios!" he cried, and waved the intruder to a cushioned seat. "What seek ye of me, Lord Prefect?"

His manner was almost fawning; but there was no humility in his dulled eyes.

Georgios Maniakes glared at him, one hand upraised as if to strike. The Prefect of Immortals, "the Lion of the Purple City," as men called him, was in a most leonine fury.

"What is this I hear?" he roared. "I bring you a man to be killed, and you heap him with honors! He has slain the emperor's guards, and you make him chief over guardsmen! He has insulted me, and you make him my equal! Was this what you promised me? By St. George of Cappadocia, this is not to be borne!"

The Eunuch smiled ingratiatingly, shrugging his lean shoulders.

"Ah, Lord Prefect, if you but understood! Were the culprit but a barbarian mercenary, he should have died on the cross, as you desired. But a king's son, the darling of every Varangian—"

"The son of a savage princeling, no more to be considered than a dog!" the Prefect thundered. "The darling of his own spears—but what he is to men who never knew him, as most of the Varangians do not? And he has laid his hands on me—"

John's shoulders straightened. He assumed a dignity that, for all his ugliness of body, sat on him well.

"You speak of things you do not comprehend," he answered. "Even those Varangians who never saw him know who he is: the scion of a royal race, whom all of them respect.

"You know not how these Northerners hold together. If I had slain him, the whole corps would have been in rebellion. I could not tell you this last night, when you were too raw with injured pride to listen; but now I tell you I have only done that which was best for the realm, and for you."

"For me!" The face of Georgios was livid. His eyes played like lightnings. "Let me judge what is good for me, and do you keep your hands off!

"I am a Greek patrician, of blood that has given this people emperors. And you give an upstart stranger—my enemy—honors equal to mine!"

Once more the Eunuch smiled. "Not so, my lord. I have given him danger, which may end in his death. I have given him work to do which must be done, if the empire is to stand. When he has done it there are dark, deep cells; there is steel; there is poison." He paused, and Georgios eagerly broke in:

"You mean that when you have done with him, I may have him?"

John bowed. "No less. In the meantime you must not harm him, must not plot against him, must not block his path. If you do, purposes no less dear to you than to me will perish. Leave him to me, for now; rest assured your vengeance shall be satisfied. And now, that you may know how much I value you, how richly I would reward your great deserts, I have resolved to bestow on you—at the express bidding of the emperor—the governorship of the Theme of Bulgaria."

Georgios started. "Theodamas has failed, then?"

"Aye; he has not succeeded in crushing the Bulgar revolt. If you win where he has lost, I can promise you the ministry of defense. Whether you succeed or fail, all spoil taken is yours.

I know you will not fail, for there is no general like you."

Georgios ran one great hand through his shock of black hair. The Eunuch's promise had taken the fire from his anger, and he felt like a pricked bladder.

"Theodamas has had all too few men in his command to win battles," he muttered.

"I saw to that," John chuckled. "I meant him to fail, that you might win more glory as his successor. You shall have two more divisions of Immortals, men whom you have trained, and who worship you. With them you must win matchless glory. It may be that the barbarian will be ripe to pluck when you return from the campaign."

"When do I march?"

"It were best," John answered softly, "for you to leave as soon as you can equip your men and stock your wagon trains. In that way your quarrel with the barbarian will be forgotten, and he will be the riper to fall into your hands."

Georgios fixed the Eunuch with a blazing stare; but John's brown eyes were dulled and unwavering. With a bow that held scant measure of reverence, Georgios strode away.

THE south court of the Strategium, where the Varangians were housed, seethed with armored men; strong-sinewed men, big and blond; men who bore themselves arrogantly; men scarred of face and intolerant of eye.

Some warriors paced to and fro, scowling; some leaned wide shoulders against the brick wall and grinned; but by far the most had their heads together, talking in couples, in groups, in companies—and most of them spoke in undertones. Some few, surrounded by excited friends, cursed and shouted loudly. The air was charged with resentment and expectancy.

Two stood apart from the rest, angry of face, their voices bitter.

"It is an insult, Svioslav!" So spoke the smaller of the pair, a thick-set officer wearing the copper medallion of a captain. His companion, a huge Russian, tugged fiercely at his drooping mustaches.

"Such an insult as no man of this corps has yet had to bear!" he snarled. "An insult to all of us, and thrice an insult to me!"

"You will resent it?"

The Russian turned hot eyes on his friend. "Have I ever failed to avenge my wrongs, Rotlieb?"

Rotlieb, a fox-haired Frank, glanced about, to make certain that none heard them.

"We Varangians choose our own Prefect," he muttered. "It is our oldest privilege. Yet the cursed Eunuch has kept us without a leader for these three years, forcing us to take our orders from him; and now a message bidding all officers of the corps assemble, to receive the orders of their new Prefect! A Prefect we have had no part in choosing; one who has neither camped nor fought with us; a stranger, and an unbreeched boy!"

The Russian growled in his throat, like a great mastiff. "Who is this Harald Sigurdsson?" he cried. "What has given him the right to command us? May I be impaled on the devil's tail if it be not this same Eunuch's work! Let him come! We be here, as he bade us. We will show him that Varangians obey no Prefect not of their own election!"

His voice rose with his swelling anger. Others, hearing, strolled up to the pair.

"Would John leave anything undone to humiliate us, think you?" one called; and a murmur of rage ran through the court.

Svioslav the Russian spun round to face the speaker. "Aye; but this! To place a new-come stranger over us—a stripling! To pass over men who have grown gray with years and red with wounds in the service!"

The captain Rotlieb nodded wisely. "We may be sure the Eunuch but waited to find a man who would carry out his will, without question, as none of us would do. Doubtless he has found this Norwegian one after his own black heart."

A dark-browed man, tall and lean, shouldered his way forward, and thrust one knotty fist under the Frank's nose.

"Smell this, dog of the Rhine!" he bellowed. "It can smash a skull or swing a biting blade! Though I like this breach of our rights no more than you, I will have the heart of him who dares miscall the brother of King Olaf the Holy!"

The Frank dropped one hand to his sword; but with the lean man's eyes on him, he did not draw. His antagonist stood tense for awhile, then turned away with a short laugh.

"It takes a man to outface Erik of Valdres!" he boasted. "We be old sword-wolves, we Norwegians!"

Others crowded about him, some shouting angrily, some laughing and clapping him on the back. Ugly names were hurled back and forth; hands tightened on hilts. Blood might have been shed had not the Russian taken the situation into his own hands. Snatching up a shield, he beat upon its metal boss till the court was filled with the clangor. Understanding, the angry men dropped their quarrels and turned to hear him.

"Fools!" he cried. "Will ye shed blood for a stranger, and so give the Greeks cause for laughter? This is my affair and Aldhelm's—no other's. Aldhelm is not here yet: therefore it is my affair alone, till he comes. Ye prate of your rights; but it is my rights which suffer, and I know how to take care of them. Leave this Harald in my hands, which are strong enough to deal with ten such unfledged goslings!"

Shouts of applause greeted him. "Northman's way! Northman's way!" they cried, rattling their scabbards. "So should a Prefect be chosen. Man against man, and the best man to rule!"

ERIK of Valdres shrugged his lean shoulders. "So be it!" he grinned. "Yet thou wilt not find Harald Sigurdsson such easy plucking, Svioslav. And if he should fall at thy hands, know this—there be other good Norwegians here to avenge him. He is our royal blood."

The Russian giant laughed uproariously. "When I have done with him, I will take each Norwegian here, one after the other, and crack them in my fingers!"

Amid the uproar that followed his boast came three men, scarce noticed by the excited Varangians. Only the dark Norseman, Erik of Valdres, ran forward to greet them.

"Ill doings, brothers!" he spoke swiftly. "Is it true that John has made Harald Sigurdsson our Prefect?"

The tallest of the three nodded shortly. "It is true. I had it from Harald's own lips, and heard John give him the title."

"Then we who served with Olaf must stand behind him, Thiodolf," Erik said with fiery eagerness. "All the Norwegians here wish him well, though they like not the manner in which he is set above us; and the rest are bitter that the Eunuch should defy our privileges. Svioslav is in one of his killing rages. He will strike as soon as Harald shows himself."

Thiodolf the Skald glanced at the two with him. "Svioslav has cause," he answered. "he and Aldhelm had a better right to be chosen than any other. What say you, Ulf?"

"Aye," the squat Icelander agreed. "Svioslav is oldest theme-commander in the service, and a mighty champion. And though Aldhelm the Englishman is but a captain, he is second to none either as soldier or as leader of men. All men know our choice of a Prefect would have lain between these two."

"Aldhelm would have won," spoke

the third man, a tall, square-made captain, very handsome, with cold, green eyes. "The Russian's seniority would help him little in an election, for his savage fury has made him few friends among us who like not to be bullied. You say truly, Erik: blood will be spilled over this. Be it our task to see that it is spilled in fair fight, not in foul murder."

Thiodolf struck hands with him. "Well said, Halldor! Yet I think Harald will need none of our help, if it come to sword-strokes. In case he does, let us quickly draw the Norwegians and Icelanders together."

They mingled with the crowd, picking out their own countrymen, whispering a word here and there. The Norsemen began to draw apart; and soon the others, noticing, began also to collect, taking position by the Russian.

Into the gathering storm strode a calm-eyed man, very tall, who, seeing what was toward, stopped in the arched entrance-way. A shout went up from Svioslav's backers:

"Aldhelm! This way! To thy friends!"

Aldhelm advanced a few paces, surveying them coolly.

"What is your will?" he asked.

Svioslav pressed forward to meet him, thrusting his own well-wishers aside with rough shoves of his arms.

"Look you, Aldhelm! Here are thou and I, the best men in the Guard, scorned for a stranger! Our comrades would have chosen one of us Prefect: Wilt thou endure such an injury?"

Aldhelm stared at him. There was no friendliness in his eyes.

"Harald Sigurdsson is my friend," he answered. "It is true that I had some hopes of the election—if John would ever let it be held—but I am too much the soldier to rebel when a better man is put in my place. I have just come from the Hospice, with word for you all that our Prefect is on his way hither."

Svioslav laughed nastily. "Some men fear death more than dishonor!" he sneered. "Eat as much dirt as thou wilt, Englishman; I will maintain my rights with my sword!"

ALDHELM stepped forward instantly, his hand leaping to the hilt. The Russian, glad of the chance to crush one rival before dealing with another, drew blade and rushed at him. The Varangians all swarmed around, forming in a great circle, that all might see. The bright blades rose and clashed.

Even as steel rang on steel, they who faced the door raised a cry. A lithe figure stood poised in the archway, at gaze. Like an arrow loosed from the string he shot through the circle, whirled a gleaming ax, and smote up the blades of the fighters.

Aldhelm, recognizing the intruder, stepped aside with a smile; but Svioslav turned on him with an angry bellow:

"For that thou shalt die!"

The ax-bearer dodged a fierce slash, sprang in, and caught Svioslav by the beard. At sight of the terrible bully thus set at defiance, the throng gasped. Desperately the Russian strove to shorten steel, wrenching to and fro to tear away from the iron fingers; but each time he would have thrust, his tormentor, grasping him close to the chin, flung his head up so violently that he could not see to strike. Svioslav's eyes filled with tears of pain.

His captor smiled on the yelling crowd. "I am Harald Sigurdsson, your Prefect!" he announced. "I hear that some of you will not accept me. It is good old Northern custom for him who disputes a chief's right to settle the matter by steel."

They fell silent, staring at him—all save Svioslav, who tugged and jabbed vainly, spitting curses. Whenever he raised his sword, Harald swung him off balance, so that the stroke went wild. The bully, dangling helpless by the roots of his own beard, frothed

with harmless rage. The rest glanced one at another, as men who have seen the heavens fall. At last they broke into a shout of applause:

"Well spoken, Sigurdsson! Northman's way! Steel to steel, and we obey the victor!"

He had won them—or the most of them—by his bold appeal to the trial by combat, love of which was deep in every Northern heart: yet, but for his bearding of Svioslav—which amazed them and set them to laughing at the same time—he could not have gained their ear so easily. Only a few, hangers-on of the Russian, cried out against him. Glaring at one of these, Rotlieb the Frank, Harald cried:

"Wilt thou come against me? I will split thee with one hand while I swing this goat with the other!"

Rotlieb backed against the wall. He spoke growlingly, afraid to fight.

"It is Svioslav's affair, now Aldhelm will not fight."

Harald waited; then, as none other spoke, he asked innocently:

"Where is this Svioslav? I hear him not."

The Russian shrieked in baffled rage; the Varangians laughed almost as one man; and Harald looked at his captive with assumed astonishment.

"Ha! It is thou, brawler! Dost thou challenge my right to give orders here?"

Svioslav, who had not let go his sword, suddenly ceased his struggles, going limp in Harald's grasp. Then, with lightning speed, he dashed his hilt upward at his persecutor's face. So swift was the stroke that Harald barely avoided it, the heavy pommel bruising his cheek. Leaping back, he raised the ax Hell.

The two blades met, the advantage with the nimble sword. Svioslav slashed in furiously to win ere Harald could recover. In and out the point flashed, barely parried each time; yet its parrying maddened the Russian. He struck again and again, his reckless attack forcing the Northman to remain on the defensive. Harald could gain neither room nor time for a sweep of his massive weapon. Svioslav's backers howled their glee; while the rest of the Varangians waited, anxious and glowering.

At last Harald dropped on one knee, his chest laboring for breath. Exulting, the Russian raised his sword for a backstroke that would end the fight. As the gray steel rose, Harald flung himself forward, left hand touching the pavement, and drove all the length and the lean power of his body into a thrust with the pointed flange of the ax.

The sharp steel tore a fearful gash in the Russian's thigh. Pain, and the sheer force of the blow, sent him staggering backward, so that his stroke ended in a crash of steel against the stone floor, as the sword smashed in a shiver of flying metal.

Harald bent over his foe, who lay, cursing, in a pool of blood. When the guardsmen's cheers died down, he asked:

"Do you obey, or die?"

Svioslav glared up at him, his eyes red with hate. "I obey!" he snarled.

Harald lifted him up. "Tend his wound, one of you!" he ordered.

Men came forward; but ere they reached him Svioslav flung himself on Harald, his broad knife flashing from its sheath. Suspecting no treachery Harald had turned away. A cry from Thiodolf warned him. He wheeled, took the knife in his shoulder, and dashed his shortened ax into the Russian's throat. Svioslav dropped, his neck half severed. Bleeding from the dead man's stroke, Harald faced the throng, his wet ax lifted.

"Who else challenges?" he cried.

NONE spoke. All stared, amazed, at him who had slain the foremost champion of the guard. At length Erik of Valdres drew sword, and clashed mightily on his shield.

"Skoal, Harald, Prefect and Champion!" he roared. "Skoal!"

From five hundred throats the cry reëchoed:

"Skoal, Harald! Skoal! Skoal!"

Harald smiled, though his wound burned.

"Such is the world's way," he said. "He rules who can. John rules in Mikligard, and I rule you.

"Ye have thought I was John's slave, to make you do his will. Know that I am no man's slave, and do what is good in my own eyes. So long as John plays fair with me and mine, I—and you—obey him. Ye are my men. Let John but wrong the least of you, and I will avenge you as I would myself. Now hear my orders:

"Ye have rebelled against discipline. For that, every band in the corps shall drill four hours each day, in full equipment. Ye must learn to obey, whether ye like it or no. Having now a Prefect of your own race, ye have no cause to complain. Ye shall find me a just master, though somewhat hard—which is for your own good. Are ye content?"

Rotlieb the Frank thrust himself forward.

"By sword and shield!" he panted. "Thou art a man! We ask nothing better than to have a man over us. Had we known thee before, there would have been no trouble. We are content!"

"Good!" Harald answered. "John the Orphanotrophos has sent me word that Georgios Maniakes, being about to leave the city, is giving up his prefecture. Aldhelm the Englishman will henceforth act as Commander of the Third Theme and Prefect of Police."

Aldhelm looked at him incredulously. "You mean," he asked, "that I, who am but a captain, am to have authority over a thousand? And police power within the walls?"

"More than that!" Harald smiled upon him. "As Prefect you shall have six full themes of a thousand each. We cannot have the city less well policed than before Georgios left it. Nor could I do less for a man who might have stood in my shoes."

Aldhelm grasped his hand and wrung it hard.

"Ulf Uspaksson, and Thiodolf," Harald continued, "keep their present posts at the palace, save that each receives the rank of commander. Halldor the Icelander takes charge of the military camp between the inner and the outer walls; Eilif Rognvaldsson is in command of the barracks. Erik of Valdres goes on duty at the Zeugma Port.

"Now heed one thing: two divisions of Immortals are to march with Georgios. That leaves but a handful within the city, and three bands to share duty with us at the palace. Ye see that John has once more full confidence in us. See to it that he has no cause to repent his trust! There is to be no brawling, either with citizens or with Immortals. It will go hard with him who breaks my command!"

His eyes, grown hard and cold, swept their faces.

Ulf Uspaksson stood a-tiptoe to whisper into Thiodolf's ear:

"Our new-hatched Prefect crows lustily. He dares much, to lay such command on men like these. What if Svioslav's friends had rushed him?"

Aldhelm the Englishman answered quietly: "I came later than you three; I spoke last with him before he arrived here. He trusted to win over all, and he succeeded. If he had failed, Eilif Rognvaldsson and the five hundred who followed Harald from Russia wait with drawn swords just beyond the entrance. A single shout from Harald, and they would have rushed in like hungry wolves."

Halldor turned his ice-green eyes on Thiodolf. "Here is a man indeed, oh, skald! Brave, generous, and cunning. Make a song of his deeds swiftly, lest they outstrip your power to tell of them!"

Thiodolf glanced toward Harald, whom the Varangian officers surrounded, eager to clasp his hand.

"It will be a good song," he mused, "and the refrain will be: 'He rules who can!'"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SLAVE.

WITHIN a fortnight Harald's wound had healed, for the Russian's knife had been almost stopped by the tough links of his mail shirt. Harald had never let it interfere with his work, which demanded all his time.

Each morning, with the help of Greek clerks furnished by John, he transacted the business of his office: received reports from his subordinates, heard complaints, planned the work of the day; and—when time permitted—listened to one of his clerks read aloud from the military treatises of the great Greek generals, Bardas and Nicephorus Phokas.

In the afternoon, inspecting the bands at drill, and making the rounds of the sub-stations of police.

In the evening he went to the palace, to render account of his duties to John. This was ordinarily a mere formality; though at times the Orphanotrophos gave him shrewd advice, or plied him with questions. To all appearances John was his stanch friend.

Of all the new Prefect's tasks, that which most fascinated him was the study of Greek military tactics. He had had no more understanding of the advanced methods of the East than of its complicated drill. War in the North was a matter of simple formations, in which dogged courage and brawn counted far more than discipline.

In Constantinople the soldier was more than a mere fighter: he was a trained unit in a perfect machine. The common soldier in the Varangian ranks knew more of warfare as a science than his Prefect; and Harald felt the full depth of his ignorance as soon as he first saw his own men at drill. Straightway he set about learning this new art; and he learned fast.

While yet the westering sun flashed on the spears of Georgios and his departing hosts, Aldhelm took over the prefecture of police. The gleaming building off the Forum of Constantine still reeked with the perfumes of the Immortals who had been stationed there, but the bleak room which had been Georgios's office was Spartan in its severe virility and order. Records and files were neatly stowed in cabinets about the walls; the tilted desk was clean, the furniture rough and simple.

"St. Guthlac make me as good a man and as stanch an officer!" Aldhelm breathed, as he ran through the taped manuscripts.

A fortnight it may have been after he had taken charge, Aldhelm came early to the prefecture, to find Harald waiting him in the court. The Norseman wrung Aldhelm's hand, and glanced about curiously.

"All in good order here," he approved. "There has been no trouble in the city since you took command. A good beginning!"

"Townsfolk walk warily when Varangians are in control," Aldhelm smiled.

"Aye, when the Varangians themselves are kept in hand. Have you a map of the city?"

Aldhelm drew forth a huge parchment roll, and laid it flat on his desk. Harald bent over it, studying it closely.

"Here are all twelve quarters of the city plainly marked," he mused. "I shall expect you to station two bands in each, and hold the rest in reserve."

"It has been done," Aldhelm answered.

Harald laughed. "You are matchless, Englishman! Each band is how strong? Seventy men?"

"Sixty to seventy. The proper strength of a band is one hundred; but, since the Varangians are apt to be used as troops on the frontiers, at least thirty men in each band are armorers, wagoners, cooks, and engineers. In these last years of peace, John the Eunuch saved wages by dismissing all these."

"I SHALL restore them," Harald said, "but not with mere workmen. Within ten days every band in your command shall be recruited to full strength by trained soldiers."

"Then who," asked Aldhelm, "shall cook, drive, dig, and repair in time of war?"

"There are soldiers who can do these things, and yet fight well, too. In my country all men are both craftsmen and fighters. Henceforth every man taken into the corps shall be first of all a warrior. If there are not enough transport men and engineers among them, I will train them. With two full bands in each district, and four thousand in reserve, you should be able to master any trouble that may arise. If there is need, I can send you help from the Strategium."

Aldhelm thought it over. "There is more to this than good policing," he said at last. "In this way you hold all Constantinople in the hollow of your hand. Aye, even the palace, which is full of your guardsmen. Save for a handful of Immortals, your troops alone garrison the walls."

"Aye," said Harald, "till Georgios returns from Bulgaria, or till John orders one of the Greek generals to march in his troops from the provinces. There are two hundred thousand men garrisoned in the provinces, from Africa to Thrace."

"None the less, it means that you are master of the empire. If John chooses to bring in troops, you can seize him ere they arrive."

"All of which John understands," Harald reminded the Englishman. "He knows I will obey his orders while he keeps faith with me. Unless he is a fool—and he is not—he has nothing to fear."

Aldhelm studied him. "You will be a great man," he said, "if you are not murdered. Yet I fear greatly for you. John is not the man to give such power to another without protection for himself that we know not of."

A Varangian entered, saluting:

"One Demetrios, a Syrian, with a petition for the Prefect."

Aldhelm glanced at Harald, who nodded assent. The soldier, with small respect, herded in an undersized, furtive-eyed man in vivid blue silk. He had no more than crossed the threshold and caught sight of the two officers than he flung himself flat on the floor, beating his forehead in self-abasement. The guard who admitted him stood by scornfully, his toes itching.

"Get up!" Aldhelm commanded with contempt. "Are you a man, who grovels like a worm?"

The Syrian raised himself to his knees, pouring out a flood of adulation:

"Oh, mighty ones! Oh Glories of the Age! Suns of Valor, Blessed—"

"Enough!" roared Aldhelm. "What is your desire?"

"Justice, most noble—"

"You shall have it. Speak, and be brief."

His glances roving from Harald to Aldhelm, the Syrian spoke, pouring out his words in a desperate torrent.

"I am a brother to Orontides, who owns the Tavern of the Seven Delights," he began. "This morning my servants brought me word that they had seen, in the Nestorian quarter, a slave who had fled from my brother's household. I sped thither at once, with my men, to seize her.

"When we would have taken her, the dogs who dwell there fell on us with staves. We fought like lions, and would have conquered, had not your police laid hands on us all. Us who were wronged they beat, no less than the Persian knaves who withheld our

own from us. I alone escaped, to hasten hither to the fount of justice. The slave is ours, oh, Prefect! Give her to us!"

He paused for lack of breath.

"There is no report on this," Aldhelm said. "Go you, Orm, and ask if the men are on their way hither."

The Varangian departed, to return almost at once.

"They come," he announced.

HARD on his words rose a clamor and a wailing, and a dozen soldiers thrust in a motley crowd of men and women. Two burly fellows in torn tunics, battered and bleeding, were plainly the servants of Demetrios; the rest, bearded, black-gowned men and women with flushed faces and coifs all awry, were Nestorians—Persian Christians. One girl alone wore no coif, and her robes were half torn from her back. At sight of her Harald sprang from his seat.

It was Cyra, the dancing girl, who had unwittingly plunged him from the revelry of a tavern into a cell, and thence into sudden greatness. Aldhelm, noticing his interest, pointed to her.

"Is this the slave?" he asked.

"Please, your Mightiness, it is!" Demetrios panted.

Aldhelm addressed the girl gently:

"Are you truly the slave of Orontides, as this man says?"

Cyra, drawing her torn garments about her, knelt at his feet.

"I was his slave, my lord; but one generous beyond my poor power to praise gave me a rich gift; and because of this the Greek captain Karaktos, being angered, bought me from my master for a jewel." She paused, and cast a timid glance at Harald.

Aldhelm turned on Demetrios. "Do you acknowledge the sale?"

"Never, most mighty lord! The wench lies."

Aldhelm frowned, tugging at his beard.

"One of you lies," he said. "If I can learn which one, there will be punishment."

The Nestorians burst into cries of protest, till Aldhelm waved furiously for silence. Demetrios, glancing from one to another of the Prefects, saw Harald smile, and, misreading his amusement for a sign of favor, flung himself at Harald's feet.

"Oh, Prince of the Age!" he implored. "Well of Mercy undefiled! To you I appeal! Give me this slave who is my brother's. Behold, even now my brother lies sick unto death, having been cruelly beaten by the tyrant Georgios—and his tavern closed for a month—all because of thee! Grant justice! Command that she be restored to him, lest he die in poverty!"

Harald laughed scornfully. "Thou fool!" he replied. "Not I, but the Prefect of Police, has authority in this case."

"But thou art his master, and he thy servant!" the Syrian pleaded. "Command him, and he will obey. See, lord"—he pulled from his fouled ropes a heavy purse—"here is much gold! I can pay the worth of the slave. Give her to us, and all this shall be thine."

Aldhelm got to his feet, white with fury; but Harald held him back.

"Let me deal with him," he urged. "The dog has tried to bribe me." He towered above the frightened Demetrios, glaring savagely down on him.

"Justice is not to be bought in Constantinople while I am Prefect!" he said sternly. "By trying to chaffer with the law thou hast confessed thyself in the wrong. I myself saw the Greek buy this girl from thy brother; and afterward I killed the Greek. Therefore she is either free—her owner having died without heirs—or my slave, the spoils of my victory. If she is mine, I will not sell her; if she is free, she cannot be bought. Speak thou, Prefect Aldhelm! Is she mine, or free?"

Aldhelm, marking the twisted face of Demetrios, in which fury strove with craven fear, laughed aloud. He strove to read Harald's flashing eyes, and read them aright.

"Hear judgment in thy case, oh, Syrian!" he pronounced. "The girl is free by the law. None may buy or sell her. She is dismissed. But first thou, who hast insulted justice and sought to bribe thy betters, shalt suffer sentence. I condemn thee to pay the contents of thy purse to this girl, whom thou hast wronged by seeking to enslave her."

Demetrios struggled to his feet, white as ashes. Both his trembling hands clutched the purse, folding it to his breast. The breath whistled through his nostrils.

A Varangian snatched the purse from him, and handed it to Cyra.

"Thrust him hence and dismiss these!" Aldhelm commanded. The soldiers instantly cleared the court: the Persians, as they departed, calling down blessings from heaven on the most just of Prefects.

Cyra alone lingered. She clasped Harald's feet.

"For liberty, and for the means of life, I thank thee!" she breathed. "Would that I might repay thee!" Rising, she glided out.

Harald turned to his friend. "Well judged, oh, Upright One!" he laughed. The Prefect of Police snorted.

"Foul beast!" he cursed. "I know something of his kind. They will find some way to strike at you for this: for they will blame you, as my master. Poison, or a knife thrust in the back."

"I will watch them," Harald answered carelessly. "Am I not guarded by thousands?"

Aldhelm shook his head gravely. "Walk warily after dark," he cautioned.

Harald nodded. "It might be well to give orders that Orontides may not reopen his tavern for yet another month," he said. "It will teach these swine that we have the upper hand of them."

IN the evening Harald found John awaiting him at the palace with less than his wonted urbanity. The Eunuch drew him into his study, sent away his servant, and fixed Harald with his unreadable eyes.

"Why have you ordered the companies on police duty recruited?" he asked pointedly.

"They were all too few to keep so many thousands of folk of different, jealous races in order." Harald spoke carelessly, being sure of his ground.

"Georgios kept order by the sheer terror of his name."

"I have no name as yet among the folk," Harald objected. "Give me time, and I will make my word stronger than another man's blow. Just now, when thousands of troops have been sent to Bulgaria, only the arms of my Varangians keep the lawless in check"

"Let it pass." John waved the subject from him. "It was unwise to anger Demetrios the Syrian."

Harald stared at him; but the Eunuch's eyes were veiled.

"You are well informed," Harald replied.

John waved one soft hand. "I confirmed the decision of your Prefect of Police," he said, "but I urge you to revoke your additional sentence against Orontides. He has been punished enough. Let him open his tavern. It brings in much revenue."

"How?"

John smiled mysteriously. "A place of such ill fame for drinking and dicing pays well to be let alone. Orontides takes in much gold, and is generous with it to those who are generous to him."

Harald shrugged. "I but extended the sentence Georgios imposed on him. So far as I can judge, Orontides is a fat snake, with venom in his jaws. Aldhelm reports that his records are full of

charges against him. Varangians have been killed in his house."

"And Immortals," added John with unsmiling humor. "It is true; yet his gold is good."

Harald was slow to understand; yet he had some faint perception that Orontides had bought the Eunuch's favor.

"If I change my decision," he objected, "men will say that my word is like a veering wind. Only by enforcing my judgments can I hold respect."

John frowned. "Then you refuse to pardon him?"

"I must refuse. He is a foul dog, deserving punishment."

John threw himself back in his chair, his dark eyes glowing. There was no expression in his features, but his anger was plain. Then, suddenly, he said:

"Let it pass. I will not interfere with your authority. You are a zealous officer, and in all I have heard of your doings, I find much to praise and little to blame."

Harald's own wrath was slowly rising.

"You seem to have heard in detail of my doings," he retorted.

John looked mysterious. "I have many eyes," he said.

"Say spies rather!" Harald spoke warmly, forgetting that resentment was a poor weapon against this man. "Can you not trust me? I would have told you all, had you given me time to speak."

"I trust no one," John spoke lightly. "Had I done so, I had been dead ere this. It is true that my spies watch you, as they watch all men, all things. It is my business to know all that moves or breathes in this empire. Hold it not against me. I watch you no more than others."

As Harald departed, he thought earnestly upon the Eunuch's frank confession.

"It behooves me to be wary," he reflected. "Those Greek clerks? But no! None of them knew of these things to-day."

He quickened his pace, suddenly furious. "He has spies among my own Varangians!" he muttered.

Arrived at the Strategium, he found Eilif awaiting him.

"Word from Aldhelm," the Gautlander reported. "The girl Cyra has been stolen from the Persian quarter."

"When?" Harald cried, his anger blazing. "Who has dared defy my order?"

"Two hours ago her countrymen reported at the Prefecture that many men had come, with weapons, and carried her off. Six men were killed in the fight over her."

"What has Aldhelm done?"

"Sent orders to every sub-Prefecture in the city to have all Constantinople combed for her. Give a Varangian free rein to search, and he will turn every house within the city walls inside out. She will be found, doubt it not."

"Turn out a thousand men from the barracks, and aid in the search!" Harald commanded. "If a hair of her head is harmed, I will open the belly of every Syrian in the town! My honor is concerned in this thing!"

CHAPTER VII.

INTRIGUE.

HAD he done as his temper urged him, Harald would have rushed into the city at the head of his Varangians, and stormed house after house to find the dancing girl. Such was the Northman's way; and it would have served on Norse soil. But the thousands on thousands of houses in the Greek capital, many of them of several stories, daunted him; he might search for months, and be none the wiser. Prudently he swallowed his anger, and did the only possible thing: hastening to the Prefecture of Police, he waited there, with Aldhelm, for re-

ports from the thousands of men searching the city.

The hours passed, each with its messenger; but no news of discovery, no hint that promised success.

The Syrian's house was the first to be searched; that of his brother Orontides the second. Each had been ransacked to the very vaults, to no avail. Orontides still lay groaning in his chamber, attended by a few servants; beyond these, no one could be found in the showy marble palace that was his home.

The abode of Demetrios was empty, save for a wrinkled caretaker, who declared, in an ecstasy of fear, that his master had left the city for his native land. Inquiry at the gates revealed that he had indeed departed, with all his household; but the girl Cyra had not been with him.

The Persians among whom she had been living were questioned over and over. Their tale remained the same: soon after the fall of darkness armed men had broken into the quarter, rushed the house where Cyra lodged, and carried her off.

"Bring me any man who bears wounds," Harald commanded; and most zealously his police carried out the order. A procession of cursing, struggling men, mostly Syrians, was dragged to the prefecture—some with broken limbs, some with knife cuts, some with bruises; but all denied knowledge of Cyra or Demetrios.

The night passed, and a little after the dawn Aldhelm, sleepy but cool with the stolid coolness of his race, reached for the map. His broad fingers traced along the Propontine shore, and came to rest on a halfmoon-like indentation in the coastline.

"A Sicilian galley awaits for her clearance here," he observed.

"What of her?" Harald asked.

"You have ordered that she be permitted to sail this afternoon."

"Aye. She is a peaceful merchantman."

"But she is Moslem; and the Syrians of this city are Moslem renegades, or Moslems who pretend Christianity for trade advantages. No confessing Mohammedan is allowed within the walls."

Harald leaped up, with a shouted order to the guard:

"Run to the barracks! Fetch Eilif hither with two hundred men. Speed!"

"You are quick in decision, Northman!" Aldhelm exclaimed. "Aye, and prudent; for if the girl has indeed been smuggled aboard that galley, the crew will fight to keep her. Yet Demetrios and all his servants—"

"Have fled my wrath, while his paid agents bore her to the unbelievers!" Harald broke in fiercely. "That I understand. But how he expects to get her again—"

"He has doubtless sold her to them," Aldhelm replied. "The Moslems pay well for Christian women. Understanding well that he could not hope to keep her, the Syrian took his chance to sell her for a high price."

Eilif burst into the court with clanging mail.

"Whither do we go?" he called out cheerfully. "I have tenscore of your house-carles without. Are there blows to strike?"

"Follow on, and see!"

DOWN the long Mese the Northmen sped, marching at the double, their mail and their iron-bound shields clanging like a hundred anvils.

The crowds, accustomed to give way before armed men, broke from their path and piled up in arcades, between the arches of which they peered in excited curiosity.

Vehicles sped to right and left till they almost collided with the masonry, leaving a clear road for the troops. Happily the hour was so early that most of the townsfolk were not out; else the throng would have been too dense to yield ready passage.

Pointing to the right, Harald led the way down a well-paved military road, straight to the westernmost port. On either side of them olive trees raised their gnarled branches and lancelike leaves, through which the morning sun filtered as they left the palace behind. Before them faint cries were wafted on the sea breeze, with the creak of cordage and the mingled smell of brine and tar.

His eagerness winging his feet, Harald drew well ahead. Suddenly he cried out in fury, pointing. Eilif, hastening to him, saw a long, lean, lateen-rigged ship draw out from the shore, her sails furled slantwise of the mast, her oars dipping easily to give her sea-way.

"She sails!" he cried. "Without order!"

"She will not sail far, then," Eilif answered coolly. "You forget that the shore-watch acts under your orders now."

Harald seemed not to hear him. Crying his men on, he rushed down the slope. Pressing hard after, they followed him to the gated guard-tower, only to see the Sicilian strike into a faster beat, her oars lashing the blue sea to creamy foam.

Eilif stared in amazement. Not a fire-tube turned on her to check her unlicensed departure; not a voice challenged.

Harald burst into the tower like a whirlwind. To him ran the officer of the watch—Varangians all.

"Loose on yonder galley!" Harald commanded. "Stop her, or answer to me!"

"She has her clearance!" the captain of the guard answered, his broad features agape with consternation.

Harald raised his ax. "Obey, or die!"

Springing to the wall, the officer summoned his men to the fire-tubes. The long bronze muzzles swung up, focused, spat forth the red tongues of flame with a hiss of compressed air. Fire burst out angrily on the surface of the water, a furlong behind the fleeing ship.

"She is beyond our range!" the captain groaned.

"Launch a cruiser!" roared Harald.

One was already launched, in waiting for any emergency. With short, deep shouts, the Northmen thronged the quay and sprang over her gunwales. She was a fleet pamphylian, built like an arrow, oared to overhaul anything with sails. Drums beat to give time to the rowers; swords and spears flashed from her deck; her thin prow cut like a lance through the water.

On her foredeck Harald stood like a statue of vengeance, his keen eyes straining after the Sicilian. She had a fair start, and, like her pursuer, was built for speed; but her oars were fewer. Slowly, so slowly that Harald gnawed his lips with impatience, the slender pamphylian cut down her quarry's lead.

The breeze grew stiffer, beating the water into choppy waves that smashed against the prows. Faster and faster grew the drumbeat; and in the pursuers' ears, borne by the head wind, thrummed the *nakers* of the Moslems. Like a bird the galley skimmed over the whitening crests; like a swift sea-eagle the pamphylian swooped down on her.

"Good boats, these!" Eilif grunted to his lord; and Harald, licking his lips, gave no answer. His hands whitened on Hell's haft; her thin blade gleamed evilly in the mounting sun.

MAILED men clustered in the Sicilian's stern, their helmets glittering above white turbans.

"Merchantman!" Harald scoffed. "She bears all too many spears for a trader."

"Those are bowmen yonder," Eilif observed. "And we have few archers with us. Shall we train the forward fire-tube on her?"

Harald shook his head. "If we do,

she will burn before we can take the woman off. Have the men ranged their shields along the gunwales?"

"Aye. But their arrows will sweep us from stem to stern. You had best take cover, Harald."

Harald laughed in his face, a savage laugh. Yet he turned on his heel and walked aft. Eilif stared at his back.

"There is blood on the wind," he muttered. "When Harald leaves the post of danger, it is to brew death."

He was right. The pamphylian veered off suddenly, heeling over as she swept into an angle to her former course. With a yell of exultation the Moslems saw her turn, and put fresh strength into their oars. They leaped ahead, while the pursuer seemed to drop far behind; but in a little while the pamphylian swung back to her former course.

Now she was drawing, not close behind, but parallel with her prey, and safely out of arrow flight. Slowly the stern of the galley drew closer, then, with a mighty spurt, she drew abreast.

But Harald was not content. On and on, the drums thudding furiously, the hundred oarsmen gasping as they pulled, she forged ahead, and on her poop the fire-tube lifted.

Harald hailed in Greek, shouting between cupped hands: "Heave to, or we burn you!"

Faced with the menace of the terrible Greek fire, which, as they now lay, would sweep his boat from stem to stern with all the force of the wind behind it, the Moorish captain obeyed perforce. His exhausted oarsmen slumped over their handles, barely stroking enough to keep her head into the wind; and the grim pamphylian drifted down on her.

"You have a Persian woman on board," Harald shouted. "Send her, with your captain, aboard us."

There was nothing for it but to obey. Slowly the Moors lowered a boat; unwillingly the Moslem captain descended into her, accompanied by a muffled figure. A few strokes, and they were under the loom of the pamphylian's side. A rope ladder was thrown down, and the Moor made to mount; but Harald waved him back.

"The girl first!" he ordered, smiling at his foe's angry glare.

With trembling feet Cyra mounted, and almost fell into Harald's arms.

He thrust her upon Eilif.

"Take her away," he commanded. "Make her comfortable."

THE Moslem officer, who had now reached the deck, turned angrily on his captor.

"By what right do you stop me?" he demanded fiercely. "I have my clearance."

"Your name?" Harald countered.

"How does it concern you?"

The Mohammedan was a tall, lean man, clad from head to foot in close-meshed mail, the curtains of his turban-wound helmet swaying below his well-trimmed, grizzled beard. His eyes were hot, his features thin and fanatical.

"It concerns me that your life is in my hands," Harald answered. "This is my authority." He showed the gold medallion that marked his Prefect of Varangians.

The Moslem bowed grudgingly. "My name is Yusuf ben Mirza," he said.

"You say you have your clearance. Show me your papers."

Ben Mirza handed over a parchment scroll, which Harald examined. He could make nothing of the Greek writing, but the seal was that of John the Eunuch. Passing the parchment to Eilif, he asked:

"What does this say? You can read these bird tracks."

The Gautlander spelled out the scroll laboriously, reading aloud, one great finger following the words.

"It is authority to sail, signed by the Orphanotrophos," he answered.

Harald frowned. "Then a power

higher than mine forbids me to interfere with you," he confessed. "Nevertheless the girl, being free, goes back to the city with us."

"Take her at your peril!" Yusuf warned. "I have bought her in fair trade, for the Emir's harem."

"Who was the seller?"

"A Syrian. What matters it?"

"The Syrian is a fugitive from the law," Harald explained. "He had no right to sell her. You have been cheated. A free resident of the city cannot be sold; moreover, the law of this land forbids the sale of a Christian to an unbeliever."

Ben Mirza fixed him with glittering eyes. "Nonetheless you had best give her back," he said ominously. "I am the agent of the Emir of Sicily, with whom your emperor is at peace."

"Aye," Harald retorted. "An agent who comes with many spears, claiming to be a merchant. You may go now—without the girl."

The Moslem swung on his heel, but at the rail turned for an instant.

"If war breaks out again between us," he cried, "may we two meet in battle!"

"You are a strong man," Harald observed appreciatively. "May God grant it!"

"WHAT will you do with her?" asked Aldhelm.

Harald did not know. "You are right, Englishman: she is safe here in the Prefecture, but this is not the place for a woman. She is not safe in the city—so much we have seen already. Nor do I know this country well enough to find a refuge for her."

Aldhelm fingered his yellow beard. "In a land like this," he reflected, "no refuge is sacred enough, none safe from intrigue and bribery, save—the cloister."

"You would make a nun of her?"

"I know she is not the sort of whom nuns are made," Aldhelm admitted. "She is too fair. Have you noted her hands? Never have I seen a woman with such tiny palms, such tapering fingers."

"I see she must not stay here," Harald smiled. "Nor elsewhere among men, if her beauty turns even your cold head. Which nunnery shall we send her to? There are many."

Aldhelm thought. "Take her to the Patriarch," he advised, "and ask him to find a cloister for her."

"I will take her to-night!" Harald declared, and he rose.

The better to escape attention, Harald went unattended, his mail wrapped in a wide cloak. Cyra was heavily veiled. It was no rare thing for girls of the lower classes to walk out with soldiers; and Harald hoped to attract no curious eyes. But he had forgotten the inimitable grace that clothed the Persian girl's every movement. One who had seen her close could hardly mistake her undulating walk, the perfection of the dancing girl's training.

The streets were crowded, as always in the evening. Every one who passed turned to stare at the tall soldier and the graceful woman with him. Now and then men laughed significantly, or flung gibes at them. Harald became anxious, and Cyra shrank closer to him.

Suddenly Cyra shrieked. Wheeling, tugging at his ax, Harald felt her snatched from him. Even as he got his weapon clear, a knife smashed against the mail above his ribs.

Cyra was struggling in the grasp of two men. The crowds about them had vanished as if by magic at the first outcry, leaving the two surrounded by cloaked figures. Whirling his ax, Harald leaped for the two who held the girl. Instantly four men flung themselves in his way, short swords outthrust. Others closed in behind and on his flanks.

He did not wait for them to carry the fight to him. Two chopping jabs sent the men on his left reeling back, and he sprang in to Cyra's aid. The

great ax rose and fell. One fellow, releasing his grasp of her too late, died as he reached for his weapon; the other fled.

Even as a blow from behind sheared the steel rings protecting his left shoulder, Harald turned, and became on the instant a fighting madman. His ax whirled, slashed, bit—so fast, so terribly, that the assassins had no chance to work in concert. Again and again their strokes went home; but the fine mesh of his mail turned all but that first blow at his shoulder, and that had not gone deep.

The first ax stroke told him they were unarmored: such assassins relied on surprise to effect their purpose. His savage onslaught overbore such little courage as was in them. Suddenly he realized that he stood fighting the air, with no enemy before him. Cyra lay in a huddle at his feet, one of the dead assailants sprawled headless across her ankles.

Flinging the body aside, Harald lifted her gently up, and bore her toward the darkened portico of the Patriarch's palace. She came to in his arms; and, still thinking herself in the grasp of the ruffians, she struggled gallantly. With a few gruff words he quieted her.

BEATING on the oaken entrance door with his dagger haft, Harald waited long to be admitted. At last the great door creaked, and opened scarcely an inch.

"Who comes?" quavered the frightened voice. A round, scared eye peered through the crevice. Harald thrust at the door with his foot, but it did not give, being set on a massive chain.

"The Prefect of Varangians!" he announced himself reluctantly. He had been in no mind to admit his identity to any save the Patriarch in person; too many eyes seemed to be upon him in this intrigue-ridden city.

There was no answer, but the door did not close. He listened for the sound of feet or voices, but none came. He was about to hammer on the door again when it opened wide. Scarcely had he borne the girl through it before it was closed again, and bolted. A cringing old man in rich livery stood before him.

"This way, my lord," the servant mumbled. Following him through the long corridor, Harald saw that the Patriarch kept no state, despite the silver edging on his servant's robes. The house was old and shabby, the soft-piled rugs on the floor were worn almost to rags, and heavy with dust. Into a large atrium they passed, in the style of the last Roman emperors; and from this into a retired chamber where, on a high raised seat, an old man sat alone.

As they entered the old man rose, and dismissed the servant. He was very tall, with the head of an aged lion. His eyes had once been fine; now they were dim with years and hot with repressed bitterness. His long, white beard, carefully tended, flowed down over sunken cheeks and rested on a tarnished robe.

"I have heard of you," he said at once to Harald, waving aside all formal greeting. "Men call you honest, though you serve John, the enemy of God."

Harald set Cyra down. She stood trembling, with downcast eyes, her little hands twisting.

He turned to face the Patriarch. "I serve not John, but the emperor," he answered.

"He, too, is God's enemy!" The Patriarch's voice vibrated with passion. "And on him God's wrath rests even now, weighing him down with the sickness of death!"

He paused, to search Harald's face. "What is your will with me?" he resumed, his tone sullen, as of one who has had to bear much, and without patience to bear it well.

Harald extended his hand in a ges-

ture toward Cyra. "She is a free woman, whose beauty is her danger," he said. "Four times, the last time tonight, I have saved her from those who would enslave her. I have brought her here that your holiness may find a place for her in some nunnery."

The Patriarch looked long at Cyra, his old eyes unwinking. There was no trace of kindness in them. He spoke at last:

"She is the dancing girl of Orontides. I know somewhat of her. Is she willing to take the vows?"

Harald was astonished. How did this retired old man, who, though he was official head of the Greek Church, lived in a sort of exile, watched and suspected by the court—how did he know Cyra, the dancing girl?

The Patriarch answered the unspoken question. "I have my agents," he said in a dull voice; and then, tremulously, he broke out, his voice hot with passion:

"How should I live—I, who am hated by the jackals in the palace—if I did not keep an everlasting eye on my foes? They spy on me, seeking every chance to make accusation against me. Only by setting spies on them do I keep myself safe. Some day God will place in these feeble hands the instrument of His vengeance!"

HE rose, trembling, almost tottering, but strong in his passion. To Harald's eyes he was only an old man in fear of deadly peril; nor had Harald come on the Patriarch's account, but on Cyra's.

"We must not trouble you then, holy father," he said. "I will find some other refuge for her. Let us go with your blessing."

The Patriarch silenced him with a gesture. "I fear you not, Prefect," he said, more quietly. "If you were not the kind of man I could trust, you would not have risked your life to help this girl. I asked if she desired to take the vows?"

Cyra flung herself on her knees before the grim old man.

"Oh, my father!" she cried. "If there is peace, if there be safety, in the cloister, let me hide behind its walls!"

Assailed by sudden doubts, Harald turned to the Patriarch.

"Is there surely safety in the cloister?" he asked.

The old priest smiled, the grin of a wolf at bay.

"Many are the shames the Eunuch has heaped upon the church," he replied. "But he has not yet dared the infamy of violating the cloister. It is safe."

He clapped his hands for his servant. When the old steward shuffled in, he signed to the girl to go with him.

"Place her in sanctuary in my private shrine," he ordered, "till we can find a place for her among the sisterhood of St. Helena."

With a last look backward at Harald, Cyra departed; and Harald would have gone also, but the Patriarch forbade.

"Be not so quickly gone," he said, his hot eyes burning. "I am told you are the son and brother of kings. It is even said that your elder brother is a saint of the Roman Church."

"It is so, father."

The Patriarch's glance flashed fire.

"Then why," he demanded, "why do you serve men who have mocked the sacraments, laid murderous hands on God's anointed, and defied His majesty?"

Before the old man's wrath Harald felt himself shaken. He crossed himself.

"Do you not know," the relentless voice echoed in his ears like the knell of doom; "do you not know that he who calls himself emperor, aided by his brother the Eunuch, murdered their prince, and through an infamous marriage took unlawful possession of the throne?"

Recovering his self-control with an effort, Harald faced the accusing eyes.

"I have heard this," he answered, "but John himself told me it was a lie."

"Told you, no doubt," the patriarch said scornfully, "that the empress herself slew her husband, and that John forced her to marry his brother that her mad folly might be curbed. Aye! That is the tale he told the people; and there are those who believe him. Fools! Hear now the truth:

"The emperor was an old man, too old to keep a woman's love. John was a mere palace eunuch, whose low birth justified his menial rank. Knowing the empress for a weak, vain woman, he found a place at court for his brother Michael, who now is emperor, and whose beauty quickly brought him into favor. The empress saw him, and loved him. They were lovers long before the emperor died.

"John grew in rank and honors as the empress's love for his brother increased. At last he secured a place in her own household, and fanned the flame of her wicked love. From that day the emperor grew sick—by slow poison, which John administered. But when his death came not swiftly enough, John and Michael strangled him in his bath.

"Before he was cold, they forced the empress to marry Michael. Aye, with hands yet hot from the hideous crime, the usurper succeeded both to the throne and to the wife of his victim."

HE paused, studying Harald's face. The repulsion he saw there satisfied him.

"Can you," he went on, his words slowly falling; "can you, the blood brother to a saint of God, serve such men as these?"

Harald fought hard for calm. "You—you know this to be true?"

"Zoe has confessed to me. And now, by giving you power, John has placed in your hands the means to effect God's vengeance."

Harald was struck with a horrible suspicion. Did the mad patriarch dream—?

"You"—the Prefect breathed thickly—"you would have me slay him?"

"Is it not your duty to slay God's enemy?" the old man asked implacably.

Harald glanced helplessly about him.

"I have sworn an oath," he said, striving for firmness. "An oath to serve the emperor faithfully, unless he or his brother plays me false. How can I break my pledged word? Or how can I be false, even to a villain, if he trusts me?"

"How if the emperor is no emperor, but a usurper?" the patriarch questioned with tireless malice. "Is not your duty to the throne rather than to a slave who sits upon it? Zoe is empress; nor can a wicked marriage make a king of him who married her."

"I could give up my commission," Harald said, more to himself than to the aroused old man. But the patriarch would have none of that.

"To do so," he retorted, "were to give up the advantage God has given you. As Prefect, you command thousands of men — enough to force the murderers from the palace, to place them on the scaffold. Your duty to the empress demands it.

"She is weak, if you will; nay, she has been wicked: but she has atoned her sin through bitter suffering. You, who are a servant of the imperial crown, must cast her persecutors from power, and set her free."

The Prefect stood silent, overborne. The fierce old voice resumed:

"Because I know the truth, I, too, am a prisoner. Only on holy days, when I must celebrate service in the cathedral, am I allowed to leave this house—and then under strong guard, lest any speak with me. John would kill me if he dared, but he fears the people. They cared little for the slain emperor, but they will not see their anointed bishop perish.

"But I am cunning." His hot eyes

narrowed. "Through a secret way my spies leave me and come to me—a way through which I might escape, did not God demand my presence here. Every holy day I show myself to the people, at John's order—lest the people think me murdered, and rebel against him to avenge me. But with none am I allowed to speak."

"THEN how was I allowed to enter?" Harald asked.

"Men were sent to stop you," the patriarch replied. "Men who, day by day and night by night, have stood watch to keep me from departing or others from visiting me."

"You mean," Harald exclaimed, scarce believing, "that they who fell on me to-night—"

"Were sent by John. Aye. And for all your strength they would have slain you, being many, had they not been ordered but to beat you helpless and take the girl away. The Eunuch meant no more, this time, than to keep you from me. Even now his hirelings report that you beat them off, and are with me."

Harald's anger leaped to life, smothering his indecision. "If you are right, then John has already lifted his hand against me, and so absolved me from further service to him!"

"And you may now slay him without breaking your oath!" the patriarch concluded eagerly. His very eagerness gave Harald pause.

"If you are right," he repeated. "But you may be deceived. Nay, be not angry with me, father. Before I risk my honor I must be sure. I have too much to lose to strike blindly."

The patriarch fell to brooding sullenly. At length he seemed to reach a decision.

"You must be sure," he agreed, with a touch of bitter irony. "But what will it take to make you sure? Will it suffice if you hear, from the very lips of the empress, the truth of what I have told you? And if you get proof that John himself inspired the attack on you—what then?"

Harald's own eyes glowed. "Prove these things," he replied. "But prove them, and I will hack the dog to bits!"

"There speaks a brave, an honorable man." The priest sighed, and the wrinkles between his white brows showed more plainly. "It will be hard to get you an audience with the empress, for John keeps her more closely watched even than he does me. He would have you killed if you were caught in the women's quarter of the palace. But I will find a way. Kneel now, and receive my blessing."

Harald knelt, but his soul had little peace in that blessing. He was too shaken by what he had heard, too deeply caught in the whirlpool of rage and doubt.

The great door closed behind him, and he stood once more in the light-pricked streets of the city. But the evening air could not cool his brow; and though his thoughts whirled, his eyes watched vigilantly for any that might follow him.

No one followed. When he reached the spot where he had been attacked, there was no trace of the fight. The dead were gone, the very blood removed.

In the shabby palace he had just left, the patriarch once more summoned his steward.

"Get word to-morrow to the eunuch Zodatas," he commanded. "Bid him find the girl Cyra a place in Zoe's service."

The steward bowed, but stayed to question. "Will not John—"

"Zodatas will see to that. Nor does John care greatly what women are about the empress, so long as none of them leaves her presence without his spies close at heel. None will refuse the girl entrance; it will be escape she cannot hope for. Now go; and see to it!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

"I got so I could dodge through any crowd; all my tricks came easy to me."

The Winged Pedestrian

Far different hard city pavements and smooth gridirons, homeward rushing throngs and desperately charging linesmen—yet for Clive Ferrall it was all football

By BENNETT LADD

"YOU fellows," said Coach Lenahan, waving a careless hand toward the dozen dejected figures, among whom Clive Ferrall was the most disconsolate. "trot off with Putsey Brant. And Putsey, we'll send Clayton over to help you with the backfield a little later."

The famous coach turned from them to the squad of men whom he had tentatively selected for the first team, and ordered them out to the middle of the field.

Brant, the captain of last year's Beaufort team, and Pete Clayton, who had been the flashy half back, had returned to help round the new team into shape.

The figures clustered silently around Brant were the left-overs from the first two teams. They were rather carelessly trained by whatever graduate players returned, and used as fodder for the first two teams, called the varsity and the scrub. These hapless creatures were officially nameless; and the numerous titles applied to what served for a third team were better not repeated.

It spoke highly for American optimism that these left-overs would daily undergo a rough and rigid practice for the privilege of using opponent's plays on the varsity, and being battered by the new plays of varsity and scrub. It was rare that a player in this anoma-

lous group arose to the varsity. The ascent was almost impossible in one year, and after being once classed with the third team, the stigma remained. Their one compensation was the game in early November with the freshmen team.

It was this dismal future which oppressed the young men, waiting to be trotted off to the spare ground between the gridiron and the campus, there to await the benefactions of Putsey Brant, who seemed not at all eager to terminate his conversation.

"Probably talking about last year's team," thought Clive Ferrall. Last year Pete Clayton had been his hero. Ineligible for the team then, Clive had studied Clayton's methods of evading tacklers, and determined to emulate him when his chance came for the team.

Like each of the other men, Clive had hoped during the two weeks' practice, had hoped until the last name of the second team was called, to be picked for either the varsity or the scrub.

The failure was more final in his case than with most of the others. He was a senior, and this was his last chance at the team.

"All right, boys," called Putsey Brant, with assumed cheerfulness, "let's run over to the lot. Hurry over, Pete," he shouted after Clayton, who was swinging after his second team with the familiar stride. Brant had never been run over to the "lot," Clive Ferrall thought bitterly, and he probably doesn't hold a high opinion for those who are.

But Putsey showed himself to be decent enough. In the cheerful tone he had assumed, which sounded more natural, he said: "Well, fellows, we'll dope out a few signals of our own; and when we take on the scrubs tomorrow we'll give 'em something to worry about."

Consequently, the next hour was spent in learning a set of rudimentary signals. The team then stretched out in a circle for a rest, while Brant, standing in the center, outlined several trick formations. Brant was joined then by Pete Clayton, and the work began. Putsey labored over the line, while Clayton gave pointers to the backs.

Clive could form his interference all right, but he had difficulty in following it. The men seemed to plod along, rather than run. His natural speed kept him on the heels of his running mates, and more than once he circled wide of the interference to stretch his legs.

"Look here, you!" Clayton bawled at him finally. "You follow those men. Do you think you're so damned good you don't need to be covered? If you were a broken field shark you wouldn't be running with this bunch. Get it now. Stick behind your interference!"

Clive felt that remark was entirely unnecessary, but he said nothing, although he was unable to prevent an angry look of surprise leaping onto his face. He had not thought the great Clayton could be brutal. His own teammates grinned; they had not enjoyed having their heels nipped.

CLIVE went back to his practice, determined to stick behind those men. And he did, although it irritated him.

Dusk was falling on the field. The men were tired, running through the plays apathetically. But Brant and Clayton wanted to keep them out as long as the other two teams, which were both busy on their fields.

"Let's run through the signals once more and we're through," called Brant, in his cheerfulness. "Come on, fellows, a little snap in it now."

The monotonous work took on a spurt of briskness. After running off a few plays Ferrall was called around end on the double pass formation. He was feeling the spirit of the game, and, catching the ball on the run, he

sped after the two men. Before he realized it, he was on the heels of one and almost stumbling over the other. They were curving inward, and with the zest of the play, he swerved around them, and ran on clear of the two backs.

"Drop that ball!" shouted Clayton. "I told you to stick to that interference. Do you think you're putting on a fancy exhibition? You run through this play the way I say, or, dammit, you won't even make *this* team."

Every one laughed. Ferrall stood silent a moment. His face had gone white. He sensed a personal malice in Clayton, and couldn't understand it. Perhaps Clayton resented his imitating the great back's style. He moved slowly into position. The play was called again, and Clive trotted indifferently after his mates.

"Ah, hell," called Clayton. "Let's call it off, Putsey."

"All right, men; beat it for the showers," Putsey announced.

In the showers, Clive found no sympathy from his teammates. He had come into the class as a senior, passing his three earlier years in the down town extension classes, and they did not regard him as one of them. But Ferrall was used to that now.

It had hurt him at first. When he entered the regular university at College Heights, this year, it had culminated four years of hard grinding for him. Working all day in a bank, and studying at night; saving all the time for this last year: to be free of work and scrimping to enjoy leisure and friendship—free to make the team of which he had dreamed at his office desk, and sitting sleepy-eyed in dull classes.

He had found it entirely different. The men of his own class were associated with bonds of three years: he was a newcomer, an outsider, and not a very interesting one. Just a medium-sized young man, of average dress, who talked like anybody else, with no particular flair, and who had had most of the abandon of youth pressed out in four years of bank work and night study.

There was one person he could talk to. Marjorie Ashton. But she was, like himself, obscure. She had attended a small country college upstate, and she had wanted to graduate from the renowned Beaufort University, in the city, because it gave more prestige to her teaching. She was in his English Lit class, and he usually met her in the Golden Age Cafeteria. She, too, was always alone.

But to-night he did not want Marjorie or her sympathy. He had enough of also-rans with his third team. He went to his room, and took his best suit from the closet. He put on a tie he had been saving for a vague "occasion"; stopped for a shine.

He entered the Campus Inn, a smart and expensive place which he had never dared enter before. It too was a cafeteria; but so much grander, swankier, than the white-topped tables of the Golden Age. He hesitated as he entered, seeing a chimera of faces and heads, recognizing none.

Clive hurried over to the line he judged to be selecting dishes. It passed miserably slowly, and he felt himself flushing. He wished he had not ventured in, to be, as he imagined, the cynosure of every eye in the cafeteria—amused, contemptuous eyes.

AS he neared the end of the counter, he steeled himself to glance about the room ringing with light chatter. At a table right by him sat Pete Clayton, with two other chaps, and—Muriel Courtworth!

The queen of his Contemporary Philosophy class. At least the queen of it to him; and the favorite of every one else. Even old Professor Wadley seemed less concerned about Santayana's Platonism when Muriel talked. It was a subtle adulation granted by the whole class which Clive felt.

He had longed to talk with her. But she was always with fellows who owned high powered motors, and who boasted a greater variety of suits than he did of ties. And she was here with Pete Clayton.

She was smiling at him—or was she laughing? Clayton was smiling amusedly, and the unknown students were laughing. But she was not laughing: she was smiling. Clive flushed as he spoke to her. He managed to reach his table without accident; but eat his food he could not.

Muriel! If he could afford this place more often he might in time know her intimately. What a dream. He came out of his trance when Pete Clayton and the two fellows were leaving, Muriel remaining.

Then she seemed to be beckoning to him! No. Impossible. He looked behind him. There was no one. She laughed in friendly manner and made an unmistakable invitation. He arose slowly and traversed the thousand miles to her table.

"Sit down," she smiled up at him. "Those conceited creatures would not wait for me to dawdle over my second dessert—and I've wanted to talk with you for a long time."

"Me?" Something inside of him popped out inanely.

"Yes. You make such interesting remarks in class, I wondered what you did; this being your first year at the Heights, we know nothing about you."

"At night I study, or read. Usually I am too tired to do anything. You see, I—I practice football in the afternoon."

"Oh, you're on the team! Tell me about it."

"I'm not on the team exactly. I am—a candidate."

"How thrilling! How did you happen to go out for the team? Did you play at prep—or high school?"

"No. I've never really played before. Just a little with pick-up independent teams. No coaching or anything. But I've always wanted to play—that's why I was so anxious to finish at college."

As he hesitated in confusion, she smiled reassuringly and said in a voice that thrilled him:

"Perfectly wonderful! To think of going out for the team with no experience. How did you get the idea you could play?"

"Oh," he fumbled, self-consciously, "it is what I've wanted to do all my life. It's too much to tell—you would be bored."

"Don't be silly. I simply must know. I think this is too exciting."

"Well," he began, "it first started when I was at high school in Eastwood, New Jersey. I wanted more than anything to play on the team; but I had to work in the afternoons. I used to go to the games, and determined to play at college. When I finished high school, my family needed me to go to work, and I took a job in the State and City Bank.

"I resolved not to give up my dreams and I attended the down town branch of Beaufort at nights. I did want an education and college life—but my desire to play football was really the urge that gave me the courage to keep on. At times I was very discouraged—but my dream of playing on the Beaufort team in my last year pushed me on." He hesitated an instant.

"I HAVE never told any one my way of practicing during those four years. It was a kind of secret." He looked into her smiling eyes, full of encouragement, and he continued wistfully:

"Every day going to and from work I used to run. From my house to the station I would run that quarter mile. From the ferry in New York, I ran through the crowded streets to the bank. After work I subwayed to school, and ran from the subway across the park to school.

"Every time I ran I imagined I was on the field. The other people were imaginary tacklers. So I dodged through them, I sidestepped; I would come to a dead halt, and start again at top speed; I practiced changing pace, and changing direction; I shifted my body.

"Gee! It was thrilling to me. Sometimes, on crowded streets, I got very excited. I counted the yards as I ran. This was a dash off tackle; this was a sweeping end run. When I came to a jam, and couldn't possibly get through, that meant I had been tackled. I got so I could dodge through any crowd; and all my tricks came easy to me. I knew if I could put those into practice on a field, I would be a star."

Clive suddenly realized to what an extent he had talked about himself, and he came to a painful silence, flushing.

Muriel smiled at him curiously. She said: "You are a very odd person."

He laughed as he recovered himself and replied: "Not too odd, I hope."

She laughed again curiously. "Very interesting, I assure you. I must run along now."

Before he apprehended her, she was up, and as he strove to push back his chair, she said gayly: "Don't hurry. I must be off. I am late for an engagement," and with another curious smile, she rushed from the cafeteria.

A slow and uneasy sensation crept over him, and vaguely he felt that he had been a fool. It must sound silly to another person, his little game of playing football with street crowds. They could never understand what it had meant to him. After seeing a big game, he would compare the running of the famous backs to his own running through the crowds.

He imagined himself playing against Cornell, to-morrow Colgate, then Pennsylvania, and then the Nebraska Cornhuskers. His game: and he had told, of all people, Muriel Courtworth, who had hardly spoken to him before.

Next afternoon his outfit was excited for their scrimmage with the scrubs. The first team was occupied in developing secret plays for the opening game Saturday. Putsey Brant ran his charges through all the plays twice, and then trotted them over to the football field for the scrimmage.

Clive seemed to sense a peculiar attitude among his players, which he was at a loss to place. As they reached the field they were joined by Pete Clayton, who came up to the team, grinning.

"Well, fellows, we'll hold the scrubs to-day and surprise them. But you, Ferrall, had better not try your unusual method of crowd dodging on these babies: you'll find a tackling football man different from suburbanites."

At that the covert grins of his teammates became open; even Brant smiled indulgently.

Clive was stunned. He could only glare at the grinning Clayton: his face seemed to leer at Clive. Unconsciously almost, Ferrall took a step toward him, his fists clenched. He saw in a flash the whole contemptible game: They had put Muriel up to it.

FORTUNATELY, Brant observed the situation, and called: "All right, men, line up. Here come the scrubs. There's going to be no kickoff. No downs. They'll keep the ball first. Then you keep it. Just remember all you've learned. Don't get excited. And be sure to pick your man—then hit, low and hard."

As Clive took his position at defensive right half back, he noticed a knot of students in the stands. Several of the varsity coaching staff were looking on.

Clive tensed as he heard the scrub quarter back calling signals. He was in the midst of taking a deep breath when he saw the lines clash, and a huddle of men, four solid, were racing around his end! His mouth went dry as he moved forward in the line of the rush.

He saw his own tackle boxed, dimly saw his end plunge into the interference, saw them split, the end go down, and the ball carrier was speeding on with one man in front of him. Clive rushed in diagonally.

The interference turned and dived for Clive. Clive leaped and missed the main blow, but the flailing arms slightly staggered him. He lunged toward the ball carrier, who was already even with him and going like the wind. Clive gathered himself and leaped. He landed heavily in the turf, empty handed, rolled over to watch the back speeding on, finally dragged down ten yards farther on.

Clive took his place again, badly upset. In a second the scrub line ripped through his own. A hole a yard wide appeared and the solid four again plunged through. Clive rushed forward. His big full back leaped into the interference and split it. But he went down, and the ball carrier with one protecting man climbed over him.

Then Clive was on top of the runner. He dove for his legs. He crashed into them, felt a twisting, slithering motion. A flying heel struck his jaw; he tautened and made a despairing grab at the legs as they spun from his grasp. Ten yards farther on Clive's quarter back and end dragged the man down.

Clive again took his place, deciding that the coaches knew what they were about when they picked the teams. This second team was invincible: what must the varsity be? He set his jaw and made up his mind that not another man should pass him.

There was a quick rush over the opposite tackle. Clive sped over. He saw the tackle boxed, the end shoved outward, and the ball carrier and his one man, knifed through. He saw his left half taken out even more cleanly than he had been taken out.

He was right behind his big full back when the full back dived for the speeding man. The man shifted, twirled, and jerked free, staggering. In that moment Clive sprang clear over the fallen back and catapulted into the runner from behind. Off balance as he was the player collapsed.

Clive ran back to his place, filled with a new confidence. On the next play around his end, he eluded the interference, and again spilled the runner.

From then on he fought like a demon. He was going to show these coaches he was worth a chance. Then the ball was given to his bunch. Four plays were run off, Clive falling into a ragged interference, that somehow just missed the machinelike precision of the scrubs. Then the ball was given him on a wide end run.

HIS new confidence made him anxious to show what he could do. He dashed after his interference. When they lagged as they turned inward, Clive swung clear of them, off into a wide circle. He did not see the opposing tackle burst through his end and tackle, nor the opposing end cut through his interference.

He saw the backs running parallel to meet him. As he turned in he noticed the end appear from nowhere, swooping down upon him. Frantic, Clive used a bold but desperate move to outrun the end by curving backward around him. He was fast, but so was the end. In a burst to make the turn, Clive swung backward one more pace, and then the earth crashed into him and he rolled over, it seemed to him twenty times. It was thirty seconds after the crash before he realized the tackle had hit him from behind.

When the two other teams trotted up, Clayton called out: "You see, Ferrall, these boys are different from your docile street opponents. Hereafter, you might take the advice of men who have played against football teams."

The other men laughed, some goodnaturedly, others jeeringly.

Clive shut his teeth grimly and took his position. The rest of the afternoon

he stuck behind his ragged interference. Before he was in a position to dodge or twist, a swarm of tacklers was over him. But he tried doggedly.

Every time he took the ball, he attempted to evade a tackler by one of the tricks he had practiced running to the bank. It didn't matter that some one from the other side lifted him clear off his feet in the midst of a sidestep, that he was knocked flat when he changed his pace; he kept trying.

He got his revenge when the scrubs had the ball. He tackled with a viciousness that before the scrimmage was over earned him the commendation of the coaches as a strong defensive man.

It was a weary Clive Ferrall who walked toward the showers when Coach Lenahan himself, after watching the scrub attack, broke up the scrimmage. Clive was weary in spirit as well as body. The incessant raillery of both teams sorely tried his nerves. He realized the futility of retort; he could only fight harder. But those jolts and knocks had taken a heavy toll of bruises and abrasions.

As, limping slightly, he passed the stands he saw Muriel Courtworth with two other girls and a man, but they made off at his approach, and he thought he saw her whisper to her friends. He called after them, but she barely turned and gave the coldest of salutations. With his anger boiling he limped furiously to the showers.

In his everyday suit and one of his everyday ties he returned to the Golden Age Cafeteria. Apparently waiting for him was Marjorie Ashton. His first impulse was to avoid her; but a wistful appeal in her face undid him, and he found himself placing his tray on the table at which she was dawdling over a poisonous-looking chocolate eclair.

"Don't you big strong men envy me?" she asked lightly. "Look at the delicious dessert I can eat."

"I might as well eat one myself for all the good my diet is doing me," he retorted bitterly, his pain bursting out.

"Clive, you must be patient. These other fellows have been playing for years. You can't expect in your first experience to do as well."

"I know, but I thought my way of playing would help me."

"What way, Clive?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand."

"Of course, I would understand," and he looked into the softest, kindest eyes he had ever seen in his life.

Before he realized it, he had poured out the whole miserable tale, concluding: "I'll show her and that dirty bunch!"

"Clive," she said in a low voice, "you will never show them that way. It was a despicable thing to do. But don't allow yourself to be seething because of—them. Go about it with calm determination."

AS best he could Clive went about it with calm determination during those long, gruelling October days when the varsity was polishing into perfect condition for the big games in November. Clive's outfit each week practiced the plays of the team to oppose the varsity, every Tuesday using those plays in scrimmage against the varsity; and on Friday they scrimmaged with the scrubs. At other times they were fodder for the other teams.

But on these two scrimmages Clive tried doggedly his spectacular method of broken field running. He was learning many differences in running against a team and against a street crowd.

Never given good protection by his irregular interference, and having always two or more tacklers on him at once, he never tired of trying his tricks. Many times during the last of October he found himself free of the first tackler, sometimes half breaking from the second; but always others sifted through to nail him.

Clayton was ever ready with his leer and sarcastic remark, and his team-

mates with their grin or derisive jest. All that he endured in his running he compensated for in his tackling. He learned that it was difficult for many fellows to make a hard, clean tackle. The flying feet and kicking legs checked many men from leaping boldly in. But Clive could leap—and he did. Many varsity backs had commented on his tackling. He went at a runner to stop him short or die in the attempt.

On Wednesday, of the first week in October, the third team played the freshmen in the stadium. The varsity and scrubs scrimmaged as usual; but the coaches watched the frosh third battle.

From the first of the game Clive noticed a difference in his running. The light freshmen were not breaking through the line and interference so easily, and he had a chance to get a good start, pick openings, and elude tacklers, without others piling on him.

His teammates noticed the same, and eager to make a showing, the quarter back ran him frequently, and the backs worked harder than ever in scrimmage to screen him. In the second quarter, after making consistent gains during the first, Clive broke away and scampered thirty yards before the defensive quarter intercepted him. Ferrall pulled away from him, but an end brought him down from behind.

The eyes of the coaches were upon Ferrall now. They agreed that he was a valuable tackler, and it was news to them that he could perform offensively. Lenahan instructed the freshman kick-off man to send the ball to Ferrall.

Thus, as the second half began, Clive found himself in the position he had fought for during the hard, bitter weeks. Standing on his own five yard line he received a low kick in his arms, and mechanically started forward.

At that moment a voice, loud and laughing, drifted across the field: "Watch out now, Ferrall, these are tacklers and not suburbanites!"

Fury seized him, and he plunged head on into the first would-be tackler. His knees coming up, piston fashion, caught the light end in his chest and caused him to lose his balance; plunging forward viciously Clive knocked the man off and cleared his stride. Three men were closing in upon him.

He realized he had lost time by shaking the tackler off, rather than evading him, and he cooled off; remembered Marjorie: "Calm determination." He swerved diagonally across the field, watching the approaching men warily.

Seeing Clive ride their end down had intimidated the tacklers for a second; and in that second he had dodged past the foremost; then he sidestepped the second, slowed down for the third, and burst forward, right into the waiting arms of the guard.

As that man lunged forward Clive swerved suddenly toward the other side of the field and sped on. Men rose up from everywhere, and he went through all the tricks so familiar to him from his runs to the bank.

Suddenly, he realized that only one man was in front of him, every one else behind. He settled into a straight course, and not two seconds elapsed before the fifteen intervening yards had been covered and he was upon the quarter back. The quarter back set himself, and with Ferrall upon him, leaped forward. Timed to a hair's breadth, as the man leaped, Clive swerved, and dashed the remaining fifteen yards to the goal.

The sudden shout that arose dazed him. He could not believe the stands were cheering him. And the freshman captain said: "Old man, that was a damned good run." His teammates treated him with respect and cordiality.

That night in the Golden Age Cafeteria, Marjorie's enthusiasm was balm, but he couldn't help wonder how it would sound from Muriel Courtworth, to whom he had not spoken since that horrible afternoon. Marjorie's enthusiasm was like her encouragement, familiar; but it was nice.

As they left the restaurant, Pete Clayton was passing with Muriel. Clive heard a laugh, and the words, indistinct but clearly meant for his ears, floated back: "Our third team hero."

He took a step forward, but Marjorie held his arm. "Clive," she whispered, "I must tell you something. I was standing behind the coaches today, and I heard Pickett, the backfield coach, say to Clayton, just after he had yelled at you: 'I think your prejudice hasn't given that fellow a square deal: he looks good to me.' And while Clayton tried to laugh it off, Lenahan broke in: 'I doubt if you've given us correct reports on him. I like his work!'"

"You heard that?" cried Clive, incredulous.

"Yes, and I think they'll probably give you a chance."

WHETHER that was the reason, or whether it was because Captain Bartley had his leg broken on Saturday, Clive did not know: but on Monday morning he was ordered to report to the training table in the future, and work with the scrubs.

In class he told Marjorie, with an assumption of casualness: "Well, I won't see you at dinner any more. I have been placed on the scrubs, and I'll eat at the training table."

Her face was illumined with enthusiasm, and she cried: "Oh, Clive, I knew you would do it!"

He felt his pride revealed in a self-conscious grin. All at once he was uncomfortable. It was with shame that he realized she knew of his mortification, doubts, and despair: and he wished this girl was not so familiar with his foolish dreams and failings. He grew silent. So did she.

Among the regular squad he found a more comradely spirit; there was a unified spirit, a common ambition which transcended the personal hopes and spites. He knew he was a marked man; his rise alone was significant, but his peculiar past, which had been a joke, and his triumph over Clayton's enmity, put him in the limelight.

It was subtly felt, never shown; outwardly he was one of them. Clayton was not the sarcastic, superior creature to the scrubs he had been with the nondescripts, and he let Clive strictly alone.

In playing against his old teammates Clive could execute his tricks much more effectively than with them. Frequently he broke clear for long runs.

Against the varsity it was almost as hard as ever, except that he was never smothered before he got started as in his third team days, and once he got free for a substantial gain. His tackling, watched seriously by the professional coaches, was accepted as a feature of the scrubs; and he was regarded as a dependable defensive man, functioning effectively against the varsity.

An undercurrent of excitement pervaded the team, and was reflected through the university, as the Thanksgiving game with Weldon approached. The traditional rivalry was intensified by neither team having lost a game in the State, making the victor virtually State champion. Weldon was undefeated thus far, but Beaufort, having dropped one game to a Middle-Western university, with Captain Bartley out, was on the short end of the betting.

In class Clive rarely talked with Marjorie. She was interested in his progress, but he was not again going to confide in her; he was still sorry for his last indiscretion. Muriel ignored him, although on more than one occasion he had noticed her surreptitious glances.

The momentous day arrived with Clive in the dubious position of the scrubs' most dependable defensive man. This was his farewell to football, his achievement. He thought of that as he filed into the enormous field, surrounded on three sides by a double-tiered horseshoe and across the fourth by temporary stands. It was the City Stadium, so that the seventy-five thousand spectators could be accommodated.

Clive glanced up at the human mountain, and could almost pick the spot from where he had watched this battle last year, when Weldon won 17 to 7, Beaufort's lone tally being made by Clayton, whose running tactics Clive had practiced during the winter on his street runnings.

It was that fellow who had jeered him, had made him the laughing-stock of three teams, and was probably the cause of his being huddled in his blanket in the midst of the scrubs at the tense moment when the two teams spread out for the kickoff.

THE whistle blew, the dull thud of toe against leather sounded, the spheroid sailed through the tense air, landed safely in the arms of Harcross the Beaufort fullback, and the rushing teams merged into one seething mass. Harcross was thrown on the twenty-five yard line.

Clive wondered where Muriel was. Probably back of him in the cheering section. And Marjorie? He thought of her little, wistful face with big grave eyes, probably lost somewhere in the second tier. A mighty cheer rose from the other side of the field. Beaufort had already kicked, and Garbon, Weldon's ace, had run the ball back almost to midfield.

Every thought vanished, and Clive glued his eyes on the teams, as Beaufort held, forcing Weldon to kick. Weldon punted over the goal line, giving Beaufort the ball on its own twenty-yard line. A bad start!

Again Beaufort failed to gain, and kicked. This time they stopped Garbon with a short rush. The ball see-sawed back and forth, with Weldon gaining ground steadily, penetrating deeper into Beaufort territory. Twice they had advanced inside Beaufort's twenty-yard line, when Beaufort braced and held.

The game wore into the second quarter, with Beaufort unable to make any consistent gains against Weldon. Crowell, the fast left half, whose running prowess availed little, had been replaced by Macon, a defensive back. Still Weldon pushed on, their slippery backs irresistible.

Toward the end of the quarter Garbon, who was ending his career in a blaze of glory, got away for a long, gliding end run, being brought down by a desperate tackle on the four-yard line. Three off-tackle plunges netted a bare two yards. Again the same play—and then a streak flashed around the struggling mass.

It was Garbon! Sedgwick was on him, bringing him down fighting; he fell with the ball inches over the line. Touchdown! The goal was kicked amid the mad yellings on the Weldon side of the field.

Under the showers at the half intermission, Clive learned that a team could be murderous as well as skillful. Not a man on Beaufort was holding up under the vicious, gruelling attack. Every man was complaining about the roughness of Weldon.

Lenahan substituted Wortham for Gresham at quarterback, to innovate the forward passing attack. It was useless to oppose Weldon on straight football.

Changes were made in the line to lighten and speed it up, in an effort to counter the fast, shifting backs and ends of Weldon.

The whistle came all too soon for the tired players, and Clive, huddled on his bench, felt the birth of eager hopes. He saw that a defensive man was needed against the slippery Weldon outfit, led by the almost invincible Garbon.

Without warning came what seemed the final blow. Time was called out for Beaufort. The doctor dashed out on the field. The man he brought back was Acting Captain Sedgwick, groaning with a fractured collar-bone. Amid the sympathetic applause of both sides, Lenahan roared to Powell, the scrub captain, "Go in, and hold 'em—and get that forward pass working."

Weldon started another offensive to

put the game on ice. Not around the fresh Powell's end did they come; always over the right side, wearing down the battered Macon. On they rushed. As they neared the goal, Weldon hurried a play to catch the tired Beaufort unprepared. Again they dashed.

There was a scuffle. Three Beaufort men dived into the muddle. Everything was a heaving pile of brown figures. When, at last, it settled down, the referee was pointing down field. A great cheer rose behind Clive. Weldon had been overanxious, and Beaufort had recovered a fumble.

AT once Lenahan sent Phelps, a fast back, but weak on defense, to replace Macon, with the exhortation to "get that ball down the field."

On a fake kick, Powell's flashing figure, speeding parallel to the line of scrimmage, took a wide curve in the open, and dashed to the thirty-yard line before he was downed. Again that cheer rose behind Clive; and although he was happy to see Beaufort coming back, his heart pained him, for he believed he could do as well as Phelps had done.

When Weldon began to stop the speedy Phelps, Wortham opened his passing attack, which, alternating with Phelps, carried them to midfield.

There the alert Garbon dashed in and intercepted a long heave, and again Weldon was advancing into Beaufort territory. They wore down Phelps as they had Macon, and in a dozen plays it was first down on Beaufort's thirteen-yard line.

If they made that nothing would hold them from another touchdown. Clive felt his heart stop beating. "Ferrall!" he heard. "You go in and tackle as you never did before. Stop them!"

As Clive sped across the field every thought he imagined he would have, vanished; he was an automaton; he was to stop Garbon. He did not recognize the voice as his own that announced his substitution, and he was still trembling when he saw an avalanche bearing down upon him.

He ducked through the interference and Garbon was speeding past. Clive threw himself wildly at the flying feet. A struggle, a desperate effort to hold the legs slipping through his grasp, and he was down, empty-handed. He rolled over quickly and realized that he had made Garbon hesitate long enough for Harcross to nail him. Two yards had been his gain.

Again that mighty interference was bearing down upon him. Again he was slipping through. A half blow staggered him; he recovered to see Garbon swerving outward from him. Without waiting for balance, Clive threw himself after the figure, his hands grasping one heel and one calf. Clive jerked forward as he collided against one foot raising from the ground.

Garbon took a nasty tumble. Rolling over quickly, he muttered: "We'll get you."

But Beaufort took heart, held like a stone wall for the next two downs, and with Powell, Harcross, and Clive working like a machine defensively, they took the ball not over seven yards from their own goal.

On the first play Powell dropped behind his goal line for a kick. Wortham knew that no team would expect even a losing opponent to try anything from their own goal line. He also knew that Weldon was unaware that the giant Harcross could throw a ball forty yards like a bullet, for his earlier passes had been relatively short.

Harcross was standing on the goal line, ostensibly to protect Powell's punt. Wortham and Clive were behind either tackle, and the ends were out to get down under the kick. Back flashed the ball, as Wortham and Clive dashed around the tackles, and sped down the field five yards behind the ends on the inside.

Clive saw his end look backward, change his direction, and prepare to catch the surprise pass. He saw the

alert Weldon back run to cover him. He saw the defensive fullback coming over, gauging the ball. Clive knew it was coming. He glanced around and saw a brown bullet speeding high toward his end, and in the same flash he saw the Weldon back run alongside to intercept.

Clive swerved suddenly into the path of the pigskin, leaped high with outstretched arms. The hard leather struck the heel of one hand, and bounced from his clutching fingers. He covered it with his other hand as he came to earth, running, juggling the ball, but the fullback was charging into him.

Clive grasped the ball against his body, stopped in his tracks, spun in the opposite direction, and, as the fullback pulled up short and dived, he sped away with the ball tucked under his arm. He shifted at once, straight down the field, where Garbon was waiting.

WITH the quarterback waiting in his path, and the halfback, free from Clive's end, pounding after him on one side, Clive watched Garbon give ground in the opposite side to pen him in. Instinctively he knew what to do, having been in this position numerous times on his street runs. On top of Garbon, he swerved sharply toward the side on which the other back was coming.

The Weldon ace dived, clutched, and fell. Clive shaking free, gathered his stride as the other back jumped. He threw himself violently forward, twisting and twirling. One foot struck the ground precariously, a hand balanced his tumbling body, a kicking, pulling motion freed his foot, and with a vicious jerk he was free.

Straightening quickly, he picked up his stride, and changed direction suddenly toward the corner of the field, as he observed the right halfback coming on him. He heard the thudding feet, nearer, nearer. Then the thudding stopped and Clive knew the player was leaping.

How many times this had been rehearsed! He swerved sharply back toward a direct line, giving the wild leap which had more than once elicited unkind comment from startled pedestrians. The man's clawing hands and threshing arms struck him as he touched the ground.

He was off balance. But surging forward, his speed freed him, and again he was picking up his stride; when he saw the goal posts rise up before him, and he realized but a few yards separated him from a touchdown.

At the same instant he heard thudding feet directly behind him. On he sped, straight for the goal. He thought he was passing the ten yard line, when the thudding ceased. Again he was leaping in a new direction, now toward the corner of the goal. Again he struggled free. As he straightened up and caught his stride, he saw the goal line right before him. He dashed across with two tacklers close behind him.

Touchdown!

In a daze he heard the clamor of the stands, as a dull roar; heard the mutterings of both teams, one of jubilation, one of condemnation as a vague rumble. In a daze he took his position for the kick for point.

Then a madman crashed into him, he was toppled to the ground; he rolled over to see the same madman leap in front of Powell, and block the kick. Point lost!

He felt that he must bury his head. In his triumph he had let through the man who snatched away the extra point, and they were still trailing, 7 to 6.

But he lifted his head. A victorious confidence rose in him, that what he did once he could do again.

And he did. Again and again he was given the ball. And again and again he reeled off gains. With the perfect interference of Powell, Wortham, and Harcross screening him until he passed the line of scrimmage with the famous offensive backs of Weldon tired

from their attacks, it was just like running through the crowds. Sidestep, shift; dodge, stop; change pace, change direction. Another first down!

And then once again he found himself out in front, with only Garbon between him and the goal post. Garbon, who had threatened him. Garbon, squarely in front of him, waiting with the evil look of a man who can kill. No one else was within ten yards.

With straight-arm he made a tremendous leap straight into Garbon. He felt the man collapse as he plowed and stumbled over him, gathered himself, and sped ahead of the pounding feet to a second touchdown!

And then the game was over.

13 to 7.

He couldn't move. Players, coaches, students, old grads, were all over him. Pounding his sore back. Shaking his sore hands. Shouting into his ear. And then before him stood Muriel. Gorgeous in her enormous coat. Smiling, laughing. She made for him, and he felt her cool lips on his own bruised mouth.

Victory!

What was it all about? Who were these people? They meant nothing to him. He hadn't fought for them. It was for himself he had played like a demon. Something was missing. He raised his head for air; and back, back, on the walkway of the stands stood a girl alone, watching him with love in her eyes.

He tore the restraining arms of Muriel from his neck. He laughed into the envious, angry face of Pete Clayton. And he plunged through the mob. This was what he was used to. Street crowds. In a moment he was at the iron base, reaching up, and pulling down a wistful little girl. Kissing her before ten thousand people. And when they saw her smile, ten thousand people cheered.

Victory! It meant something now.

THE END

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"Two Years Before the Mast" Brought Author $250

RICHARD HENRY DANA sold the manuscript of "Two Years Before the Mast" for two hundred and fifty dollars. The book, now studied by every high school student and given a place on Dr. Eliot's five-foot shelf, was published as No. 106 of a popular series, Harper's Family Library.

Dick Dana dropped out of Harvard at the end of his sophomore year because of eye trouble and shipped on a hide and tallow drogher to the California coast, where he spent more than a year. He was an ordinary seaman on a ship owned by Bryant & Sturgis, of Boston, of which Edward Faucon was captain.

The agent for Bryant & Sturgis in California was Alfred Robinson. Young Dana attended his wedding at Santa Barbara to the fourteen-year-old daughter of Don Jose Antonio de la Guerra y Noriega. Dana's description of the merrymaking was not flattering to the agent for the shipping firm, whom he described as wearing "a tight, black swallow-tailed coat just imported from Boston, a high, stiff cravat, looking as if he had been pinned and skewered with only his hands and feet left free."

When copies of "Two Years Before the Mast" reached California, Robinson promptly penned a book, "Life in California Before the Conquest," in which he paid retaliatory respects to Dana. *Leon Rowland.*

She drew back and flattened herself against the wall of the building

The Raider

Married under false pretenses to Jeff Hale, Ellen Ballinger finds herself entangled in the web of her father's unscrupulousness and the trickery of Dallman, the land shark

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "Mystery Land," "The Mesa," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ELLEN BALLINGER, young and very modern, defies her stern father, Matthew M. Ballinger, by riding away from his Hour Glass ranch to find and marry a former suitor, Jim Kellis. Arriving at his cabin near dusk, she finds he has a Mexican wife and child—and that her father knew it.

Enraged, she rides away, vowing to marry the next passable man she met and drag him back to the ranch. Instead, her horse is thrown, and she is bound and gagged, and carried to a woods cabin by a man snarling threats at Ballinger.

He leaves her. Late that night, a party of horsemen pursuing some man stop outside, and their leader, Jeff Hale, sees her in the cabin. He dismisses his men, and stands guard over her, waiting for the man's return. In the morning, Ellen deliberately lies to Jeff, saying she recognizes his voice as her kidnaper's, and adding that she will report overhearing him and his men telling of hanging a horse-thief, Hank Kroll.

Jeff, a daring, ruthless spirit who has no use for women, is convinced she believes what she says, and his code

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 17

of honor finally forces him to offer to marry her and save her reputation. Ellen triumphantly accepts, but after the justice, Jay Link, performs the ceremony in Randall, she is less confident—for she knows she loves Jeff, and he does not love her.

In the restaurant, Sheriff Hazen and a posse of farmers attempt to arrest Jeff for killing Kroll. Jeff's cowboy friends are ready to fight, but Ellen swears Jeff spent the entire night with her in the cabin, and the sheriff withdraws. But Jeff remains cold and formal toward Ellen.

At the Hale ranch, the Diamond A. Mrs. Hale lets slip that Ballinger and a lawyer, Wade Dallman, are trying to steal a section of their valley land, thanks to the strange disappearance of a deed.

One day, when Ellen is out on the ranch, Wade Dallman finds her, and charges her with marrying Jeff to help Ballinger get the Hale land.

Jeff comes upon them, and horsewhips Dallman off the place. And Ellen suddenly recognizes Dallman's voice as that of her kidnaper!

CHAPTER X.

JEALOUSY?

JEFF had been away again, for another two weeks. Again Ellen knew he had absented himself for the purpose of permitting her to desert him without creating a scene that would apprise his parents of how matters stood between them, for when he came upon her in the patio, on his way to his room, he started, looked keenly at her and confronted her.

"You're still here," he said, and she perceived that he seemed slightly puzzled.

She was arrayed in one of Mrs. Hale's house dresses and was confident that she looked her best.

"Don't you want me here?" she asked.

"You are my wife," he answered.

"That isn't an answer," she declared. "If you don't want me here I shall go!"

"I never evade my obligations," he said. "You can stay as long as you want to stay."

He smiled, though there was hostility in his eyes. It seemed to her that there was also suspicion and perhaps grim amusement. He hated her father and he suspected deceit from her because of the relationship. He was loyal to his parents and expected her to be loyal to hers. A simple philosophy.

But of course he didn't know that she would not be loyal to her father when she knew a crime was being committed. He did not know enough about her to decide whether or not she was in sympathy with her father's deeds. And perhaps he would never know her. He didn't seem to care.

She thought of his promise to whip her father as he had whipped Dallman. Telling her of that promise was his way of warning her that he wanted nothing to do with the Ballingers, herself included.

"I am going to stay here until you discover that I am not the kind of girl that you think I am!" she declared. "I want you to know that I am not trying to steal your land!"

"Nobody will steal it," he said. He looked at her with queer intentness as though studying her. He said quietly:

"Your father has been inquiring about you. He sent Jim Peters to Randall to search for you. Jim told various people that you were lost. They are reported to have had a posse out searching for you. Jim finally discovered what had happened and I presume that by this time your father knows you are married."

"Isn't it odd that father's men did not come here to verify the report of my marriage?" Ellen asked.

"It's not very odd," returned Jeff. "I told Ballinger that if I ever caught him on the Diamond A I would use a

bull whip on him. It is likely that he considers that the promise applies to his men."

"Would you really whip him?"

"Certainly."

"Why haven't you whipped me? I am his daughter, I am on your land, and you seem to dislike me as much as you do my father and Dallman!"

"I haven't decided that you are concerned in the plot to steal the land."

"Oh, you haven't! Well, the evidence points that way, doesn't it? I am a Ballinger. I managed to have myself abducted by you, and I arranged matters so that you would have to marry me."

"You couldn't have foreseen where I would be on that night," he said. "I've thought about that."

"Oh, you have!" she said. "Well, that's encouraging!"

He ignored the sarcasm. There was a somber shadow in his eyes.

"WHAT was Dallman saying to to you?" he asked.

"He was saying just what you are thinking—that my father arranged to have you marry me so that part of the Diamond A land might come into the Ballinger family."

He shook his head.

"You don't know what I think. But there's this much to be said: if you hadn't threatened to tell what you knew about the hanging of Hank Kroll, and about your thinking I had abducted you, the marriage wouldn't have taken place. If you had had sense enough to promise to keep those things to yourself you wouldn't have got yourself into this fix."

"Oh, you think it is a slight thing for a girl to be abducted?"

"I don't know a damned thing about it!" he declared. "How can a man tell what a woman thinks, or whether she ever thinks! A man meets a woman. When he meets her he is free as air, and the first thing he knows he's tangled up so bad that he don't know whether he's going or coming. A man wants to do the right thing, but after he gets tangled up with a woman he don't know right from wrong."

She could not restrain a smile. She had what she wanted, anyway, even if he was dissatisfied.

"I didn't ask you to marry me, you know. You did the proposing."

"I'm not kicking about that," he said. His brows were wrinkled and the shadows in his eyes were deeper. "Any man would have married you, and I reckon you'd have married any man right then."

Jealousy! Just a throb—but it was the first exhibited sign of interest!

She wisely turned her head so that he might not observe the flash of triumph that lighted her eyes. She must be careful now!

She looked straight at him, to observe that he was still frowning.

"Would you have married any woman?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "I had to, just to be a man. But it was different with you. If you didn't like the man you could refuse to marry him."

"How do you know?" she said, smiling mockingly. "I married you without liking you. And I don't know that I like you now. You aren't ideal, by any means. You have a terrible temper, you go around whipping people that offend you: you hang men without giving them a fair trial, you think laws are safeguards for fools and weaklings, and you think all women are liars and cheats. Could you expect a woman to like a man of that type?"

It was obvious that no other woman had ever talked to him as Ellen was talking. It was doubtful that his mother had ever even reproved him. In fact, Ellen had gained the impression that he had been spoiled by lack of governing influences. He was a wild product of a wild country and whoever tamed him would bear scars of the battle.

"Well," he said, "we are even. I married you without liking you. It seems we have all the prime disagreements of a first-class divorce case. Whenever you are ready to go back to the Hour Glass I'll take you."

He turned and began to walk away from her. She had been wondering how she could get to the Hour Glass to bring back her personal belongings. She calmly halted him with a word:

"Jeff!"

He paused, turned.

"To-morrow morning, if you please," she said.

"What?" he asked. She perceived that he was frowning.

"You may take me to the Hour Glass in the morning, if you please," she said. "I have been wanting to go."

"H'm," he said. "You decided in something of a hurry, didn't you?"

"Oh, no. I have been thinking of going for quite some time."

"Well, why didn't you go?"

"You weren't here to take me," she said quietly. "Don't you remember what you told me about gadding around the country alone?"

His frown deepened. His gaze was somber.

"All right," he said suddenly; "be ready at six."

He turned again, walked stiffly across the patio and vanished through the doorway of his room.

Ellen watched him out of sight. Then she turned, entered the living room and sank into a big chair facing a shelf upon which reposed a photograph. She was sitting there smiling at the picture when Mrs. Hale entered and observed her.

"Ellen," she said, shaking a reproving finger, "I shall have to tell Jeff how you sit here and smile at his picture! I don't believe he knows how much you love him!"

"Does any man?" asked Ellen.

"No," declared Mrs. Hale, "they don't. And you can't tell them. They're all alike. There's only one way to convince them, and that is to show them."

Ellen smiled at the picture, nodding wisely.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE HOUR GLASS RANCH.

WHEN they rode away from the ranch house the next morning Ellen divined that Jeff's morose mood had lasted through the night. He hadn't said a word to her at breakfast, and he did not speak as they rode into the great, green valley.

Ellen talked whenever the impulse seized her. Jeff's answers and forced comments were monosyllabic and gruff. He would not look directly at her, but she observed that when she appeared to be interested in objects ahead of her his surreptitious glances were long and frequent. He appeared to be studying her again, moodily, sullenly.

As Ellen was aware that she was not more mysterious then other women, she decided that he was finding her more interesting than he wished her to be, and that, having invited her to leave him, he was now reluctant to see her go. Of course, she was only visiting the Hour Glass to bring back some necessary clothing, but he thought she was not going to return.

Ellen intended to permit him to go on thinking that. She had got a delicious thrill out of his flash of jealousy the day before and she was now enjoying the knowledge that at last he was finding her desirable.

Of course, she did not anticipate sudden surrender from him. He would never give his love to any woman without first convincing himself utterly that she was just the woman he wanted. He would take a long time in his appraisement of her, but his acceptance would be complete or his rejection final.

Just now she knew he was resisting. He hadn't liked her at first. He was only just now discovering that he was

interested in her, and he was setting his reason and his prejudices against his emotions, with the result that he was uncertain and irritable.

The trail they were taking would not lead them into Randall, but a few miles southeastward of the town, and Jeff rode beside her as silently as if he were alone. She observed that his furtive glances at her were growing more frequent and she suspected that he had thoughts that would presently be expressed. She was not surprised when he spoke.

"You were mighty sudden in making up your mind to leave!" he said.

"Oh, no," she answered without looking at him. "I have been contemplating this trip for quite awhile." She had, for she had needed other clothing.

He evidently considered her manner frivolous, for he glowered at her.

"I can't make you out," he said.

"Can't you? Well, I'm sorry I'm such a puzzle to you. But you haven't paid very much attention to me, have you?"

"H'm. You're used to having people pay attention to you, I reckon. You're not satisfied to be a little in the background."

"Why," she said, laughing, "we are quarreling just like people who have been married for years! Can't you think of other disagreeable things to say?"

"Plenty of them," he returned, frowning at her. "One is that you have been brought up wrong. You've been traveling with a fast crowd. You think life is a farce comedy, that there is nothing to do but have a good time and try to put fool theories into practice."

"Won't you explain?" she said.

"Glad to. Have you done anything in a serious way?"

"I married you. Wasn't that serious?"

"It's the most serious thing you've done, I expect. But it isn't serious to you or you wouldn't be joking about it."

"Being married to you is no joke, Jeff," she said, smiling.

HE frowned. "That's like you," he charged. "It proves what I've said—that you can't be serious. You're insolent and impudent. You go to a university to be educated, and when you come out you are merely fresh and arrogant. You think you know a great deal when you know nothing. You miss the big things in life."

"Just what are the big things, Jeff?"

"The big things are love, duty and achievement."

"Ah! You place love first!" she said, glancing at him. "Do you love anybody?"

"No!"

"Not even your father and mother?"

"That's different."

"Oh, then there are different kinds of love! The kind of love you mean is the love that a woman should have for her husband—or a husband for his wife. Is that it?"

"Of course."

"And do you not love your wife?"

"Look here," he said, "you're impudent! When the time comes I expect I'll do my share of loving. But I don't intend to love anybody until I want to."

"I see," she said, "your kind of love is the kind that comes when you beckon to it."

He scowled.

"You don't see anything!" he charged. "Your conclusions are absurd!"

"Don't you believe in love at first sight?"

"No," he stated heavily. "You can't love anybody without first knowing that person's character, and you can't read character at a glance."

"Oh! Then beauty doesn't appeal to you? And character is everything!

I had never thought of that before. But it seems to me that beautiful women have more suitors than homely women. And have you ever noticed how women run after a handsome man? Do you think those people are studying character?"

Jeff did not answer. He was frowning.

They rode up the slope of the big valley and reached the crest, from where they saw the silent, rugged country basking in the sunlight below them.

Jeff halted his horse and wheeled him so that he faced the valley out of which they had just climbed.

"Look down there, please," Jeff directed.

Ellen looked. About ten miles out in the valley were the Diamond A ranch buildings. Ellen could see them very clearly. There was the river, gleaming in the sunlight: there was Randall with a yellow dust cloud veiling its crude structures.

Scattered here and there were shacks belonging to the dry farmers who had bought or preëmpted land and were eking a precarious existence from it. However, the valley was so big that all the buildings together were insignificant dots upon the vast bosom of nature.

"Can you imagine what that valley was when my father and mother took up the Diamond A land?" asked Jeff. "They were the first settlers. For a great many years mother lived there with father. Their nearest neighbor was more than a hundred miles away. There wasn't a doctor within three hundred miles.

"They had to freight their supplies from Laskar. That was three hundred miles. There was only father and mother, and mother would be alone for weeks at a time. There were hostile Indians and roving outlaws. Can you imagine how lonesome that was for a woman?"

Ellen shuddered.

"She is a wonderful woman!" was Ellen's tribute. "How she must have loved your father!"

"WELL," he said dryly, "I reckon it was something more than looks that kept them together. Father wasn't what people would call handsome. He had something more than looks. What he had is called character. He took his part in life seriously; he meant business. He had his mind set upon building himself a home in this wilderness, and he did it. Mother stayed with him.

"Mother wasn't exceptional, nor was father. What they did has been done, and is being done, all over the West. It was done in the East, the North and the South. You know that."

"The Ballingers did the same in the East," Ellen said, straightening.

"Well," said Jeff, "do you think a woman of to-day—a woman of your East—would go through that with a man?"

"Certainly, if she loved him."

He was gravely watching her.

"She couldn't do it if she loved him only because his hair was black, or wavy, or because he had an engaging eye," he suggested.

"No. I think he would have to be kind and considerate and brave. Certainly he would have to be all of that, and perhaps something more. He most assuredly would not possess a temper," she concluded.

"And his wife would not be impudent," said Jeff. "Nor could she put on airs that she had brought straight from a university. Such a marriage would not last."

Ellen looked at the far horizon.

"We are temperamentally unsuited to each other," she said lowly.

"Hm," answered Jeff, musingly, with a note of irritation in his voice.

"I could never cease being impudent, because in my husband's opinion frankness is impudence."

"Hm."

"And I would always be 'fresh' while my mind was young."

"Hm."

"And I want my husband to be handsome."

Jeff frowned.

"And he should have to govern his temper and be very much in love with me."

Jeff moved uneasily.

"Therefore, since we disagree so completely, we should cease this profitless discussion and be on our way," she added.

They went on again, into a virgin wilderness. And as they rode side by side Ellen cast glances at Jeff and perceived that his lips were set and his face stern. He was handsome, he was brave, and she had no doubt that to the woman he finally loved he would be kind and considerate. Also, she suspected that toward one he loved he would exhibit no temper.

They rode down the great slope into the Navaho Basin about eight o'clock. Before long they were watering their horses at the river in front of the cabin in which Ellen had been imprisoned by Wade Dallman, and where she had fooled Jeff into believing, she was convinced, that he had abducted her.

And not yet did she regret fooling him.

She had him, and she fully intended to keep him. And she knew why his mother had spent thirty years in the wilderness with his father, and why she had endured lonesomeness and danger for him. She knew more about it than Jeff knew, for Jeff did not love.

SHE was interested in the trail that led northward through the forest, for it had been over that trail that Dallman had taken her, after he had found her unconscious beside her horse. She recognized the hill where she had fallen, but all signs were obliterated, and they passed the place in silence.

Jeff avoided a trail that led to Jim Kellis's cabin, though Ellen saw the building from a distance, and remarked:

"There's a house."

Jeff laughed and told her that a man named Kellis lived there.

"Tin horn," he added.

When she asked him what the term meant he told her that Kellis was a petty gambler. Ellen had not told Jeff that she knew Kellis, and now she was glad that she hadn't.

Jeff followed the trail that Ellen had taken to reach the Kellis cabin, but Ellen's feelings on this trip were different. She knew that she had learned a great deal. Coming, she had been confident and carefree; returning, she was deeply in love and acutely conscious of the seriousness of life. She had discovered that life is serious enough when there is a goal to be attained.

Curiously, her feelings toward her father had changed. Somewhere in this wild land she had lost her resentment. She perceived that she had been just what her father had declared her to be, heedless and self-sufficient, headstrong and arrogant. In one month she had mellowed into maturity, with maturity's wisdom, its calmness and conservatism.

She had found her man and she was married, yet her former wild desire to confront her father and confound him with the evidence of her achievement had changed to a quiet timidity. She no longer blamed her father for her own little shortcomings; she understood that he had merely been wiser than she.

Emerging from the timber, they crossed a big pasture and rode down along its fence to the ranch house. Ballinger was seated in a chair on the wide gallery. He was smoking a pipe, and when he observed her he drew the pipe from his lips and sent a long spiral of smoke upward. And when Ellen and Jeff rode up to the edge of the gallery, Ballinger slowly got out of the chair,

walked to the edge of the gallery and greeted them, bowing formally.

Matthew M. Ballinger was sixty. He was tall; his hair was white, wavy and abundant; he had keen, humorous gray eyes, his chin was pugnacious, and his head was set on his broad shoulders in a manner that hinted of independence. In his expression at this minute was none of that sneering derision that Ellen had anticipated and dreaded.

He seemed to Ellen to be the perfect father—kindly, considerate, suave and sympathetic. Ellen wondered if he had not always been that; wondered if her own judgment had not been warped! However, she was amazed and delighted, and for the first time in years Ballinger witnessed the miracle of his own daughter blushing at sight of him.

"Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson Hale are welcome," he said. "Won't you get down and visit."

The man who had threatened to whip Ballinger was coldly polite in the presence of his enemy and his wife.

"I am forced to decline your invitation, sir," he said. "I came here to escort my wife. Good day, sir."

He would have dismounted to help Ellen off, but she was out of the saddle before he could move, and was standing, facing him when he had answered Ballinger.

And now he swept his broad-brimmed hat from his head and bowed to her from the saddle, his gaze holding hers and seeming to tell her that he understood that this was to be the end and that he had some regrets in the matter. But before she could read his expression clearly he had wheeled his horse and was riding away, tall and erect in the saddle.

Ellen watched him until he vanished among the trees—watched him, knowing that her father was regarding her quizzically, and finally turned, her color betraying her.

Ballinger smiled. And Ballinger's smile, when guileless, was wholesome and winning.

CHAPTER XII.

ELLEN AND MATTHEW M.

THE Hour Glass was a modern ranch. Its buildings were of the Spanish type, with low walls, wide eaves and gently sloping tiled roofs. There was the ranch house itself, distinguished by its huge red-brown sandstone courtyard and the roughly rounded pillars of its colonnade; the garden with its palm trees, prickly pear hedges and vine-laden trellises, white pergolas and flag walks. There was a tennis court, a swimming pool, great stables.

The atmosphere of the ranch suggested wealth and efficiency. It was operated without visible effort, smoothly, like a well oiled machine. Like a gentleman's country estate.

Ellen spent two days in the ranch house, two restless, lonely days. There was nobody there but her father, herself and the servants. Ballinger was not in the house often, and when he was he spent his time at his desk in the big library, reading or writing.

The big rooms, with their polished floors, their gloomy recesses and nooks, the great dining room with a table which would seat forty; the colonnaded courtyard with its vacant chairs, oppressed her.

The house was magnificent, luxurious, spacious, but it was not a home. It lacked something. It lacked the intimate relationship that should exist between members of a family. Every time Ellen stood in one of the big, silent rooms she visioned Jeff's parents in the living room of the Diamond A ranch house—Adam Hale in a big chair reading a newspaper, Mrs. Hale sitting in a chair beside a center table, contentedly sewing. No formality there!

Ellen had intended to stay at the Hour Glass for a week at least, which would give Jeff time to miss her. She had a feeling that before the week passed Jeff would ride over to see her. But the evening of the second day found Ellen more restless than ever, and she began to pack. She filled two trunks and several bags, and on the morning of the third day she appeared at breakfast arrayed in her riding garments.

"Riding?" asked Ballinger.

"I am going back to the Diamond A," Ellen answered.

"Jeff coming for you?"

"Jeff thought I would stay longer," said Ellen.

Ballinger smiled.

He had treated her with unusual consideration. He had not questioned her, nor had he acted as though he expected her to explain her action in marrying Jeff Hale. And, strangely, the Ballinger smile of derision—which she had expected—had not once appeared on his lips.

More than once in the two days she had spent with him had Ellen wondered if she had not been to blame for her parent's former attitude toward her. Perhaps, as he had told her, she had been too insistent upon having her own way. At any rate, the father who now took leave of her was new and interesting.

"You are going to stay at Hale's?" he asked.

"For the present."

"No honeymoon trip?"

"We don't care for that."

He smiled at her.

"You have changed, Ellen," he said. "You seem to have developed a new, a more attractive personality. You are growing to be very much like your mother. No wonder Jeff Hale loves you!"

"Aren't all husbands supposed to love their wives?" she asked.

"I could name some who don't. Jeff does, or he wouldn't have come here with you after threatening to horsewhip me." He chuckled. "Did you know that?"

"Yes. But I think he did not mean that, father."

"HE whipped Dallman," he reminded her.

"Don't you think Dallman deserved it?"

"Do you?"

"Yes. Dallman had been warned to stay away from the Diamond A."

"Then I think that if you are to see me again you had better come here. I don't care to tempt your wild man."

"He isn't a wild man, father. You would be astonished to see how gentle he can be!"

"Dallman's evidence is all to the contrary." There was a glint in Ballinger's eyes. "And there's his record in college. Ever hear it?"

"It wasn't scandal, father."

"No; just hellishness. He wouldn't conform to rules. They had to expel him or the school would have been turned into an Indian war village. Oh, yes—he's gentle!"

"Why do you want that piece of Diamond A land, father?"

"That's business, Ellen. It was open, and I filed on it. Anybody had that right."

"You won't do as Dallman is doing, father?"

"Hardly. Dallman is a land shark. I'll do nothing but wait. If the title is awarded to me, I'll take it, of course."

"How did you know the certificate was missing?"

"It was Jim Kellis who told me about that. He'd been over to the land office, looking over the records, and discovered that there was no certificate on file and no record of one ever having been filed."

"It would appear that Jeff Hale and Kellis are not on friendly terms. If they were, it seems Kellis would have gone directly to Jeff with his information."

"Kellis and Jeff have had trouble," said Ballinger. "Kellis is a worthless fellow."

"And yet you permitted me to go—"

"I wouldn't have sent this Ellen!" interrupted Ballinger. "The girl I sent on that wild-goose chase was insolent and stubborn. She needed a lesson. But she didn't go alone, for Jim Peters kept her in sight all the way.

"I made one mistake, though. I told Peters to follow you to Kellis's cabin, and back here. I thought you would head straight home as soon as you found out about Kellis. Peters waited a mile or so back on the Hour Glass trail for you. And when it grew dark and you didn't come, he went to the Kellis cabin to find you.

"He found that you'd gone toward Randall. He felt that he had no right to spy upon you further, so he came back here. The next day, toward evening, I sent a party of the boys out to search for you. They came back the following day and reported that you had married Jeff Hale, in Randall.

"I had an impression that you never had any idea of marrying Kellis, and that you and Hale had an agreement to meet and marry. That shows how little fathers know about their daughters." He shook a finger at her. "I supposed I was disciplining you, and you had your mind made up to marry Hale."

She nodded.

Yes, she had been determined to marry Jeff, but the determination had not been taken until she had met him in the cabin. What would her father say if he knew the truth? What would Jeff do if he discovered that she had lied to him? The Ellen of a month ago would have been amused; the Ellen of to-day was subdued and worried and wistful.

Ballinger followed her to the edge of the courtyard and helped her upon the horse that the stableman had brought up. She told him about the trunks and bags she had packed, and asked him to send them the next day to the Diamond A. At the edge of the forest she turned and waved at her father, who still watched her.

CHAPTER XIII.

RANDALL AFTER DARK.

ELLEN rode into Randall at three in the afternoon. She wanted to make several trifling purchases, and she had reached town early enough to do her shopping and still ride the ten miles to the Diamond A before dark.

Randall was in the throes of its mid-afternoon activity when she rode down the street, and apparently no one paid her special attention. She remembered that on the night of her marriage Jeff had sent the horses to a man named "Allen," and so now she rode along looking for that name on one of the numerous signs.

She saw it after awhile, at a little distance down the street from the jeweler's shop where Jeff had selected her ring, but before observing the sign she had seen something else which set her heart to throbbing abnormally.

Jeff's horse was hitched to a rail in front of the Elite Restaurant! The animal was his favorite, and she would have recognized it anywhere. A big, rangy, glossy black with a patch of white on its forehead and another just above the fetlock on the left foreleg.

Ellen grimly fought the sudden surge of jealousy that seized her, and calmly rode to the door of the livery stable, dismounted, and gave her horse into the care of the man who came forward.

The man gave her a curious glance, but she was convinced that he did not know her.

"Feed and water him, please," she directed.

"What's the name, ma'am?" asked the liveryman. But though Ellen heard,

she did not answer. She had already selected a store across the street, from where she could see the front door of the Elite, and she entered.

She made some purchases. The man who waited on her was talkative, but he received answers that silenced him. Ellen was not familiar with the emotions that seethed in her. She did not know whether she was hurt or angry. The torturing suspicions of jealousy had never before attacked her.

She could not stay in the store longer, for the storekeeper was watching her curiously; so she stepped out into the street again, pausing for an instant on the sidewalk, undecided.

Just ahead of her she observed a sign which was suspended above the sidewalk, bearing the words: "The Randall House." Instantly deciding, she walked rapidly down the street, entered the doorway below the sign, and approached the clerk.

Only one man was in the lobby, and he was huddled in a chair reading. He did not look up from his paper.

The hotel was small, but seemed respectable. Ellen asked for a front room, and the clerk himself ushered her upstairs after she had signed the register as Ellen Hale.

She thought the clerk looked at her curiously several times, and, thinking that he was speculating upon her presence at the hotel unaccompanied by her husband, she told him that possibly Jeff would join her later. That would keep the clerk from talking and thereby spreading the news that she was in town.

She didn't want Jeff to know she was in Randall, but she would not stoop to signing a fictitious name to the register.

The clerk paused in the act of closing the door.

"Jeff made it hot for Wade Dallman, didn't he?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Whipping him that way. Dallman wasn't for letting it get out, but it seems a man named Seifert was riding in the valley that day and saw Jeff whipping Dallman. Dallman was cut up considerable. He's boiling mad. I'd tell Jeff to keep his eyes open. Dallman's bad when he's stirred up!"

"THANK you," said Ellen. "But I think Jeff is not afraid of Dallman."

"Afraid!" laughed the clerk. "Not him! But you know what I mean, ma'am. It ain't that Dallman will go gunning for Jeff right out. He knows better than that! He won't do that unless he's stung bad, though folks tell me that he's right clever with a gun when he's cornered. But Dallman's slick and he's got friends who are just as slick as he is. Bill Hazen, for instance."

"Are Hazen and Dallman friends?" asked Ellen, astonished.

"Well, they ain't parading that they are," answered the clerk. "But there's people that have seen them with their heads together pretty often, and I reckon if they was enemies they wouldn't have nothing confidential to talk about."

"Does Jeff know they are friends?"

"Sure! That's what stirs Jeff and his ranch owner friends up so much. Look, ma'am. You don't know what's happening in this section of the country, do you? No, you wouldn't. Well, Dallman's a land shark and everybody knows it. He's stolen land enough to start a State. And he'll steal more.

"He ain't got no scruples at all, for he sells land that he ain't got any title to. Then he goes over to the land office and juggles the records. Well, Bill Hazen knows what Dallman is, and yet he throws in with him against the ranch owners.

"There was that hanging. Hank Kroll and his gang of horse thieves have been stealing stock from all the ranch owners. There's folks that think Hazen and Dallman are making things easy for Hank Kroll's men. However,

nobody's saying that very loud and I wouldn't want you to repeat it.

"Jeff's friends had caught some of the thieves, but Hazen always let them go. Some of the ranchers have been shot up by the thieves. Well, about a month ago Hazen found Hank Kroll swinging from a tree in the Navaho Basin.

"But shucks, you know that, for it was you proved an alibi for Jeff. Well, Hazen ain't got over that. Swears he knows Jeff done it and that he'll get him some day!"

Ellen did not answer and the clerk closed the door and departed. Ellen locked the door, glanced at the room, which was clean and plainly-furnished; then walked to one of the curtained windows and gazed down into the street.

The Elite Restaurant was almost directly across from the hotel. Jeff's horse was still at the hitching rail, but it seemed that Jeff himself was not in the restaurant, for the tables were all vacant.

Sadie was there, however. She was standing just inside the front door, arrayed in a gingham dress, a stiffly starched white apron and a white cap which sat jauntily on her head. And Sadie seemed to be looking straight at the hotel door!

For an instant Ellen was convinced that Sadie had seen her enter the hotel and was watching for her to come out, but presently she observed that Sadie's gaze was roving as if it were following the progress of some one who was walking along the street. And then Ellen saw Jeff come into sight on the sidewalk directly in front of the hotel.

Jeff crossed the street, passed around the hitching rail in front of the Elite and entered the restaurant doorway. There, for several minutes, he stood and talked with Sadie. Then he turned from the girl, stepped down to the sidewalk and stood motionless for a time.

Presently he was joined by two other men, who were evidently friends, for there was no mistaking their pleasure over the meeting. They were ranchers. Ellen watched them as they walked down the street together. She lost sight of them when they mingled with a crowd far down on the other side of the street.

WHILE the meeting between Jeff and Sadie suggested intimacy, it did not definitely prove anything serious in their relationship. But that fear had been in Ellen's mind when she had entered the hotel, and even now she was conscious of a cold and furious resentment.

Yet it was with a feeling of guilt, of shame almost, that she turned from the window. The impulse which had led her to enter the hotel for the purpose of spying upon Jeff and Sadie had seemed justifiable at the moment, but now she knew that the action was undignified, contemptible. She had always managed to deserve her own good opinion of herself, but now she was in danger of losing it.

She suddenly decided that she would leave the hotel and ride at once to the Diamond A. If Jeff wanted the girl in the restaurant he could have her.

She started toward the door, hesitated and glanced out of the window. Twilight had come. There were still her purchases to be attended to. By the time she did her shopping it would be dark. She didn't know the trail to the Diamond A well enough to ride it at night and so she decided that she would remain at the hotel overnight and go to the Diamond A the following morning.

She locked the door of her room, walked down the stairs, crossed the lobby and stood for an instant in the hotel doorway. There were not so many people on the street now. Twilight was merging with darkness. Many windows were glowing with light.

A hush had enveloped the town. The houses seemed to huddle together as

though seeking protection from the monstrous blackness that was slowly settling over them and pressing in upon them from all directions. Randall was brave enough in the daylight, but it was strangely subdued at night.

She glanced across the street at the Elite, to discover that Jeff's horse was no longer at the hitching rail. He had probably ridden away while she had been preparing to leave the hotel. Sadie was inside the restaurant carrying a tray between the now well-filled tables.

Ellen walked down the street a little distance and entered a store. She was inside for perhaps half an hour and when she again stepped out on the sidewalk the darkness was intense.

While she had been in the store the merchants had closed their establishments for the night. While she stood on the sidewalk the man who had just waited on her extinguished the lights and emerged. He locked the door, stepped down to the sidewalk, and almost collided with Ellen.

"Shucks," he said apologetically, "I didn't see you." He started away, paused, and added: "You're a stranger here, ain't you, ma'am? Do you want me to see you where you're goin'?"

"Thank you," Ellen answered, "I'll manage. It isn't far."

The man grunted and vanished into the darkness. Ellen could hear his step for a time. She turned and began to walk back the way she had come.

She now realized that she had walked quite a distance to reach the store. There were no lights anywhere near her. Far away, seemingly, she could see the illuminated windows of the Elite and at other points were the dimly glowing windows of saloons.

SHE had never encountered darkness so impenetrable. She could not see a foot ahead of her. Twice in walking less than a hundred feet she stepped off the walk and floundered in the dust of the street.

A little farther along she stepped off the other side of the walk, bumped into what she thought was a corner of a building, and fell to her knees. When she got up she could see no lights anywhere, and in something of a panic, stretching her hands out in front of her to protect herself in case she should collide with another building, she began to search for the sidewalk.

In falling she had lost her sense of direction, but she kept moving, hoping to see a light. Presently, when the feeling of panic left her, she stood still and attempted to penetrate the wall of blackness that surrounded her.

She turned clear around, slowly. There was no light anywhere. Even the stars were obscured by a veil of dust that perpetually swam over the town. She was on a stretch of level ground, she decided, for her feet had encountered no obstructions or depressions of any kind.

She knew, of course, that she had strayed from the street or the lights of the saloons would be visible to her. She also knew that she was south of the street because she had been walking on that side when she had collided with the building. But the knowledge was of no use to her because she had lost her sense of direction.

She was calm now, and grimly amused over her predicament. Of course she wasn't lost, and of course she was not far from the street, for she hadn't been away from the street more than ten minutes and she couldn't have walked very far in that time. Moreover, she had probably been traveling in a circle.

All she had to do was to keep on moving and presently she would see a light.

She had undoubtedly got into a vacant space which was surrounded by buildings, and if she could find the opening through which she had entered she would have no trouble in reaching the hotel.

She moved on again, carefully, feel-

ing with the toes of her riding boots for pitfalls and obstructions, stretching her hands out in front of her so that she would not strike her head if she ran into anything.

It seemed to her that she was confined in a windless void. There was no sound, no motion. Silence, dead, heavy and oppressive, enveloped her. If she could have heard a voice on the street, the rumbling of the wheels of a passing vehicle, the hoof beats of a horse, music, anything, she would have directed her steps in that direction. But the town was dead. The coming of darkness ended all activity.

She was still moving carefully when she heard sound. It was a dull, sodden thud. That was all. No other sound followed, though for several minutes she stood motionless, listening. She was about to go forward again when the sound was repeated and this time her heart thumped heavily, for she recognized the thudding noise as the impatient stomping of a horse.

She was evidently near a stable, and if she could find it she could follow along it to the door, and by finding the door she could determine the direction of the house, for invariably stables were built behind houses.

She again heard the thudding sound and this time located it as being almost directly ahead of her, so she moved toward it, still slowly and carefully and at last felt her outstretched hands come in contact with its wall. And now, triumphantly, she began to feel along the wall.

She had reached a corner and was preparing to go around it when a match flared a little distance from her and she saw two men sitting on the ground beside the wall. If she had kept on going she would have stumbled over them!

One man was lighting a pipe. The flickering light that he held over the bowl disclosed his features and the face of the man sitting behind him. The man who held the pipe was Bill Hazen and the man sitting beside him was Wade Dallman!

ELLEN was startled but not frightened. It was quite evident that she had surprised the two men in the midst of one of their secret conferences. They would not dare harm her even if they discovered her.

But she did not intend to let them know of her presence and so she drew back and flattened herself against the wall of the building until the flame of the match went out. Then she stood there silently, listening.

For a time there came no sound from the men. The rank scent of Bill Hazen's tobacco floated around the corner of the stable and assailed Ellen's nostrils. The smoke was strong, and once or twice Ellen was in danger of sneezing. But she fought the impulse off and presently heard Hazen's voice.

"Well, they'll run into a snag to-night!" he said.

"Why to-night?" asked Dallman.

"If you'd been in town to-day you'd know," said Hazen. "Jeff Hale got to town early this mornin'. Him an' Slim Patton, an' Cherokee, an' Jim Withington have been together. An' just about dusk Hale rode out of town. Sure as them fellows meet in town there's a raid that night."

"That means they'll raid Bohnert's place," said Dallman. "Bohnert's got a warning from somebody three or four days ago."

"I know that," said Hazen. "Bohnert found it tacked to a post in front of his house. I've tried to identify the writing, but I can't do it. It ain't Jeff Hale's nor Patton's nor Cherokee's nor Withington's. There's a gang of them fellows and it might have been any of them that wrote the notice Bohnert found. Bohnert ain't on Hale's land, is he?"

"No; he's on that strip of Miller's, that I sold him three months ago. There was a mistake in the field notes and I found it."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Hazen. "If there's anything wrong with a survey you'll find it, and if there's ain't anything wrong you'll make somethin' wrong. You're a slick sucker, Wade!" he finished, admiringly.

"I aim to get what's coming to me," said Dallman. He shifted his position; Ellen could hear his shoulders brushing against the boards of the wall. "These mossbacks don't know anything; they ain't got any right to hold any land at all. They've never done anything but run cattle on it.

"Anyway, that piece that Bohnert's on belongs to me, now, and those fellows have no right to run him off. You say they'll run into a snag if they try it to-night. What you done?"

"Plenty!" declared Hazen. "I sent four deputies over to hide in Bohnert's stable. They've got rifles. I told them to blast into any gang that tries to raid Bohnert. They're to shoot first and ask questions afterward. I told them to make sure of getting Hale. He's the ringleader, and if they get him it's likely the rest will scatter and quit."

"YOU aiming to take a hand in it?" Dallman asked.

"I ain't going near Bohnert's, if that's what you mean. I don't want to go riding around and mebbe flush them. But I figure I'll get close enough to hear what's happening."

"Well, if they get Jeff Hale I'll be satisfied," said Dallman.

"Sure, you would be!" laughed Hazen. "What did you let him whip you that way for? Why didn't you shoot him?"

Dallman cursed.

"I didn't see him coming," he said. "I was talking to that slut he married and didn't see him sneaking up behind me."

"It's too bad Hale flushed you out of that cabin in the Navaho that night or you'd have spoiled Ballinger's scheme to get hold of that Hale land."

"I might have known she wouldn't be hanging around there just by accident," said Dallman disgustedly. "Her and Ballinger must have knowed Hale would be at the cabin that night. She was heading straight there to meet him.

"After Hale's gang quit chasing me I cached my horse and sneaked back there. Jeff Hale and the Ballinger hussy was standing by the window of the room where I'd left her. They was chinning, and quarreling. I wasn't close enough to hear what was being said between them.

"But anyways, she stayed there all night with him. I'd have snuck their horses off if I'd have had a chance. I figure she met him when he was East at school, and when Ballinger wanted the land he brought her out here to marry him.

"Ballinger would do that; he would do anything to have his way about a thing.

"Well, they're hooked up all right, and now let's see what good it will do them!"

Dallman, of course, was merely guessing. His voice lacked the ring of conviction. He had not guessed all the truth, and his reasoning was absurd.

Yet he was vindictive and unscrupulous and perhaps dangerous.

Ellen did not listen further. Carefully she moved along the stable wall, again seeking egress from the blackness that inclosed her. Her lips were set tightly together, and a fierce hatred gripped her. Never had she hated anybody as she hated Dallman! She was amazed at the intensity of the passion.

She had been nauseated by the spectacle of Jeff beating Dallman with the bull whip, and for a time she had not been able to think of the scene without a shudder of disgust. But if there had been a bull whip in her hands now—

She saw a light gleaming through the

blackness somewhere in front of her, and she ran toward it.

CHAPTER XIV.

"THE BEST LAID SCHEMES—"

WHEN Ellen reached the street she discovered that she was within a few hundred feet of the hotel. She had been running, and for a few minutes she stood on the sidewalk attempting to regain her breath and her composure.

She brushed the dust from her clothing, made certain that her hat was on straight, tucked in some wisps of hair that had been neglected, and by the time she entered the doorway of the hotel she felt that, outwardly, she had subdued her excitement.

At least the clerk appeared to observe nothing unusual in her manner as she stopped at the desk and smiled at him.

"Man called while you were out," said the clerk. He was leaning over the desk, and his gaze seemed to be slightly derisive. "Jim Kellis," he added; "said he'd be in later."

The news was a shock to her; it enraged her. Her contempt for Jim Kellis was as great as her amazement that she had ever wasted time in talking to the man. She had almost forgotten that she had ever known him. Certainly she never wanted to see him again!

She ignored the clerk's reference to her caller, and asked him if there was a man named Bohnert in the valley. She tried not to appear eager, for she did not wish to arouse the clerk's curiosity.

"Bohnert?" he said. "Why, yes. Sure. Ain't it strange, now? It just happened that Bohnert was in here the other day. Usually I don't ask a man what his name is, but I saw that this fellow was a newcomer, sort of, and so I asked him. Sure. Bohnert—one of those dry farmers.

"A Dutchman or a German. A Dutchman, most likely. I couldn't decide which, because I never could catch onto their lingo. And I never could see any difference between a Dutchman and a German, myself. He's just as likely to be one as the other. Names don't mean a lot. There was a fellow in here the other day—"

"Oh," said Ellen in a burst of impatience, "I don't care anything about his nationality. I merely wish to know where he lives!"

"Sure. I know where he lives. That's funny, too, isn't it. We got to talking. Usually I don't engage people in conversation, but this day maybe I felt a little lonesome. Some days there ain't much doing and time sort of drags along. You take to-night, for instance. There ain't been a soul—"

"But where does Bohnert live?" asked Ellen, ruthlessly interrupting.

"I'm coming to that," returned the clerk, smiling fatuously. "As I was saying, I don't talk much. But this day I felt like talking, and so I asked this man, this Bohnert, a lot of questions.

"He's a new man out here, I believe I told you. A dry farmer. Well, we got to talking about dry farming, and that's how I came to ask him where his place was. Seems he—"

"Where is his place, please?" interrupted Ellen.

"Why, it's just down the valley a ways. About seven miles, I think he said. Not right straight down the valley, but a mile or so east of it. You go straight down the valley for about five miles, and then you strike a creek. Red Creek, I think he said it was.

"Well, there's a trail leading along it. He said if I ever wanted to visit him I should turn east just after I passed a saguaro forest, and once on that trail I couldn't miss it."

"Thank you," said Ellen.

She crossed the street to the livery stable, asked for her horse and was presently riding down the street to the

edge of town. She rode slowly, for she observed the hotel clerk and the liveryman watching her, until she was certain the darkness concealed her, and then she wheeled her horse and sent him southward, straight down the valley.

SHE could not see the trail, but trusted to the instinct of the animal under her and to the conviction that she was following the trail Jeff had taken when he had escorted her to his father's house on the night of their marriage.

The darkness did not seem to be as dense as when she had lost herself by stepping off the sidewalk. She could see some stars and there was a luminous haze, faintly blue. No doubt the horse could see better than she, for he loped steadily forward without guidance.

Ellen had no idea of how to find Bohnert's place, nor did she know what she should do once she reached there. She could not go boldly to the door of Bohnert's house and tell him what she had overheard, nor could she let herself be seen by the deputies secreted in the stable.

Her only hope of averting the tragedy that was sure to follow the arrival of Jeff and his men was to intercept them while they were on their way to Bohnert's. And there would be no possibility of intercepting them in the darkness unless she chanced to be near enough to them to call to them.

She did not know just what happened when such men as Jeff and his friends made a "raid." She assumed a raid meant violence of some sort, and from the conversation between Dallman and Hazen she understood that Bohnert was to be driven off the place he had bought from Dallman.

She was certain, now, that Jeff was morally right, although she also suspected that Dallman was adroit enough to have the law on his side in all his transactions. But whether Jeff was right or wrong, she didn't want him killed!

She drew a deep breath of gratitude when she became aware that the stars were paling and that the haze above her was growing brighter. And when a yellow, effulgent glow appeared on the eastern horizon and spread with incredible swiftness up the great arch of blue she felt a new reverence for nature.

The magic night light disclosed the trail, the river beside which she had been riding, trees hitherto unseen, and presently, as the disk of silver swam clear of a mountain peak, the entire valley was disclosed to her.

She brought the horse to a halt and scrutinized the glowing levels, the great slopes, the high ridges. She saw no moving object, and so she settled herself more firmly in the saddle and gave the horse the rein. The animal ran lightly, easily, his hoofs drumming with a thunderous rhythm that filled her with a strange exaltation.

She met and passed the saguaro forest, with its weird and grotesque desert sentinels, and saw beyond it a faint and narrow beaten path that swerved eastward in long undulations beside a small stream of water. The stream was Red Creek, if the hotel clerk's information was correct, and so she took the trail and straightened the horse out for a final run.

She was now on the giant upland east of the center of the valley and she felt the horse slowing its stride. She did not urge the animal, for though she was impatient to reach Jeff she judged that he and his men would not appear at Bohnert's place until later, perhaps around midnight.

About a mile up the creek the land in the vicinity of the stream began to narrow and after awhile Ellen found she was riding through a gorge. On both sides of the gorge rose mountainous walls and buttes, and for a time the trail ran through a wild mass of virgin timber and brush.

She held her breath while riding through this section, for down here the moonlight did not penetrate and the darkness was solemn and oppressive. But the gorge widened presently and when she reached its end she saw stretching before her a moonlit flat.

About half a mile ahead of her was a house with a glimmer of light flickering through a window. She brought the horse to a halt and sat rigid in the saddle, wondering if the house was Bohnert's.

SHE could not be certain of that. If she had taken the right trail there could be little doubt that the house was Bohnert's. But if she had been wrongly directed and the house was not Bohnert's she would miss Jeff and his friends and—

A mental picture of Jeff being shot down by the deputies' rifles flashed vividly for an instant, bringing incoherence of thought that frightened her. She hoped she was not going to become panic-stricken in this crisis, and she sat there fighting for clarity of vision and calmness. Calmness would not come.

She found she was trembling in a frenzy of apprehension, and when after awhile the torture of inaction assailed her she determinedly sent the horse scurrying down the trail toward the house. She meant to go straight to the stable to see if Hazen's deputies were there.

While she was riding she could manufacture some sort of an excuse to explain her presence at Bohnert's. No matter what explanation she made they would have to accept it. They would not dare to harm her.

The flat was not very wide. She could see the entire length and breadth of it. No horsemen were visible. The trail she was riding was straight through the center and the moonlight was now so bright that she could be seen by any one who might be concealed in the wooded slopes surrounding her.

Jeff and his men might be hidden somewhere close at hand, waiting a convenient time to raid Bohnert's place, but if Jeff and his men were around they either did not see her or were disregarding her.

When she drew nearer she observed that Bohnert's house faced the creek. It was a small house, containing, she estimated, not more than three rooms. It was built of logs, but had a shingled roof and a small porch.

The light she had seen was in the kitchen, and it was still burning as she passed it at a little distance and rode toward the stable, which was a small building situated about three or four hundred feet from the house.

There were several giant cottonwood trees between the stable and the house, a great many pines and fir-balsam and junipers and small pecans surrounding the stable, and so the moonlight did not strike her as she rode close to the building and dismounted.

She heard no sound. She led her horse close to a small juniper, tied it and turned to be smothered in the strong grasp of a man who had suddenly materialized from the darkness in the timber.

His sinewy arms were holding her so tightly that she could not move, and her face was buried in his shoulder so deeply that her startled gasp was almost inaudible.

The man laughed low and mockingly, still holding her so tightly that she could only wriggle impotently. But she did kick at his legs in an effort to force him to release her.

"You're caught," he laughed. "Go easy. No use of kicking!"

Jeff!

Her heart fluttered wildly for an instant, and for an instant she was rigid, straining to free herself so that she might attempt to see his face. Then she relaxed, sobbed once, convulsively, and was still.

Jeff must have felt her weight, for he loosened his grasp, pushed her back

a little and peered intently at her, seeking her face in the shadows. She felt his arms stiffen, heard his voice, a hoarse whisper:

"Hell! It's Ellen!"

He pushed her farther away and held her at arm's length, rigidly, almost savagely, she thought. He was amazed, incredulous, for his voice betrayed him.

"You!" he said. You!" His voice changed instantly to mockery. "I "I thought you'd be on your way East by this time!"

There was a note of elation in the mockery. She detected it and exulted. He could not see the light in her eyes.

"NO," she said, forcing calmness. "Oh, no. On the contrary you observe that I am gadding about the country alone, as usual."

He released her and stood motionless, peering at her, trying to see her face.

"Seems you've got that habit," he said gruffly. "But I can't understand why you have gadded in this direction."

"Yes," she said, "I believe there are times when you don't understand very well. I don't believe you ever will understand."

"What are you driving at?"

She laughed, knowing that he should understand that her gadding to the Bohnert place could not be accidental. She wondered if he really did believe that she was in the habit of wandering aimlessly about the country!

"I presume it isn't much—to you," she said. "But you see, I got into Randall this afternoon. Just after dark I went out to do some shopping. I got lost and wandered around among the buildings in the town's back yard for quite awhile. While I was lost I overheard Hazen and Dallman talking about you.

"They were saying they had a trap laid for you. Four deputies in the Bohnert stable, who were to shoot you on sight. I just thought I would ride over here and try to warn you. That is all."

"You rode all that distance alone?" he said, his voice tense.

"Why, yes. There was no one to send. I have no friends in Randall."

"Hm," said Jeff. "Shucks." He laughed lowly and spoke to her again. "Would you like to see how Hazen's kind of law has fared to-night?"

She felt one of his hands gripping her arm and she was led around a corner, through a door and into the stable.

Half a dozen men, their faces masked with handkerchiefs, were inside. Some were standing, others were lounging on a pile of straw in a corner. But all were facing Ellen; she could see their eyes glittering in the light from a lantern that stood on the dirt floor near them.

Ellen gazed wonderingly at Jeff and he placed an admonishing finger to his lips. Then he quickly covered his own face with a handkerchief, drew still another from a pocket of his shirt and covered Ellen's face so that merely her eyes and a little of her forehead were visible under her hat.

And now, peering deeper into the shadows beyond the light, Ellen saw four other men. They were in a stall. They were facing the manger and their backs were toward her, but she divined they were Hazen's deputies. Four rifles were on the floor behind them; in a corner on some straw were several heavy Colt revolvers and two long-bladed knives.

Ellen observed that the men were bound together. Their hands were tied behind them, and their necks were encircled by four loops made in a single rope, so that one man could not walk without taking the others with him.

THE atmosphere of the stable seemed to be heavy with a grim humor. Nobody laughed; there was not the slightest sound, and yet Ellen's impression was that the eyes

which were regarding her were gleaming with an emotion akin to mirth, or at least with appreciation of the grim comedy that was being enacted.

Comedy it must be, of course, or Jeff would not have brought her into the stable to exhibit his captives. But she well knew that Hazen had planned a tragedy. Jeff and his friends had averted it and were now enjoying their victory. How had they captured the deputies? A smiling devil lurked in Jeff's eyes as he watched her. What other mischief was he meditating?

Jeff made a sign to one of his friends and the six instantly moved toward the men in the stall. Jeff gently ushered Ellen through the door which she had entered and, standing outside in the shadows of the trees removed the handkerchief from her face. He merely pulled his own down so that it encircled his neck.

"Hazen's deputies are not so bloodthirsty now," he said.

"You knew they were here! You must have known!" she said.

"Sure."

"Then I rode over here for nothing."

"Well," he said, "you couldn't help it that we knew. Your intentions were the best. We thank you, of course. But you shouldn't have come. This is a man's country, you know, and if a man isn't able to take care of himself he'd better not stay here."

There was a sound that seemed to come from the other side of the stable. A door banged open.

There came a shuffling noise, cursing. Then from the shadows around the stable the four captives appeared, walking away from the building in single file, the connecting rope still looped around their necks. Jeff's friends were walking behind them and the cavalcade moved slowly eastward, out into the moonlight beyond the trees.

"What are they going to do with those men?" asked Ellen, dreading.

"They won't do as much to them as they'd have done to us if they'd had their way," answered Jeff. "They're hoofing it back to Randall. The trail they're taking will cover ten miles. One of the boys will march behind them until they come in sight of town, so they won't try to break loose. Hazen will appreciate that."

"What have you done to Bohnert?" she questioned.

"Bohnert! Why, Bohnert went away to-night. He found that Wade Dallman had sold him something that Dallman didn't have any right to sell.

"He admitted he had made a mistake in not heeding a warning he'd got to the effect that the land is owned by some one who don't want to sell it just now, and so he decided that he wouldn't object to the real owner taking possession."

"There wasn't any violence?"

"No. Bohnert was sensible. He was mighty eager to oblige."

"There is a light in the house," she reminded.

"Yes. We left that burning so that in case Hazen came snooping around he'd think nothing had happened. But there'll be more light pretty soon."

ELLEN gasped.

"Do you mean that you are going to burn the buildings?" she asked.

"Sure. If we'd leave them here Dallman would soon sell them to another dry farmer. We've got to remove temptation from Dallman's path."

"Isn't it rather ridiculous for big, strong men to go about in the darkness setting fire to buildings?" she said scornfully.

"We've got to have some pleasure," he mocked.

"Oh, then you take pleasure in these —er—depredations?"

"Look here," he said, "you're deliberately trying to ride me. This isn't boys' play, though it may seem like

that to you. But I think you know a damned sight better than to think that. We're fighting for what belongs to us. Do you think Hazen put those deputies in the stable just to play hide and go seek with us?"

He turned and faced the house. Ellen heard a crackling sound and faced about also, to see tongues of flame shooting up inside the kitchen. The faces of several men were revealed by the flames. The faces were lean, bronzed, grim, but not villainous.

Through the windows of the house Ellen could see Gargantuan shadows cast upon the walls by the men's bodies as they busied themselves setting their fires. Taller shadows flitted here and there upon the ground outside the house.

At a distance, in a clearing, Ellen could see the deputies filing away, distinct in the moonlight, followed by a rider with a rifle resting in the crook of an arm. No; this was not a boys' game. The shadow of death was here.

The flames were now roaring. Ellen turned to see Jeff watching her.

"Well," he said, "that's about all. The show is over. It isn't likely that the light from this fire will be seen in Randall, for there's a high ridge between, and quite a stretch of timber. But it's just as well to be on the safe side. Hop on your horse. I'll take you back to Randall."

Ellen mounted and rode away with him. Twice before they reached the gorge where the fire would be hidden from them Ellen looked back. Now the stable was also burning. She glanced at Jeff. He was staring straight ahead, and his face was expressionless.

She had hoped to place him in her debt and had not succeeded. She wondered if he really thanked her for what she had tried to do for him. She could not tell. But of one thing she was certain. When he had recognized her there in the shadows of the stable there had been something in his voice that closely resembled delight.

She was not prepared to decide definitely, but it was something—something which would not have been there if he disliked her. A tremor of satisfaction ran over her.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Double Crossed

SEVERAL years ago the Hawaiian authorities imported from the Philippine Islands a raft of mongooses—not mongeese—which were turned loose in the hills of Oahu, the third largest island of the Hawaiian group and, since the city of Honolulu is located there, the most important. The duty of the mongooses was to exterminate the rats with which this beautiful isle was infested. For, as it was pointed out, a mongoose is a fearless little creature and will attack and kill even the most poisonous snakes. Rats, then, should be easy pickings for a mongoose.

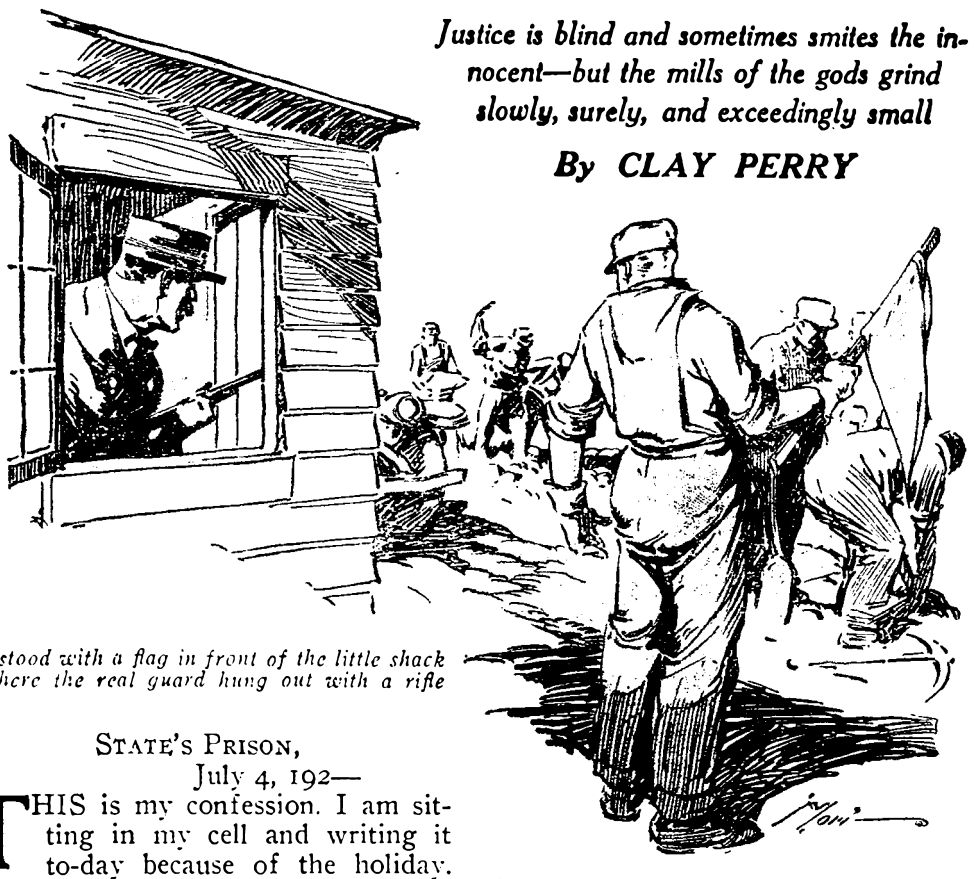
But much to the chagrin of the authorities, the four-legged killers conscientiously objected to kill. Very much on the contrary. They made friends with the slithering rodents, cast in their lot with them, and—intermarried! Consequently, the Island of Oahu now is not only well populated with rats, but likewise with hybrids—half-breeds, which are part rat and part mongoose.

John N. Stanton.

Retribution

Justice is blind and sometimes smites the innocent—but the mills of the gods grind slowly, surely, and exceedingly small

By CLAY PERRY



I stood with a flag in front of the little shack where the real guard hung out with a rifle

STATE'S PRISON,
July 4, 192—

THIS is my confession. I am sitting in my cell and writing it to-day because of the holiday. We grays are not allowed liberty to-day, for fear we might rig a mob and make a break. They only have chapel, like on Sunday, and read the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution to show us grays all men are created free and equal and to make us ashamed of our crimes and help us to reform.

I am confessing because, if I did not nobody would know who it was committed this thing they call a crime. It is not a crime—but it is turning out wrong.

This all begun 'way back when we was kids and went to school together in the little town near Coneyville, where we all three lived. There used to be a picture on the schoolroom wall of Dante and Beatrice. That was why I called Her "Beatrice"—but I was no Dante. I was just a crude kid that was crazy about Her; and all there is between me and Dante was that he imagined Hell, and I've been through it.

In that place there was Upper Town and Lower Town, and you lived in one part or the other. I lived in Lower Town. She and John lived in Upper Town. But we all went to the same school and was taught that all men is created free and equal. But the world ain't built that way; when you get out of school you find out. You can't buck the game.

It looked to me like I had as good a start as he did. He was going to law school when he finished high

school, and I was going to be an inventor. I always hung around my old man's shop, and I learned to fix almost everything, like the old man could. He was a jack-of-all-trades, but he used to say: "Men like me won't last long, because they turn men out in cast-iron molds now."

He meant the mills of Lower Town; he was bitter about 'em. My mother came of a family from Upper Town, and then she married the old man, and she never went back into Upper Town. She was great about it, but she got sickly, and then, the next thing I knew, the old man got careless around a bad horse. He was kicked in the spine.

Beatrice didn't want me to quit school. She said I ought to get a education, even if I had to sacrifice. But what could I sacrifice, except to let the old folks starve or go to the county hospital? And what good would a education do me that way? I just had to go to it at the shop and make out the best I could.

Being an inventor in school, and being a tinker out of it, was different. You see, the Upper Town run the Lower Town, which did the dirty work in the mills, and John's father was head of the mill company, and John would inherit the property. I would inherit a little wooden shack of a shop. That was where John and I started out being unequal—when we was born; but I didn't think so yet, because I felt just as good as he was, even if he could afford to learn to dance and I couldn't, and even if he owned the first auto in town. Well, I was the first fellow to fix up an auto.

John always called me Jim, like it didn't make no difference and Beatrice called me Jim too, but when John come back from college he begun to call me Rawlings, my last name, when he brung his auto around to be fixed. By this time I had a boy to help at the shop and a girl at the house. Pa was dead from the hips down, and Ma couldn't get out of bed either.

I used to see Her once in awhile, generally when John drove down to have a tire patched, with Her in the seat—and he would talk to Her as if I wasn't there. I guess it was this made me grab the chance to buy his old car when he ordered a new one.

It was good business, too, if I was going to fix autos. I told him I could not pay cash for it, but he said I could have it for two hundred down. He already owed me half of that, and I signed a note for the rest at the bank where his old man was president. They said his old man was sore when John got his new car, and raised hell about paying for it. It cost ten thousand. I did not think much about that, because the day before my note came due my Ma died.

I FORGOT all about the note. Well, the bank didn't. They had took a mortgage on the shop, and my car was busted from driving like hell over to Coneyville to get a doctor when Ma got took bad.

The bank foreclosed on the mortgage, and, what was worse, locked and sealed the shop so I couldn't even do repair jobs. When I kicked they advised me to get a lawyer. I didn't do nothing; I was too busted up.

They was a reason why they jumped me, all right. Just two days before Ma died they had some trouble at the bank with the time lock on the vault. My old man had rigged the clock, and they sent to see if he could tell them how to open it. He was cranky about it.

He told them he would tell me how to open it. It was part of my stock in trade, he said, rigging locks and getting 'em open when they got cranky. And I did the job easy, too. But the bank wouldn't do no favors for me on the mortgage, you see, after that.

The day after I was foreclosed Beatrice happened by and saw me sitting on the steps. She called me to the gate and said how sorry she was about Ma and everything, and why didn't I

ask John to help me out. Or she would ask him, because he was going to be a lawyer and would like the experience. I was just fool enough to ask him, and he just laughed and said he would take my case for the experience and the hell of it.

Then, that same day, in the afternoon, I met Beatrice on the street, and she wanted me to make her some good, strong steel knitting needles for her crowd that was all knitting socks for soldiers. She said the ones from the stores bent or broke too easy.

It was war time, and I had wanted to go myself, but what could I do, with the old man on my hands? Anyway, I thought, I can make needles to knit socks for soldiers, needles that would not bend or break.

The old man went blooey from the neck up, after Ma died. I kept quiet to him about the mortgage and all, and my case about the mortgage never come up at all. The very next night after they sealed my shop the bank was entered and robbed of seven thousand dollars from the vault—and whoever did it got it open without ringing the alarm, and got away slick and clean.

I was in Coneyville, in my car, where I had gone looking for a job, when they got me. Nobody would believe I hadn't done it, except Beatrice. She come to the lockup twice to see me, and I had to tell her to keep away or people would talk.

The next day John came. He was, in a way, already my lawyer, but I was surprised the way he jumped in at me.

"Now, I want you to tell me the whole story," he says. "The truth. That's the only way I can help you out of this."

"Why, I didn't rob the bank, and I don't know a thing about it," I says. "That's the truth."

"So that's your story?" he asks, with a cagy look.

"That's the truth."

"I've kept my mind open, Rawlings," he says. "In spite of the evidence they have against you. The law says a man must always be presumed innocent until he's proved guilty."

"I'll be innocent if they prove me guilty," I come back, "and you can just put that down"—he had a pad and pencil. "I know why they think I robbed the vault. It was because I knew how to open it, but I can prove I wasn't near the bank after I did that for 'em."

"An alibi, eh? But you made some bad mistakes, Rawlings," he says, his lips tight and his eyes small and sharp. "You left the skeleton keys in the shop and they've got them—with your finger-prints on 'em and on the vault door. You'd have to prove all those finger-prints were made the time you opened the vault under their eyes. It's a double-edged alibi, Rawlings. Maybe we can think of something else. It's little things that count. Think!"

I stared at him. "Why, I left that ring of keys on the bench in the shop," I says, "two days before this robbery, and the shop was locked and sealed right after I left 'em there."

"Ah! But the seal and lock were broken," John snaps out.

"Is that so? Then somebody broke the seal and lock and got the keys to make it look like I did the job, eh?"

"But only your finger-prints were on the keys," he half whispers.

I was stalled.

"Finger-prints," he went on, "are about the best circumstantial evidence in the world. Almost as good as an eyewitness, and better sometimes, because they don't lie. Now, who knew enough about you and the keys and the vault lock to do the job without rubbing off your finger-prints or putting on new ones?"

"WELL," I says sarcastic, "nobody but my old man."

"Rawlings," he says, with his face all screwed up and stern, "you oughtn't to say that. Your father is beyond suspicion—or arrest—for any

crime. He died about midnight, the night of the robbery."

"Well," I said, "then he's got an alibi, anyhow, that they can't break and it helps spoil mine. I'm getting wise. I was afraid the old man wouldn't want to hang around much longer—after Ma died."

I didn't want to talk to him any more.

"My advice to you, Rawlings," he went on, "is to plead guilty and offer to make restitution."

It took me a long time to get that. Then I had to laugh. He thought I had planted that seven grand! And he said he had an open mind! Well, if he did, then I didn't have a Chinaman's chance with a jury.

"It's the only consideration under which I'll take your case at all," he says.

Well, after the grand jury hung it on me, good and strong, the case come up in Superior Court, in Coneyville. I didn't have a lawyer, but the court said they would assign one to defend me. I got up and said no, I wanted to plead guilty. The judge called me up to the bench and talked to me. And when I admitted I wasn't really guilty, but thought that was the best way out of it, the judge made me have a lawyer, anyway. It didn't do no good.

"You have been given the full protection of the law, young man," the judge said. "It appears that you must even be protected against yourself. You appear to believe, because you have got yourself into trouble, that every man's hand is against you and that society owes you something.

"On the contrary, society must be protected from you. It is only because of your youth and the tragedy which, I understand, came into your life at about the time of this robbery that I am going to be lenient with you. I am going to give you an indeterminate sentence.

"I do this, too, because you are pleading guilty, which saves the Commonwealth the expense of a trial. The duration of your sentence depends entirely upon yourself. The sooner your conscience tells you what to do, the better chance you will have of becoming a free man again. Your sentence is to State's Prison."

I never opened my mouth at all. I thought it was too late. I knew what the judge was driving at. Restitution. I had got hold of a dictionary and looked that up, and I knew what that meant. It meant, restoring what had been taken away. Seven grand!

It was only afterward, at the jail, that I realized just what had happened to me. They let me have a newspaper, without clipping it, since I was sentenced already and only waiting to be brought over here to stir, fifteen miles from Coneyville. In the paper I was in the headlines.

It told about me, as if I had dreamed it, about how I took advantage of confidence placed in me by bank officials to get the lay of the land for the robbery and using my expert knowledge of locks and keys, got in easily and then tried to make a get-away in a car, but was nabbed at Coneyville.

It said that, at first, I was defiant and refused to talk, but that through the influence of a public-spirited fledgling lawyer, a schoolmate, I had been induced to plead guilty, and it was thought I would make restitution.

The article then switched back to the grand jury report. I ran acrost my name again. It said that, in my case, only one witness had been summoned, except the officer that arrested me. It didn't give names, but it did say: "It is understood that this one witness might have been the star witness for the State if the case had gone to trial."

I didn't quite get that, at first. I read the paper all through while I was just waiting. The wise ones tell me, here, that they can read between the lines of a newspaper. I never knew that then. But I ran acrost a little item that said John was a law student

in a Coneyville lawyer's office now, and that he would soon be all ready to get his admission to the bar and be a full-fledged lawyer.

I figured that out, then. He was only a "fledgling" lawyer now. He only made believe he was going to be my lawyer. He could not have been my lawyer!

I've saved that paper and I've read it every day since. I keep it rolled in rubber in my mouth to save it from being stripped off me. It will be pinned to the last page of this confession. It will give you John's full name. But maybe you won't need it. You'll know.

I BEGAN to take my rap three days after I pleaded. Beatrice didn't come to the jail. Well, I had said I was guilty myself. I couldn't blame Her.

John got to be a lawyer. Inside of two years he become prominent in politics, too. He had the pull. He got appointed district court justice.

And then he got married—to Her.

God, I had felt that coming! Her people was old-timers. He needed that stuff in his game. It helped him get what he wanted. He got it, too. He went up to the bench of the Superior Court—not the way I did, but behind it, with a robe on.

Well, things seemed just to travel in a circle; because, the queer part of it was, the judge that sent me up died and John got the place he left. It took him ten years to get there, and all that time I was in stir, fifteen miles away, and he was married to Her and I couldn't help it. Yes, it was just like a big circle, being drawn by two hands, coming together from opposite directions.

I got in with a wise mob and framed up a plea to be sprung out of stir. There was two grays doing a ten stretch while I was doing my *when* stretch—that's what indeterminate means—and they wanted me to do a job with them because I was a lock lifter.

I was a trusty, too, and helped the head electrician here, and learned how to use the juice. I rigged some skeletons they could use to spring their cell locks, which did no harm except they would have a head start if we rigged a break some time.

This mob had a lawyer outside that would do things for a stir-bug on tick and split their first crack with them when they come out on a job. This mob wised me up to say in my petition that I would make restitution if I could find the plant I had made from the bank job, which was now supposed to be covered by the ruins of a fire, and that I couldn't trust the cops for fear of being double crossed with the stir-bugs and beaned for the swag.

Matter of fact, these grays wouldn't believe I hadn't cracked that vault for seven grand, or else why did I take and plead guilty? They thought I was just laying low—but they couldn't figger what good my *when* stretch was doing at all. Neither could I. That judge had me trapped all right. And then he up and died.

Well, this crook lawyer had got the petition framed up all right and what happened, do you think, but John got the appointment from the Governor and took the place the other judge left! I told about that. That's part of the circle.

A year went by without any word. But I knew what had happened. John wasn't going to let me out. I was wise—I hadn't spent eleven years in stir with the grays for nothing. For one thing, I wasn't afraid of stir any more. I could wait for my break for a long, long time without feeling bad about it now.

My break come all of a sudden. They shoved a bunch of us onto the road. They was laying a new concrete road between here and Coneyville, and the legislature voted to make it a State job and use men from the prison on

it. I put in a bid for a chance at it, on the excuse I wanted outdoor exercise; and, being a trusty, I got away with it.

They give us overall suits and caps and canvas gloves, so we would look like ordinary laborers. They didn't want everybody to know where us grays was working, on account of politics. But all a man would have to do the first few days we was out was look at our faces. You get a sort of color here. I wanted some of the other kind before I made the next break I was planning.

They took us to the far end of the job and put us into a camp fixed up like war prison camps you see in the pictures, with barbed wire tangled all around it—and a live wire running through the tangle. It was at Willow Corners, halfway between Coneyville and the old home town.

It seemed funny to be working on that road I'd traveled so many times, and to ride past the courthouse in Coneyville, where I got mine, and to see how much the same, and yet how different, things was. You wouldn't think they would be so many autos. They was so many they built the road half and half so they wouldn't stop traffic.

After the first two weeks I got a soft job with a pick. They made me flag guard for the traffic. I stood out in front of the little shack where the real guard hung out, with a rifle inside and his eyes open, and gave a red flag to the last car that went through and took it back again from the last car in the bunch from the other direction. It was easy, except, two or three times I looked up and found I was handing the flag to somebody I used to know—but nobody knew me.

I never thought I might see Her. It almost knocked me off my dogs to reach out and take a flag out of a white hand that was put out the window of a big closed car—and it was Her. I almost ducked, but she looked straight at me, and I stood like a stone.

John was driving the car and didn't pay no attention to me. I wouldn't have known him if Beatrice hadn't been there. He had growed a little pointed beard and he looked twenty years older than he was. Well, I suppose I did, too. Her face was older, too, but more as if she had got wise—too wise.

HE parked the car alongside the works and talked to the boss, a State man. I don't know about just what myself, but a gray that was bending those twisted steel reënforcing rods near the car, he told some of the other grays that "the old guy with the pretty wife was fishing for info, and he said he'd have convict labor off this road or break the man that sprung it."

Well, the news spread and some of the grays was wild. When they asked me about it, because they knew I used to live near here, I said, yes, I knowed him; that he was a judge and boss of the county machine. Those grays loved their outside work, and don't you ever think they didn't. But what could they do? Pound sand.

We doped it out we'd be back in stone shade again if John had his way. I thought it was time for me to quit waiting for breaks to come my way and make a break for myself.

I got hold of three grays that was with me strong and told them I had something on the old guy if they'd help me spring it. It was all I had to offer, but it worked. They loved their work.

All I wanted was eight hours. It was only eight miles to Coneyville by road; about six by a crossroad through the woods that I knew. The guards had little shacks at the four corners of the yard, outside the wire. They slept at night, because of the live wire and barbed wire and bug lights every twenty yards all around camp. But they turned us out at midnight for a count, to make sure.

I felt good. The hard work had helped me, then the soft job had let

me limber up. My hands was all right. I only had to wait for a dark night.

It come two nights later. Kind of rainy and the clouds low, no moon or stars, nazy over the flat country and the woods. I had got a steel reëforcing rod hid in the grass behind the shack I slept in and I had loosened a board alongside my bunk so it would come off easy. One of the grays who bunked next to me was going to answer my number on the midnight wake and say I was sick. I had played off being hit by the muggy heat that afternoon.

I got ready to spring myself out of camp as soon as the lights went out inside. I had it all fixed in fifteen minutes, my bedclothes rolled up like I was in 'em, the board off and me outside, and the board back. I crawled to where the long rod was and laid on my back.

It took me twenty minutes to scrape the insulation off in two places, one on each of the live wires that carried juice for the bug lights. The rod had sharp edges on it. I stuck it in the ground, then, so it would flop back and forth between the live wires and make the bugs flicker and cast queer shadows. Then it was easy to find the high-tension wire in the barbs and ground it in two places and wiggle between the ground terminals into the brush outside.

It was easy. When I got to Coneyville, near enough to see the tall tower on the courthouse, it was five minutes to twelve. Pretty late, but not too late for me to do business, I thought. The newspapers had told me where John lived. I got to it over back streets.

There was one room lighted up on the first floor, one room on the second floor, and almost as if I had X-ray eyes I could tell that John was downstairs in his study and that She was upstairs in Her room.

I sneaked across the lawn and looked through a window, behind a tall bush. I looked into a combination office and library, with shelves and a desk and some easy chairs, a couch, a fireplace. In the middle of the room was a big table, with a nice lamp on it—but something else got into my eyes right away.

It sort of took the starch out of me, for a minute. I was all sweat when I put my hand to my face and I was breathing hard. It was what laid under the lamp, on the table, that got me. I hadn't wanted to see Her at all, but this made me think of Her and of how Her face had looked when She handed me out the flag at the guard shack on the road.

I got a slant at John, sitting in a high-backed chair at his desk, which was against the wall, so his back was to the hall door. It was open; I could see a dim light in the hall, and the front door was open, too, because of the muggy night; there was only a screen. With that pointed beard and the way it changed him and with his head part bald, he didn't look like the man I wanted.

I couldn't help thinking, though, that it was John, just the same, and I thought: "What poor devil is he fixing to send up now? I wonder if he even looked at my petition. I wonder if he has got it here?"

This give me something to work on, to sort of take my mind off them things under the lamp. I didn't want to look at them or to think about them too much. I went to the front door, then, taking my shoes off on the grass, and opened the screen without making a sound. I stepped inside and through the door of his room.

He didn't move, except to turn a page of something on his desk. I had to pass close to the table to get to him and I couldn't keep my eyes off them things. I went to pick one up—then I remembered—finger-prints.

I HAD my canvas gloves in my pocket where I'd put them after getting through with the "hot" wires, and I put one of them on and picked one of the needles out of the ball of yarn and looked at it, close. It was just

what I thought. It was one of the very same steel knitting needles I had made for Her, eleven years ago.

Them needles was a foot long and wouldn't bend or break unless you put them in a vise and hammered them. That was the way I had made them, in the shop, just a little while before I was locked out of it. It looked almost like She might have left them there on purpose.

I stuck one end of the needle through the folds of the stiff glove and then wrapped the glove around it. Then I stepped over behind John. The chair he sat in had a high back, with little holes carved into it, and I stuck that long needle through one of them and against his back on the left side, just under the shoulder blade; and I said:

"Don't move or make a sound. I've got a stiletto on you and it's got a blade a foot long and sharp as a needle."

The smooth, sharp point went through his smoking jacket or whatever it was, and against his flesh, and he kept still, except to squirm a little.

"Take your hands off them papers and let me see what they are," I says, thinking maybe it was some kind of frame-up against us grays working the road. "Don't put your hands down; keep them up on the desk."

He spread his hands apart, and I see they was shaking already. When I saw the papers it give me a start. It was my own petition. It looked as if it had been handled a lot, all wrinkled and rubbed, something like the newspaper that I read so much.

"Well," I says, "it looks like you was getting ready to spring me. It's kinda late. I don't know as I want to get out now. They have got me down for seven grand—for restitution. How the hell do you think I can dig that up?"

"You—" he begun, in a strangled voice and trying to turn his head and see me, but I pricked him a little harder with the knitting needle.

"Quiet!" I says. "Yes, it's me, Jim Rawlings, with an eleven-year stretch back of me—for the work you did, John."

He give a sort of shiver, but he sat still. I wanted to see his face better. I made him lean forward touching the desk so that I could set one end of the needle into the wood of the chair back. I put the glove into my pocket. I hadn't touched the needle with my bare fingers once. Now he sat, with one end pricking him, as far forward as he could lean, his chest jammed against the edge of the desk.

To the left of him was the fireplace, that jutted out into the room and made a little alcove, near one side of his desk. I stepped into that alcove, where I could look at him and he could look at me, but nobody could see me from the door, if they come.

"I've got a rod in my pocket," I says to him, with my right hand bunched and forefinger pointing, in my coat pocket. "Hold that pose and look at me. Don't move your body; twist your neck. Do you remember seeing me lately?"

He rolled his eyes up. His face was as gray as mine had used to be. His eyes looked sick. He shook his head.

"Try to think," I says, "of the little things. Where, outside of prison would you expect to see a convict working, nowadays?"

His lips slacked open, but he couldn't say nothing.

"On the State road job," I says for him, "with a red flag in his hand. Get it?"

He groaned and nodded.

"Maybe that's why you're so set against convict labor on the roads, eh? You might see me—or She might."

He wrinkled his forehead as if the needle was sticking into him, bad. I was going to stick things into him, all right.

"But first," I went on, "that's why you held up my petition and wouldn't spring me out after you got to be judge. Not even when you see that I offered

to make restitution, when it was you that told me, long ago, that if I made restitution, you'd help me."

He was sweating now. It stood out in little drops on his face and run down his nose and dripped onto the petition. That made me grin.

"Well, I made up my mind," I said, "that I'd make you sweat for that—and all the rest."

"I—I was going to—sign the petition," he whispered, stuttering. "I just got it out—" He licked his lips and they was shivering as if he was cold. "She—asked me to," he gulped out.

"I thought so," I says, soft and low. "I thought so. And I don't want you to sign it. It won't do me any good. But I got another thing for you to do. The convicts want to work on the road, where they can get a little sun and wind and a look at the sky. Get busy about that."

He fumbled for a pen and some paper. He knew what I wanted.

"Write it to the warden," I suggested, "and make it strong. Put it in an envelope, address it, seal it, and give it to me to mail.

"And now," I says, shoving the letter in my pocket, "I'm going to ask you a question. Answer it with your head, up or sidewise. You used your head to get what you wanted, John. Use it now. And remember, I've got my gat on you—and the knife is back of you, fastened in a little hollow in the back of the chair."

I STOPPED talking, quick, because I caught the sound of a door opening upstairs, then soft footsteps coming down. I backed into the alcove and whispered to him.

"Keep Her out! This is between you and me. Make believe you are busy."

He batted his eyelids and I knew he was too scared not to play right.

"John," come Her voice at the door, a voice that went through me—like a needle, it was so soft and sad and tired. "Pardon me for disturbing you, but I left my knitting—"

"Get out!" he snaps at Her, so savage I almost jumped. "Those damned knitting needles have got me crazy enough. Get out!"

"Why, John!" She gasps. "I'm sorry, John, that they—"

"The hell you are!" he bursts out. "I know who made them and you're asking me to let him out of prison. I've got my job in front of me. Get out!"

She didn't say another word; only drew in her breath in jerks and turned and went upstairs.

Well, I saw how it was between them; just as I had thought. The needles had got him. He had been jealous of me, all the time, and he was jealous of them steel needles I had made for Her—and that She had kept. And one of them was sticking into his skin, right now, back of his heart. He didn't know that.

When I heard the door close upstairs, I stepped out of the alcove.

"Now, the question is," I says, "you used gloves when you busted the seal and the lock on the old shop and got them keys and opened the vault and got the seven thousand dollars to use for yourself—didn't you? So you wouldn't leave any finger-prints?"

He seemed to be waiting a minute. My mind was working like greased lightning. I had everything all straightened out now—how he had framed me from the start, pulled the whole job and rode me through. He'd sent me up; he was the "fledgling attorney," the "public-spirited schoolmate," the "one witness"—and everything else that it said in that old newspaper.

He'd started out by being jealous of me, because of Her. He'd sent me up, just as sure as if he was a judge on the bench, like he had got to be now. But I was behind the bench right now. I was the judge. The circle had come together.

"Shake your head 'yes' or 'no,'" I says to him. "And remember, the wrong answer will finish you. Guess which is the right one! Think hard. And remember, I know the right answer, John, anyhow. You talked about restitution when I was first locked up and I didn't even know, at first, what it meant. I know now. It meant eleven years off my life.

"Do you think you can make restitution for that? By signing my petition? Not in a thousand years. It's too long a word. It's a word with eleven letters in it that makes up a sentence—of eleven years. I don't know of any other word, except one, that can make up for what that word did for me. It happens to be just as long a word. It's *retribution.*

"I've looked that up, too—but you know what it means. Now, you answer my question—you framed me because of Her, didn't you?"

His head was bent so far forward it almost touched the desk, between his hands. His eyes were turned up toward me, and they looked awful, like the eyes of a man that is dead.

He shook his head from side to side.

It was the wrong answer—

How did I know he would jerk back? All I did was to pull my hand out of my pocket, quick. He must have felt that needle digging into him—but maybe he had leaned so far forward, it didn't touch his skin, just hung in his coat, and he forgot it was there. Of course, he didn't know it was a needle.

I swear to God I didn't intend to kill him.

I was back in my bunk in camp before daylight, and rain washed out my footprints. I had a perfect alibi. Not even finger-prints.

But I hadn't thought about *Her* finger-prints being on that knitting needle.

That's why it is turning out wrong.

THE END

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Airplanes Replacing Dog Sleds

THE snow-covered wastes of Alaska are still traversed by dog teams, but airplanes are threatening to do away with the older form of transportation, even as Dobbin had to give way to the gas buggy.

One veteran aviator, Thomas Gerard, with headquarters at Fairbanks, in a territory having a scant fifty thousand inhabitants, carried more than five hundred passengers last year. And they weren't pleasure flights.

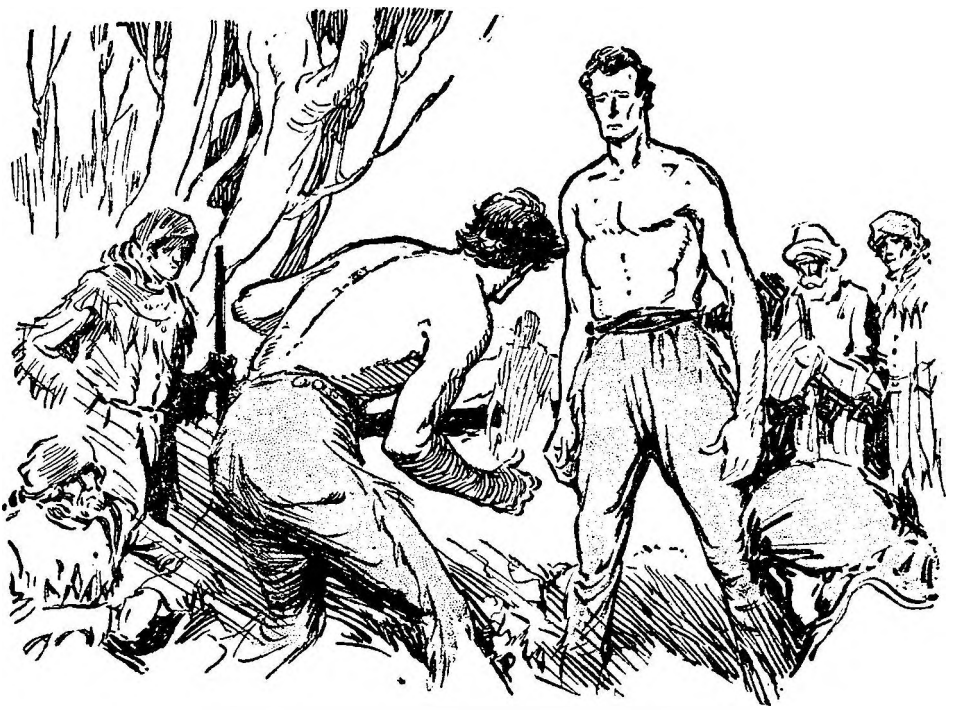
His plane has been used for transporting everything from eighty thousand dollars' worth of fur pelts to carrying three hundred pounds of gold dust. In most sections of the United States twenty to thirty cents has become almost a standard charge for taxi service, but in Alaska it's different. Rates there are based on the hazards, and they are many.

Forced landings in Alaska aren't mere little inconveniences; too often they take a tragic turn, for airports are practically non-existent, and suitable landing places are few and mighty far between.

Gerard always carries three weeks' rations with him, including dried moose meat, chocolate bars and tea. A small gasoline stove is always carried to warm the motor, and this is also handy for warming the tea.

The latest plane purchased by Gerard is equipped with twenty-five instruments, believed to be a record number on any one plane. Skis are used in place of wheels, and are a life saver during forced landings.

Gerard has played the good Samaritan with his plane, too. Last spring he flew three sick people two hundred and fifty miles to the nearest medical aid and was instrumental in saving their lives. *Harold J. Ashe.*



Lincoln, smiling patiently, waited for Louis to begin

When Trails Were New

Hot on the bloody trail of Black Hawk and his braves, Louis d'Arras scouts for Lincoln's militia and searches the Sac lines for some trace of the missing Daphne

By TALBOT MUNDY

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

LOUIS D'ARRAS, hunter in the Wisconsin woods in 1832, loves Daphne Beaucheval, whose despicable father is in the power of Simon Sully, shrewd trader of Fort St. Pierre. Sully schemes to get Daphne and wreak his hatred on Louis. Louis has some stanch friends—the Sac, Blue Heron; Bizard the blacksmith; Conrad, trader of the Astor Company; Crawford, genial hard-fighting drunkard.

Black Hawk, persecuted by Sully and others, is on the war-path against the whites, in revolt from his chief, Keokuk. Louis, who has befriended him, gets his promise not to attack the fort; but while Louis and his friends are in his cabin, celebrating his marriage to Daphne—which Father Felicien performs after making Louis vow not to fight Sully—Black Hawk and his Sacs burn the fort.

Louis and Daphne are separated; and she, with Blue Heron and Conrad's squaw, Running Caribou, return to the fort, where she finds her friend Elizabeth Turner's baby, still alive. There they fall in with Sully, who

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really had been out to kill Louis, and who declares Louis was dead.

They escape from him, reaching the militia camp at Dixon's Ferry, where Lieutenant Jefferson Davis and Captain Abraham Lincoln question them. They leave down-river for Fort Armstrong just before Sully arrives at Dixon's Ferry; but the Indians have been held prisoners.

Meantime Louis, Bizard, Conrad and Crawford have been trailing Black Hawk, who, though he freed them when his braves caught them at the cabin, yet had broken his pledged word to them. At last, however, they lose the Sac band, and head southward, hunting for Daphne and the militia.

Beaucheval has callously agreed to send Daphne to a charity institution in St. Louis. But late the night before she is to leave, Blue Heron, who has escaped with Running Caribou, gets through the lines at Fort Armstrong, and takes Daphne, the baby, and an Indian wet-nurse—Two Crows—up-river to find Louis d'Arras.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I'M A SHON-OF-A-GUN ON A SHKIN-FULL!"

LOUIS was as determined now in his search for Daphne as he had been grim in the pursuit of Black Hawk. He grudged the minutes in his eagerness to overtake her.

The four friends were of one mind in their haste to reach Dixon's Ferry, though for different reasons.

"Rum, boys! Rum!" said Crawford, making thirst-suggestive noises.

"Money!" said Bizard. "They will ask me to enlist, and I will laugh! They shall pay—believe me, they shall pay for smith's work! I have been in the militia!"

"I'd like ter ketch that squaw o' mine afore she cuts loose an' starts lookin' fer me, gol-durn her hide!" said Conrad. "She's gettin' awful old. I'd hate fer ter hev her ketch somethin', lyin' up in the open. Blast her ol' gizzard, she might die of it. I wonder if the ol' gal's got my bag; I'm sufferin' fer b'ar's grease."

Time was lost hunting for meat. It seemed wiser to bring down a buck that would feed all four of them for several days than to go after wild-fowl with rifles; one shot, even if it brought a duck down, scared all the rest out of range, and as Crawford said:

"Gol-durn it, a bullet don't leave nothin' o' the bird but feathers!"

But the game had been thoroughly scared; the Sacs had been hunting all over the neighborhood, and the buck they eventually killed cost the best part of their second day.

Then, a day's hard paddle yet from Dixon's, a militia scout hailed them from the left bank and they stopped to talk with him. Since the scout had all the news of the militia, and a flask of whisky the exchange of courtesies took time. He had no news of Daphne.

"There was a young married woman with a baby come to Dixon's an' was sent on down, but I dunno where she was from. No, I didn't hear her name. No, I didn't set eyes on her. I heard say she was awful sick o' childbearin' an' no 'tention."

"What are the militia doing?" Louis asked him.

"Nawthin'! Ev'rybody givin' orders an' nobody obeyin'. Companies marchin' this way an' that, all independent, an' ev'rybody yellin' to go home. My time's up, an' I ain't seen no pay yet. Injuns stole my horse; that leaves me one f'r plowin', an' it's gettin' late. What beats me is why you fellers can't do y'r own fightin'."

They began to take leave of him, not quarrelsomely, having drunk the greater part of his whisky; but a second scout arrived on the scene, and this man was a sergeant, with a scar all down one side of his face and an air of looking for a chance to settle the account with some one.

"Orders are to bring in any one we find," he announced defiantly.

"Yer'll hev ter fight afore ye fetch us anywhere!" said Crawford. "Feel like tryin' it?"

The question was wholly superfluous. The sergeant threw his rifle down, peeled off his jacket and accouterments, and glanced about him for a piece of level ground.

"One down, t' other come on!" he answered. "Fancy y'rself, Buffalo?"

That was a challenge no man on that frontier would dream of refusing. Bizard leaned his rifle against a tree and began to strip.

"I asked him first," Crawford objected.

"Your turn'll come when I've licked the big one," the sergeant retorted scornfully. He evidently liked them big. His own lean frame was shorter than Bizard's by nearly a foot, but his muscles stood out like whip-cord.

He betrayed neither surprise nor nervousness when Bizard's buckskin shirt came off and the lumps of muscle showed under the black hair.

"Best of three?" asked Louis, holding Bizard's rifle. His smile seemed to irritate the sergeant for some reason.

"One'll be enough f'r him. He'll fall heavy. You're nex'!"

BUT Louis did not begin to strip. He picked up Bizard's shirt, turned it right side out, and waited. Bizard approached the sergeant, holding out both hands. Not another word was spoken for two minutes. The sergeant sprang in like lightning before they had circled once, and Bizard fell with a thud on top of him. One of the sergeant's legs emerged, feeling for a purchase on the ground; Bizard seized the ankle in his right hand and began to twist.

The agony of that hold was dynamic. The sergeant twisted like an eel, and in a second both were on their feet again, Bizard revolving slowly and the sergeant circling for another chance to spring.

"Watch him!" yelled Crawford. "He's ugly!"

The man was worse than ugly; he was half mad. The glitter in his eye was like a rabid animal's, unused to failure and enraged by it. He sprang, locked his legs around Bizard's, got a hold on Bizard's neck and tried to drive both thumbs into the giant's wind-pipe.

"Foul!" yelled Crawford, starting to the rescue. "Kill him, Paul!"

But Bizard fell forward a second time, his whole weight crushing his opponent, pinning both his shoulders to the earth.

"I give that a fall! What's the trouble?" asked a quiet voice.

The only one not taken by surprise was Louis. He had seen the new arrival tie a lean horse to a bush and come striding in ungainly fashion toward them. A taller man than Bizard, but lean—lanky—gaunt—possessed of enormous hands and feet. He wore a sword that he managed awkwardly, and a smile that suggested horizons and incalculable depths of humor.

Bizard got up, but the sergeant lay still.

"He offered to lick us all," said Louis. "Are you his friend?"

"I'm his captain. He has frequently offered to lick me," said the newcomer. "However, that did not occur to me as necessary. Who began this?"

"They did!" said the other militiaman. "Say, Abe, it's up to you! Sergeant Purdy ordered these four to come along 'cordin' to orders. They swore they'd fight first, an' he offered to lick the lot, one down, t'other come on. You've got to finish the job! Don't fergit the honor of the comp'ny!"

Abe Lincoln smiled. He stooped over the sergeant to discover whether he was badly hurt, and glanced over his shoulder. Three hundred yards away a company of eighty men was approaching over the top of a rise in ex-

tended order; he beckoned to the nearest of them, and the whole company came forward at the double.

"What is it, Abe?"

"What's doin'?"

"Hello, Abe—you an' the sergeant been tuh grips at last?"

They swarmed around the party in nothing that resembled a formation, all asking questions and displaying no sympathy whatever for the beaten man.

It was a minute or two before they caught on to the fact that Bizard, and not Lincoln, had downed the sergeant. Then, however, there was very nearly a free-for-all fight; disputes within the company were a family matter, quite in order; a victory by a stranger over one of their own crowd was something else.

"It's up to Abe!" some one shouted from the rear. "Abe's licked us all excep' Purdy. Who says Abe ain't the best wrastler in Illinois?"

"I do!" announced Louis, throwing up his hand.

Bizard objected promptly; the easy victory over Sergeant Purdy had no more than made his giant muscles tingle.

"You wait till your turn comes, Louis," he said testily.

The company roared delight. "Match 'em!" yelled some one. "Let 'em have it out! The winner takes on Abe!"

BUT Louis, stripping off his deerskins and thrusting the rifles into Crawford's hands, stepped up to Abe Lincoln and claimed privilege. The frontier code was peremptory.

"I challenged first. Are you afraid?"

"Hear that, fellers? He asked if Abe's afraid! Hah-hah-hah! Soak him, Abe!"

"Do you refuse to come with me on any other terms?" asked Lincoln.

"There's our canoe," said Louis. "We're going in it, after you're on your back!"

"Two out of three!" said Bizard cautiously, conning both men. He was a student of physique.

"And if I throw you twice, you and your three friends will offer no further objection to obeying the military order?" Lincoln asked, smiling down agreeably at Louis.

Louis liked the smile, but disliked the proposed alternative prodigiously.

"What order?" he demanded, glancing over-shoulder at his friends. "We don't belong to the militia."

"The order is to bring into camp at Old Man Creek any one, white or Indian, whom we discover. I propose to obey it. If I lay you on your back twice, will you and your friends withdraw objections?"

Louis nodded, seeing no alternative.

"Very well," said Lincoln. "I would rather do that than use force."

He began at once to pull off his own weather-beaten jacket, and his men, spreading out into a wide ring, sat down, laughing and offering to bet. Nobody had money. Lincoln had none; several tried to borrow from him, and he turned his pockets inside out to prove he had not a single coin.

Finally the four friends put up their canoe and paddles against a wooden drum half-full of whisky and a long-haired mongrel dog that had followed the company. There was considerably better feeling after that, and Crawford went and sat beside the whisky drum.

For a full minute Louis and Lincoln stood, in the midst of the circle, considering each other, Bizard booming his advice to Louis:

"By gar, he's a tough one, Louis! Quickness is your bes' chance." The crowd laughed gleefully at that advice.

Lincoln waited, smiling patiently, for Louis to begin. His arms hung loosely at his sides; he made none of the passes that most wrestlers indulge in as they feel for an opening hold, but stood stock-still until Louis lost patience at last and, feinting for a neck hold in order to get Lincoln to throw

his arms up, ducked with the quickness of lightning and threw his whole weight and strength against his adversary's knees.

It was a trick that had succeeded scores of times, especially against opponents taller than himself. He usually knocked their legs clean out from under them and had their shoulders pinned to the earth before they had time to draw a breath.

But, as Bizard had warned him, this man was tough. He did not go down. Length seemed to give his legs strength instead of weakness, and in another second Louis was fighting to extricate himself from an intricate hold that almost paralyzed by its increasing strain. But he was strong—young; he broke it, and they went to the earth together amid howls and yells and Bizard's bellowing:

"Nelson, Louis! Nelson! It's your bes' chance!"

But Bizard had been right the first time. Speed was Louis's one advantage; he had the worst of the weight, and much the worst of the reach. It was a toss-up which knew most of the science of the game, for wrestling was a sport that all men practiced, and the better wrestler a man was the more frequently he had to prove his skill.

It was nothing unusual for a man to walk across a whole State for the sole purpose of challenging a local champion; both Lincoln and Louis d'Arras had learned in an exacting school.

They rolled and rolled over the grass until the eighty men rose to their feet and yelled madly for Abe, while Bizard nearly burst his lungs bellowing for Louis. Crawford came near starting a fight on the side, kicking at men's legs and yelling, "Room! Give 'em room!"

Conrad was the only quiet man; he found some grease in a militiaman's open haversack and, sitting down to strip himself outside the milling circle, applied it gratefully to his joints, muttering, "'Tain't b'ar's grease, but it seems ter git thar'."

ONCE Louis got a half nelson on Lincoln and nearly broke his neck. The eighty groaned aloud; Bizard and Crawford danced and beat each other on the head and shoulders. But sheer strength broke the hold.

A roar went up as Lincoln twisted free, and in another moment both men were on their feet, feinting for another opening. Louis had measured Lincoln's strength, and knew it was twice as great as his; his only chance was all the speed he had left, and he tried his knee-hold trick again, charging in suddenly with all the wilderness-won energy he had in him.

This time Lincoln went down headlong, but caught Louis's leg, and in a second they were at it again, rolling over and over, locked together and panting like the exhaust of a donkey-engine.

It was Lincoln's turn to recognize a fact. Strong he was, and skillful; but the speed of the younger man was going to master him unless he found some means of bringing strength to bear against it. In no way could he hold Louis.

Bizard's triumphant bellowing began to outroar the noise of eighty men as it was borne in on them that their captain was having the worst of it. Lincoln played for a crotch hold; Louis wriggled clear and tried again for a half nelson; they swayed, struggled nearly to their feet, and fell in a heap together.

"Dog-fall!" thundered Bizard. "Pull 'em up!" He was within his rights according to the frontier code, and he knew that Lincoln's superior strength would triumph if they were allowed to lie in that inextricable tangle.

So the contestants were pulled apart, and Lincoln changed his tactics. He went on the defensive, "falling away" as the term is, keeping his back rigid

and, holding Louis by the arms, sliding backward away from him whenever Louis rushed.

For fifteen minutes, with almost mechanical patience, he kept that up until Louis began to tire; then suddenly Bizard yelled a warning—too late. Over Lincoln's shoulders and down to the earth with a thud went Louis.

"Yours!" he conceded. He could not have stood up for another bout to save his life.

"The canoe! The canoe!" The yell went up from the whole company as they swooped down on the decrepit thing and hauled it high and dry.

"What'll we do with it?" "Let Abe sleep in it, he lacks a tent!" "Tent for the company captain!"

"Burn it!" yelled another faction. "Bonfire! Let's do a war dance!"

"Who says a drink? There's about a spoonful each."

But there was not. Crawford had attended to it. While Conrad greased his aching joints and the others milled and yelled around the wrestlers, Crawford had reduced the whisky rations to almost nil.

"Take it, fellers. I wouldn't rob yer," he said, handing the almost empty drum to the nearest man. "Louis's ben an' broke my heart."

They would have broken Crawford's head if Lincoln had not interfered to save him, dragging him out from under a dozen men by main force.

"I'll pay, fellers! I'll pay!" yelled Crawford. "Hell, I'll shing shongs fer ye all ni' long—I'm a shon-of-a-gun on a shkin-full!"

CHAPTER XXV.

"I WISH I HAD YOUR GIFT OF SPEAKING INDIAN LANGUAGES."

THOSE were not days when a citizen army obeyed its commander without question. A captain was a man who by consummate tact effected compromises between the orders of the day and whatever the rank and file proposed to do. They, having elected him, considered they had full right to be heard; and they were heard. That company commander was a wise man, who let them have their way on unimportant points, in order to gain his own way in essentials.

Unanimously the company decided to bivouac there by the stream that night, and Lincoln, having looked the other way and listened, gave orders accordingly. It was a good enough place for a bivouac, and night was falling in.

Louis had won golden opinions by putting up a good bout. Crawford sang himself into favor. Bizard capped it all by crossing the stream in the canoe and shooting an enormous sow that had strayed from some settler's abandoned cabin. There was meat for all, no rain, and everybody happy.

They set the canoe upside down for Lincoln's shelter. After he had posted sentries, who joined in the chorus of Crawford's songs to keep themselves awake in the outer lonesomeness, he came and sat with his back against it to talk with Louis, Bizard and Conrad, who had built a small fire.

Lincoln wanted to know everything, from Black Hawk's reason for taking the warpath, to what was the value in cash or barter of a beaver's pelt; and it was a long time before the whole story of the massacre at St. Pierre des Bœufs was told, because of his frequent interruptions.

It was longer yet before Louis chose to discuss his own affairs. But there was something ruggedly appealing about the gaunt wrestler that at last overcame Louis's reticence. He spoke of Daphne.

"Was her father's name Beauchéval?" asked Lincoln.

Then it was his turn to be cross-examined, and he told of Daphne's arrival at Dixon's Ferry with the baby in her arms, and of her leaving the same noon.

"Have you seen your child?" he asked. "When was it born?"

Bizard bellowed laughter at that, rolling over and holding his sides, until men came running from the camp fire to discover what the joke was.

"Abe been tellin' a new one?"

They went back to join in Crawford's choruses when they learned it was not one of Abe's reminiscences.

"Imbeciles!" yelled Bizard. "Blind—all four of us! And there it was, plainer than writing. Ha-ha-hah! She found a baby—Turner's baby, it mus' have been—and took the goat along to suckle it. Such a mystery! Yah-hah-hah-ho-ho!" It struck him as indescribably funny.

"Yes, there was a goat," said Lincoln. "We forgot to ask her married name, and that's strange, for we all supposed she *was* married—and I think her father said so."

"So she *is* married," said Louis. "I am her husband."

Lincoln stared at him.

"How is it you are separated?" he asked after a long pause."

So Louis explained that, and tersely gave his reasons for going hot-foot after Black Hawk. "He gave his word to me he wouldn't attack St. Pierre. Then straightway he did it. I'm going to get him if it's the last thing I ever do."

"Did he or his braves attack the place?" asked Lincoln.

"He was skulking at the rear," said Louis, and told that part of the story. "He tried to claim he'd kept his word to me by sparing my life and that of these three. I told him to his face I'd get him or die for it."

LINCOLN thought for a long time, staring at Louis across the fire, with his long legs stretched out straight in front of him.

"There were orders not to burn Black Hawk's village on Rock Island," he said at last. "But our troops burned it. There are orders not to kill Indians if they surrender. I regret to say I know of cases where they have been killed.

"The only promises a man can keep are those which concern his own actions. I learned that when I indorsed a friend's promise to pay a sum of money. It took me two years to save enough to pay when that man failed to keep the promise."

"Yes, but you paid," Louis argued sulkily.

"My fault lay in overtrusting," Lincoln answered; and Louis thought that over for a long time, lying with his elbows on the ground and his head between his hands.

"H-m! You paid, though," he said at last. "So must Black Hawk."

"I think he will," said Lincoln. "He has a long account to settle. But are you sure he made no effort to keep his men from attacking that village of yours? I know we made an effort to keep our men from burning his village, for I was there. Is he so much better than we are that you hold him so responsible? Or is he a savage?"

"Damn him, he's a savage!" Louis answered.

"And his men?"

"Huh!"

"Can he wrestle?" asked Lincoln; and Louis stared hard at him.

"I can persuade my men to obey orders—sometimes—by wrestling with any one who disobeys," Lincoln went on. "But, at that, I have had to wear a wooden sword on two occasions as a sign that the whole company was in disgrace.

"The reason why we are here tonight, and not fifty miles beyond, is that the men refuse to go farther from home. And the reason why I shall no longer be a captain one week from now is that my men have decided to go home and till their farms. I can imagine Black Hawk has his difficulties."

Louis laughed at last. "Bizard always said the militia's no better than a mob, didn't you, Paul?"

"And are the Indians our superiors?" asked Lincoln. "I am willing to concede that Black Hawk is a good general, for he has given proof of it. But so is Atkinson a good general. How would it be for General Black Hawk to cut General Atkinson's throat in the night, because some of our troops burned Black Hawk's village?"

"Has Atkinson made promises?" asked Louis.

"He gave the order not to burn that village."

"Were women and children in it?"

"Yes."

Louis thought again a long time.

"Why don't you lay off Black Hawk's trail yourself, then, if you think he's in the right?" he demanded at last.

"General Black Hawk," said Lincoln, "has brought on a state of affairs in which the only possible course is to defeat him, however long it takes. He has challenged the United States. As a man who must inevitably be defeated he has my sympathy.

"I borrowed a horse to come and help defeat him, but I would like to make friends with him afterward, and your account of him has increased that feeling."

Bizard chuckled, his eyes gleaming mischievously in the firelight.

"By gar, Louis, what you think?" he asked.

Conrad coughed dryly. "The captain's damn right," he remarked.

But Louis said nothing. He had a way of laying out his thoughts on two sides, setting one against the other, which required time.

Crawford was still singing ridiculous songs over by the camp fire; some of the men were joining in the chorus, others were asleep, and the bivouac was slowly settling down for the night.

Nothing disturbed the outer silence but the melancholy howling of a wolf, which the company mongrel replied to by barking hysterically.

"Like candidates for office," Lincoln remarked.

CONRAD rose to his feet, straightening his back in jerks. "My rheumatiz irks me, gol-durn it. Mebbe ef I walk a bit she'll ease up," he said, and wandered off into the dark. He was gone a long time. Lincoln got up presently to walk his rounds and relieve the sentries, which also took a long time. There were arguments about whose turn it was, and why sentries were needed anyway. The howling of the wolf had ceased; the company mongrel, satisfied that he had routed the intruder, curled up and fell asleep under the canoe.

Crawford turned in under somebody's blanket, and the bivouac grew very still.

Out of the dark, from the direction of the river, Conrad came at last, carrying something, and no longer obviously suffering.

"B'ar's grease!" he remarked, and sat down with a contented grunt.

Bizard reached a hand out, felt at the bag Conrad had brought, and said nothing. Louis did the same thing. Listening intently, Conrad satisfied himself that Lincoln was nowhere near before he spoke again.

"Gol-durn her hide, I *said* she'd find me," he remarked at last. "Squaws is unreasonin' faithful. I giv' her the res' of our deer meat. She canoed up fr'm Ol' Man Creek—that was her, wolf-howlin' awhile back. I hed her rub the b'ar's grease inter me.

"Daphne's all safe along o' Blue Heron an' a 'breed squaw, name o' Two Crows, an' she's lost Beaucheval, which won't hurt nobody, except him, mebbe. Two Crows is sucklin' the Turner baby, which Daphne diskivered 'live an' kickin' near the fort, an' the three of 'em are givin' Sully a blin' trail all they know how. Sully's on the rampage—so she says."

"I'll go and talk with her," said Louis.

"Son, you won't. She's a mile downstream by this, an' I'd ha' gone with her if it weren't you promised Lincoln we'd all stay. I ain't disparagin'; you put up the best wrastle you hed, but I wisht it hed ben Bizard; he'd ha' busted that long captain feller."

"Why such a hurry?" asked Bizard, for Louis was silent, eating self-reproach.

"'Cause I sent her smokin'! Durned ol' fool, she's ben an' knifed two militiamen as was guardin' Blue Heron at Dixon's! Ef she was ketched they'd shoot her sartain.

"Seems she an' Blue Heron kep' after Daphne an' stole her fr'm Fort Armstrong; the officers was goin' ter send her to St. Louis or somewhere. On the way upstream they near run inter Sully. Blue Heron learned o' you bein' alive fr'm a Sac prisoner at Dixon's, an' he figgers now ter k e e p Daphne out o' Sully's reach ontil—Look out, here comes the captain!"

"I didn't know you had a bag with you," said Lincoln, stumbling over it in the dark.

"Oh, didn't yer?" said Conrad. "I don't min' you knowin'. I was keerful o' them boys of yourn."

"Good night," said Lincoln, rolling under the canoe. Then, from under it: "I wish I had your gift of speaking Indian languages."

For five minutes the only sound was either the beginning of a snore or else a chuckle, from under the canoe; it was difficult to tell which.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"IT'S A SORT O' MODESTY; WE MALES DON'T HAVE IT."

THE whole traffic of the forces operating against Black Hawk followed the course of the river; some by boat, some on foot and horseback along the left bank.

There were nights when the river was as quiet as in the days before the coming of the white man, with no sound but the music of the water and the breathing of wind among reeds; other nights full of l a u g h t e r and swearing, with crimson glow of bivouac fires reflected in the stream, creaking of oars and cordage and the shouts and splashing of boat crews aground in the dark.

Nights again, full of the nervous, hushed silence that warns ears keyed to the voice of nature; for night is never silent unless alien intrusion stills her myriad voices.

Blue Heron's alertness for danger conveyed itself to Daphne without words. She ceased singing, and, though the thought that she was going to meet Louis transcended all else and she was happier than she had ever been, her eyes and ears grew as keen as an Indian's for the unusual, which is danger's keynote.

They passed a bivouac where a dozen boats were tied to the shore and sentries stood outlined in the glow of fires, but that was nothing to arouse anxiety; they even crept in close from curiosity, and took delight in slipping in and out between the pools of firesheen on the water.

To Daphne the thrill was exquisite, of passing so close, all unknown, to the men ashore and passing on into starlit wilderness. That was not the danger. There was something else. They sensed it. It was something the night held in store for them—bad medicine, Blue Heron would have called it—that aroused what the dogmatists would scorn as superstition.

Long before dawn Blue Heron turned inshore and hid the canoe with even more than usual attention to minutest details. Then he led the way to a cave that had an entrance like a slot, through which they had to crawl; but once inside, they found it thirty feet long, and even when Blue Heron lit a pine-knot it was hard to see the blackened roof.

Remains of fires and smoked walls

showed that it had been used by Indians frequently. There was firewood heaped in confusion at one end, and out of the midst of that Blue Heron produced a skin bag nearly full of parched corn.

Then he pulled away more of the firewood and uncovered the mouth of a smaller, inner cave into which he signed to them to crawl, and, following, he pulled the dry twigs and branches back into place.

The squaws settled down at once to sleep, but it was stuffy in there, and Daphne sat close to the opening to get what little air came through the interstices of the heaped wood.

"Now tell me about Louis," she demanded abruptly. She had surely made enough concession to the Indian's dislike of telling news without long forethought.

However, Blue Heron had little to tell, and did not enlarge on it. While under guard at Dixon's Ferry he had talked with a Sac prisoner, who had seen Louis and his three friends set free by Black Hawk. The Sac had been sent scouting immediately afterward, and had been captured. That was all.

"Then how are we ever going to find Louis?"

She could see Blue Heron's face now against the faint light that filtered through the opening. He jerked his head in the direction of the squaws.

"Running Caribou taking bag to Mountain Goat."

He knew, and assumed that she would know, that Louis and his friends would follow the marked trail from the fort to the pond and down Rock River.

"I'll go with her!"

Blue Heron shook his head. He had his own reasons for believing that if Running Caribou were caught it might go hard for any one caught with her, but he did not say that; he fell back on his promise to protect Daphne and stay by her.

"Why don't we all go with Running Caribou?" she asked him.

HE appeared to consider that suggestion, for he made no answer for a long time. She was about to ask again when he leaned and whispered to her to keep still, and she knew by his attitude that he had heard some sound too distant for her own ears to detect.

After awhile she, too, heard heavy footsteps, and soon after that two men crawled into the outer cavern—big men—she could see their bulk against the opening. Then a voice that she knew sent cold chills down her spine. It was Sully!

"God, I'm tired! Yes, this'll serve fine. Fetch some wood and make a fire."

The other man pulled away so much wood from the heap that he uncovered six inches of the opening.

"There's a smaller cave in back there," he said. "We could stow the regular trade goods here for a blind, and put the real stuff in back. There's room enough in there for powder an' rifles to—"

"Hush!" said Sully.

The other man laughed and went about making the fire. "Who d'ye s'pose 'll hear?"

"You never know," said Sully.

He lit the fire and sat down, facing the other man across it. "Now listen," he said, "I'll give ye a letter to St. Louis as will make y'r credit good. I stole pen and ink at Armstrong's. You buy the stuff an' ship it; that part's up to you. Best pack it in a keel-boat underneath trade blankets; an' you might add tobacco and cardigan weskits f'r the soldiers—that's always a good blind. Let rum alone—they'll all be sellin' rum. I'll get over to Keokuk's village from here, an' pick some good dependable Injuns to do the actual trading.

"Y'understand, I can't trade with Black Hawk personal; that 'ud be too

risky, and there's more'n a chance he couldn't pay. *Sacré bleu!* We ain't runnin' this risk f'r nothing! I'll point out to the gang I'm going to pick, that if they buy the stuff from me, they can sell at a profit to Black Hawk. Get me?

"I'll give them credit; if they never pay they'd be in hock to me, an' that'd suit me fine. Meanwhile, I'll put 'em to work. While you're buying and shipping the goods in St. Louis I'll have 'em look the country over for that gal—she can't ha' gone far."

"She's probably gone back to Dixon's," said the other man.

"Not she! A 'breed squad named Two Crows escaped from Armstrong's same time she did. Blue Heron and Running Caribou got away from Dixon's by murdering two militiamen; they'll never take her back there! And she never got away from Armstrong's without Blue Heron fetching her—I'll bet all I've got on that. Good job I put into Armstrong's!"

"Bet it is. You wouldn't have met me if you hadn't. But what's she running for?"

"She's running away from me," said Sully. "Some young women would sooner be catched than stand still and say yes. It's a sort o' modesty. We males don't have it. Once I've catched her and treated her a bit rough she'll make a fine wife."

"Aye, I've known 'em like that," said the other, "but isn't she kind of overdoing it?"

"She's maybe a mite hysterical," said Sully. "There was happenings at St. Pierre des Bœufs! Say, by the way, you'll go by Armstrong's—do me a favor. There's a man there, name of Beaucheval—an old gray-bearded fool with a big stomach. If he isn't drunk, make him so. Take him with you to St. Louis and lose him; he's a nuisance."

"All right. I guess we understand each other," said the other man. "I'll go. No sense in wasting time. I'll take the canoe to Armstrong's and ride a steamer down from there. Give me the letter."

"Can't see to write it in here," said Sully. "Come outside."

THEY crawled out just as dawn was breaking, and Blue Heron, rifle in hand, began to stalk them; but Daphne clutched at him, clung to him, insisted, went into a panic at the prospect of more murder. So Blue Heron waited; but he crept to the opening of the outer cave, and slipped out when her back was turned. She heard a shot before she knew he was gone, and scrambled out into the open.

Sully saw her. The other man fired at Blue Heron and missed. Sully, who had no rifle, jumped into a canoe and would have left the other man behind if he had not rushed into the water and grabbed the stern; he climbed in clumsily, and by that time Blue Heron had reloaded.

Daphne cried out to him, but he ran along the bank trying to get another shot; when he did fire his bullet splashed astern.

He came back, excusing himself on the ground that the rifle was a bad one. He was very angry with Daphne for not letting him kill Sully when he had the chance. He said that now they must go away, because Sully would undoubtedly return with Indians, who would discover them very easily. The very first thing was to find a canoe for Running Caribou to use in her search for Conrad.

So in broad daylight they set off again upstream, keeping close to the bank and hiding in the reeds whenever the movements of the wild fowl suggested danger. Several times they were passed by keel-boats returning empty from Dixon's; they made very slow progress and found no canoe, although Blue Heron's keen eyes searched every possible hiding place. At last he decided to give Running Caribou the one they had, and to hide and wait for her.

Daphne put up a hard fight to go with her, but Blue Heron stood on his promise, saying he did not care whether the squaw was killed or not, but that he had given his word to his brother, Wideawake, to safeguard Daphne. To clinch the argument he showed her a cord with which he would tie her hands if necessary.

So Running Caribou went on alone, and for awhile they lay up in an old abandoned teepee near where the Prophets' village had been before the troops destroyed it.

But toward evening they heard militia—one of those independent companies marching aimlessly anywhere, to keep the men from quarrelling among themselves. Rather than run the risk of being caught by them, Blue Heron took the trail again.

It was he, not Daphne, who was growing panic-stricken now. The 'breed squaw took her lot philosophically, carrying both babies, seemingly content as long as there was a man to give her orders; but Blue Heron was nervous and irritable, imagining more danger than there was, and leading them farther and farther westward toward the Mississippi.

At last, after dark, he announced that they could reach the Mississippi before morning, and perhaps they might cross that and be safe on the western side. Daphne objected strenuously, but he threatened again to tie her hands, and the 'breed squaw took Blue Heron's part, having no more taste than he had to be retaken by the troops.

So there was nothing for it but to go with them, and Daphne had to carry her own bag, for otherwise Blue Heron heaped it on to Two Crows, who already had both babies and the heavy bag of parched corn.

They walked all night, and she could have cried from weariness long before morning came, only that she knew that would put Blue Heron in an even worse temper than he was in already.

Before morning, however, he decided it was dangerous to continue without first scouting carefully. He left them hidden in a thicket on the edge of a cranberry bog and went forward alone to reconnoiter. Daphne fell asleep, too tired and wretched at last to care whether she ever waked again.

She was wakened by a yell at the break of dawn as a party of twenty of Black Hawk's scouts left cover. Two Crows had disappeared with both the babies. Blue Heron was nowhere to be seen, although she heard a rifle shot.

The Indians swooped down on her, seized her bag, dragged her to her feet and hurried her toward a copse a quarter of a mile away, behind which their ponies were tethered. There they hoisted her on to one of the ponies behind a feathered brave and galloped away northward.

It was all she could do to cling on, and she knew that if she fell they would only pick her up and tie her; so she clung to the brave's shoulders, set her teeth, and prayed that the troops might come and catch her after all!

At sunset that evening a leg-weary 'breed squaw, carrying a papoose and a white baby, staggered up to a white man with a heavy black beard who was talking earnestly a mile from the river bank with a dozen Indians; they addressed him as Sully. She offered herself to him frankly, for he looked like that kind of man, and said her name was Two Crows and her husband had disappeared. Within five minutes Sully had her story.

"So Blue Heron's dead, is he? Sarve the varmint right! And Daphne—you're sure they were Black Hawk's Injuns?" He turned to the indolent neutrals around him.

"One o' you go and find Black Hawk. Tell him I'm coming f'r that white gal. Tell him I'll give fifty rifles and five barrels o' good powder for her. Let him keep her safe until I show up with the rifles.

"And tell him this: If a hair of her head's hurt, I'll get him, if I have to hunt him to my dying day! Tell him Sully said that. Yes, a rifle, two pounds o' powder and a bag o' bullets for you if you take the message and bring me his answer back."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"IT IS EVIDENCE."

THE frontier code is silence when suspicion is in the air. There are men who don't observe it, but Louis, Bizard, Conrad and Crawford were men who did, and for this reason they could count on one another absolutely, and on themselves with equal confidence. They were one for all and all for one.

Lincoln was a stranger, whom they more than suspected of having witnessed Conrad's interlude with Running Caribou, and although Crawford did not learn of it until the following morning, when he awoke complaining of the quality of militia whisky, he fell on guard as rigidly as the others.

If Conrad was in trouble, they were with him to a man and against all comers, the United States included.

So the march to Old Man's Creek was overhung, so to speak, by a cloud of taciturnity. The four friends marched alone, speaking to one another out of the corners of their mouths at long intervals. Crawford refused to sing for the company, saying his mouth was like the lining of a crow's nest.

The militiamen decided the newcomers were giving themselves airs, dubbed them wilderness dudes, and returned their aloofness with interest. Lincoln had his hands full. It was extremely difficult to keep the men from firing their rifles on the march.

To all intents and purposes a state of mutiny existed: the men were going home, they were determined on it, and were celebrating the intention. Their time was up; they had not been paid; they had seen no Indians, had marched on scant rations, had slept in the open, had been kept more sober than they thought was good for them, and were absolutely satisfied that all those in authority were fools, or worse.

Most of them were of opinion that they had turned out in answer to a false alarm, and as they had only been mustered in for a month they considered they were absolutely within their rights in demanding dismissal.

Louis's state of mind was almost desperate. If only Blue Heron had brought Daphne to him, instead of hiding her and sending Conrad's squaw with a message; if only the squaw had not killed two militiamen; if only they four had gone on, the day before, instead of stopping to exchange news with that scout on the river bank; if only he had not been such a fool as to wrestle Lincoln, instead of letting Bizard do it; if only a hundred other things!

"If all the militia's like this," he said, "Black Hawk will overrun the country!"

"These are good," said Bizard. "These are better than the ordinary. By gar, Louis, I was once in the militia. They will do nothing but fight among themselves until Black Hawk defeats them once or twice. Then the privates will leave off giving orders to the generals, and Black Hawk will begin to have the worst of it."

"I'm afraid," said Louis, "that Black Hawk may raid down-river; and he may get Daphne."

They were all afraid of that, so no one answered him. Not a word was said about Running Caribou, for fear of hurting Conrad's feelings; he was just as much entitled to be worried on the squaw's account as Louis was to be worried over Daphne.

Neither had the right, or would have dreamed of claiming the right, to put his own problem first. Each was far more likely to insist on the other's pre-

cedence to the point of quarrelsomeness. The only reference to Running Caribou was made by Conrad himself.

"I told her this outfit's headed fer Ol' Man Crik, an' fer her ter git word to us thar, if she kin."

THAT was about the sum-total of their conversation until they trudged into camp at Old Man's Creek near nightfall, and were greeted by a whole militia regiment that turned out en masse to view the four friends curiously and to yell for news. There was no rifle-firing, though; General Atkinson was there in person with some of his staff and the beginnings of the grip of discipline were being made felt.

Lincoln went into the general's tent to report and the four friends waited within hail. They made no plans in advance, held no conference; each knew the others' loyalty, and they were too used to facing difficulties as they turned up, to waste breath on useless speculations.

When a sentry summoned them they filed into the general's tent, carrying their rifles, with exactly the same air with which they would have entered any stranger's quarters; no swagger about it, just a tinge of deference and the innate courtesy of strength under control.

Lincoln, standing by the general's rough plank table, introduced them. Atkinson motioned to them, and they sat down on a row of boxes of provisions, their long rifles upright between their knees.

General Henry Atkinson was a rather handsome man, clean-shaven except for a touch of whisker on either jaw, and something of a dandy. He smacked more of the ancient order than the new, sat upright with an aristocratic air, and wore his epaulettes with the distinguished air of breeding seen in portraits of a century ago—not one item of which was a recommendation in the eyes of the four friends. They might have felt at ease with him if he had lolled in his chair or leaned his elbows on the table. However, his first words were disarming.

"Captain Lincoln tells me you four gentlemen have rigidly kept your word to him. I understand that you came with him unwillingly, having other business of your own, but that, once having promised, you made no difficulties. I am obliged to you. Please tell me what you know of the affair at St. Pierre des Bœufs."

One by one, prompting one another now and then, they unfolded the story of the massacre as they had told it to Lincoln, including the account of Louis's visit to Black Hawk, his effort to bind a bargain that should have prevented the massacre, and the effort all four of them had made to track down Black Hawk afterward and kill him. Atkinson turned the story over in his mind for a long time before he asked another question. Then, indicating Louis:

"You have been accused of instigating the massacre at St. Pierre des Bœufs."

"By him?" asked Louis, staring at Lincoln; and Lincoln smiled broadly.

"No. By a man from St. Pierre des Bœufs, who gave a very different account of the whole affair."

The friends exchanged glances, but nobody spoke.

"You make no comment?"

"Yes," said Crawford, grinning through his mess of tangled red whiskers, "I'll say somethin'. The man who told yer that was Sully, an' he maybe figgered we was dead; he always was a optimist. He was born tellin' lies, an' he'll die tellin' 'em—onless I ketch him with a bullet 'fore he has a chanst ter speak."

Atkinson spoke again after a long pause, during which he examined each man's face minutely.

"Captain Lincoln tells me he believes your story. I am inclined to agree with him. But he also tells me

that last night an Indian squaw stole up-river in a canoe and had a conference with one of you." He looked hard at Conrad. "The squaw went away again down-river. Have you anything to say?"

"I hev a squaw," said Conrad. "She's a Cree, an' faithfuller than night an' mornin'. She brought the b'ar's grease fer my rheumatiz."

"Why did you send her away?" asked Atkinson.

"Because the environments o' the militia ain't no place fer squaws," said Conrad dryly.

"Where did she go to?"

"Ef I knew, I'd foller," Conrad answered. "She's gettin' awful old. I'm kind o' worried on her 'count."

"You sent her away without knowing where she was going?"

"Gol-durn it, I couldn't go with her," said Conrad. "We'd passed our promise ter go with the captain thar."

BUT Atkinson was not yet satisfied. He crossed his legs, uncrossed them, and leaned forward over the table.

"Not spying for the enemy?" he asked.

Conrad smiled. Crawford bristled angrily. Bizard let out a great gruff laugh. Louis frowned.

"I'll wager my life on it she weren't," said Conrad quietly.

Atkinson picked up a pencil and turned it end over end on the table, glanced at Lincoln swiftly and down again, struck his teeth with the pencil, and looked again piercingly at Conrad:

"There were two Indians—a Sac, and a squaw who was not a Sac, who came down-river with some refugees named Beaucheval from St. Pierre des Bœufs. Both Indians were detained for information. One of them, it is believed the squaw, murdered two sentries, and both Indians escaped.

"My information is, that the squaw had admitted she belonged to a Mr. Conrad; and that the Indian's name was Blue Heron. Now, are that squaw who escaped from Dixon's, and the one who visited you last night, the same?"

Conrad did not hesitate a moment. "Yes," he answered.

"And she murdered those militiamen?"

Lincoln coughed sharply. "Is that evidence?" he asked, stroking his chin.

"I weren't there," said Conrad. "I couldn't answer that."

Atkinson played with the pencil again, frowning and glancing up under his eyelids. The sentry came in with a candle-lantern, set it on the table and went out.

"If you four men are honest," said Atkinson suddenly, "why don't you tell me frankly what all this means?"

"You didn't ask," said Louis. "I'll tell you. My wife's somewhere over the river, hiding from Sully, who wants her. I haven't killed Sully because I promised not. Maybe Sully thinks I'm dead.

"Blue Heron swore to me, and Running Caribou swore to Conrad, they'd look after my Daphne. If you separated them from what they'd sworn to do, they're Injuns, and they wouldn't let two strangers' lives stand between them and doing what they said."

"Who is your wife?" asked Atkinson.

"Daphne, daughter of old Beaucheval."

"They were sent down-river. Where do you say they are? How do you know?" demanded Atkinson.

"My squaw brought that news las' night," said Conrad. "Her, an' Blue Heron an' Daphne an' another squaw is hidin' somewhere's over thar."

"Very well," said Atkinson. "In that case we will send and find them. Captain Lincoln, you will take your company across the river at dawn, find these individuals and bring them here to me. Meanwhile, will you four men give parole, or—"

The friends exchanged glances again.

"Personal, between you and us, we'll stay," said Louis, "until we serve you notice otherwise."

"See they draw rations," said Atkinson, and Lincoln led the four outside.

They messed with Lincoln, at his request. "Boys, I'm not questioning your promise to stay here, but I'd like to be able to answer to-morrow morning for all you did during the night."

"We'll tell you," said Louis.

"There will be no need," said Lincoln, lighting a fire with his own hands; and they all sat down beside it.

SO Lincoln was with them, talking under the stars, when a cry like a lost soul's went all through the camp. Three sentries challenged simultaneously, and six hundred men ceased talking and laughing as if a hand from another world had touched them. The cry came from somewhere near the water's edge. Out of the silence a sentry's voice gave an angry command:

"Put yer hands up! Quick, afore I—"

Then the cry again, more melancholy and harrowing than before. Conrad sprang to his feet and without a word to any one went hurrying toward the river, Louis hard after him, then the others, Lincoln last.

In the darkness by the river bank Running Caribou was standing close to a canoe, with both hands up over her head and the bayonets of two sentries thrust against her ribs. Conrad ran straight up to her and almost showed emotion:

"You ol' bad penny! Gol-durn your hide, what d'ye think y're doin' here?"

She jerked her head toward the canoe, still holding up her hands, too terrified to answer. One of the sentries spoke to Lincoln:

"There's a dead Injun and a gov'-ment rifle in the canoe, sir."

Louis, Lincoln, Bizard, Crawford seized the canoe and dragged it clear of the water. Louis's arms were down into it first; he raised Blue Heron by the shoulders.

"He's alive," he said curtly.

But that was all. There was an arrow in his ribs, broken off nearly flush with the skin. No more life remained in him than was kept there by sheer strength of will. His lips moved, and Louis laid his ear close to them to listen, all holding their breath for fear he might lose one word of the almost inaudible voice.

"Fellers," said Louis at last, getting into the canoe and sitting down to let Blue Heron's shoulders lean back against him, "Black Hawk's scouts took Daphne yesterday, and Blue Heron stopped an arrow.

"He shot the man who came to scalp him, and he's got the scalp o' that man in his fingers now. He says it's the scalp o' the Pottawotamie who stole his squaw; that means the Pottawotamies has joined Black Hawk. He says—what's that?"

"Go on, Blue Heron, I'm listening—he says he crawled toward the river and Running Caribou found him and helped him the rest of the way, and gave him the news of us. Go on, Blue Heron, say that again. He says, we're his brothers and he's our brother—and he's sorry, but he done his best—and to tell you all good-by."

Blue Heron's head fell back on Louis's shoulder, but he was still breathing. Out of the darkness Conrad's voice mumbled and grumbled, talking in an Indian dialect to Running Caribou. Lincoln touched him on the shoulder.

"Sorry," he said kindly, "but she's under arrest. You may talk to her in English, if I listen."

"Louis!" Conrad shouted—almost yelled. "Ask Blue Heron who killed them two militiamen!"

"I guess he's gone," said Louis. "Gone, or awful near it."

But Crawford knew where whisky could be found. He took it from a

man who wanted money for it. Bizard kept the rightful owner of the stuff at bay, and Crawford held the flask to Blue Heron's lips.

"Go on, yer lucky stiff, swallow!" he commanded. "Yer'll go out feelin' good!"

Blue Heron's throat moved and he swallowed a good mouthful of the potent stuff. His eyes opened. Louis began to speak to him in the Sac language, but it was some time before Blue Heron seemed to understand. At last, however, he smiled grimly and his lips moved in answer.

"I heard him!" shouted Bizard, too eager for Conrad's sake. He had not heard a word. No one had.

"Hush!" said Louis. "He's asking something. Oh, I get it; he wants to die standing up."

He rose and hove Blue Heron to his feet, standing behind him with arms under his. Blue Heron seemed to gather all his strength for one last effort.

"Me—I kill those men!" he said, and died.

LOUIS gently laid his body down again, full length in the canoe, and gazed into Blue Heron's face a long moment. At last he straightened again.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Lincoln.

"Yes," said Lincoln.

"Do you believe it?" asked Bizard, seizing him by the shoulder.

"It is evidence," said Lincoln, stroking at his chin. It may be that he hid a smile, and maybe not; there was no telling.

In a rather dry tone of voice he requested the whole party to follow him to the general's tent, where a conference was going on; they had to wait a long time until it ended. When the staff officers filed out at last, and they filed in, the general looked very tired, but he listened attentively while Lincoln described what had taken place.

"Is that the squaw?" General Atkinson demanded at last, and Running Caribou was stood up in front of him.

Her face was like a mask. He began to question her, but she answered absolutely nothing.

"Doesn't she know English? Ask her why she doesn't answer!"

"She's too skeered," said Conrad. "She's gittin' awful old. She's carried that heavy Injun, Lord knows how fur, an' brought him across the river, an' she's skeered o' baynits an' bein' shot—an' she ain't nowise talkative, not any time."

"And all of you heard Blue Heron say that he killed those two men at Dixon's? You heard it, Captain Lincoln? You say she's your squaw, Mr. Conrad? Since when? Twenty years, eh? Um-m-m! Released in your custody. And now, what do you men propose to do?"

Louis stood out at once in front of him. "I serve you notice that I'm leaving the camp," he announced.

"Same here!" said Crawford, standing up.

"And me!" said Bizard, lining up with Louis. Conrad said nothing for the moment.

"I'm off after Black Hawk," said Louis.

"Same here!" remarked Crawford.

"Me, too!" echoed Bizard.

"He's taken my wife prisoner. I'm off to settle the account with him," said Louis.

"And I serve all of you notice," said General Atkinson, smiling grimly, "that I will put up with no such independent nonsense!

"You are the very men we need as scouts. You may go against Black Hawk on those terms, or else be sent down-river. There's a scout battalion forming. If you like to join that I'll promise to keep you out in front, as close to the enemy as you can get. I've no authority to make you join. I offer you the opportunity."

All three demurred. They loathed the militia life. Recollection and tra-

dition—the free air of the wilderness that they had breathed—made them despise subordination; they laughed at the very thought of taking orders from an officer in epaulettes. It was not until Lincoln put in a word that they capitulated.

"Three days from now my men are to be mustered out. I shall reënlist as a private," he said quietly.

Bizard yielded first. "All right, Long-legs," he grinned. "By gar, I join up jes' to wrastle you! I beat you good—you wait an' see!"

"All right," said Louis. "If you don't keep your word and send us to the front, I'll go anyhow. I'll join."

"Hell!" exclaimed Crawford, grinning through his whiskers. "Me a long-knife! Sarve out yer sabers! Sure, I'm comin' in!"

"And you?" asked the general.

Conrad nodded reluctantly, but firmly.

"What about that squaw?"

"I'll send her somewhere till the campaign's over," Conrad answered.

Outside in the darkness Conrad talked to Running Caribou in the midst of a circle of his three friends, with Lincoln looking on.

"Gol-durn your hide, ef you weren't all that old I'd have let 'em shoot yer! Now, whar's that white papoose? Yer don't know? Go find it! Take it over to Keokuk's village an' find it a good wet-nurse—understan'? Straight after that, you git on Black Hawk's trail! And git took pris'ner!

"Gol-durn your hide, it 'u'd sarve ye right if ye was scalped! Git took pris'ner, an' git close ter Daphne. Git her away ef ye kin. Ef ye can't then stay by her. Tend to her. Look after her."

He turned to Louis. "Lift Blue Heron out o' the canoe; I'm goin' ter send her away in it."

Louis and Bizard went down to the water's edge and Lincoln followed them, with an eye to the rifle that was still in the canoe.

"Now see here, ye ol' fool," said Conrad with his arm around the squaw, "they'll have ter sarve me out a new rifle, so I'll give yer this one. Take keer o' y'rself. Mebbe they'll not scalp ye ef ye han' the rifle over. An' no more murderin's—ye understan'?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"YOU'RE DAM-RIGHT!"

LOUIS, Bizard, Conrad, and Crawford buried Blue Heron on the top of a mound, looking westward over Rock River toward the plains his soul had yearned for. It was their last act as freemen of the wilderness.

That morning Captain Abraham Lincoln administered the oath of allegiance to the United States of America and thenceforth they were drops in an ocean of power, whose prodigious destiny few men foresaw as yet.

Then came the rain—the wet Wisconsin clouds that turned the undrained leagues into foundering swamps, as if the very elements were fighting for Black Hawk.

Floods along the river wrecked the long flotillas of supplies; horses and cannon and men were bogged until a five-mile march was a long day's labor; cholera broke out in the camps down-river; starvation and worn-out boots played havoc with the front; politics at the rear nurtured disaster and discouragement.

Traders, figuring percentages and boasting louder than the politicians who protected them, sold whisky to the troops until at last, in desperation, General Atkinson issued his famous standing order, that any man found drunk must dig his own grave to save trouble for the burying squads.

Black Hawk's men swooped down on unprotected points, and everybody blamed everybody else for disasters that did, and did not happen.

For a month, and longer, out in the ain, long leagues ahead of the toiling

regiments, Louis, Bizard, Crawford, and Conrad sought for contact with Black Hawk as persistently as wolves on a moose's trail. First one and then the other took back word to the army, but Louis never; nothing induced him to slacken for a moment the tense strain of the hunt.

It was he who first discovered that the Sacs were eating their own horses, although, knowing how that news would hearten the whites, they made every effort to conceal the fact. Louis signaled for Bizard across ten miles of country, and they met midway.

"Go straight to the general, Paul. Don't say a word to another living soul. Tell him to drive, and drive, and throw all them loads away, and to hell with cannon, but keep his troops together and we'll bring on a pitch fight now in next to no time."

So Bizard took that message back, and grinned in the faces of staff officers who ordered him to tell them what he knew. They even put him under arrest, and he could not find one friend to reach the general's private ear, until at last in desperation he knocked two sentries' heads together and burst into Atkinson's tent.

"By gar, I quit your army!" he announced. "Give me two hundred pick' men—me, I pick 'em!—and I bring you Black Hawk tied on a teepee pole!"

Then he gave Atkinson the message, with his own conclusions added. "Your army is like a blacksmith trying to make watches! By gar, you should be like dogs after a buck! You should run him down, and eat after you got 'im! Look out, or Black Hawk cross the Mississippi, an' then you hunt 'im two hundred year! March, quick now, an' you ketch him before he cross."

THAT was the beginning of the final drive that brought Black Hawk to bay, but only the beginning of it. It took time to organize and launch the hard-marching battalions of picked men who needed no pampering and whose only ambition was to come to blows and have the business over with.

And meanwhile, Louis held the trail in wind and storm, deciphering the signs, deducing this and that at times he was confused by Black Hawk's deliberate efforts to throw scouts off the scent, but he always picked up the trail again, and always left at least half a day ahead of the regular scout battalion that spread itself in a long, enduring line across the wilderness.

They turned aside for every wisp of smoke, investigated every burned hut, sent back a skein of guesswork for every thread of truth. He kept to the true trail; and Bizard, Crawford, and Conrad were the links that kept touch with the rear.

It was Louis who sent back word that might have prevented the disaster at Kellogg's Grove. He was actually in Black Hawk's rear when the desperate chief made that raid that routed Dement's men and increased his store of rifles and ammunition.

It was then that he first got news of Daphne. Black Hawk had thrown a screen of scouts to keep both flanks clear and to secure his line of retreat. Louis crept up on one of them, clubbed him with his rifle butt, and, finding after awhile that he was only stunned, coaxed him back to consciousness.

The Sac was free enough with information after Louis had shared his own scant rations with him; he said that Daphne was well mounted on a good, fat pony, and well cared for by the squaws. He said there was a Cree squaw, who waited on her hand and foot, although the only reason why the Cree had not been killed was that she bought her life with a very good rifle from the man who captured her.

He also said that Black Hawk had moved heaven and earth to persuade the Fox and Winnebago tribes to join him, but had so far failed, and that about all that was left for the chief to do was to cross the Mississippi. He

gave the number of braves in the field as eighteen hundred, but said they were becoming discouraged.

Louis handed the prisoner over to Bizard, who convoyed him to the rear, and after that Louis was never more than twenty miles in the wake of the Sac retreat. For retreat had begun in real earnest; Black Hawk was sending his emissaries over the river to feel out the attitude toward him of the tribes on the other side.

His own scouts, and more than one white trader, had warned him of Atkinson's preparations; and there were steamboats, armed with light cannon, working their way up the river, hampered by shoal water and by having to cut wood for fuel, but deadly dangerous if he should delay the crossing too long.

And then at last came the really determined effort of the whites at last, made by men who took their cue from J. D. Henry. He cared for neither precedent nor politician, spared neither horse nor man, but clapped his tough volunteers on Black Hawk's trail and let them melt under the strain until hardly six hundred of them still stood up in the ranks when Black Hawk chose a battleground on the bluffs of the Wisconsin, and left it strewn with his own dead—his first defeat.

Henry's men—they had abandoned blankets, provisions, everything except ammunition—had gone their limit for the moment; but Atkinson now hurled his regulars into the chase.

Officers and men rankled with jealousy of the militia that had presumed to "show them how," so that the pursuit of Black Hawk never slackened, Henry's exhausted and depleted companies, reduced now to the strength of hardly a battalion, bringing up the rear.

THE trail, by lake and river and woods, was by now littered with Black Hawk's abandoned camp stuff; the Sacs had no time to hide their trail; they had eaten most of their horses. There were bodies of braves who had died of neglected wounds; occasional squaws too spent to march; bones of the horses eaten, every other evidence of pell-mell flight.

And for scores of miles behind the pursuing column lay a line of stragglers, foundered horses, cannon and wagons and commissariat abandoned in the rain, lest Black Hawk get away from them.

There was no doubt of the outcome any longer, even in Black Hawk's mind; he was no longer fighting Stillman's picnicking militia. The grim old savage strained every nerve to get his already beaten force across the Mississippi before the avenging whites could catch up.

And at last, out of the mist of an August morning, word came from Louis d'Arras, who had not sent one false word of information, that Black Hawk had rallied his braves at Bad Axe, only a few miles farther on. A roar went up, and, like a confirmation from Olympus, came the boom of cannon as a river gunboat raked a party of a hundred picked braves on the Sac right wing.

The scouts closed in on one another, forming one scant company that engaged the Sacs and tried to hold them until the army could come up; for Black Hawk's stand was a heroic effort to save his force from destruction, not a vainglorious attempt to hurl back the tide of the advancing whites. He split his force in halves and set one-half to crossing the river while the other half stood at bay.

Louis, Bizard, Crawford, and Conrad were all together in the midst of the company, hard-pressed by the Sacs, shooting through a mixture of mist and acrid powder smoke, when the first of the regiments came roaring into range and opened fire.

The instant that crackling din broke out—they could not see for rifle smoke, and a cloud bank from the rifles of the Sac braves drifted on the breeze to

mix with it—the four friends cut loose from the formed-up scouts without as much as a "by your leave" to any one, and raced for the river bank, hoping to catch sight of Daphne.

In a minute they were face to face with a party of Sac braves, who rose out of ambush and exchanged one volley, then fled, thinking there were probably a hundred men behind them; and in another second they were wrapped in smoke and mist.

Then down they lay in the reeds on the river bank and watched the progress of the battle. There was an island crowded with willows on their left front, and on that Black Hawk had rallied his right wing under cannon-fire from the gunboat, in order to cover the retreat of the left wing as it tried to cross the river.

The Sacs had no canoes, no boats. The squaws made tiny rafts of reeds and bark, laid their children on those, and swam. Braves breasted the current with one hand holding a rifle high out of water.

It was no rout, but splendid generalship conducting a retreat from a stricken field. Even when Henry's men roared down the bank and plunged into the river to assault the island there was no panic among Black Hawk's braves; the old chief had them by the reins and held them to it masterfully.

But nothing could stop Henry's men; they "showed the regulars the way" again, swam, waded, stormed the island bank, and got home with the bayonet. It was then, and not until then that the Black Hawk formation went to pieces in a general rout.

And it was then, as the cannon ceased, for fear of butchering Henry's men, that all four friends at once saw Daphne.

TWO ponies plunged into the river from behind the island, each with a rider on its back and surrounded by swimming braves, some of whom clung to the ponies' manes and tails. The troops on the bank opened fire on them, and the hail of bullets forced the swimmers to scatter. Louis plunged into the river just as one of the ponies turned toward him, guided by a squaw, who swam beside it, clinging to its mane.

"Gol-durn her hide, who says the ol' gal ain't got guts!" yelled Conrad. "Ho, there, Running Caribou! This way, y' ol' wolf!"

There wasn't one chance in a million of her hearing him; men were pot-shotting at the heads on the water; the din was deafening. Conrad and Crawford rose and ran along the bank in the line of fire, trying to get them to stop until the pony could reach shore.

And meanwhile Louis's head was enough like an Indian's to make a target for fifty rifles. Bullets splashed in the water all around him, until Bizard joined Conrad and Crawford and ran, yelling, straight at the ranks of the regulars, threatening to shoot an officer apiece unless the firing ceased.

Bizard caught a young lieutenant in his arms and hurled him at his men, then jumped on him and beat him until he ordered his platoon to cease fire, with what scant breath he had left.

Even so, Louis reached the pony amid a shower of bullets. One stray shot drilled the pony's head and it rolled over sidewise. Louis pulled Daphne clear, and she reached out a hand for Running Caribou, while Bizard, plunging breast-deep, waded out toward them; he could not swim; he had to wait until he could grab Louis by the hair and tow him inshore.

They came ashore amid a hail of bullets; men too far away to recognize them were taking pot-shots at everything in sight.

Louis had swallowed so much water, and was so spent with his effort that for a moment he stood speechless on the bank, with one arm around Daphne, looking at her, trying to summon enough self-command to smile. But Bizard did not wait for that; he seized

them both by the back of the head and rubbed their faces tight together.

"Kiss, you imbeciles!" he commanded. "By gar, you meet in a river and gape like two fishes!"

Conrad stripped a blanket from a dead man's pack and approached Running Caribou in no particular hurry. The squaw waited for him, smiling sheepishly.

"Thar, gol-durn your hide, put that on yer," he ordered. "You come near drownin'. She's gittin' awful old," he informed the world at large. "Consarn you, git away an' dry y'self, you ol' murderin' hoss-thief, you'll git pneumoney!"

Louis spoke at last: "Where's Black Hawk?" he demanded.

"Gone," said Daphne. "He was on that other pony. He's across the river."

"Wait here. I'll get him!"

He had already turned to go, but Daphne clung to him. "No, Louis, no! Let him get away—please! For my sake! Listen: he treated me splendidly. He threatened to kill any Sac who was not civil to me. He told me he would never kill you or me unless you forced him to; he said you are his brother. He killed Sully, because Sully tried to steal me and—"

"Killed Sully? When? Where? How?" The four friends spoke in chorus.

"Early this morning. Sully came with a boatload of rifles, but he would not part with any rifles without money. Then he saw me and offered fifty rifles for me. I refused to go and Sully beat me. Black Hawk shot him. His body is in the river somewhere."

"Louis," said Crawford, screwing up his face until it looked like a mop of red whiskers, "I ain't speakin' personal, nor backin' out o' no engagements, an' I'm game ter go ter hell with yer an' kill any Injun as yer say's yer enemy. But, stric'ly atween frien's, an' nothin' personal, mind, that thar Sully's enough to make Black Hawk's 'count reasonable squar'."

"You're dam-right," answered Louis.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"I DID NOT FORGET."

IT was a week before they caught Black Hawk. The Winnebagoes brought him in, dressed in white deerskins. They delivered him to General Street at Prairie du Chien.

Old one-eyed Decori, to whom Black Hawk had surrendered, rose soon after Black Hawk and two other prisoners were seated in the general's tent, and made a short speech:

"My Father:

"We have done what you told us to. You told us to get these men, and said it would be the cause of much good to the Winnebagoes. We have brought them, but it has been very hard for us to do so. Black Hawk was a great way off.

"You told us to bring him to you alive. We have done so. If you had told us to bring his head alone, we would have done so, and it would have been less difficult than what we have done.

"My father, we deliver these men into your hands. We want you to keep them safe. If they are to be hurt, we do not wish to see it. Wait until we are gone before it is done."

So, in the presence of those Winnebagoes, General Street handed over Black Hawk to Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, with orders to protect him on the journey to St. Louis, that they might feel sure he would receive the treatment due to a defeated warrior.

And outside, as he left the tent, Black Hawk shook hands very solemnly with four men and a woman. He looked into the eyes of each, but only spoke to one. To Louis he said:

"You are my brother—you who fed us in the winter when the squaws were hungry. I did not forget."

THE END

What a cigarette meant there

Ten seconds to go—

and raw nerves fighting wearied muscles, driving them on into that fearful unknown beyond the wire. What man will *ever* forget the steadying solace of that last sweet stolen smoke?

What a cigarette means *here*

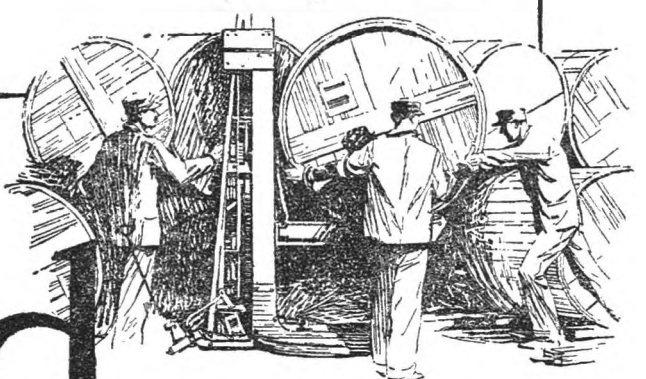
Two years to go—

the slow "ageing" by which tobaccos for Chesterfield lose all bite and harshness . . .

Mysterious, this chemistry of Nature! Endless rows of great hogsheads, stored away in darkness; choice tobacco, tightly packed . . . just waiting. And as if on signal, twice each year the leaf goes through a natural "sweat"—steeps in its own essences, grows mild and sweet and mellow.

Selected leaf, costly patience, endless care—that's what a cigarette means *here.* But right there is *exactly* the reason why Chesterfield means what it does to you!

Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co.



Millions of pounds of choice tobacco from each crop are stored away in great warehouses to "age."

field

. . . . *and yet* THEY SATISFY

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

PRESENTING MR. PERRY

AMONG the newcomers to ARGOSY is Ralph R. Perry, author of many excellent sea stories, besides a long string of Western tales. Mr. Perry makes his bow with a Western novelette, "Men's Business," but he will soon make his second appearance with a fine sea story. Of his experiences he writes:

The hurricane deck of a ship suits me better than the same part of a cowpony. At least, I've spent more time on the former. Left California for the North Atlantic and put in the next three years, partly coastwise, partly deep water. The worst weather I ever encountered was off the Azores. The barometer went down to 28.53, which according to newspapers means a wind velocity of about one hundred and twenty miles an hour. *We* didn't measure it. Too busy trying to get in lifeboats before the sea smashed them. We got in three, and lost three. Pretty even break.

My worst time at sea, though, was within a day's sail of little ole New York. Twenty-seven hours on the deck, and when I got a watch below at last, there was hot and cold water in my bunk. Fact. A leak in the deck was cold; a leak from a steam radiator pipe, hot. I'd always thought I could sleep through anything, too.

When the sea began to be too much like hard work I went hunting after the old West of the cattle and six-guns days I'd missed as a kid. Found some—here and there, away from the railroads and the auto trails in Texas and New Mexico. All this I try to get into my yarns. RALPH R. PERRY.

A PRETTY good case Mr. Wood makes for the Western stories:

Hollywood, Cal.

First of all, I want to sing praises to your Western stories. I've read quite a few kicks about 'em in the Readers' Viewpoint, but please listen to one who *knows* what a big help wild Western yarns are!

I work in a crowded store all day and, believe me, by the time I inhale eight hours of city air and walk four blocks of concrete to my rooming house, a good old Western story, in the keen little magazine called ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, is a God-send. They bring to me starlit nights on a wind-swept prairie, and how a sun sets when not obstructed by a big city. Yes, sir! I am a wild Western booster, and for those who "ain't"—just tell me who they are, and I'll start in arguing "*muy pronto.*" VICTOR WOOD.

A ROOTER for historical fiction is Mr. Weese. We hope that "He Rules Who Can" is near enough to the Roman Empire to fill the bill for him:

Flint, Okla.

Let the old ARGOSY-ALLSTORY "shove off" each week just as she is.

One of the greatest benefits a reader gets from good fiction is general, historical and geographical information. Your old readers who have read steadily for years have gathered more of that than they realize.

Let's have more stories of the Roman Empire. How about one dealing with Napoleon's wars?

The article on "Dead Man's Island" was especially interesting to me because I was stationed at the submarine base at San Pedro. I have seen the island there in the channel hundreds of times, yet never knew there was any one buried there. The coast artillery used it to signal from during 1918.

P. R. WEESE.

PERHAPS one of our readers can help out Mrs. Joslin with the last installment of "The Way of the Strong."

Norwalk, Conn.

I first began reading your magazine some twenty years ago. I think it was first *Argosy*, then *All-Story* and now ARGOSY-ALLSTORY. One particular story I read, about fifteen years ago, "The Way of the Strong," is, in my estimation, the finest story ever written. I read all the story except the last installment, and I have never been able to finish it. We were unable to get the magazine that week, they sell like hot cakes up here. So that story's ending has always been an unsolved mystery to me.

My husband and I always have a friendly scrap as to who reads the magazine first. Wednesday evening runs into Thursday morning before I finish my book.

One story I thought particularly fine in the *All-Story* was "Celeste Marie," that was more than worth the price of the book alone.

"Moonglow" was a fine story, "Squatters' Rights" was another, and I was really sorry to

have that delightful and thrilling "Trouble Ranch" end this week.

George M. Johnson is my favorite author, with George F. Worts next. Can you tell me the author of "Celeste Marie," written about twelve years ago, I think?

I am grateful to Mrs. Nelson H. Brown for her method of saving the best stories. I shall do that also. I like Western stories, in fact, I like all stories that are good, regardless of North, South, East or West, for a setting. Most *all* of them *are* good. You used to publish darky stories. Skeeter Butts and his crowd were my husband's favorites. He always got a good laugh out of them, and I always knew what story he was reading. Can't we have more of them?

Semi Dual was always interesting, and a wonderful character.

One story, a short story, "Take Him for a Ride," by Wirt, made me afraid to go to bed—at three thirty in the morning—until I had tried all the windows. I often wonder if the authors realize how much genuine pleasure and satisfaction they give to others who read their works.

Here is wishing you continual success in your selection of stories for ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY. MRS. FLORENCE N. JOSLIN.

ANOTHER newcomer who has made himself right at home in the ARGOSY family circle is W. Wirt. Plenty more of his yarns on the way to you also.

Chester, Pa.

I've been a steady reader of the ARGOSY for the last fifteen years or more, and will say for good all-around reading it can't be beat. Don't make any changes, let it stay as it is.

I just finished W. Wirt's novelette, "Kill Him, Jimmie—or I Will," and will say it brings things out just as they are in this country to-day.

I have nearly every ARGOSY issued since 1909. A good many of them I've read twice. The first story I can remember reading was "The Land of Lost Hope," and I believe I can truthfully say it was the best I ever read. I guess you know how long it's been since that was published.

I never start a serial until I have all the installments, for when I start I like to go right through with it. O. R. WATTS.

PLENTY of readers seem to want to hear more from Will McMorrow. A two-part story of his will be coming along pretty soon.

Haverhill, Mass.

Inclose find six coupons. I received my drawing and liked it very much. In the last six magazines the stories I liked best were: "Sea Marauders," "The Scandal on Kitikat Key," "The Chinook," "Trouble Ranch," and "The Crime Circus." "Madman's Buff" was a good story, but I think Mr. McMorrow could have done better. Of the short stories I think "In Case of Fire" and "Take Him for a Ride" were the best I have read for some time.

I am glad to see that Mr. Seltzer is coming back again, also Mr. MacIsaac. They are both A No. 1 writers, I think. Can't you get Mr. McMorrow to write a war serial? If he would write one as good as "King's Khaki," which was in the ARGOSY about a year ago it would be O. K.

I like the little articles that you use now much better than the poems. Your covers are great. GEORGE THOMPSON, JR.

STILL another rôle for ARGOSY—Cupid this time! Mrs. Johnson's letter is as interesting as any story we've published.

Robbinsdale, Minn.

About seven years ago I was quite ill. I had been working for my aunt, who had a restaurant. A certain young man who took meals there heard that a girl was sick and asked if I would care for anything to read. When I said yes, he sent me an ARGOSY. After reading it I thought any one who picked such good reading would be worth knowing. Well, he was. He still keeps me supplied with ARGOSIES—and also with the other necessities of life.

We both think the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY can't be beat. MRS. D. JOHNSON.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

I did not like.....

because.....

Name.....

Street.....

City.....*State*.....

12-1

Looking Ahead!

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by W. WIRT

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ISSUE OF DECEMBER 8th

BOOKPLATED—by FRED MACISAAC

will be the complete novelette in this issue—a tale of an every-day lad with an every-day job, who suddenly faces the chance of a lifetime.

The Feature Short Story

GREEN FOR A CLEAR TRACK

by DON WATERS

A railroad story that catches and presents a bit of the heart of the railroad old-timer.

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18K Solid White Gold engagement ring. "A. A. 1" diamond. $3.96 a month.

CA4 $48.50
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CA5 $75.00
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CA7 $36.75
New, lady's friendship ring, 18K Solid White Gold, 3 perfectly matched, blue white diamonds. $2.98 a mo.

CA8 $57.50
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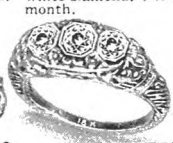

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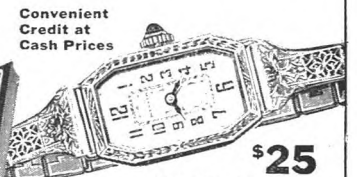

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CA12-The **"Madam Jenny"** The latest from Paris, expressing the modern vogue. Guaranteed **Elgin** movement. As dependable as it is beautiful. Supplied in GREEN JADE, BLACK or RUBY ENAMEL. $2.83 a month.

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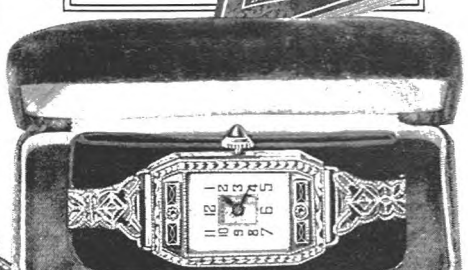
CA15-Nationally advertised, **Elgin** or **Waltham,** gentleman's strap watch. Handsomely engraved, Green or White Gold filled case. Warranted 20 years. Radium dial, accurate and dependable. Specially priced, $2.12 a month.



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