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VOL. CLIII — CONTENTS FOR JULY 28, 1923 — NUMBER 2

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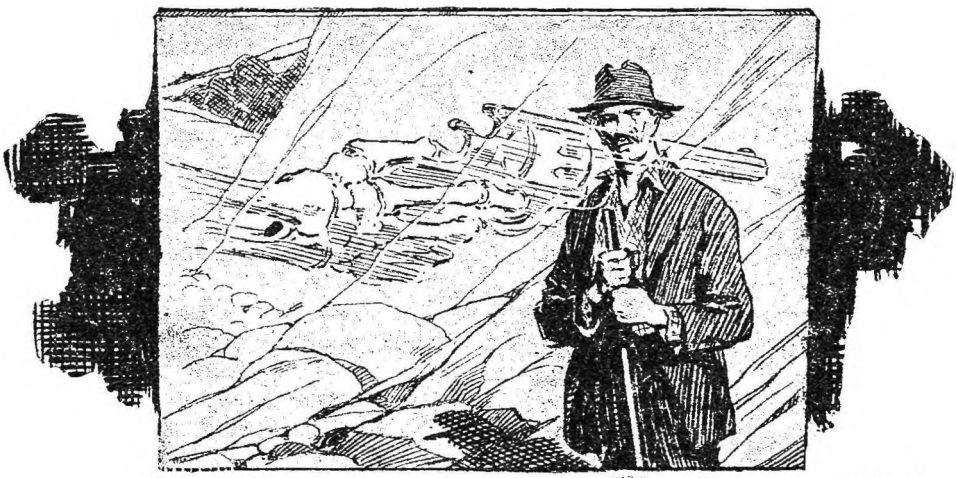

A Hatful of Trouble

By FRANK BLIGHTON

Author of "The Pagan," "The Invisible Burglar," etc.

CHAPTER I.

EYES AND THE UNICORN.

ARTHUR TOWER missed his unicorn at about one twenty o'clock in the afternoon. The discovery that the unicorn was gone was like a blow on the top of the head.

It left him so dazed that he did things, then and thereafter, that he had never dreamed of doing, and undoubtedly never would have done had he not found the unicorn gone.

Gazing at where his unicorn should have been, he stood stock still in the middle of a crowded street, thereby tacitly inviting death from a taxi driver, who just missed him by the proverbial hair's breadth.

How the unicorn had vanished, why it had vanished, and where it was at the time he discovered his loss, were things far more real than bellowing klaxons, clanging gongs on street cars, shouting teamsters, or any other of the visible or audible phenomena in his vicinity at one twenty o'clock in the afternoon.

He remembered that he had last seen his unicorn in its customary pose of rearing on its hind legs at seven o'clock that same morning, when the train whistled for Bonicrest, just before he jumped off.

There could be no mistake about that.

The unicorn always stood above a Latin motto, "*Hic et ubique*," meaning "Here and everywhere." He had no difficulty in translating the motto, for Latin had been

one of the courses at Schofield Scientific School where he had graduated with a B. S. after his name.

Unicorns were not down on the curriculum of Schofield, hence Arthur took only a perfunctory interest in his until he found it was no longer his. When he had seen it at seven o'clock he was thinking not of unicorns, their habits or mannerisms, nor of why they carried their curling tails the way his did.

Instead he was thinking entirely of the wistful tenor of Felice Moran's last letter to him, couched in such terms that he determined to drop off at Bonicrest, while en route from Schofield to New York, and pay her a brief and wholly unexpected call.

He was able to do this because he had discovered a magical black little "f" in the time-table, signifying that the limited would "stop to discharge passengers from Schofield and points east."

At half past six that morning, therefore, Arthur Tower was already dressed, and had taken his bag and camera to the smoking compartment, as the train would arrive in Bonicrest at seven.

In the interim he was conning a book of lectures to pass the time. The volume was by Sir William Ramsay, the noted scientist, and the reader, from time to time, underscored various paragraphs with a lead pencil, attached to which was a clip to retain it in his pocket.

One such paragraph read:

> Until 1894 it was supposed that our atmosphere consisted mainly of two gases, nitrogen and oxygen; but in that year it was shown to contain a not inconsiderable amount of another inactive gas, called argon; and crude argon has since been found to contain no fewer than four similar gases, among them krypton.

On another page the passenger also marked another paragraph:

> One part of krypton is present in seventy-one hundred parts of ordinary atmosphere.

A traveling baggage transfer agent came in, and Arthur Tower arranged to send his trunk and bag to a hotel in New York. Then he resumed reading:

> All these questions are very obscure, and have not, as yet, been thoroughly investigated; only the fringe of the subject has been touched. Nothing can be more certain than this: that we are just beginning to learn something of the wonders of the world on which we move and have our being; and that we are but children, picking up here and there a pebble from the shore of our knowledge, while a whole ocean stretches before our very eyes.

Arthur Tower glanced almost furtively around the empty smoking compartment, and thrust his book into the bag. When his hand emerged it carried a long, extremely slender tube, not unlike a clinical thermometer in shape, but much thinner, and without markings or color of any kind. On the top it had a small metal cap.

He ran to the door and looked out. No one was in sight.

He gave a twist to the rubber-tipped end of his lead pencil, and it came off, disclosing a cavity where the lead should have been, but considerably larger.

Holding the pencil upside down, he stripped the glass tube of its metal cap, tossing it out of the Pullman window. Then he thrust the tube into the hollow of the pencil, very swiftly replacing the rubber-tipped end by screwing it into place.

He closed his eyes, held his breath, and twisted the retaining clip.

Then, after a short interval, he replaced the pencil casually in his pocket. The porter came in as he was closing and locking his bag.

"Give this to the traveling baggage agent on arrival in New York, please," directed Arthur, pointing to the bag.

"Thank you, sah." The porter grinned at the tip. "De train am whistlin' for Bonicrest right now, sah."

The half hour had vanished very swiftly, or so it seemed.

The limited was already whisking into the station with that air of nervous expectancy common to fast trains when hesitating at unimportant places.

Arthur Tower clapped on his hat with a similar feeling, slung the carrying strap to his camera over his shoulder, and fairly skidded into the vestibule where the porter was raising the platform as the long string of Pullmans came to a barely perceptible stop.

The instant he was on the station platform, Arthur had ceased to think of his unicorn, the book of scientific lectures, or of anything else — except the one thing worth thinking about, which had led him to get off the train at this point.

He thought merely of Felice Moran and how they had first met each other at the Schofield Scientific School prom the year he had graduated—two years previously; of his first impressions of Felice, which had never changed since save to deepen. His next thought was how to reach her in time to get back to the station to take a local train to New York and keep his appointment at two o'clock in the afternoon.

The only other human being in sight was a flat-faced yokel, with a dingy cap and dingier overalls, who looked as if life for him was just pushing one trunk after another. He seemed intent at the moment only on seizing and devouring such heroic hairs as dribbled down from his straggling mustache within reach of his yellow fangs.

"Good morning," said Arthur Tower. "Can you direct me to the residence of Mr. John Moran?"

The station agent stared.

He saw a compact youth, with broad shoulders and lean flanks, wearing a straw hat set rather cockily on wavy black hair, a suit of gray flannels, low tan shoes, and gray hose.

"He's gone to New York two days ago. Next train leaves here in twenty minutes," he mumbled.

"Thanks," said Arthur brusquely. "But he lives near here, doesn't he?"

The station agent's eyes swept up to the other's face. He saw a rather long nose, which gave his questioner the air of being perpetually on the scent of something, flanked by a pair of candid black eyes. His chin was rather square—almost blunt, but the smiling mouth above it and the dimple in it gave the face a pronounced boyish touch.

"No, he don't," said the agent. "It's all of three miles."

"In which direction?"

The agent shuffled over and pointed. Following the extended finger, Arthur descried a pretentious country house, topping the summit of a wooded hill, silhouetted against the pink and topaz of a summer morning sky.

"You can foller the main road to the foot of the hill, and then go up the drive—if you take a taxi."

There was a lingering, tentative note to the word "taxi."

Arthur Tower, thinking of many other things, gave a slight frown. He was not conscious that it quite transformed his face. To the watching agent, however, the metamorphosis was both striking and startling.

The mouth suddenly tightened as if drawn together by an invisible string; the black eyes grew keen and penetrating. But the effect upon the dimpled chin was most marked. It narrowed until the dimple seemed a scar.

"I'm much obliged," stiffly returned Arthur, as he handed the chap a cigar in a half mechanical way, "but I guess I'll walk. Good day."

The fellow mumbled something and watched Arthur trudge down the thoroughfare toward the far-off country house. He reached it in due time by a little path which he guessed must approach the dwelling from the side or rear, affording an arrival less conspicuous than that of a man on foot coming up a driveway designed for vehicles. At the summit of the hill the path passed through a tangle of shrubbery and skirted a rather high wall of cut stone enclosing the grounds.

Arthur threaded this path with a growing diffidence.

He had never met Mr. John Moran, although he had met Felice's mother. He wondered how the owner of all this magnificence would receive one who dropped in on his family so informally.

Remembering that Mr. Moran was away, he took heart of grace until he remembered that such establishments have servants. He was wondering how the servants would regard him when he suddenly heard his name uttered in accents at once incredulous yet delighted.

Arthur Tower stopped short and looked up.

Felice Moran was sitting on the top of

the wall, holding a big sun hat by its band of ribbon. On her face an enchanting smile which not only exceeded his fondest expectations, but resolved all of his previous doubts.

For an instant he could do nothing but look at her.

She had the wonderful complexion of the Irish race, and a mouth that to Arthur seemed carved from a celestial strawberry. The arching brows and eyelashes drooped over eyes of an incredibly deep pansy purple—eyes into which he had first looked the night of that immortal prom. Merely to look into such eyes was equivalent to always afterward loving them.

The sunlight, filtering through the lattice behind her, sent a shimmering aureole through the golden brown meshes of her hair, abundant but so soft and fine that he longed to crush the wisps of it to his lips.

In lieu of this, Arthur Tower flicked off his hat, tossing it behind him, flicked open the camera case, popping up the focal plane device and then and there registered her on the ground glass, in his impulse to perpetuate the ravishing vision by means of something more permanent than a mere human memory.

From the arch of her instep to the coquettish curve of the sun hat, whose side was caught up and held against the crown with a bow, Felice Moran was scarcely less alluring on the ground glass than on the wall—although much more diminutive.

Arthur Tower permitted his gaze to linger for another instant, wholly oblivious that other eyes were gleaming from the shrubbery behind him—eyes whose malignant tenseness transferred themselves next instant from his back to something else, with an alteration of expression indicating a rather ominous satisfaction.

CHAPTER II.

THE TOP OF THE MORNING.

GAZING thus at the image on the ground glass, the girl seemed to her visitor the incarnation of that loveliness which always entices yet always eludes.

Just as he was about to press the bulb, Felice moved, and her whole head went out of the range of the camera.

"Not that way—as you were, please," said he, without removing his eyes from the opening. "Thanks. Now, hold it!"

The camera clicked. He folded it, thrust it into the case, and ran over toward the wall.

"Consider yourself shot, Felice," said Arthur. "Now, shall I help you down or come around to some gate?"

Ardently he looked up at her, totally unaware that in that brief but lingering look into the camera's orifice he had shunted events to come as a dexterous prestidigitator shuffles a deck of cards; still oblivious of the fact that the gleaming eyes peering furtively from the shrubs behind him had faded out, with a farewell glint more feral than before.

No hint or surmise of anything unusual or vengeful came to him—nothing but a breath of sea breeze that crept up from stretches of wind burnished sands on the beach beyond, stretches yet damp and tawny and smooth from the reluctant ebb of slow surges of hammered silver. He could see the beach through the trees.

Felice swung down. Arthur caught her as she came.

"I'm so glad to see you," said she.

Arthur Tower had no words. Manlike, he only gulped. The shy sweet look she vouchsafed him atoned for all the intervening months of lonely drudgery. The ornate mansion behind, with its elaborate grounds, faded out.

"Wait until I get my hat," quoth Arthur, suiting the action to the word. He clapped it on his wavy thatch and ran back to her, asking: "How far is it down to the beach?"

"Not far." She smiled up at him again. It was so long since he had actually seen that smile that he grew almost dizzy.

Followed a short babel of conversation confusing to the visitor, owing to his state of mind. Suddenly he remembered that he was humanly hungry, in spite of it all, and he was a little more a normal human being when he found himself halfway to the beach.

He came out of what had been a most delicious trance, during which his unicorn had not the slightest chance to intrude. Besides, it wasn't that sort of unicorn anyway. It never intruded. It always exhibited an attitude of calm poise, despite its perpetual roar.

It hadn't occurred to Arthur to ask Felice why she hadn't suggested going around to the front of the house with her to make his visit assume some semblance of the normal call, until they were some distance away. Then he stopped suddenly.

"I'm afraid—" he began lamely.

"Of what?" challenged Felice.

"—that I've forgotten something," he continued. "I ought, of course, to pay my respects to your parents. It isn't actually conventional—"

"You can't—this morning," she interposed. "Papa is in the city on business. Mother was called away last night by a phone message from a sick friend. Went down in a machine. That leaves me—well, what do you call it when the sailors put the captain in a boat, row him to a desert island and then sail away again, leaving him there alone?"

"They maroon him, I believe."

Felice laughed. "Isn't that queer! Maroon is the color of the car that mother drove to town. By the way, what on earth brings you down this way? It's the oddest thing, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," agreed Arthur, as he noted the pretty white mull dress she was wearing, with its dainty blue figure that somehow seemed to match the color of her eyes. They were cornflower blue out here in the glowing sun. "But, then, the world is full of all sorts of odd things. Finding them out is what gives my work a zest that it would otherwise lack. Most people never guess what a lot of interesting things hide behind mathematics or science."

"I never did," said Felice candidly. "I always hated the mathematics. All sorts of poky letters, figures, lines and angles—but that doesn't explain how you came to pop in on me this way. Why didn't you write or wire?"

"No time," said Arthur. "I answered an advertisement in a Boston newspaper. I received a reply from New York late yesterday afternoon, and a draft to cover my expenses, asking me to come on for a personal interview at two o'clock this afternoon."

He explained how his discovery of the time-table's "stop to discharge passengers" led to his impulse to get off and pay her the call, also that numerous other local trains from the same station made a continuation of his journey entirely practicable, provided he reached it around noon.

"It was very thoughtful of you," said Felice shyly. "But you can't have had breakfast, have you?"

"Not yet."

"There's the cunningest little restaurant down here," she went on, "and the fish is excellent. Broiled flounder is one of their specialties and they serve excellent coffee and real cream. On the way, I can show you our pier. Father sometimes takes a motorboat up to town, when the weather permits."

"Are you sure it's all right to go along with me?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. There's no one at the house but the servants. There's our pier."

She waved toward it. Arthur saw a long, spidery steel structure running out some distance and terminating in a very substantial boathouse. A sudden diffidence descended upon him. Until this morning he had never an inkling of the fact that Felice Moran was the only daughter of parents exceptionally well-to-do. It gave him a somber instant for reflection upon the disparity of their conditions.

"Of what are you thinking?" said she.

"Of the night of the prom, when I first met you."

"So was I." Her smile was enchanting. "Do you know, Arthur, when mother wanted me to go to visit Professor Evans and his wife, I hadn't the least idea of how things would turn out. Mother and Mrs. Evans, you see, went to school together. Well, I simply must tell you about it. At dinner in their house, the professor spoke of you and praised your work in mathematics. Imagine!"

"I can't!" he admitted.

"Of course you can't," she agreed, tak-

ing his arm with such friendly camaraderie that he thrilled again. "I listened, of course. And I tried to think what you would look like. It was awfully funny! You were in my mind as a long, bony young chap, with hollow cheeks, big spectacles, and all that—can you see what I mean?"

Arthur threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"Then," confided Felice, "when I did meet you at the prom and you asked me to dance, I could hardly believe that any one who could waltz the way you could ever messed up with all those poky old lines and angles."

He laughed again as they reached the boardwalk.

"If you say so," said he, "I'll do my best to have all the books of that kind destroyed—they seem to annoy you."

"You dear boy—you look as if you mean it. But that would be silly, wouldn't it? Isn't it something about them that brings you down this way this morning?"

"Something, I fancy. But the letter was rather mysterious."

"What kind of a position is it?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Arthur. "I'm to call at a certain office and ask to see a certain gentleman. I don't like to hold back any information, but the fact is, I was enjoined to strict secrecy."

Her eyes widened. "How romantic!"

"Meeting you—yes. By the way, what made you pull your head over to one side just as I was all ready to snap your picture? One moment I saw you clearly, the next your head wasn't in the picture at all."

"I thought I heard something, but it must have been my imagination. Something like the snap of a thumb and finger—only more metallic—although it wasn't the camera, was it?"

"No, I hadn't tripped the shutter then. Which way did it come from?"

"From nowhere, I guess," said Felice. "Anyway, it's of no consequence, is it?"

"I don't remember hearing it at all."

"It may have been one of the men in the garden, pruning a vine. Here's the restaurant. You must be quite hungry."

Arthur was. That sort of hunger he appeased, presently, by the appetizing bit of broiled fish that followed a flaky breakfast food, with clotted cream and coffee whose aroma was perfectly in keeping with everything else this divine morning. He devoured things to the last crumb.

Then he walked back with Felice to the side gate in the wall, noted the number of her private wire, and promised to call her up from New York that day or the next, and, in any event, to write to her.

He found himself wondering where the forenoon could have vanished as he trudged briskly back to the station and caught a local train after a brief sprint. He paid a cash fare and thrust the rebate slip into his pocket.

New York loomed in his mind like a formidable barrier. Enormous obstacles rose between him and the state of affluence that he felt he must attain—especially since his last meeting with Felice Moran.

His thoughts engrossed him until he suddenly discovered the train was in the terminal. Presently, by following the stream of other passengers, Arthur Tower emerged on the street.

There a gust of air smote him full in the face before he could conjecture that the tall building directly opposite him had magnified a zephyr into a whirlwind. His hat went skittering away toward the center of the broad thoroughfare on which he found himself.

He pursued it frantically. It was a perfectly good hat and he could not very well keep his business appointment hatless. The hat, however, seemed endowed with a certain malice.

It persisted in spinning on one edge just out of reach, but described the circumference of a huge circle, around which he raced, to the amusement if not the edification of all those present.

His innate fondness for mathematics—instead of the very real danger of being struck by a speeding taxicab—impelled him to pull up short and escape the vehicle. But Arthur Tower hadn't seen the taxi, its driver or its occupant. He merely saw that his spinning hat would presently overtake him, instead of his overtaking it—which it did—whereupon he stooped down and recovered it with absurd ease.

As he started to replace it on his head more firmly, he happened to glance inside of it. At once Arthur Tower began to behave very queerly indeed.

Instead of proceeding on his way he stopped and continued to stare into the crown of his hat, standing in the center of the street as if he had grown there and solidified so firmly that he could not move.

That, at least, was the effect noted by the police officer who was watching him. There was a cause behind this effect. The cause was that Arthur Tower's unicorn, last seen in its accustomed place in the crown of his hat, indelibly printed on its silken lining and astride a motto signifying "Here and everywhere," was no longer there.

It was gone—along with two gilt initials, "A. T.," signifying that the hat and all it contained, including of course the unicorn and the motto, were the property of one Arthur Tower.

A neat circular hole was cut in the silken lining, leaving a gaping chasm. Who could have stolen so useless a thing—and how? He stared so long and so hard into his hat that the police officer came over to take him by the arm, piloting him to the curb out of the maelstrom of heavy traffic.

CHAPTER III.

UNDER SUSPICION.

ARTHUR TOWER went along calmly enough, but the curious expression upon his face was something that combined chagrin and perplexity. This the officer noted.

Habit is a cable. A thread of it is woven every day, and it is hard to break. Arthur's research work in science, since leaving school, involving often the use of higher mathematics, impelled him to withdraw his thought and cudgel out his problems in the realm of pure imagination. Habit gripped his mind no less than the officer gripped his arm. He walked like a man in a dream, gently but firmly propelled out of the danger zone but oblivious to the fact that he was being closely scrutinized.

Patrolman McGuire looked over this eccentric young man from sheer force of habit. The avenue teemed with heavy traffic. Taxis and costly private cars scurrying to and from the station with arriving or departing passengers, trucks and street cars, and a line of buses which pivoted here for trips uptown, were the principal factors in the congestion.

McGuire had not seen either the loss or the recovery of the hat, but merely the spectacle of a black haired young man pausing to gaze fixedly into the crown of it, as if he were alone in the world. The circumstance was enough to arouse at least a transient curiosity.

This was the germ of the idea in McGuire's mind when he aided Arthur to the pavement. The weird look on the face of his charge deepened the impression his behavior first created.

McGuire, an unusually big and muscular man, topping six feet three inches and renowned for his prowess in hammer throwing and other feats calling for strength as well as skill, looked down on Arthur.

"For what was you standin' in the middle of the sthreet lookin' inta your hat?" he asked.

Arthur was still standing with knitted brows, apparently studying the toes of his own tan shoes. He looked up.

"N-n-nothing!" he stammered, adding, "that is, I was thinking of something else. Anyway, I quite forgot I was in the street."

Candor is frequently unfortunate.

"You forgot!" repeated McGuire. His sarcasm was heavy but plentiful.

Arthur consigned the lost unicorn to the limbo of the past.

"I just came out of the station. Came down on the Boston train," said he.

"From Boston?" queried McGuire. "And you forgot you was in N'York and was thinkin' of somethin' else? You didn't happen to be thinkin' you was the Bunker Hill monument, did you?"

Behind the last query was a certain subtlety on which McGuire prided himself. In fact, he deemed it very acute. For there was no train due from Boston at this time. The last statement that this queer behaving youth had just made was equiva-

lent to piling fresh fuel on McGuire's first suspicions that he was not altogether "right."

"No," smiled Arthur, "I wasn't. But, since you mention monuments, I might say that you have a certain resemblance to one of some local fame down on Bedloe's Island."

McGuire grinned. He knew many men envied him his bulk and he construed the rejoinder as a compliment, although a rather oblique one. Then, with that perversity with which fate seems sometimes to saturate the most casual words, Arthur Tower transmuted the whole trivial incident into a fresh source of acute suspicion.

"Anyway, it's of no particular importance. I—"

He was about to add: "I thank you," and move on.

The two motives were not exactly timed. He started to move with the word "I," and McGuire, interpreting this as a slight upon the dignity of his office, suddenly grew stern.

"Wait a minute, young feller. I want to ask you a question or two more."

Arthur glanced tactlessly at his watch. It was twenty-two minutes past one. His appointment was down town and was for two o'clock. It would not quite fit in with his plans to be late. Tardiness on one's first appointment is not accounted a virtue.

"Very well," said Arthur Tower, replacing his watch. "But, as I have an appointment, please delay me as little as possible."

"You said you come down from Boston?"

"Yes."

"And that you just come out of the station?"

"Shortly before you saw me—yes."

"Where was you the rest of the time?"

McGuire propounded the question with a force proportioned to throwing the hammer in some hard fought athletic contest.

Arthur reddened. His impulsive act in leaving the limited was involving him in a curious skein of events and a nefarious train, he thought, when he again considered his missing unicorn. For the unicorn was not missing by inadvertence but by design. Why? Of what value was this silly trade mark.

His abstraction was not pleasing to McGuire. Naturally, it seemed to the officer that Tower was trying to "cook up" some "phony" explanation to account for the palpable misstatement regarding whence he came.

Arthur drew a timetable from his pocket with a lead pencil, the rubber tip of which was reversed and fitted over the point of the lead. The pencil, too, had a clip, such as is worn on pens to keep them from being lost from one's pockets.

But Arthur Tower merely spread out the timetable to the officer's view and pointed toward the scheduled hour of his train's leaving Boston. McGuire nodded. He had been right "all the way."

"You may see from this," said Arthur Tower, flashing the stub of his Pullman ticket, "that I did come down on this train."

"Yes," said McGuire.

His voice sounded queer, even to himself. A strange feeling of unreality seemed to close down over things.

Then, to his amazement, he found that he was staring at the revolving door of the big hotel, around the corner of which the swirling zephyr had magnified to a small whirlwind, removing Arthur Tower's hat, and starting a chain of events wholly unprecedented in the career of Patrolman McGuire.

There was no young man present answering the description of the object of his suspicions! Nor even approximating him! More than that, from the clock face that leered at him from a neighboring restaurant window, McGuire saw that it was fifteen minutes to two!

An instant before he had glanced at the face of the missing young man's watch and then it had not been half past one.

It was entirely incomprehensible.

Both the interval and the black haired young fellow were mysteriously gone. McGuire, ambling toward the box where he was "due for a ring" at two o'clock, gripped his club as he tried to fathom what such an extraordinary thing portended.

It was unfathomable.

Beyond reiterating to himself that he had been "right all along," he was sure of little, save that he was still alive and in apparently his normal senses.

CHAPTER IV.

A WEIRD INTERVIEW.

WHEN Arthur Tower confided his bag and trunk check to the baggage transfer agent on the limited, preparatory to his descent from the train at Bonicrest, and receiving in return a numbered check which would allow him to claim those articles on arrival at the hotel the agent had suggested, he had fully intended to register at the same hostelry before keeping his appointment down town.

His meeting with Felice and its consequent delay, which had entailed his hurried sprint to catch the local, complicated by the absurd incident in the street which led to his encounter with the policeman, made it incumbent on him to forego that arrangement and go directly to the office named in the letter.

There was a curious look on his face, half exaltation, half uncertainty, as he deliberately left the officer standing where they had been talking and hurried around the corner.

He drew out the letter and noted the address again.

The subway was the shortest route. There was a stairway so convenient that it seemed made to order for his fervent wish. He hurried down and boarded the express, debouching at Fulton Street and walking briskly up to the first policeman.

That gentleman directed him to the building he sought, and at ten minutes to two he found himself speeding with the celerity common to New York express elevators up to the twentieth floor. Room 2025 was easily found. He walked in.

A prim young lady looked up from a desk. Arthur presented the special delivery letter in reply to her: "Whom do you wish to see?"

She took it, walked into another office and was gone some little time. When she emerged she did not invite him in, as he had expected, but, instead, beckoned, and he followed her out into the hall and around the angle past the same elevator up which he had come, to an office that seemed to be located at the farthest point possible from Room 2025. The door was ajar and she waved him in, without returning the letter —a circumstance which he quite overlooked in his expectancy.

From force of habit Arthur closed the door behind him and then found himself facing a man at a desk.

He was a slender and elderly man, with enormous tufts of reddish gray hair that bristled up in the space above his ears—and contrasting absurdly with the bald shiny dome. His nose was huge and flat at the point, as if some one had jabbed it with a forefinger which had left a permanent print. The face was dominated by a high forehead, which seemed higher because of the baldness. His eyes were apparently set very obliquely, but this was due to the pronounced droop of the upper lids at the outer corners. They were the eyes of a man apparently very much on guard.

His rather long upper lip was covered with the same sort of reddish gray stubble that protruded above his ears. It gave his mouth a grim, inflexible look, especially as his chin was wide and square.

"Sit down," said he to the visitor. "You're the young man that wrote me from Boston?"

His voice rasped but was not unkindly.

"Yes, sir," said Arthur Tower, as he complied.

"You understand the kind of a young man I'm looking for?"

"Only to the extent of the advertisement."

The man behind the desk nodded jerkily, as if he approved the limitation implied by the answer, while his wary eyes kept appraising the caller.

"Well," said he, "I want a young man well up in modern science." Then he paused.

Arthur interpreted the pause as calling for a reply. "So I understood from the advertisement," he answered.

"And," went on the other, "a young man with a lotta zecutive ability." He

clipped and hardened the first syllable of "executive" so emphatically that Arthur had qualms. Heretofore he had always worked as an assistant. Did he have that quality?

Never having been in sole charge as yet, Arthur felt that it would be unwise to try to certify to that kind of ability, so remained mute.

"What do you know about science, anyway?" demanded the other.

"It all depends, sir, on what you mean by science. The term is a very general one."

"What does science mean?"

"I should say it refers to the kind of knowledge that can be gained by exact observation and correct thinking."

The other reached up to his right ear and carefully folded it together. Arthur suddenly had a chilly feeling that he was on a fool's errand.

"Give me an example—just as if I didn't know what I wanted you for."

"Well, science can analyze a tear and expose the elements that compose it, but it has nothing to do with the emotion that made the tear."

"Go on."

"How far?" parried Arthur.

"Until I stop you. Just act as if you were a professor and I a student."

"Well, science is a child of mathematics, I should say. For instance, you've heard of the wireless telegraph?"

"Yes."

"A scientist named Maxwell discovered the principle of the wireless telegraph by making deductions on the square root of minus one."

"Just explain that to me."

Arthur began with increasing confidence. He was on his favorite hobby and he spurred it into a trot.

"The square of a number is a number multiplied by itself. The square root of a number—"

"Jump to the minus one part of it—what's that?" interrupted the man behind the desk.

"It's an imaginary quantity, sir."

"You may stop there."

Arthur obeyed. The man reached for his desk telephone. Then he scribbled a few words on a piece of paper. Arthur felt that he ought to get up, for he had a feeling from the cold and dispassionate air of the other that he had failed to meet some mysterious preliminary requirement for the job. Then he thought again and decided he would remain until so informed.

Came a tap on the door. The man behind the desk pressed a button. The same prim young woman appeared. She was very unlike Felice and looked terribly efficient and correspondingly homely in her big glasses.

She received a piece of paper and passed out with the silence of an automaton, save for the click of the locking door behind her.

"You said science was the child of mathematics. Mathematics is common sense, isn't it? That is, in a way?"

"No, sir. Not the way I look at mathematics. Common sense is a phrase. It implies knowledge limited to the present moment. It neither leads nor lags. Mathematics, the thing that common sense swears by, constantly contradicts it."

"That's way over my head, young man. Bring it down."

"I'll try. Common sense balks at the idea of less than nothing. Common people say: 'I'm from Missouri, you've got to show me.' Mathematics constantly deals with less than nothing—even with imaginary numbers—and gets practical results."

"You may stop there. I get you."

Arthur complied. This was one of the weirdest days of his life. Mathematics was partly to blame, but so also was the missing unicorn. In the long pause that ensued he began to think of his unicorn.

What did the absence of that animal portend?

He marked this question with an x, for the answer was unknown.

Who had taken it and for what purpose?

He marked this question with a y, because also unknown.

Then another tap came at the door. This time the man rose and walked to it. That brought him behind Arthur, who was too well bred to turn around. The door opened for a fraction of a second, closed, and the man resumed his seat.

For the first time he seemed to see the camera Arthur carried.

"Know anything about photography?" he asked.

"Very little. I make a few pictures for my own amusement."

The man looked out of the window and lit a cigar. Then:

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"No, sir."

"Why?"

"Well, they're not scientific."

"Suppose you could photograph one—what then?"

"I should seek for the cause of the thing which produced what you call a ghost and try to explain it in scientific terms."

"Look at this!"

Arthur rose and came to the desk to take a photograph.

The print was not mounted. In the foreground stood the man with whom he had been having the interview. He was dressed in rough clothing and a slouch hat, and held a wicked looking rifle by the muzzle with the butt resting on the ground. Behind him was a profusion of rocks and holes—it might be a quarry of some sort.

But the thing that made the younger man open wide his eyes was the figure of a skeleton hand, clutching a pistol, which loomed large but faint between the man in the picture, and, quite evidently, between him and the camera.

He looked at it closer. Although the image was sufficiently wraithlike to make the use of the word ghost permissible, it was still sufficiently clear to show a bullet lodged in the skeleton hand holding the pistol, where the palm bones met and joined those of the wrist.

CHAPTER V.

STAYING SCIENTIFIC UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

THE relation of this photograph and part of the preceding interview was plain. Arthur had emphatically denied his belief in "ghosts." Why was this man testing that belief? Clearly, because Arthur's statement about mathematics fitted, for he had said that mathematics contradicted common sense, instead of supporting it.

As if his *vis-à-vis* across the desk was reading his mind, the man chuckled:

"Minus one—that was what you said, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Young man, I'm minus one ghost. He's a real ghost. How do I know?" He carefully folded over his right ear again, as he replied to his own question. "I know because a friend of mine was taking my photograph and the ghost stuck in his hand. You can see the hand?"

"The bones of the hand," corrected Arthur Tower gently. "Yes, sir."

The other man snorted. "Bones? Of course. Every hand has bones. But the part that surrounds the hand, it's dim and shadowy—what's the scientific word for that appearance?"

"Apparitional," replied Arthur so sharply that the man jerked his head back.

"You said something—then," he muttered. "Apparitional." He rolled the word over and over as if it were a choice morsel that he found especially palatable.

"Apparitional," he reiterated. "And is it scientific to say it's the shadow of something *real?*"

"In a sense, yes," returned Arthur. "It might be more correct to say that it's an imperfect image of the real thing."

"That pistol is real enough, isn't it?"

"Sufficiently so to make it discernible as a pistol," said Arthur. "I should even hazard a conjecture that it was a real pistol."

"Well, you're from Boston, all right. That's a perfectly good conjecture—but who's the hazard belong to that's in them bullets inside that pistol?"

Arthur flushed. "The mathematics of that is perfectly simple," said he. "The hazard must belong to the man at whom the pistol is pointed, if we may assume that it is a man."

"We may assume it is," said the other, with mock gravity. "Anything else?"

"The next deduction is that the man at whom the pistol is pointed is not the man in the photograph—who appears to be yourself."

The other frowned.

"How do you make that out?" he demanded, a trifle uneasily.

"From the position of the pistol. It is not, apparently, pointed at you directly, but at right angles to the line of focus of the camera."

"Scientific thinking?" jeered the other.

"As near as it is possible to judge by the photograph," qualified Arthur Tower, remembering that he was seeking employment, although what bearing this curious interview had unless it was a test of his statements in his letter of application he could not imagine.

"The appearance, eh?" reiterated the other man. "You are not sure, then?"

"One cannot be sure from appearances. They are deceptive."

"You may stop there for a minute and tell me why you think appearances are deceptive. Hold it down, young man, to the level—"

He grinned, very humanly; then his mouth set again in the same grim, stern line.

"—down to the level of this floor of this building. We're not in Boston but in New York, you know."

The applicant for a scientific position winced, but not so much at the rigid irony latent in the remark as at the recollection of his chance encounter with a police officer whose sense of humor was about as crudely developed.

Then he determined to stifle that sort of joking with a reply so simple a child could understand.

"The space between you and me seems to be empty—between our eyes, for instance, as you look at me. Yet it deceives us. It is filled with air, which has weight."

The man nodded.

"Anything else in it?"

"Science imagines an impalpable substance, called ether."

"Keep up the barrage until you run out of ammunition."

"The ether, in theory, carries waves of light. Those waves enable me to see you and you to see me. It also enabled this photograph to be taken through the medium of light waves."

The man with the queer questions and the queerer appearance suddenly held up a peremptory palm for Arthur to stop, again. The discourse on science was meeting with almost the same obstacles as if it had been a homeward bound auto in heavy traffic compelled to wait authority at street crossings.

Then, as several times before, the man carefully folded down his right ear, the top half upon the lower half. In all the world there seemed to be nothing quite so important as this curious mannerism.

"Then the air holds things we can't see? Answer yes or no."

"Yes."

"Is a pistol one of those things?"

"Not ordinarily."

"Could there be any circumstances under which a pistol could be in the air or pass through the air without being seen?"

"Yes, sir."

The fellow stiffened. "Explain!" he demanded.

"The same circumstance of high velocity that might enable one of its bullets to be in the air and not be seen."

"My hat's off to Boston," grinned the other. "But, they don't shoot pistols in front of cameras up there, do they?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"Well, if they do, I'll leave it to the Boston brains to find out how they do it. Now, can you tell me *how* that pistol got in front of that camera when I was standing right down where you see me standing and a very particular—that is a person I esteem very much was holding the camera in both hands, and there was no one else there?"

"I cannot do it offhand, sir."

"Do you think you ever could?"

"I could try."

"How would you go about it?"

Arthur didn't know. But, being intent on employment of some sort such as the advertisement had indicated, he felt such an admission would not increase his chances of employment. So he said: "I cannot tell that, either, offhand, sir."

"Have you got any idea how long it would take?"

"No, sir. Time is the measure of duration, but it is not the controller of ideas."

"I really must buy me a map of Bos-

ton," jeered the other. Arthur didn't mind the quip just then, for the words could not veil the admiration glinting in the eyes of the man watching him.

There was a period of silence so prolonged that it irked Arthur Tower. But in science one learns the virtue of patience. A grain of corn will not grow faster than normally, no matter how impatient the farmer may be.

There is something of the same sort in events. They refuse to be hurried. So, Arthur bided the pleasure of the other man.

Then, without any further questioning, the interviewer drew from his pocket a bunch of keys as queer looking as himself. He solemnly laid them on the table and then fished from another pocket a fat bunch of bills that were very yellow and crisp and new, and held in place by a rubber band. These he laid alongside the keys and looked at Arthur Tower as if he were a pane of glass and perfectly transparent—and had been, all along.

" How much?" he asked.

CHAPTER VI.

HIRED!

ARTHUR looked at the two objects. " I don't understand you. Do you mean how much you owe me?"

" How much money will it take to find out how that ghost got in front of that camera?"

" I cannot say, offhand. I can only go to work on what I think may be scientific lines. By the way, it may not be worth any money at all."

The man stared. No New Yorker, to judge by his stare, would have made such an extremely unprofitable remark. But this time he merely said: " Why?"

" The photograph may have been made by a trick. There are such things, I understand. If you wanted to employ me to discover how it had been made, I should certainly begin and analyze the facts that led up to making the picture, so as not to be led astray by false clews. If it is a trick photograph, it is bad enough to have you deceived by it, without having the deception carried further to your financial detriment."

The other indulged in the luxury of a long, slow, sardonic smile.

" I can see where I missed some things by not growing up in or near Boston," he rejoined. " But don't worry about that part of it, young man. If anybody can throw the big hyp—"

" I beg your pardon, sir, the big what?"

" The big hypodermic—I call it the big hyp—and I was saying if anybody can throw the big hyp into George Black, Incorporated, why, they're welcome. I've been meeting all sorts of folks for a few years, and some of those years weren't strictly scientific. And I'm here and you're here."

" Yes, Mr. Black," said Arthur contritely, " we are. Now, just what is it you want from my abilities—assuming I've demonstrated any?"

" I expected to give you the gate in two minutes," said the other, with brutal candor, " when you come in. But you nailed me to the chair with that ' minus one ' remark. I'm minus one good ghost that didn't get on that photograph by a trick. I know."

" Would you care to tell me how it was made? There may have been nothing there —apparently—when it was made. Or, again, the outline of a hand and a pistol may have been printed in on the photograph from another negative—lightly exposed, and then your negative laid over it and given a longer exposure, or your negative may have been exposed twice."

" Maybes don't fly in my business. Here's my negative. The ghost is on that, young man!"

It was. But Arthur merely opined, again, that negatives are not always infallible and can be tampered with.

" This one wasn't tampered with," said the other, more grimly than ever, " for I bought a box of 'em, myself, in a place where they never saw or heard of me before. I used all of them before I used this last one. They were never out of my possession. None of these plates, except this one, had a trace of a ghost hand on it."

" It may have been partially exposed at

the factory," suggested Arthur, with a candor quite commendable, especially as he would lose the expected employment if he solved the secret, offhand.

The other man shook his head. "I investigated that, too. It wasn't done at the factory. Besides, look how clear and sharp my picture is, even to the saw-tooth edge of the leaves on the tree behind me! If a negative had been partially exposed, wouldn't that ruin it for the exposure afterward?"

"Apparently, it would," admitted Arthur.

"Look at the extent of the ghost hand," continued the other man, "and you will see that it would have ruined the plate to do it."

"Who was present when the exposure was made?"

"Myself and the party holding the camera. And it was developed the same night; in fact, I developed it myself."

"It's a pretty little problem," said Arthur, frowning down at the negative and then at the print.

"The problem of a man that's minus one ghost," returned his *vis-à-vis,* with grim facetiousness.

Arthur looked him straight in the eye. This was an extraordinary situation, viewed from any angle. "May I ask you a question?" said he.

"Certainly."

"Did you ever know any man with a bullet in his wrist, such as this ghost photograph apparently shows?"

"Yes."

The laconic reply was matched only by the grimness of the lines of the mouth. That mouth again dominated the whole expression of the face in which it was set.

"May I ask another question?"

"All that you like."

"Thank you, sir. I have no wish to intrude, unduly, but would this man point a pistol at another, with the intention of shooting, if he had provocation?"

"He certainly would."

"Did he ever point one at you?"

"He never did."

"Have you any reason to think he might?"

The other leaned forward and there was a sincerity in his reply that forbade doubt. "He never would point a pistol at me, no matter if he would at any one else. I know him well. I think I get what's in your mind. You think this chap with the bullet in his wrist might be able to solve this riddle—is that it?"

"Something of the sort. This photograph is an effect. It must have been made by some cause. A cause implies a motive. But, the pistol wasn't pointed *at* you, but at right angles, apparently, to the line of the focus of the lens."

The other man made an impatient gesture.

"Forget it. That man is more puzzled than you are, right now, as to how that picture came to be on that plate."

"Then," rejoined Arthur, with a boldness that suggested he was fast losing his sense of self-consciousness, "you want me to find out *how* that image came to be on that plate."

"Bless my soul," jeered the other, "you're a mind reader. Do they grow many of them in Boston? That's exactly what I want to find out. And, I'm willing to pay for it. Now, how much?"

"The expenses will be the first item. I will leave the question of the remuneration entirely with you. I take it this is a sort of a test. I am looking for permanent employment. If I make good do I—"

"That's a bet. Put that wad in your pocket and count it afterward. I give you *carte blanche* on the expenses. Do what you think has to be done."

"I am very grateful for your confidence and shall try to merit the trust," said Arthur. But the words seemed weak and flabby, compared to the feel of the bills in his pocket. The word "wad" while rather inelegant was also very expressive. "I shall need a laboratory in which to work, perhaps." he amended. "Have you one that I can use?"

"Take them keys."

Despite the faulty grammar Arthur did as bidden. They were odd looking keys and he regarded them gingerly. The man behind the desk caught his furtive air and smiled, rather sardonically.

Then he gave a number and a street in a hushed whisper.

"Don't write it down," said he. "Go there. Them keys are all numbered. Number one fits the outside door. It's a padlock. Number two also fits it. It's a mortised lock. When you go in, always lock the outside door. Otherwise, you may have the bulls nailing it up."

Arthur frowned. "The bulls?" he reiterated.

"We call policemen bulls in New York sometimes, because they horn in on folks. Use any room in that building for a laboratory. Get what you want. It's empty."

"I understand, sir. I am to get what apparatus I need, but of course only what is needful."

"You've got the big idea by the nose, young man. As Monte Cristo said after he dug out of his dungeon and took to the water: 'The world is mine!' Paste that in the top of your hat and when in doubt, read it. But get me results."

"Am I at liberty to visit the place where the photograph was made?"

"I've been thoroughly over the ground. There is no clew, no more clew than there is in this room right now, that I could see. Can you work scientifically without going there?"

"To a certain point, yes. But a visit might supply the one link in the chain."

"Later on, if it is absolutely necessary, I'll see. But, do all you can first. Give me a report when you can. But don't communicate with me here again. Make a mental note of this telephone number."

He whispered it so low that Arthur Tower had to lean over to catch it.

"Ask for Mr. Black," went on his employer, "and suppose you use the name Smith or Jones. Or use both of them. If I'm not there, they'll take your message and I'll get in touch with you where you say you'll be. Don't make any appointments for the laboratory, either."

There was a cryptic something behind his words that savored of as much mystery as his willingness to intrust an unknown young man with a plentiful supply of money. Arthur Tower was no pedant, although he looked one. He thrilled at the maze of obscurity in which this whole affair was swathed.

It was like a cocoon inclosing a grub. The mystery was the grub. If Arthur could solve it he would cease to grub. He would be released from the irksome routine of an obscure assistant in laboratory work, in funds, perhaps, to make researches of his own.

He was very grateful for this chance; especially when his employer added:

"Go out and go to it, young man. Tell nobody but me anything, any time. I'll do the same. My own private secretary don't know I've hired anybody. All he knows is that I've had tons of answers to my advertisement. Look at these!"

Arthur looked as a drawer was opened, and when they all tumbled helter-skelter into a waste basket, he thrilled again. It was a "blind ad," and every one but he was in utter ignorance of the fate of his letter, unless, perhaps, a curt statement on a postal, "the position is filled," should be sent them.

Evidently it was not to be sent.

Arthur Tower rose and picked up his hat.

"I think I understand, sir. I'll do my best."

The other nodded. His expression, however, said plainer than words:

"Young man, you only *think* you understand. But while I treat my pronouns cruelly, I can also hold my tongue."

"Good afternoon," said Arthur as he walked to the door.

"Good afternoon," said his employer, reaching for his desk phone as the subdued whir announced a call on the wire.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MATHEMATICS OF TROUBLE.

THE skyline seemed to possess much less altitude as Arthur Tower glanced through the windows of the hall on his way to the elevator. By the time he was on the ground floor and passing out of the building, Arthur forgot the walls of the civic cañon in which he found himself long enough to flag a passing taxi and tell the driver to take him to the Hotel Romaine.

Reaching the hotel he registered and was assigned to a room with his baggage. Here he locked the door, changed his clothing, and removed the stains of travel.

Then he sat down and studied the photograph and negative. Until now he had not examined the money he had been given. It was his habit to attack problems to the exclusion of everything else. This one was a poser.

There seemed, too, to be about it an atmosphere of unreality that was very weird. The laconic air of his employer, his reticence, his curious air of holding back something which might have solved everything, and the inflexible tightening of his lips as if he found it hard to refrain from speaking further, all came back to mystify young Tower.

Then he shook it all off.

The reasons that actuated Mr. Black's behavior did not in the least concern the young man whom he had hired. His job was to do what that rather eccentric gentleman demanded, do it as soon as he could, and thereby command his future confidence.

Yet, with nothing but the negative and the print, Arthur had not the slightest idea how to begin or continue. Trailing a ghost is not especially scientific. Trailing the photographic image of a ghost is rather less so.

"A ghost is an unknown quantity," he told himself with a faint smile, "in that it is an intangible entity. This ghost had a pistol in its hand. That gives the unknown equation two properties. I'll call them x and y. The equation then reads: x plus y equals a good job. I guess I'll let the solution wait until I've had some dinner. This is paramount for the time being."

He wrapped the negative and plate in separate papers and put them into his traveling bag. From his trunk he took a small leather case which contained an assortment of chemicals, among them a developer solution for his own photographic experiments.

The trunk itself, a small, cheap steamer affair, held nothing but his wearing apparel and a few books, one of which was a work on mathematics which he was still engaged in studying.

It was a volume of lectures. Arthur found them exceedingly fascinating and, on occasions, positively inspirational. It was still broad day and he concluded that he would run down to the neighborhood of the building where the laboratory would be located and look it over.

From Mr. Black's manner and his furtive way of referring to the locality, he judged it was also untenanted. He put the keys in the bag, too, all but numbers one and two, which he placed in his vest pocket after detaching them from the ring.

They were not heavy keys, but they bulked a bit too large in his pockets. Carrying the bag, he went back to the office, sought out a directory, and in the privacy of the reading room made sure of his streets. The building was on the west side, well up town and could be reached handily on foot from Forty-Second Street and Broadway.

Arthur called a taxi and drove to the locality, paid it off and went the rest of the way on foot.

The two keys afforded him an entrance to the building. He relocked the outer door as he had been admonished to do, taking the padlock inside with him.

He was in what he judged had once been an office of some sort. There was a wire grating over a long counter and through the accumulated dust, the word "Cashier" loomed with a gilt mistiness.

He opened the bag and took out the keys. In sequence he went through the various rooms. They occupied three floors and numbered exactly twelve. None of them contained much of anything, except a few chairs which seemed decrepit from extreme age, although in the room unlocked by key number three were also several windows that gave ample light, a long table and a few shelves.

It was on the ground floor quite convenient, and he found two spigots marked "hot" and "cold" over a sink in the rear. The "cold" spigot furnished water when turned, but the "hot" did not. There was another door leading into the cellar. He ventured down the creaking stairs and found a furnace, with a hot water boiler piped to it, and some coal in a bin, thickly covered with dust.

That was absolutely all.

He would have to rely on certain makeshifts if he was to do any laboratory work here—or go through the motions of laboratory work—for, as yet, he hadn't the faintest idea where he should begin or to what lengths he should go.

He went back to room 3, put all the keys in his bag, except the two for the outer door locks, and left the bag there. Then he went out and relocked the building securely.

Here he noted that it was about a block from another street which paralleled the Hudson River. This street teemed with traffic, and Arthur walked in that direction, orientating himself carefully as he went.

He found the water front street was one which continued southerly indefinitely; that it was lined with piers, and numerous rough looking fellows, longshoremen and teamsters, he judged.

He made his way back to Forty-Second Street and again took a taxi and drove eastward. In this vehicle, and for the first time, he removed the roll of money from his trousers and counted it. He leaned back in the taxi and took a long breath.

The thing was incredible.

It couldn't be true. The possession of such a sum in cash was more incredible than the problem which had been given him to solve—more bewildering than the loss of the unicorn.

In a vexed sort of way, Arthur took off his hat and gazed at the place where his unicorn should have been. Then he remembered the semifacetious instructions of his employer: "The world is mine! Paste that in the top of your hat and when in doubt, read it."

Arthur could read it without pasting it there at all.

"But, of course," he told himself, "there has been a big mistake made. Mr. Black had two 'wads'—that was what he called them, 'wads'—and in his anxiety to get some one he deemed qualified to do the work he wanted done, he gave me the one he intended to reserve for himself. I must call him up forthwith and inform him of that error."

He left the taxi at Times Square and soon found a telephone booth. He asked for the number, inserted a coin, and presently a bland voice on the other end of the wire inquired who was speaking.

"Mr. Jones wishes to speak to Mr. Black."

"He isn't in. Any message?"

"Say to him that I will call later. When do you think he will be in?"

"I cannot say. He may be in later tonight. Is it important, Mr. Jones?"

"Mr. Black is the best judge of that," said Arthur stiffly, for he did not altogether fancy the note of curiosity in the other's inquiry. "It goes without saying that if I did not think it was important, I would not have called him."

"Where are you now?"

Arthur hung up. The fellow was impertinent. The circumstances of his employment did not allow any intrusion, even so slight a one as this. Secrecy was paramount—in fact, secrecy and mystery seemed to be about the only things he had been able to discern thus far.

He walked out and took his way to a near-by hotel, whose appointments were far superior to those of the Romaine. It occurred to him that he would change hotels. The Romaine wasn't altogether as cleanly as he would like, anyway.

Dinner over, he thought of Felice, and walked to another booth and called her number. Felice answered in person. In a guarded way Arthur conveyed the glad tidings that he had "landed the job."

"Lovely!" exclaimed Felice. "What kind of a job was it?"

"Well, it's one that looks difficult enough—but I've got to make good on it," he equivocated. "I can't very well go into details at this distance. But some day I hope to tell you more."

"Can you come down and spend the week-end with us?" she asked.

"What day is to-day?"

"Silly!" she laughed. "Why, it's Thursday. Didn't you know it?"

"How can one remember the days of the week when one is privileged to meet you?" bantered Arthur. "I should call it a day of felicity—or Felice's day!"

"As bad as that?"

"It certainly has been a most notable

day," said Arthur warmly. "Will you be at home to-morrow?"

"Unless mother sends for me to come to the city."

"Well, I've got to get busy on my job, and—"

"Do you work nights?"

"It was not so nominated in the bond, but I'm to do something as soon as I can, so I may work this evening. What I intended to say was this: I'll call you to-morrow, and let you know if I can run down over the week-end. Will your father be home?"

"Oh, yes, he is generally home over the week-end. I want you to meet him."

"Thank you. *Au revoir,* then, until to-morrow."

"Good night," said Felice, "and I wish you all the luck in the world in this new work."

Arthur glowed. "If I can't succeed with that kind of backing I don't deserve the chance," said he. "Good night."

Whatever of doubt had seemed to invest his new and peculiar task seemed materially less as he left the booth and stepped again into the street. He squared his shoulders and moved through the throngs that began to fill the theatrical and restaurant section with the first pulses of the tide of Gotham night life. He was among them, yet not exactly of them.

He smiled as he walked down Broadway. How their eyes would pop out, Arthur Tower thought, if any of these people could look through the frail web of his clothing and discern the wad which Mr. Black had mistakenly given him! None of them, he was sure, carried such a sum of money in so careless a fashion.

This thought led to another. Was it altogether prudent of him to be wandering aimlessly, with a large sum of money belonging to an employer as eccentric, yet so painfully in earnest, as Mr. Black? Arthur was new to New York. The city was a synonym for pitfalls for the unwary, especially for any out of town individual who would be such rich "picking" as he.

An ingratiating taxi driver looked him over tentatively.

Arthur decided that it would be the part of prudence to take a taxi back to the Romaine or at least to the corner nearest it. He stepped inside the vehicle, and told the driver to proceed to the intersection of the streets nearest it.

Then he lighted a post-prandial cigar, leaned back in the vehicle and smoked. The paramount idea in his mind now was the work which he must do. He simply *must* go about locating the ghost which clutched a pistol at right angles to a picture —he *must* learn how and why that image got on that plate. The quicker he did that, the more his chances for permanent work were increased; for while Mr. Black might be both eccentric and laconic, he would not be ungrateful for a speedy solution. The thing troubled him, of that Arthur was sure.

The new problem engrossed him to the extent that he quite forgot the incident of his missing unicorn; and also the fact that missing his unicorn had brought him, immediately upon arrival in New York, in collision with police authority.

But while he had forgotten Officer McGuire, that police officer had not forgotten him. The same policeman was on duty as the taxi in which Arthur was speeding south came abreast of the railway terminal. The taxi top was down, for it was a warm night.

Handling traffic and standing directly in the center of the street, Officer McGuire was in the act of beckoning the driver of Arthur's vehicle to proceed, when Officer McGuire caught sight of a frowning face, glowering at the end of a glowing cigar.

The face had a cleft in the chin that narrowed to a scar.

He recognized Arthur Tower the same instant that young man recognized him. In fact, the recognition was mutual, and while the policeman waved the other traffic to proceed, he checked Arthur's vehicle as he came over to it.

Then and there Arthur Tower again bethought himself of his missing unicorn. It was a mathematical sort, being now a factor of his first equation. In fact, x represented the missing unicorn, no less than the "minus-one ghost" which Mr. Black had so facetiously referred to at the time of engaging him.

There were no unknown factors in the present equation.

Arthur Tower represented a known quantity, which might be said to equal *a*. Officer McGuire also might be said to personify *b*.

And, it was certain that the equation *a* plus *b* could equal nothing in the world but trouble!

CHAPTER VIII.

AVOIDANCES AND INTRUSIONS.

THE brutal fact was obvious that trouble was coming closer with every stride of the policeman. Arthur had no option but to wait its arrival.

He remembered, however, that he had changed his clothing since meeting McGuire, and, instead of gray flannels and low tan shoes, was now wearing a suit of dark blue material, with a pin stripe of blue, and riding and smoking a cigar, instead of walking. He continued to smoke and regarded McGuire with a blank stare as he reached the vehicle.

"Why did you skip away from me this afternoon when I was going to ask you some questions?" demanded the patrolman.

The occupant of the taxi took his cigar from his lips and returned the other man's glare with a level gaze that did not flinch. His dissimulation was admirable. It was the poise of a man unperturbed.

"Come on—why did you?" barked McGuire angrily.

Tower flashed the driver a look that plainly said: "Is this man drunk?" Then, aloud: "Driver, why are we detained? Please remember what is said and done. I ask you to note it carefully."

"None of your blarney!" sputtered McGuire.

"Driver," retorted Arthur, "I may wish to report this officer's eccentric conduct to his superiors, provided he does not explain it himself. Now, sir, before you explain, I'll note your name and number!"

He whipped out pencil and memorandum book and waited.

McGuire was dumfounded. He was very sure, on first glimpsing Arthur, that he was the same young man who had left him so strangely earlier in the afternoon of the same day. The queerness of it, coupled with the absence of any sign of confusion or guilty panic in the air of this chap, magnified his sense of the unreality of the still unexplained incident.

He continued to stare.

"I'm waiting," said Arthur Tower imperturbably.

"You know what I'm talking about!" growled the other.

"Driver, note that this police officer imputes to me an ability to read his mind, and, so far, has not exhibited a warrant for my arrest nor charged me with a crime, and that I have asked why he detains me."

The situation, tense and surcharged, suddenly seemed to resemble a boxing match. The ponderous officer, with slower mental processes, was being jabbed by the more agile minded man in the taxi.

The chauffeur nodded his assent.

Patrolman McGuire suddenly found himself, so to speak, "on the ropes." He knew that Tower—providing he was the same young man who had been standing staring blankly into his hat on the middle of the street—was guilty of no offense that he could establish, save that of incurring his suspicion.

"Have I ever seen you before?" asked McGuire, floundering in his perplexity.

"Driver," said Tower, "make a mental note of my reply, after first noting that this officer asks me a question which imputes to me a familiarity with his powers of observation, while still evading giving me his name and still refusing to charge me with any offense against the law."

He turned on the patrolman.

"I demand that you give me your name; and then either charge me with an offense or permit me to proceed on my way."

"Let me look at your hat!"

Tower complied, after first turning to the driver with a slight smile, and a shrug of his shoulders, as if he were complying more to appease a petulant individual than one bound by the iron discipline of the department he served.

McGuire held it aloft.

He seemed to be scanning the new moon

through it, and the driver, who cocked one eye up to observe the shimmering golden sickle hanging against the almost indigo sky, next winked to his fare.

"You're wearing the same hat—a hat wit' no initials in it," announced McGuire with a crafty smile. "I mind it well. You was standing in th' middle of the avenue, a-lookin' into it this afternoon. That hat has had the cr-rown of the lining cut out, belike this wan. You *are* th' same man."

Tower replaced his cigar and puffed it nonchalantly.

"Let me understand you," said he. "Driver, please listen. I am charged with being—somebody—and with wearing a straw hat with a crown, or lining, in it like this person you mentioned wore—is that it?"

The driver chortled in glee.

This was as good as a play. The dispassionate tone of his fare impressed him with its evenness, and the clicking taximeter was adding up the charges.

"You're under arrest," triumphantly announced McGuire, handing back the hat, "for escaping from an officer about to arrest you."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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LONG ISLAND PEBBLES

COLD, crystalline, pure from the parent stone—
Wave-worn, and molded by the shining sands,
They gleam along the foam's marmorean zone—
Drawn by the glacier from the northern lands.

And some are kindred to the lucid rain—
Sister to snow, or fountains in the night;
And some seem children of the rainbow's stain,
Or amber pearls and orbs of malachite.

Virginal and translucent, pure as dew—
Pellucid, and with moonlight for a soul,
Jewels like these the naiad's hand might strew
On wintry beach or lonely Arctic shoal.

Such globes the vine of sorcery might bear,
Crushed not to wine, but in a cairn of ice
Hidden for sirens of the north to wear
On paler breasts that have no mortal price.

Or polar witches, palaced on the floe,
Might pave their silvern grot with such as these,
Gathered in ghostly twilights of the snow,
Along the margin of the glacial seas.

Some glow like frozen honey on the sight,
And some like topaz of a sunset shower—
Agate and onyx hollow in the light,
Jasper and jacinth of a tawny flower.

But chill and chaste and crystalline each one,
Music of stone, a god's eternal tears,
Fallen from oriels of moon or sun,
And changing not their beauty with the years.

George Sterling.

Ain't Women Peculiah?

By LORING BRENT

Author of "Peter the Brazen," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

PROPERLY speaking, this ain't a story at all. Stories generally end up somewhere concisely. Reading them is like taking a train to the end of the line. All the while you know where you're going, and all the while you know, barring breakdowns, washouts and strikes, that you'll get there. Following a well worn groove, he takes her little perspiring white face in his big brutal brown hands, a kiss takes place that rocks the world—and another pleasant young couple has been launched on the ticklish rockbound waters. But some things don't end that way; some things go on and on like the poet's celebrated and continuous trout stream, and sometimes it is hard to make head or tail out of what is visible to the naked eye.

Jerry Beamway has frequently asserted to me that women are peculiar, and that will give you a glimmering of an idea of what we are up against in the present instance. "Ain't women peculiah?" Jerry Beamway says to me, drawling as always, and tilting up his left eyebrow in the curious way he has a habit of doing when trouble is brewing.

If this was a nice, well behaving story, which it decidedly is not, Jerry Beamway would now step forward all dolled up as our hero. But Jerry Beamway is no hero to me. Seen from the observation platform of the Palm Beach Limited or Number Eighty-Five, carelessly sitting on his black Georgia pony, big, tanned to the color of a properly smoked Virginia ham by our twelve month summers, something real mysterious and aloof and haughty about him, you would say he was certified, Class-A hero material, and no questions asked. But no man is a hero to his grocer, which is what I am to Jerry.

Now a couple of things ought to be cleared up preliminary to my getting settled into my stride and telling you about our Great Adventure over at the Daytona Beach carnival, among them being Jerry himself, Vingo itself, the spunky little Chicago stenographer who was doing her Irish best to beat a five year old orange grove at its own game, and the deupty sheriff, game warden, postmaster and notary public of Vingo, the latter four of which is me myself.

To begin with Jerry. Jerry lived in the bush over near De Leon Springs, which is one of Florida's three or four hundred guaranteed and verified fountains of youth and sulphur water. He was in the cattle raising business. Now the cattle raising business down here is at about the same stage as it was out West in the palmy eighties or nineties, when there was plenty of good range and not many rustlers and you didn't have to fence your stock in. Florida is a no fence, free range State, and there aren't any rustlers for a reason which I won't elaborate on too freely, it being a custom with a certain night riding group in these parts which wears flowing white robes to deal right frankly with people who get too lippy. I knew a cracker once who used his mouth too fluently for talking purposes around election time, and one morning I took my putty knife and helped him remove himself from a thick, shiny black covering which adhered lovingly to his hide and provided a rich soil for a fine crop of pin feathers to grow in. And that's that.

Jerry Beamway was a Georgia boy of a fine old family. The boll weevil and the blue bug had about ruined his daddy, and Jerry came down here with a little money to participate in the cattle raising business with a fellow named Voosner. Voosner owned around three thousand head, and when Jerry went partners with him, Florida meat was selling at pretty fancy prices. They grew " frames " mostly; that is, they let their runty stock range and grow into gaunt, skinny animals, then shipped to Cuba, where the grazing was good and the frames could put on weight.

Jerry and this side kick of his lived in a rebuilt Spanish farmhouse three or four hundred years old, miles away from nowhere and about seventeen miles due south through cypress swamps and hammocks, of Vingo, where I run this commissary. The difference between a grocery store and a commissary is that a commissary is never open when you want to get in and do some trading. At least, Jerry, who used to drop in about twice a month at three or four A.M., for a can of pork and beans for himself and a peck of oats for his pony, said so.

Well, I run this commissary and preserve the law and order in my twin official capacities of deputy sheriff and game warden. I also raise yams, sugar cane, and a little garden truck on the side.

Vingo itself is strictly a law abiding community. We have a railroad station large enough for you to stand up in if you kind of duck your head, and this canary colored depot is the hub of a sort of invisible wheel with spokes shooting out in all directions. Vingo is booming. The population still consists of one white man, being me, but all around Vingo there is all kinds of activity.

About a mile to the east are a couple coquina rock quarries. Four miles west is a turpentine still which runs almost one solid week out of every month now. There are half a dozen tie camps scattered through the pines to the south, also a shingle mill, and to the north, about five miles by a road that is generally passable in dry weather, is a five year old orange grove, run by the Chicago girl with the Irish spunk, of which much more later. I want to give you a picture first of all of Vingo.

Vingo is in a clearing about four miles in from the Dixie Highway and about seven miles north of the nearest town, which is Ormond, where John D. Rockefeller spends his winters. Aside from me there are about ten colored families living across the tracks. The rest of the population is made up of alligators, blacksnakes, water moccasins, and an occasional rattler.

And all around Vingo is this humming activity. Going through on one of the fast Key West trains you would never suspect it. As you whiz through, lolling in your Pullman and gently cussing the never ending monotony of, first, a cypress swamp, then a ragged black wall of scrawny pines,

next a field of scrub palmetto and dry bunch grass, then the same three in the above order all over again all the way from Jax to Miami—when, as I say, you go whizzing through Vingo and see the canary colored depot, the whitewashed commissary and my lonesome looking red stained house and a few deserted and abandoned cottages, you are likely to say to your wife, " My Lord, wouldn't it be awful, Carrie, to live in a place like that!" And Carrie shivers.

Well, some days I admit I feel that way about Vingo myself. When my horse wanders off through the woods on the afternoon the local freight is due to stop with half a carload of groceries from the wholesale warehouse at Palatka: or my cow goes dry; or somebody I have given too much credit to balls the jack for Vero or Spuds or Kissimmee: then I cuss out Vingo in no uncertain terms. The rest of the time, really, it ain't half bad. I can step out into my back yard any day and knock over a quail for supper and sometimes a wild turkey—I'm game warden, remember. Taken by and large, it could be worse: and the summers are fine.

If there's a breeze blowing, as every man, woman and child living in Florida will tell you confidentially, speaking of their own house, I get it. The Atlantic is only five miles away through the bush, and I get the trade wind spang off the Gulf Stream every night. The nearest telephone or telegraph is seven miles away, but aside from them I have all the comforts you have—and I don't have to worry about coal.

One of these cunnin' little farm electric plants lights my house, pumps me all the water I can use in my modern plumbing system from a deep well, drives my washing machine, churn and ice cream freezer, keeps my ice box at forty odd degrees, and charges my radio battery. Yes, life in the wilderness is different from what it used to be. At night with my three hundred dollar radio outfit I can listen to the same records a thousand miles away that I play on my own twenty-five dollar phonograph—when the static isn't too bad.

That's the bright side of the cloud. The dark side is when my horse goes gallavanting off through the woods, or the cow goes dry, or a twenty dollar account at the commissary goes blooey, or I get a lonesome spell. And when a lonesome spell comes on I'd sell Vingo for thirty cents to the first comer with the radio thrown in for good measure.

It was when one of these lonesome spells was just coming on that the events took place concerning my cattleman friend and the orange grove girl that I'm going to tell you about. It was on a Saturday afternoon, and I was down at the commissary sawing off slabs of D. S. bellies and bailing water-ground meal out of a barrel for some of my tie-camp cash trade and feeling blue as blazes about nothing in particular the way a fellow will sometimes, when Jerry Beamway went galloping past on his black pony without waving and I knew something was wrong.

His face looked like he had dined off Key limes. Number Twenty-Nine sizzled through about then, picking the mail sack off the crane and dropping another, and by the time the mail order catalogue and parcel post C. O. D.'s was sorted and distributed and I got up to the house, there was Jerry shaving himself with my safety razor and muttering to himself like a hog-bear that has backed into a clump of Spanish bayonet.

If you have the same intimate feelings about your safety razor that I have for mine, which is almost the same feelings I have for my toothbrush, you will get my attitude where Jerry was concerned when I tell you I felt almost honored whenever he used that razor. No, I ain't joking. Jerry Beamway was one of those fellows you fall all over yourself for. He was the most reticent, reserved man I ever knew. It took me eight months to call him Jerry, and even longer than that for him to call me Buck, which is short for Buckeye, Ohio being my original birthplace.

Something about him made you think he was a valuable man to know. He was one of these quiet, few worded men who give out an impression of great strength and ripe wisdom in reserve. He carried this out even in the way he walked and moved. You felt there was something in Jerry that never showed on the surface, something big and

fine that he wouldn't let but maybe one or two people know existed in his whole lifetime.

One strange thing about him was that he never, no matter how mad he got, cussed. He was the only boy in a family of four sisters, and possibly that's why. Right away you say that non-cussing streak disqualifies him from the man class in this day and age when even the sixteen year old flappers say " damn " and " hell " four times as often as they say " please " and " thank you." But that hunch is wrong. Jerry could pour more distilled and concentrated essence of rattlesnake poison into a simple " dawggone " than I ever heard a man sling into his ripest and choices favorite cuss word. I mean Jerry was a man. A hard and decent life had made him that, and he was a joy to any eye—broad across the back, slim across the waist, with a chest like a professional swimmer's, and snaky muscles in his arms and chest and back that rippled and slid and coiled every move he made. Yes; Jerry was one hundred per cent he-material.

He had a trick when riled of raising his left eyebrow a lot higher than the other. His eyes were the piercing, gray, keep-at-your-distance kind, and this eyebrow hitching stunt gave them sometimes a most malignant expression.

The storm warning was flying high when I went into the bathroom and found him hoeing his chin with my razor, and I knew then that trouble without a doubt was brewing. He had just been under the shower, and his bleached, tan colored hair was standing out from his brown face and neck like the quills on a porcupine.

" We are goin' to town," Jerry says in answer to my natural question. " So get into yo' Sunday clothes and get the flivvuh ready to hit the ball. Theh's a cahnival startin' to-night oveh at Daytona Beach. So shake a laig."

This was eloquence for Jerry, and was delivered in the sweet drawl he always falls into when boiling mad. I asked him again what was ailin' him. He turned around from the looking glass with the razor ready to start down one cheek. " Look yuh, Buck. Ef you say one mo' thing to me, Ah am likely to go right away from heah and kill somebody daid."

Well, naturally, I let it ride at that. I don't know why it is so, but these cattlemen hate being asked questions. Jerry was boiling over with some real or fancied wrong, and in due time he would tell me all about it, so I left him there slashing at his three day stubble as if it was somebody's throat.

I went out to the barn to get the flivver ready, and while I was backing out, a little battered gray roadster went rattling and clattering past the house. The top was almost in ribbons, and there was a girl hunched over the wheel. It was Nora Bantry, one of my best cash customers, the plucky little Chicago stenographer who was trying, against its natural inclinations, to make a five year old orange grove pay.

The road from her grove runs past my house and the commissary; and she always drove that little gray rattletrap as if she was going for a doctor. I yelled and waved, thinking she wanted to get into the commissary for mail or rations, but she didn't see or hear me, but went right on, around the commissary and down the sand road which runs into the Dixie Highway four miles east.

When I got back upstairs, Jerry was just tying his necktie, looking as magnificent as a clothing ad in a light gray suit.

" I guess Nora Bantry's going to town too," I said, but he didn't seem to hear.

" That kid has more pluck than any five men I know," I added.

Jerry turned on me with that left eyebrow of his fairly flickering. " Are you goin' to the Beach with me to-day?" he growled.

Well, I told him in a few choice words what I thought of anybody for snapping at a harmless remark, but I might have been talking to a cabbage palm. He had one of his deaf streaks on, when he couldn't have heard a gun go off behind him. He went on with his beautifying, manicured his nails three times, and smoked six cigarettes pacing up and down the bedroom while I got ready.

And not a word out of him all the way

into town! He just sat there beside me like a bump on a log, with his jaw hard and white, looking straight ahead and, as far as I could judge, getting madder and madder at whatever had started him off. Dangerous? I'll say so. When we crossed the toll bridge at Daytona over the Halifax, he opened his mouth and said something for the first time. It was when the toll man collected a dollar and gave us an orange ticket with half the holes punched out in exchange.

" You ought to be hung fo' this," Jerry said in a cold, deadly voice to that astonished toll man. " And any town that has toll bridges in this day ought to be burned to the ground."

Say! I let in the clutch and we must have jumped twenty feet.

" We're goin' to have one grand little holiday if you're goin' to keep this up," I told him. " Won't we have fun! Say, what's bitin' you, anyway?"

Not a word! Not even a glance. The big dumb-bell just sat there wiggling that left eyebrow.

Well, we rolled down Main Street to the concrete incline, and down onto the beach. The tide was out, and the beach was a yellow boulevard and it looked a mile wide! I guess I've been over on the beach a couple thousand times, but I never yet have failed to get a real punch out of seeing those breakers come tumbling in.

There was a regular mob on the beach to-day; thousands of cars lined up, and thousands of people in bathing. And this was the middle of August! Daytona Beach is supposed to be a winter resort only, but that ain't half of it. I've seen bigger crowds over there in July, August and September than in December, January and February, when the winter crowds are down.

In the summer, people from the interior, places like Deland, Sanford and Orlando, come over for *their* vacations. In the winter the Northern tourists use the beach, and in the summer the watermelon tourists. Nobody seems to know why the summer crowds from the orange groves, the potato farms, the hog ranches, the sawmills and the turpentine stills are called watermelon tourists, but they are, and to be called one gives you about the same rating as " sourdough " does up in Alaska. It means you *belong;* you ain't a tin-canner or a greenhorn any longer.

In the summer the groves, farms, ranches, mills and stills aren't very active, so we all go swimming over to the beaches. And there were thousands of these watermelon tourists swarming over the beach when Jerry and I got there.

The carnival was in full swing—a merry-go-round, fortune telling booths, stalls where you could buy chances or throw rings for a box of candy or a doll or a box of nickel cigars; an airplane taking up long whiskered potato kings for five dollars a throw; and a free-for-all auto race just starting down the beach. The brass band from Orlando was playing in front of the Seaside, and the air was plumb full of holiday spirit. Girls and boys in bathing suits that would petrify a Northern censor were romping down the sidewalks, or jazzing around in shiny new cars. Everybody happy but Jerry, and even I was beginning to work up a grouch over the way he was acting when everybody else was feeling so peppy.

We parked the bus in the line-up south of the pier, and that row of cars side by side was all of half a mile long. Then we came back to the pier with an idea of renting a couple bathing suits. And on a bench in the shade under the pier I spotted Nora Bantry and a Daytona girl who gives vocal lessons—Nelly Witherel, and both in bathing suits. Moreover, they were all alone and hadn't been in. And right away I saw a chance to percolate a little sunshine through Jerry's gloom.

Nora hadn't seen us. She was gazing out over the ocean with her lips parted a little, and I never saw her looking sweeter and prettier. She was one of these rare Irish combinations, anyway, with skin as white and pure as milk, violet blue eyes and wonderful curly blue black hair. Her friend, Nellie, wasn't so much. You may have observed in your travels that the good ones don't travel in pairs very often. Nellie was a blonde and kind of chunky.

Anyhow, there sat Nora in a cunning little emerald green silk bathing suit that just

loved her, gazing dreamily off to sea; and if a good look at her in that bathing suit couldn't cheer Jerry up, then brass bands or nothing else could.

Without saying what was up my sleeve, I urged him over toward the bench. There were so many strangers around that he and Nora didn't see each other until we were almost near enough to touch her. But when they did!

Nora drew her big violet blue eyes away from the violet blue ocean just when Jerry stopped in his tracks beside me and started to tremble. He trembled, actually, like a blade of St. Augustine grass in a gale of wind! Nora's face and neck and shoulders were all of a sudden as red as fire. I didn't have a chance to get in a solitary word! Nora was up and halfway across the beach to the water before I could open my mouth, with her little chin up and her fists gripping at her sides, and Nellie tagging after her. You could have knocked me over with a fly swatter!

I looked at Jerry. That left eyebrow of his was, honestly, threatening to dislocate itself and disappear up under his hair, and his face was whiter than Nora's was red. The minute she hit the water he let out his breath with a hiss like an alligator's.

"What's been goin' on between you and Nora Bantry?" I cracked at him.

No answer. He was looking down the beach to one of the carnival stands. A man was standing there throwing baseballs at something, and a crowd was gathering to watch him. The man threw a ball; there was a crash, and everybody roared.

Jerry elbowed his way up to the counter. Well, if there was ever a novelty in the way of a ball pitching stand, this was it. The fellow who was running it had hit upon or borrowed one whale of an idea. About thirty feet back of the counter was a heavy canvas curtain, and in front of the curtain there was a big kitchen table with a wooden backstop nailed on the back of it. There were a lot of little brass hooks screwed into this backstop, and on each hook there was wired some article of dining room china—cups, saucers, butter plates, soup plates, and so on.

The big idea was that for the small sum of a quarter you were allowed to throw three baseballs at the chinaware exhibit. There weren't any prizes. All you got for your quarter was the satisfaction, if you pitched straight, of smashing some good chinaware. And right away I saw that this fellow had an idea that ought to be a gold mine. Here for the small sum of two bits you could, if you were a peeved and suppressed husband, vent your stored-up wrath; you could bust up all the chinaware you had ever, in your wildest dreams, wanted to.

Now Jerry wasn't anybody's peeved or downtrodden husband, but the idea appealed to him like water to an alligator that's been scorched in a swamp fire. He was actually licking his lips, and he was so taken over by this heaven-sent opportunity to smash something that he didn't notice several men in the crowd who said howdy to him. One of them was Fred Niver, who handles the loans over at the Daytona bank, and if Fred had a nickel's worth of Jerry's paper he had twelve hundred dollars' worth! But Jerry wasn't noticing anybody.

He stepped up, crowding the others aside, and bought a dollar's worth of balls to begin with. Jerry used to play baseball on a high school team up in Georgia, and his aim was still pretty good.

Well, he started right in to burn up those balls. First he smashed a soup plate. Then he ruined a dainty white teacup. Next he obliterated a butter plate. He was in fine form. Somebody piped up that he ought to be over in the ball grounds this afternoon pitching against St. Augustine, but Jerry wasn't paying attention to anybody or anything but that chinaware.

When the twelve balls were used up he bought another dollar's worth. The crowd, except for the usual one or two brainless professional kidders, had sense enough to know that Jerry had a mad on. After the first few pitches there wasn't a laugh cracked during the entire ordeal. It was serious business. Here was a man getting rid of a magnificent grouch at three for a quarter, and they stood back and let him wreck chinaware until there wasn't any left to wreck.

He broke the bank, you might say. For a solid hour he threw baseballs at innocent and harmless plates as fast as the balls could be handed to him and the plates hung up on hooks. He squandered eleven dollars and seventy-five cents before he stopped, and by then there were about two hundred watermelon tourists looking on, all silent, all more or less secretly approving.

Do you get the picture? Ninety-eight per cent of those men didn't know Jerry Beamway from Adam's off-ox, but they had to hand it to a man who could store up such a lot of violence. I'll bet every man of that ninety-eight per cent was wondering what Jerry's wife was like, too!

Well, when the sport was over Jerry had a tight little smile on his lips, but that eyebrow was still no more than half mast. The envious onlookers might think he had worked off his crab, but I knew Jerry better.

"When," I asked him wearily, "are you going to tell me what it is all about? Why did you throw all that money away? What did Nora Bantry ever do to you?"

"I was jes fixin' to tell you," Jerry answered, more like his regular self. "Come oveh hyeh and sit down."

We went over to a bench, sat down and started cigarettes. In a very few words he told me—trust that man to use as few words as the law would allow!

Early that morning, it seemed, he had been riding herd, gathering in all the new calves that hadn't been marked. He chanced to be passing Nora Bantry's place a little after sun-up, and he saw a lot of buzzards circling around over the southeastern corner of her grove. There were thousands of buzzards; the sky was black with them, all wheeling and settling and croaking that terrible carrion cry of theirs. When he got to the fence corner, he saw the reason for this. Fourteen of his and Voosner's cattle were lying there dead. One of them was trying to get up, and Nora poured a load of buckshot into it just as Jerry rode up.

"Jes' because those po', stupid, hahmless cattle broke through huh dawggone fence, she shot down fo'teen head of them," Jerry said in his lowest, most venomous tone. "But theh's a fence law in this State! Propehty ownehs must fence in their land to keep cattle and hawgs out. I'll sue huh, and I'll collect!"

Well, that *was* serious. Our fence law, legislated and kept legislated by the cattlemen down here, reads that property owners shall keep their land properly fenced—or suffer the consequences. I've had a herd of cattle — hundreds of them — break through my fence into a corn patch, and trample down and ruin an acre of ripe corn in less than an hour's time. Privately, I was sorely opposed to the fence law, and all my sympathies were with Nora.

"Did they do much damage to her grove?" I asked.

"Not enough damage to give huh the right to kill off fo'teen head of mah cattle."

"And you're going to sue her, Jerry?"

"I sho' am!" said Jerry with that eyebrow dancing confirmation.

Yes; it was mighty serious. I told Jerry what he already knew about Nora Bantry in an attempt to soften him—that she was an orphan, how she had been left a little legacy by some aunt, and how she had come down here and bravely tried to make that orange grove pay its way all by herself; what a fine, big hearted kid she was, and how honest she was in all her dealings.

But it didn't soften Jerry. She had called him a dirty cracker, and had kept on calling him a dirty cracker all the while he told her what he thought of anybody who would shoot down fo'teen head of dumb cattle.

"If you drag her into court," I told him, "it will simply mean you'll break her. Give the kid a chance, Jerry. I don't blame her for shooting those marauding cattle for breaking through her fence!"

"That fence was rotten."

"It makes no difference. You ought to be willing to sacrifice fourteen head of your runty, skinny, worthless cattle for a girl like Nora. I would!"

"Yes," he drawled. "You're right gen'rous with mah fo'teen head of cattle."

It gave it up, exasperated, and suggested a swim. "Personally, I'd like to hold you under water for one solid hour!" I told him.

"Well," he retorted languidly as we started for the bathhouse, "you have mah puhmission to try."

Did you ever notice how it is when you're trying to dodge somebody you don't like, or don't want to meet, in a crowd? You are drawn together like a pair of magnets. That was the way it was about all the rest of the time Jerry and I were at the beach. You would have thought Nora Bantry was following us, bumping into us purposely, but I know it was simply that fool law at work.

We got a couple suits and went swimming. The surf was deceiving from the shore—it always is. They were running bigger than they looked. The tail end of a gulf hurricane was swinging up around Jupiter, pushing these big seas ahead of it. That was the explanation. The first line of breakers were pretty heavy, but out beyond them some of the second line ones when they caved must have measured fifteen feet from hollow to crest, and when one of those big boys starts arching over you, if it only had windows you would think it was the Woolworth Building. But when you understand how to handle these big fellows they are more fun than the little ones; and Jerry and I had been in them often enough to consider ourselves experts.

We were diving under, over and through the first line toward the smooth stretch before the second line began to break, when we ran into Nora again, only we didn't know it was Nora. I saw a pretty green bathing suit out there moving along lazy and slow with a trudgeon stroke, and all of a sudden she was right among us, riding a granddaddy of a wave, just as it started to crash. All we could see of her was a scarlet bathing cap and two swimming white arms. Then she came shooting down on us in a smother of foam, straight as an arrow at Jerry. She tried to get to her feet, but was jerked under as the drag back started, and Jerry, with a laugh, took a running dive through the suds to help the fair stranger up.

She came up, mermaid fashion, with the lower half of her under water, laughing at the way that big rough wave had manhandled her—and the smile on each of their faces froze. They were a picture standing there, Jerry brown and big and towering over her like some son of Neptune, and Nora on her knees staring up at him with a face turning to white marble, and another big blue breaker yawning to crash down on them.

It never pays to turn your back on old Father Atlantic, not when he is rolling those big fellows in at about forty an hour.

I let out a yell, but it was too late. That wave came down on them and folded them in as if it had been a great big blue silk comforter. I saw white legs and brown ones, slim white arms and muscular mahogany ones, green bathing suit and blue one, red rubber bathing cap and sunburnt tarnished hair and at least eleven pairs of hands all tangled up together go under in the blue white churn before it knocked me twisting and biting sand at least twenty feet.

And when I came up, spitting out sand and coquinas, it looked as if Jerry and Nora had been petrified there by their very hatred, as if those million tons of sweeping blue water had passed over them like a zephyr of spring air. There they stood, still glaring at each other, still holding that tense pose, as if nothing had happened at all, except that Nora was now standing up in the knee deep back drag. It was a picture. You couldn't help thinking how beautiful the two of them looked and—why was God so careless about *me* when He was passing good looks and figures around!

I suppose the whole thing didn't last much longer than twenty seconds from start to finish, and then it looked for a moment as if they were going to put the entire Atlantic Ocean between them. Jerry moved back as if she was a sting ray, and she splashed sidewise toward deep water as if he were something slimy and offensive, like a purple jelly fish.

We went out right afterward, and he was worse than he had been before he had spent the eleven dollars and seventy-five cents on all that defenseless chinaware. The day was completely ruined for me. He was just about as congenial as a hungry barracouda with a ring of hungrier porpoises closing in. Wouldn't talk. Just wiggled that fantastic eyebrow and set his jaws as if he was going into competition with one of the Vingo rock crushers.

When we were getting dressed I told him exactly what I thought of the way he was acting, and he drawled: " Ef you feel the need of criticizin' mah conduct some mo' to-day, Buck, jes' signify it by sayin' so, and we will go ouah sep'rate ways."

Well, I was more than half a mind to take that up. I was fed up with him and his grouch. Here I'd left my Saturday night trade—the biggest of the week—to forget Vingo and the general cussedness of mankind for a day or two, and he was doing his level best to ruin the holiday. Yet I didn't dare let him go off by himself. There was nothing a man in his condition might not do! And it flashed through my mind that something much worse than them fourteen head of worthless dumb cattle was preying on him; and that was the nearest I blundered to the truth, which was the truth, as you will see directly.

Along about supper time we finally agreed on the first thing we'd agreed on since leaving Vingo, when we both owned up to the need of some sophisticated food. After months of our own cooking we were hungry for something unusual and foreign in the way of chow, so we went up Main Street to a Jap restaurant, where they serve real Chinese chop suey.

The place was crowded with watermelon tourists like ourselves, who were also hankering after something queer and exotic after orange grove, hog ranch and turpentine still diets, and we edged our way to a little vacant table in the corner. The table jammed in next to ours was taken by a couple girls, and I didn't notice them—and I know Jerry didn't—until the Jap came to get our orders.

Then I noticed that Nora and Nellie were the two girls, and Jerry took heed of the same painful fact at about the same time. Nora had on a blue, airy little dress and looked cute enough to hug. Without even glancing at Jerry I knew that that trick eyebrow of his was doing business somewhere between his penetrating gray eye and the cowlick that won't stay up in place.

Nora made the discovery maybe a few seconds later. She started to get up from her chair, hesitated, then deliberately walked to the nearest window, raised it as high as it would go, and came back and sat down. Well, actions in the low comedy class of that one certainly speak loud enough, but that seemingly didn't take half the load off Nora's Irish mind.

She said to Nellie, in her clear, sweet voice: " Don't you think it a shame, really, Nellie, the way the crowds over here at the beach are becoming cheapened? The way they let the lowest kind of people, like ordinary cowmen, associate with respectable people?"

Well, I made one grab for my hat, expecting a violent explosion in the immediate vicinity of my cow-punching companion, but nothing of the kind took place. The game she was playing was apple pie to Jerry.

He leaned over to me confidentially and said in a rich, clear, penetrating voice: " Buck, do you know what I'm thinkin' of doin' directly? I'm thinkin' of sellin' out mah cattle interests and goin' into the orange growin' business. I've got a Jim dandy of an idea. Yessuh! I'm goin' to buy a half a dozen three-year-old groves and amalgamate 'em all togethuh. Then I'm goin' to put ads in the papers for Chicowgo stenographuhs to come down hyeh and run 'em fo' me. These Chicowgo stenographuhs has a way of jes' chahmin' the fruit to grow. I think I'd make a killin' with them Chicowgo key pluggehs, don't you reckon I would, Buck?"

Nellie and I exchanged desperate glances.

In the pause, Nora picked up her conversation with Nellie.

" Do you know, Nellie," she said sweetly, " before I came down here from Wilamette I always had the silliest notions in my head about Southern men! I thought Southern men were naturally courteous and decent to women. Wasn't that foolish of me? Ha, ha, ha! Of course I know it *is* silly of me to class low, ordinary Georgia crackers with real men!"

Bam! Well, our chop suey came on in two steaming blue bowls then, and when the Jap had gone back to the kitchen for the black, gummy sirup that you pour over chink food and we used to think was pigeon's blood, Jerry renewed his conversation with me.

"They tell me, Buck," he said in his clear, pleasant drawl, "that Chicowgo stenographers are gettin' so's they won't take dictation from anybody." This, I thought, was almost clever, and not at all dangerous. Then he added sadly: "And they tell me that none of them has got brains enough to bell a buzzard!"

I said, growling: "For Heaven's sake, can it!" And I saw Nellie making frantic efforts at heading off Nora, but we were both wasting our time. They kept up this exchange of pretties for a good half hour, but I refuse to dignify any more of the remarks they made by repeating them. There was just about as much harmony in our little corner of the Jap restaurant as there is at eight o'clock at night in the air, when four or five tenors all begin reading off crop reports, telling bedtime stories, delivering lectures on how to eliminate rats from your garret, and forecasting to-morrow's weather, all on the same wave length. I was honestly ashamed for both of them—the finest fellow I might say I ever knew and one of the gamest, nicest, sweetest girls in the world going at each other like a pair of strange cats.

Nora and Nellie were the first to leave with nobody winner or loser, and we followed them out a few minutes later. It was dark by then, but there were still big gay crowds in bathing suits going to and from the ocean; and the Orlando band was playing a lively fox-trot in the dancing pavilion.

The minute we hit the sidewalk I knew something was going on that oughtn't to be going on. The street as well as both sidewalks were jammed with people, but mostly men and boys, and there was something peculiar in the way they were all acting. Then I saw what the trouble was. The St. Augustine ball team had been playing Daytona that afternoon, and the visitors had been unmercifully trimmed. The visitors were now over here at the beach looking for blood.

It isn't that way any more. There never was a game in those days that didn't end somewhere in a grand free-for-all. Nowadays when Daytona plays St. Augustine the two teams almost kiss when they meet.

Anyhow, this fight was starting, and in a minute I knew where we were standing wouldn't be a safe place for any peace loving neutral. Then several things happened at once. Nora and Nellie were trying to squeeze through the sidewalk mob about a dozen feet ahead of us, and I saw a big, beefy blond reach out and grab Nora by the arm and try to kiss her on general principles; then somebody threw something. At least, I am fairly certain that somebody threw something. By the feel of it, it must have been at least a four story apartment building, and it landed fair and square on the left side of my straw hat, knocking me clean off my feet.

When I picked myself up, the scrap was merrily under way. Bricks, clubs and fists were flying, and about nine hundred people were yelling police and blue murder. And there was Jerry in the thick of it doing a neat little job of first degree mayhem on the big stiff who had grabbed Nora. Nora was standing behind him, and Nellie was nowhere in sight. Jerry was knocking this big bozo down, then picking him up and pasting him again. This must have happened three, four times before the big fellow crawled between somebody's legs and made his get-away. Then one of the beach motor cops rode hell bent into the midst of things, and the scrappers scattered.

I staggered over to Jerry and Nora just in time to hear her crack out at him: "Let go my arm, you dirty Georgia cracker!"

Jerry did not let go her arm. He gave it a little twist, and she bit her lip with pain.

"Let me tell you somethin', ma'am," Jerry drawled with that tight, cruel little smile of his, "this street ain't safe for a lady right now, not even a rarin', rip-snortin' Chicowgo stenographuh! Ef you'll jes' tell me whut hotel you're stoppin' at, I'll take you theh, ma'am."

Nora clutched at me with her other hand.

"Buck, will you kindly call your dog off?"

Jerry let her go then and bowed to me with all the courtliness of your true Southern gentleman. "I'll wait fo' you right heah, Buck," he said. Then, philosophically: "Shoo! Ain't women peculiah?"

Nora dragged me away from the spot toward the corner. I asked her where she was staying.

" I'm staying at the Seaside, but I'm not going there," she answered, and she was so hopping mad she could hardly separate herself from the words. " Buck," she burst out, giving my arm a squeeze that really hurt, " I've been looking forward to this silly carnival for weeks and weeks, like a kid to its first birthday party. And now that—that cracker has had to ruin everything. I hate him. Oh—oh—I just loathe him!"

" Jerry Beamway is not a cracker," I said sternly, " and you know he isn't."

She dropped my arm. " Buck, if you're going to take the part of that cowardly, beastly ruffian I won't go another step with you! Do you know what happened this morning? Do you?"

" I heard you shot fourteen head of his cattle."

Nora grabbed my arms and shook me as if I was a child, and her eyes were like arc lights.

" Did he happen to mention what his worthless beasts did to my grove?" she panted. " Did he?" I was shaken again.

I managed to stutter that Jerry hadn't mentioned that.

" Of course he didn't!" she cried. " Well, *I'll* tell you! They broke through my fence into my nursery and trampled down and ruined nearly two thousand baby trees, and ruined at least seventy-five of my three year olds!"

" He says the fence was rotten," I put in meekly.

" He is a liar! And I would have shot every head of cattle he owns if I hadn't run out of shells! For two hard, terrible years I've given every ounce that was in me to that grove. I've worked twelve and fourteen hours a day. I finally had it on its feet. And last night—last night those—those damn cows had to break in and—" Nora spun completely about with a wild wave of her hand and faced me again. " Buck," she said in a toneless voice. " I'm ruined."

I must have looked surprised.

" I'm not exaggerating it, Buck. So help me God," she said in a terrible voice, " that man has ruined me, Buck! I was beginning to see daylight. This winter I'd have had that grove paying. Now my young trees are all dead, and on top of that he is going to sue me, and under the fence law in this State I haven't a chance in court!"

This, I admitted, was mighty serious. Jerry's one thought had been to avenge the assassination of his fourteen head of cattle. Perhaps, when he cooled off, he'd change his mind about sueing.

" Oh, no, no," she stopped me. " I hate to admit I am licked, especially by such a crude, cowardly rascal as that cracker. But I am. I've borrowed up to my limit against next fall's crop. All my profit was coming out of that nursery. I—I'm through, Buck. I'm going back to the old job in Chi. The Irish in me hates to say die, but it has to. Darn it, I really love that fool grove, but what—what chance has a girl got when she has to deal with men like that—that?"

" I can't understand this at all," I blurted out. " Jerry Beamway has always been as square and fair in his dealings as you have, Nora, and I can't say more for any man. I really admire and like him, Nora, better than any man I know. He comes from one of the finest and oldest Georgia families—"

" No man with good breeding would act as he has done," Nora stopped me firmly. " There's something—something positively malignant about that man, and— Oh, sugar, come on along and dance with me!"

Well, that was like Nora. The day when any man or the biggest herd of marauding cattle ever bred can break her spirit, I want to be on hand for the miracle! And it will be a miracle.

We went over to the pavilion on the pier and danced for almost an hour; and when I say that Nora danced like a feather in the breeze, every little feather has a right to hold up its head with pride. She danced the way she did everything else, with a light and breezy abandon.

Once or twice I thought I saw Jerry in the doorway, but I couldn't be sure; and after I took Nora to her hotel and went back to where the fight had taken place, Jerry was still standing there with his straw

hat jerked down over his eyes and a semicircle of cigarette butts on the sidewalk around him.

And I waded in where a fool and an angel both would have backed water.

"Well," I said, "Miss Nora has told me all about that cattle incident. How they trampled down about two thousand young trees, and—"

"That incident," Jerry headed me off with his slow, gentle drawl, "will be settled in the propeh place and by the propeh people."

"You mean in court?" I snapped.

"I do," said he.

"If you take that case into court," I told him, throwing discretion and common sense and every other conversational virtue overboard, "you are a coward and a skunk!"

That was laying it on pretty strong. If Jerry had given me the same medicine he had ladled out to the big taffy who had grabbed Nora I would not have been greatly surprised. Instead of that he only looked at me as if he had discovered something in my face that interested him intensely. But his reply, a Georgia backwoods phrase, was a confession that he was rattled more than he showed.

"Say which?" he stuttered.

So I told him why, told him in detail about Nora's fight and how his runty cattle had wrecked her dreams and plans—told it to him in her own words. And when I had finished he made no comment whatever. Yet his grouch seemed all at once to have left him, as if the fact that his cattle had been directly responsible for ruining Nora Bantry cheered him up tremendously.

To me this was not credible. It was not like Jerry Beamway at all—Jerry, who treated his black pony with more consideration than most men do their wives: Jerry, who would give his last dollar or the shirt off his back to a friend in need.

The rest of the evening, so far as Jerry's spirits were concerned, was a riotous success. He became his old comical self. Everything Jerry said had a laugh in it. I don't mean he was hilarious—he never was; just feeling his holiday oats, so to speak.

Couldn't we stir up a good lively poker game somewheres? Couldn't we find somebody to help us stage a beefsteak party or a fish-fry or a clambake or a flounder hunt, or something? Well, three carloads of people we knew from Daytona came along and invited us aboard. All sails were set for a turtle-egging party down the beach. There was plenty of room and, come on along. So we went turtle-egging.

Now there is no sport known to the civilized world that even remotely resembles turtle-egging, unless it be that forgotten game of our childhood of hunting under chairs and behind sofas and in daddy's overcoat pockets for Easter eggs. During July and August the great sea turtles, the female of the species, that is, come up on the beach on dark and moonless nights, scoop out holes in the high, dry soft sand with their flippers and lay as many as two and three hundred eggs at a sitting. Somebody in the party always pulls the old wheeze about, wouldn't it be nice if sea turtles could be crossed with barnyard hens, and it always gets a hearty laugh.

These eggs—I am still talking about turtle eggs—have the shape, size, color and general appearance of a virtuous ping-pong ball, only the skin is soft, like a snake's or alligator's egg. Turtle-egging doesn't call for any skill; it's all a matter of dumb luck. You simply drive down the beach in the dark of the moon, everybody looking sharp for "crawls," which are the marks scraped in the hard sand by the turtle's flippers when she crawls up out of the ocean to deposit her tender two or three hundred egg burden.

After securing a mess of these eggs it is customory to start a driftwood fire on the beach, mix some of the eggs with civilized, or hen's, eggs and whip up a batter with various ingredients that some optimistic girl always brings along in a basket, together with a pancake griddle, cane syrup and enough coffee in vacuum bottles to keep a regiment awake during an entire campaign.

These turtle egg pancakes for lightness and all around eating qualities must be described in some poetic, culinary language, like the French, to be given any justice.

Well, we finally spotted a crawl down near Mosquito Inlet, and we gathered in pretty nearly two pecks of these eggs, leaving about a hundred in the hole and covering them up again for the sun to hatch as per nature's curious plan. Sea turtles are big attractions along the beach, and we don't want to discourage their egg laying industry any more than we do the alligators', although personally I always shoot every alligator I see on sight, after seeing what one of them did to a hog of mine.

The girls got a batter whipped up and us men collaborated on a driftwood fire, which every man I ever knew knows how to build better than any other man. It must have been close on to two o'clock when enough turtle egg flapjacks had been cooked for all hands, and we were just winding up the proceedings when the first puff of that West Indian hurricane the radio broadcaster up at Atlanta or Pittsburgh had tipped me off to the night before came snorting up from down Bimini way.

In the hush, or lull, that followed that warning blast, rain began to leak down from the sky the way it does down here, just as if some practical joker up in the clouds had sneaked in and quietly turned on a shower bath; but a minute later rain and wind and salt spray and sand were mixed up in what the sailors call a full gale.

Now when it rains on the beach, you don't want to be caught with your car standing still very long. When the tide is out and the beach is in good condition, a twenty ton truck is as safe as on a concrete boulevard, but when one or two of these tropical rains let go—watch your clutch! The rain seems to dissolve the sand, and washes it out from around and under your tires, and—down they go! Then you're stuck, and if you can't dig out before the tide comes in—another good Rolls Royce has gone blooey!

You aren't a full fledged watermelon tourist until you have been stuck on the beach at least once, and we were all thirty-third degree w. t.'s. There was an orderly scramble for the cars, and we got off just in time. Sweet spirits of juniper, how that wind did blow! I have been through ninety mile gales at sea, but for pure, unadulterated thrill and scares per square minute, give yourself a ride down Daytona Beach on a pitch black night with a gale of rain and wind a-blowing!

Your headlights don't cut through the rain and flying scud much more than twelve or thirteen feet. To the left of you is solid, unblinking blackness, and to the right of you are man eating waves and all the rest that goes to make up a mighty dangerous ocean. Just how far to the right of you these granddaddies are is the ticklish question. They sound as if they're breaking right on your eardrums, but you can't see them. You can't see a thing beyond the slashing needles of water across your lights but solid roaring blackness. You have to steer a hit-or-miss, zigzag course for the incline at Daytona Beach or Seabreeze. When your wheels drag and the engine begins to knock, you know you're too far up, in the soft, dry sand; and when an oily black mass scoots under the bus you know you've steered too far toward Father Atlantic. That's all you have to go by. Well, it's some experience, and once is plenty for any man.

We got to our hotel—Jerry and me—in a driving downpour, and decided—thanks to that black coffee—we might as well sit up and watch the storm. They don't hit our part of the State but once in a couple years, and it's worth paying the admission fee when they do. Usually they blow themselves out somewhere along the keys or along the Cuban coast or in the Bahamas, but once in a coon's age the tail end of one comes snapping up past Jupiter and cracks on the beach, something like that game of snap-the-whip we used to play as boys.

Well, we stayed up and walked around town in our raincoats, listening to it roar and wondering if the people in the houses and hotels along the beach were enjoying themselves. In a blow like that one you couldn't stay dry inside of a corked bottle. Roofs and windows are no protection when spray and rain flying on the horizontal at seventy or eighty an hour swats the front of a house.

Being on the beach during a night like that gives you a thrill that you can't find in many other places—and a kind of savage

belief in a lot of things you're often kind of doubtful about. You can't see your hand in front of your face, and you wouldn't want to if you could. You just brace yourself against it, and feel the whole world shaking and trembling under your feet as those granddaddies come pounding home, and all the wind in existence goes shrieking and ripping past your ears. Oh, it's a sensation!

Then, all of a sudden, it was light. The waves were dirty gray instead of black, and the sky was even dirtier. And as far as we could see up and down the beach was wreckage—pieces of masts and hatch covers, boxes, casks, bales and kegs, all thrown up from nowhere and everywhere during the night. We went down and looked at some of this driftage, and it was labeled to and from all parts of the world.

There were boxes and cases from Spain and China and Peru and Java and even one little mashed in box from Persia. The beach combers—the kids—were out already pawing them over. I nearly fell over myself getting to a clean looking oblong box labeled in neat stencil with the name of a prominent Edinburgh business man, who was a special purveyor to H. M. the King, so it stated on the lid, and Jerry let out a warwhoop at the same time. Well, the dawggone case was empty. It was just like the ocean to play a dirty trick on us like that!

By high tide, at eight o'clock, there wasn't much of the beach left to look at. The wind had driven the water right up to the embankment. There was a crowd on the pier, watching the big fellows break and pointing out bits of wreckage to each other, so Jerry and I went up.

Now everybody on that pier knew that it wasn't a safe place to be loitering in a blow like this one, yet it was packed with people. We pushed our way through way out to the end where the crowd wasn't so thick, and of course there we had to run spang into Nora Bantry again!

She was standing all by herself against the north railing, holding on a little black hat with both hands, her gray raincoat flapping and snapping behind her in the wind, and little straggling ends of her blue-black hair flapping and snapping likewise. At first I couldn't figure out what it was she reminded me of; and then it hit me. Leaning against the wind with hair and skirts and raincoat and all standing out behind her, she was nothing but one of these figure-heads carved on the bows of the beautiful old fashioned clipper ships. Defying the elements, defying everything—that was Nora to a hair.

And then that rotten piece of railing snapped, or something happened—I don't yet know just what, it all took place in such a hurry. I was looking at her one minute; she turned her head so that I just saw her saucy little turned up nose and she caught a glimpse of who was with me, and then—*crac-c-ck!* Next thing she was floating down, turning over and over, into that hissing, churning gray welter forty feet below, or maybe it was only twenty. It looked a hundred!

Everybody who saw it happen did nothing for about eight seconds, then you could hear then groan; and in every one of our minds was the same identical thought—the piles! The barnacles on the pier piles, sharp as the fangs of a wildcat, and every bit as poisonous. Being ripped by a shark isn't much worse than being slammed by a breaking wave against one of those barnacled piles.

I say everybody who saw her fall through that railing did nothing for eight seconds; but I except Jerry Beamway from that unfair charge. While everybody was screeching and yelling at the next fellow to for God's sake do something and don't you see that girl is drowning, Jerry was out of his raincoat and doing the gracefulest swan-dive you ever saw at an exhibition.

He didn't know it was graceful: I don't believe he even knew he was diving at all—and diving at that into the worst churned up ocean along that coast since the big blow of 'ninety-eight. What struck me then was that he went through that gap in the rail so soon after Nora did that he might have had previous information that it was going to happen.

He did that dive into a back drag that might have been three feet deep and might have been thirty. And Jerry was the first

one to come up. He came up clawing that water the way a cat does when she surprises herself by falling into the washtub—you know, trying to climb right up on the surface. Then Nora bobbed up about twenty feet away, all tangled up in skirts and raincoat. There was a grand rush for the shore end of the pier; and it was from the beach that I saw the rest of it.

Jerry clawed over the top of a wave, dived deep under another that was just caving, and grabbed a handful of Nora's beautiful black hair. Luck and nothing but luck saved them. The blow was from the south, and Nora had fallen off on the north side of the pier, so the drift carried both of them away from those hellish piles.

Not more than a hundred of us waded out and helped them out onto the beach. Jerry wasn't even out of breath, only he was laughing kind of wildly; but Nora was so weak she could hardly stand up. Her left arm hung down limp, and her head sagged on Jerry's shoulder and the other arm was around his neck as if she was scared to death. Then she came out of her daze and saw who she was hanging onto, and she said something as she sprang back. The wind blew the words away, but if it wasn't "Let me go, you dirty cracker!" I'll eat an alligator raw.

Well, Jerry had let her go, and Doc Davis's wife hustled Nora into her house. I went over to the hotel and got Nora's suit case, and in a half hour she came out on the porch as dry and sweet and collected as ever. Only her left arm was still hanging down and brown with iodine. She had, somehow or other, sprained it pretty badly.

Then I noticed that Jerry had driven up in front of the house in Nora's little disreputable gray roadster. He got out and came up the steps. She looked at him a minute kind of funny, then—"What are you doing with my car?" she snapped at him.

"I reckon I'm goin' to drive you home, ma'am," said Jerry in that pleasant, deceptive drawl of his. "Seems lak to me you've had enough vacation: and you cain't drive that cah home with yo' ahm that-away."

"I'll drive my car home with one arm, and I'll go home when I am ready," Nora told him, speaking sharper than before.

Jerry looked kind of vexed a moment, as if she was trying his patience sorely. Then he said in a voice that even his dumb cattle jump when they hear, "Get into that cah, Miss Nora; I'm drivin' you home, and I'm drivin' you home now!"

And without a yes, no, or good-by-all, Nora picked up her suit case, climbed into the old gray rattletrap beside him, and away they went! And it wasn't until that moment that certain things dawned on me that ought to have been as clear as October sunlight hours and hours before.

What interested me most of all was, how was this pretty little boy-and-girl feud going to end? Did these two hissing young wild cats really love each other, or what was the answer?

I went back to Vingo and the commissary and minded my own business, which consisted during the next week of girding on my deputy sheriff's badge and an old six shooter and hiking off through the bush on my charger after a colored lady who had, in a burst of hurt pride, thrown a pan of lye water into her husband's face. When I had got her and locked her up in the hoosegow at Ormond and settled down to the grocery business once more, certain wildly unbelievable things had come to pass over at Nora's.

The rumors came trickling in all one day from all points of the compass, as rumors always do in my commissary, until no room for doubt remained. In the big towns it's the doctors and after them the lawyers who know all the neighborhood secrets and family scandals, but in a place like Vingo, the man who runs the commissary is the fellow everybody comes running to first with the latest.

At first I refused to believe these rumors, but still they kept pouring in with every new flock of customers, from the quarries, from the tie camps, from the turpentine camp, all going to prove that you don't need a radio to pick up the local news in this neck of the woods!

Jerry and Nora had got married! They were married by the J. P. at Ormond the next day after the near drowning episode.

And Jerry was living in Nora's house. Don't think I don't know exactly what this meant—what a life those two must be leading there all alone in that little home, flying at each other tooth and claw every time one of them looked at the other crosswise.

Jerry's partner, Voosner, dropped in and gave me the dope I needed to round out my theory. Yes; Jerry had sold out his sixth interest in Voosner's herd for a series of notes, had discounted them at the Daytona bank, and was sinking his money in Nora's grove. Knowing Jerry and Nora as I did, it was a comparatively easy matter to paste two and two together to make four.

In case you are still dubious, here is exactly what had happened: Jerry had acted true to his nature, God bless him. He hated Nora and Nora loathed him, but he had done the right thing—the morally, not the legally, right thing; had accepted the full responsibility for ruining her nursery and part of her three year olds, and was going to work there with her until the grove was back to where it had been before his marauding cattle broke through her fence. Throwing himself away on a girl he hated because he knew his moral duty was to repair the wroing he had done! How many men are there who would have been as white as that?

Well, a couple days later the shabby little gray roadster drove up in front, and Nora and her husband got out and came in to buy some rations. If any doubt remained about the hatred between them, it was wiped clean by the first words they exchanged.

"Did you say you wanted him to order some Bordeaux mixture, Mr. Beamway?" Nora said to Jerry, giving him a look that had come that minute off the ice.

"I will discuss my business with him when it pleases me, ma'am," Jerry came back at her in his haughtiest, meanest tones.

They went on in that loving, honeymooning way for about fifteen minutes, ordering this and that; flour, bacon, baking powder, canned goods and so on. Over the canned goods they almost came to blows. Nora wanted pineapple, and Jerry wanted peaches. They wrangled over this item for pretty nearly five minutes, until I soothed the troubled waters by suggesting that they take a can of each. What was more to the point, this cudgel play didn't seem to be hurting either of them a particle. I never saw Nora looking prettier, or Jerry looking healthier. It was a good thing that the poison wasn't spoiling their lives, anyhow. But wasn't it dangerous? That was what worried me. Mightn't she goad him into forgetting himself and striking her? I shuddered at that.

When they left, after paying cash as both of them had always done, I noticed that Jerry was very deliberately letting her carry the lion's share of the packages to the car. And what almost paralyzed me was when Jerry deliberately let her do the cranking.

Since that day they have probably been in together a half dozen times; and their animosity hasn't gone down one solitary degree. He hasn't struck her yet, and God trust he won't! In each of them is that same fine, hair trigger hatred, ready to spring out at the lightest word or look.

And that is why I said at the beginning of this disorderly narrative that some things like Mr. Tennyson's famous and continuous brook go on and on without ever getting anywhere; that things in real life don't end up so concisely as they usually do in the stories; and it was this dog-eat-dog attitude of Nora's and Jerry's that I had reference to.

EPILOGUE

I have just read this thing over after it's been laying tucked away and forgotten in the "X" box of the mail rack for pretty near two years, and I find that I have got to make a number of retractions. I find that, after talking so freely to the contrary, if I want to tell the honest truth, I will finish up with one of these stories that is like taking a train to the end of the line. I want to say something to justify myself first: I know something about life that I didn't know when I penned the foregoing almost two years ago. It's this: life don't flow along like a brook at all; it moves in jerks and by wiggles. For instance, say you get married. Does life flow along like a brook? Not much. Things go nice and

smooth for a spell, then you find yourself spang up against the need of making a lot of adjustments. Then things go all right for another spell, and bang—you're up against another lot of adjustments you've got to make. Am I right?

Well, Nora and Jerry came to the commissary in the same disreputable little gray roadster about a week ago, for the purpose of showing off as usual the finest crop their orange grove has grown yet. Jerry was carrying it—or him—in the hollow of one arm as if the kid was a stick of dynamite with the percussion cap on—the cutest little scamp you ever saw; his mother all over, but with his dad's rock-crusher jaw and that trick eyebrow. He was the funniest rascal that day. He wanted some candy—and he ain't but a little over a year old! And daddy wouldn't let him have some; and you ought to see that little scoundrel's left eyebrow wiggle. I thought it was going to pop right off on the counter!

"I don't think we should let Juniah have any mo' candy, do you, honey?" Jerry said to Nora. "Especially after the way he had the colic night befo' last?"

Nora gave him a look that would have made almost any man think he was arriving in heaven. "Why, darling," she cooed, "I *really* don't approve of it, but if you want to, of course—"

Oh, horrors! The very idea of doing anything, or thinking of dreaming of considering of doing anything that Nora honey disapproved of in the slightest, was almost enough to make Jerry darling faint dead away right there on the floor.

Somehow or other, when they went out with their packages, Jerry managed to carry every parcel, can, and bag. He wouldn't even let Nora tote the tube of toothpaste He helped her into the car as if she was a basket of fresh laid eggs. Devotion? You never saw anything like it!

Well, some deliriously happy marriages are made in heaven, as the experts say, but we know of one anyhow that was made by fourteen head of dumb cattle full of buckshot.

THE END.

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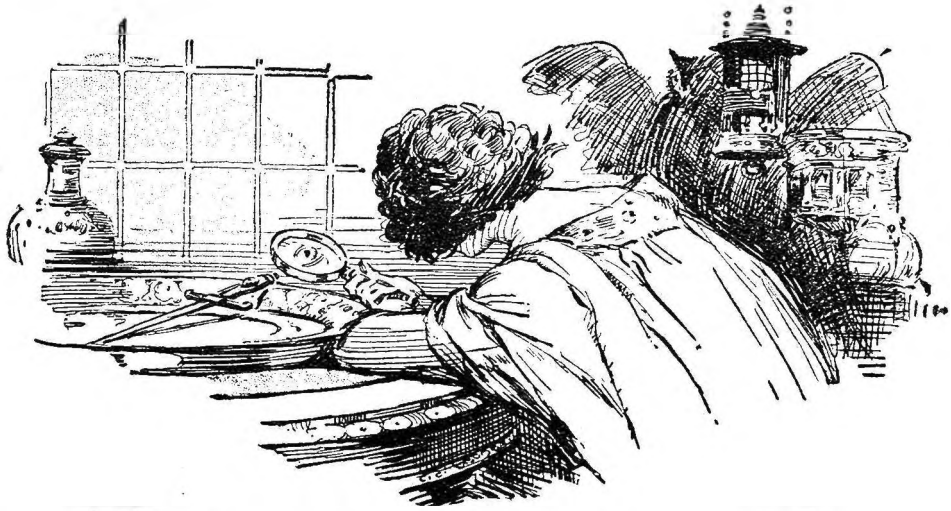
ENSLAVED

HER eyes are wells of limpid blue
In which the violet might dip.
Her mouth's a poem, rare and true,
That rimes, lip perfectly with lip.
Her cheek reflect the rose's blush;
Her hair is soft as night's own hush.

All these are but external charms
That thrill my heart appealingly.
Her inner self, like outstretched arms,
More luring still keeps beck'ning me.
Throughout life's garden, as she goes,
Some act of loveliness she sows.

Her grace, her tenderness, her wit,
Soft tendrils round my heart entwine.
And I most willingly submit
To serve forever at her shrine.
I much prefer her slave to be
Than live without her and be free.

Percy Waxman.



Mystery of Voodoo Manor

By FLORENCE M. PETTEE

Author of "Ninety-Eight Degree Murder," "Exploits of Beau Quicksilver," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

YOUNG Dr. Nancy Dayland, laboratory experimenter and investigator of baffling crime mysteries, receives a remarkable letter from aged Miss Felicia Loring, mistress of Voodoo Manor. The little old spinster invites Nancy, a stranger to her, to be a guest at the manor for the purpose of a well-earned rest after her latest exploit in solving a difficult police problem. She whets the girl's curiosity by offering to show her room No. 13, whose threshold has been barred for twenty years to all but the mistress. Nancy accepts the invitation and brings with her Drusilla Deming, her volunteer assistant in criminology. They find also as a guest Blanche Pembroke, a mysterious blond woman, who is Miss Loring's niece. In room No. 13 the girls are shown a collection of "bad luck" omens, it being the mistress's delight to scoff at all superstitions of that nature. The chief exhibit is a coffin. Nancy and Drusilla are attacked by a hold-up gang, but escape. Later Miss Loring disappears and search for her leads to room No. 13. It is locked and the key is on the inside.

CHAPTER VII *(continued).*

BEHIND THE LOCKED DOOR.

AGAIN an uncontrollable shiver raced over me. Once more I saw the bleak and mournful landscape and heard the pine trees moaning ominously.

Thomas, with his face a peculiar ashen gray, returned from his search.

"I—I can't find her anywhere. The cook hasn't seen her either."

By this time Julius Cæsar and a heavily upholstered white woman with a Celtic cast to her face, and a maid appeared.

"The key is inside the door," Nancy informed them. "She may"—she hesitated slightly—"have fallen sound asleep. Thomas, knock hard on the door."

Trembling, the negro complied with a strength which would have shaken any other less solid door.

"May the saints presarve us," wailed the Irish cook. "'Tis a noise to wake the dead." She crossed herself superstitiously.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 21.

"Oh, mither, mither, that room, *that* room—"

"Hush!" admonished Nancy.

The cowed woman obeyed. But not a sound came from behind the locked door.

"We'll have to break in. Please bring me an inch augur bit, Thomas. Julius Cæsar, get a hatchet."

I well knew what this division of labor meant. Nancy was trying to get rid of the frightened servants.

"You also," she said, addressing the women servants, "go to the kitchen and make ready some hot soup. Get a flask of brandy, and come when I call. Your mistress may have been suddenly taken ill."

"Shall I call the doctor?" I whispered as they all stumbled downstairs.

"Not yet. You stand guard here while I dress, and don't you let them begin to break in the door until I return." She darted to her room.

Again I listened carefully at the keyhole. With the exception of my fancy that I heard the wind moaning in the pines not a sound rewarded me. A cold perspiration bathed me.

"What is all the noise?" inquired the cool voice of Blanche Pembroke as she appeared, fully dressed.

"Why, we are searching for your aunt, of course."

"Oh, those stupid servants have probably overlooked her. She may be out in the garden." Her tone was airy, unconcerned, and much disgruntled at her unceremonious summons.

"But this door is locked on the inside."

She looked at me with a queer expression twisting her lips. Then she stooped and tried to peer through the keyhole. "Probably asleep," she shrugged.

I didn't respond, for Nancy was already dressed and returning. Her short, wavy hair was certainly a great asset for a quick toilet.

As she nodded to Blanche Pembroke the negroes leaped into view.

Taking the augur Nancy herself applied it to the panel on the level with the keyhole, and systematically began to bore.

Only the gnawing of the wood interrupted the quiet. From the corner of my eye I noticed Blanche Pembroke's alert, eager expression. She bent forward as if hoping to get the first glimpse into that room which had been closed to outside gaze for a score of years. She reminded me of a bloodhound or a hawk. She seemed tremendously excited, controlling herself with a visible effort.

Still the burring sound continued monotonously while we stood motionless.

A louder grating sound and the point of the bit had penetrated. Nancy lunged slightly as the steel went through. Quickly she drew back the tool and holding it unconsciously with a firmer grip, she fell to her knees and peered through.

I drew in my breath until it seemed to whistle. I saw a wave of white sweep over Nancy's face as though it had been suddenly sponged with magnesia. She shut her lips in a firm, straight line and placed her eye closer, if that were possible.

"Miss Pembroke." Her voice had a queer, hard sound like the splintering of ice. "Please go to the phone and call the family physician. I fear Miss Loring is ill."

"What makes you think so?" demanded her niece with asperity.

"What I see," breathed Nancy. But the eyes which she raised to the hesitating face of the fair haired woman blazed. "Will you call the doctor?"

With a little shrug of her shoulders the woman obeyed.

"We will have to break in the panel. Use that hatchet, Julius!"

"Yes, miss."

With a gesture she motioned him to commence, pointing out the exact spot for his operations.

As the hatchet hit the panel several blows before it cracked it, I thought of the irony of this room's secret being thus rudely exposed. The figure 13 chilled me. Never before had it seemed so much like the color of blood.

A few more blows and a few chips from the solid wood were our reward. I felt terribly sorry that each blow seemed to sound a death knell to Felicia Loring's strangely guarded secret. Again the pity of it struck me, as the scarlet 13 stared down maliciously on the scene.

A crash, and the panel splintered under the merciless blows.

"Just enough for me to get my hand through," warned Nancy.

The panel rattled and shivered and the hatchet head smashed through the last obstruction.

Almost pushing the negro aside, Nancy fell to her knees. As though galvanized by some hypnotic influence I sank beside her and peered through. There was room enough beside Nancy's entering hand.

I imagined I saw a sprigged lavender gown, but that was all. A little click announced that Nancy had turned the lock from the inside.

She arose and faced us, not even turning the knob. There was a rigid, stern expression to her set face and her eyes glowed.

"You must not under any circumstances cross this threshold," she commanded. "If your mistress is more than ill, it is doubly necessary. You must do as I tell you for Miss Loring's sake. Will you promise?"

Awed by the expression of her face and voice they nodded. Blanche Pembroke appeared hastening up the stairs. Her face showed that she had heard Nancy's words.

Slowly Nancy turned the knob, just as the blond woman augmented the circle waiting so fearfully for—they knew not what. The door of room No. 13 opened as it had not done during all the years to flaunt so rudely what its mistress had chosen to conceal.

The sight was inescapable. The green light still burned in the room, making the scene all the more ghastly. For the mistress of Voodoo Manor half leaned, half lay with her arms stretched over the black casket. I couldn't even see her face, just the limp, terrible abandon of those two arms. She lay between the black box and the window, so only the top of her head showed, bowed as it was against the long sable case.

I knew that something was very ill with the silent figure so screened. The twitter of a robin sounded outside. Its gay note was in pitiless contrast to the somber scene.

Quickly we shut the door behind us, Nancy locking it.

"Stand before the hole in the door, Drusilla," she whispered.

I was glad indeed to shut out the hard blue eyes of Blanche Pembroke and the baffled rage on her face. She appeared very anxious, very curious.

With scarcely a sound Nancy crossed over to the limp form. If possible, her face turned a shade whiter and her lips quivered. She stood quietly staring down, so motionless that I was amazed. With a quick movement of her shoulders and a clenching of her hands, her body seemed to grow taut like a bow suddenly strung for action.

Very slowly she knelt beside the sinister figure. After a moment she arose and stepped to the window from which the screen had been taken and which now rested on the floor beyond the window. She leaned out, her head twisting like that of a quivering bird.

Then she approached me and barely whispered what I already knew from her face.

"Was it suicide?" My lips just formed the words.

A look in which intense indignation and pity were curiously blended passed over her face. "No. She has been brutally stabbed, and she has been dead for hours."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE KNIFE WITH THE OPAL EYE.

MY eyes never left Nancy's stern face. I fancied I heard the soft brushing of long hair outside.

After a moment Nancy unlocked the door and we stepped out hurriedly, reverently closing it behind us. I blocked the telltale panel precipitately.

"Well?" questioned Blanche Pembroke.

The others just stared at Nancy's white face. The poise of Blanche Pembroke enraged me, although I knew that it was the time for coolness. I couldn't help but feel that she knew perfectly well what Nancy was about to say.

"She has been brutally murdered."

There was steel in Nancy's tone. The colored men gazed at her stupidly, and a little sound on the stairs told of the presence of the other two servants.

"But how?" asked the niece.

"That is not the question now," snapped

Nancy. "Miss Deming, please stand on guard before the door. Thomas, station yourself at one corner of the house, and let no one pass to the grounds between Miss Loring's windows and the wall. I shall have to call the police."

"Please, miss," interposed Julius, "I—I happen to know that Mr. Downing should be called."

"Who is he?"

"Miss Loring's lawyer, miss. He told me if anything ever happened to my mistress to tell him instantly."

"Very well. Suppose you inform him at once?"

When they were all out of sight Blanche Pembroke asked me: "How was she killed when she was locked in her room?"

"I don't know," I replied, truthfully enough.

"But her window—*that* window," persisted the woman, "is well above the ground. There isn't the sign of a rail or a post near it. Even the first tree is many feet away."

I was surprised at this itemized information relative to the secret room in Voodoo Manor. It rather insidiously suggested that the location of its window had been most carefully studied by the woman before me. Why? Again I recalled the information which Nancy's bird study had elicited.

I wondered more than ever about the headache wanderings of the dead woman's niece. Had she experienced another last night perchance? What a fiendishly perfect night it had been for any fell deed!

Nancy's voice thought: "It's a perfect setting!" returned to me with redoubled potency. And the mistress of Voodoo Manor had died—had been murdered—in that room where she had sneered at all the ill omens which had so long made stout hearts quail. The irony of it was overwhelming.

When Nancy returned Blanche Pembroke inquired almost timidly: "Can't I go in, please?"

Nancy looked away abstractedly. "You see," she explained in a monotonous voice. "nothing must be touched until the coroner arrives."

"I wouldn't touch anything."

Nancy conceded: "If you will give me time enough to examine everything in the room carefully before the police come and bungle things, of course there is no reason why you shouldn't enter."

"Knock on my door when you are ready for me," the woman agreed. Then she stepped down the corridor to her rooms.

In a second I had followed Nancy inside, locking the door and hanging one of those banshee pictures around the knob until it concealed the hole in the panel.

"How I dread having the police here!" Nancy lowered her voice instinctively. Then as she flitted about, making a hurried examination everywhere, I was impelled to see the figure which lay hidden. Dreading, yet powerless to resist, I approached it.

At first I couldn't quite understand what caused the significant brown stain on the waist. Then as I stepped to the left I saw that a knife handle showed in the soft lace fichu. The lace was dyed stiff and made a ghastly contrast to the white contorted face.

Hypnotized, I stooped as Nancy had done. I felt sick and dizzy as though I were in the midst of some horrible nightmare. My hair seemed to stiffen, for as I looked, I saw what had taken the life of the mistress of Voodoo Manor. It was the dagger whose foreign, dark handle showed a pale, single gleam. And that spot of light was the opal eye of Felicia Loring's weirdest curio.

I uttered a little gasping exclamation. "Horrible! Horrible!"

Nancy was too absorbed to hear me. Only the pale gleam of the opal eye answered me.

"Nancy," I whispered, "why, Nancy, she kept it on the table over there. And—and, here she is—and—it—"

Nancy nodded, evidently understanding the gibberish.

"But how?" I breathed.

She only shook her head, and stooped by the fireplace, forgetting me. I turned and leaned out the window. The storm had not materialized and sunlight sparkled everywhere. It appeared so heartlessly bright and cheerful, so oblivious of the tragedy within the house called Voodoo Manor.

I looked down on the clean, unbroken

brown earth, some distance below the window. Not a sign marred its surface. Only one tree, at least twenty feet away, appeared beyond the window. The others were far back. I noted that the trunk of this one tree was likewise surrounded by smooth brown earth.

Only one little patch of green grass appeared well to the right of it some ten feet. This ran back, peninsula fashion, with a narrow neck of grass nearly surrounded by smooth, hard rolled earth. This little tongue of grass reached the thick velvet green many feet beyond the solitary tree. And look as I would on that telltale smooth rolled expanse of ground, not the ghost of a fresh mark appeared.

It began to seem uncanny. Here, in this room with its single window and its massive solid door with its impregnable lock, Felicia Loring had been stabbed. The window appeared high above the ground. The white walls of the house were brick laid so smoothly that they seemed plastered together. A glistening coat of white paint covered them. Only a fly could scale that smooth barrier. For there was no window underneath, no sign of a water spout.

I looked in the air above the window. The house was high posted. An ambitious third story raised the roof well above the spot where I stood. No third story window appeared above it or near it to suggest that the murderer might have let himself down from some room in the upper story.

"Careful, Drusilla. Don't touch anything by that sill."

"But, Nancy, how was it done? Why, she—she must have—"

"No," interrupted Nancy sternly. "Look at the direction of the blow, and dismiss such an unworthy idea."

"But—but—" I began.

"You'd better go and get dressed now. There is nothing more to be learned here. I must examine the grounds down there before any one comes. Oh, if I can have only a few more minutes."

I hurried away to my room, heartily wishing that our apartment faced the thicket, rather than Black Lake that I might watch Nancy's search on the other side of the house. I had time to dress and hurry down to the grounds before she returned. With a gesture she motioned me to keep on the grass. She stood at the foot of the tree, her footprints showing plainly on the soft earth which Julius tended so dutifully.

She was staring at the large, straight trunk which grew to such a height. I have seldom seen a straighter tree, and the first branches didn't occur under twenty feet above ground. It was impossible for any one to climb it. Its girth made that out of the question. And there was no branch near the window, so what would be the use of it?

I knew from the indirect alignment of the tree that had any one managed to find a lodging in the high branches, no knife could possibly be flung across the distance into the room. The tree was too far to one side. If it had been a pistol shot—

Nancy now joined me, taking care to walk back in her own footsteps.

"Well?" I questioned eagerly.

She shook her head reflectively. That little wrinkle which always tells of her extreme mental stress was deep between her eyes.

"It's almost as though some wraith—some taunting specter of those creeds which Miss Loring scorned had done it. I've examined the tree trunk microscopically. There isn't a mark of spurred boots or anything. No sign of a ladder. It is almost as though the evil eye of the dagger had suddenly been quickened, and of its own sinister volition had reached the jugular vein in her throat."

"Nonsense!" I retorted.

"Of course," she admitted quickly. "But it is the most baffling thing I have ever seen. No one could have possibly entered by the door. There isn't the faintest evidence that any one entered by the window. It is sheer above the ground. The unbroken walls of the house are unscalable, with nothing about the window to give a footing.

"And yet, Felicia Loring sat between the window and her awaiting casket when the knife irrevocably silenced her. She was sitting sidewise, as you saw, with her face toward the fireplace. The knife entered from the window side of the room. Its position indicates that plainly."

"The roof?" I hazarded.

"I have that yet to examine. The fireplace has too small a flue to be considered. There is nothing whatsoever suspicious about the room."

"Could any diabolical contrivance have been concealed behind the woodwork or something with the dagger sprung to go off by some time device?"

"Impossible. The open window was in direct line with the woman sitting sidewise to it. Had she either faced it, or had her back to it, and the knife entered the side of her neck, then I should have looked for some hidden device within the room."

"Haven't you looked for it?"

"Yes, but it is out of the question. Besides, no one has had any ingress to the room except Miss Loring. It is impossible to pick the lock, and it doesn't even show any attempt at a forced entrance.

"If I can get up on the roof and see whether there is any sign of footprints, any marring of the coping as though ropes had been cinched to the side of the house above the window, I shall be satisfied. Lucky that Graylands is so far away."

We both went directly to the roof, Nancy bidding me to stay at the skylight while she made her investigations. She seemed to fly, stooping and crouching and pausing at the edge of the flat roof directly above the ill-fated window two stories below. She was back quickly.

"No," she shook her head. "The heavy roof has been freshly painted with white paint, a perfect surface to reflect anything suspicious. There isn't even a scratch."

I nodded as I looked. Again what she said was all too true.

"Do you mean," I demanded, "that this is one of those clewless murders in which that strange knife with the opal eye stabbed Miss Loring to death without leaving any indication?"

"It is practically as amazing as though some seemingly impossible crime had been committed. For I can find not the slightest clew as to how Miss Loring's murderer killed her with the knife in her own room. You see, that means that such a person had to enter the room and get the knife first before striking the lethal blow."

"But," I objected, "there is no sign of a struggle. Had he entered the room so, and of necessity while she was there, there would have been some indices of resistance. There is not the slightest sign of a fearful fight."

"That," suggested Nancy, "is one faint light in the darkness."

"And the others?" I murmured.

"The angle at which the blow was struck."

"How little!" I moaned.

"Yes," admitted Nancy sadly, "so little that as yet I cannot untangle a thread from the snarled skein."

As we returned to the second floor, Dr. Swift was being conducted upstairs by Miss Pembroke. He was an elderly man with white hair, a prominent forehead, and keen gray eyes.

"Terrible, terrible!" he repeated. "But how was she killed?"

Nancy's voice responded. "Miss Loring was stabbed to death with one of her own curios—a foreign knife with an opal eye set in the handle."

Blanche Pembroke gave a little inarticulate cry and fell in a heap at the top of the stairs.

CHAPTER IX.

BY WHAT UNCANNY POWER?

"POOR girl! It's enough to make any one faint. She is quite upset, naturally." The medical man stooped down briskly.

Nancy opened some windows. But the expression on her face told me plainly that she was laboring under no such misapprehension as the doctor had just voiced. Layman that I was, I, too, knew that something very sinister had brought about this great sudden fear which had rendered the cold woman before us unconscious. She had shown no indication of fainting when she had heard something that should have been far more startling—that an old woman had been murdered, and that old woman was her aunt!

Why had Nancy's clean-cut description of the weapon which had killed Felicia Loring stretched her niece out senseless? Was

she superstitious? But there was nothing in her temperament to suggest this. Again I seemed floundering about in a labyrinth—a maze of mysteries.

The lids of the woman fluttered presently and she peered about sharply. A crafty look crept into her eyes as she tried weakly to rise. Her lips opened.

"I—I—it is all so horrible! The very thought of it sickened me. I—I hadn't known she had been killed in such a way."

"Of course not," placated the doctor. "You'd better go to your room and rest. Try to keep your mind away from it."

A fearful look came into the eyes of the woman and she shuddered.

"I can't—I can't."

Something in her intonation caused Nancy to regard her critically. For the first time I felt that the woman before us was unmasked, that she no longer played a rôle. All her superpoise had vanished. Startled, I recalled how she had insisted from the first to know how her aunt had met her death. I had considered it a query to know whether she had been the victim of foul play. Now I was positive that she meant by what instrument had life been blotted out.

So Blanche Pembroke obeyed the physician's suggestion. Had she quite forgotten her insistent request to enter the room? Had that been only another attempt to view the means by which the crime had been committed? What did it portend? It was all an incredible chaos.

Behind the door with the scarlet thirteen the doctor approached his ghastly task gravely, with not so much as a glance about the much maligned room. His professional attitude said that he had quite forgotten any of the murmurs concerning it. I wondered if he even noted the casket until he gave a sudden mighty start. He stood staring at the two objects which so dominated the grisly room.

"How did this thing get here?" he asked hoarsely, nodding at the coffin.

"She—" I had never known Nancy to flounder so for words before. "She—believed in being prepared." Her voice grew firmer. "You know some people insist on having everything ready for a certain inescapable day."

Assenting briefly the doctor stooped to his examination.

"I can do nothing. She has been dead since—shortly after midnight, I should say."

I couldn't repress a start. The amazing details concerning this fatality were enough to make the most unsuperstitious pause and ponder. This scoffer of all evil omens had lived nearly the length of her days to be mysteriously murdered in Voodoo Manor's fatally numbered room at the untoward hour of midnight, and by that consummation of all execrations, the knife with the opal eye.

And not content to take her life, the death blow had flung her across her waiting coffin! The facts were like some fearful piece of fiction—not like real life.

A knock now indicated that at last the unavoidable arrival of the police could no longer be side-stepped. A sandy haired individual in a pretentious cap appeared to be the head of the Graylands department. He was accompanied by the policeman who had responded to Nancy's call two nights before.

"Ah, Stebbins," the doctor said, "it's a fearful sight you have come to see. Miss Loring has been stabbed to death, and life has been extinct for many hours. Do you wish me to continue in my official rôle of coroner?"

Stebbins's narrow blue eyes had been roving eagerly about the room. He wet his lips as he turned and drawled orders to his men to take posts, one at the front door and the other at the gates.

He shut the door painstakingly behind him and stood before it, his feet spread far apart, his arms folded. In any other less poignantly impressive room he would have been ridiculous. Here he was only grotesque. He looked all about the room, allowing his eyes to rest finally on the lifeless figure.

"I'd like a few minutes first," he answered the doctor in a sonorous voice.

Then he hurried to the figure, peering at it from all angles. Again he assumed that ludicrous, pseudo-dramatic pose, staring about the room and into the bat lined casket.

"How did that box get here?" he demanded.

"It has been here for some years," answered Nancy quietly.

"Just as though it were waiting." The officer from the village shook his head dubiously. "Whose dagger was that?"

"The deceased woman's."

The policeman went to the window, carelessly leaned out and looked around speculatively.

"Well, I declare!" he exclaimed. "The murderer climbed that tree. The footprints are there fresh."

"No," corrected Nancy. "Those are my footprints."

"What were you doing there?" His tone was suspicious.

The reflection of a smile touched her lips. "I wanted to investigate."

"And who are you?"

"I am Nancy Dayland."

He looked his surprise. "I'm glad you're here," he said simply. "From the nothing that I can see, we need a person like you."

The unpretentious, modest statement was dignified and sincere. More often Nancy was received either with derision or contempt, remarkable as were her achievements. Petticoat efficiency still seemed to rankle, and jealousy walked in the police profession.

"What do you make of it, Dr. Dayland?" he continued.

Nancy looked surprised at his knowledge of her prefix. "I don't know yet."

"Could she have killed herself, Swift?"

"Impossible. As her family physician I can swear that she was right-handed, and a right-handed suicide couldn't possibly have dealt that blow."

"It is not only anatomically impossible for her to have done it," added Nancy, "but physically she didn't have the strength. A person of the most tremendous muscles or the litheness of a panther is responsible for such a blow."

The doctor nodded in approval. "I had missed that point."

As Stebbins examined the lock he asked Nancy to narrate the entire circumstances surrounding the mystery. This she did with an admirable brevity, with the facts so cleanly incised that their sequence was inescapable.

"Of course she had many enemies," ruminated the officer, "so motive isn't far to seek. But how it was done is beyond me. Must have come in a flying machine."

Nancy shook her head impatiently. "Won't you give your permission to have that pitiful figure taken from here. It's—it's horrible to leave her so any longer. Were it any way assisting the apprehension of her assailant, it would be different."

"Of course," asserted Stebbins, "provided the coroner here is willing to give the order."

"Certainly," was the quick reply. "I think it will not be necessary to hold an autopsy."

After the blood-stained knife had been mercifully extracted and left on a designated silver tray on the table, the doctor and the officer, at Nancy's suggestion, placed the body on a couch in Miss Loring's sleeping room, there to await the undertaker. They likewise removed the casket and its case, and then followed Nancy downstairs to the living room. I wondered what had now to be discussed prior to the lawyer's arrival. Nancy soon enlightened me.

"I wonder," she began, "whether you, Mr. Stebbins, or you, Dr. Swift, attached any significance to the fact that Miss Pembroke fainted only when she heard described the knife which had killed her aunt?"

They both shook their heads.

"It is untenable," held Nancy, "that she should have fainted because of the horror suggested by my description of a knife. She previously showed nothing but a keen curiosity, not even when I told her that Miss Loring had been murdered. I know that she recognized the knife by its description."

"What of it?" questioned the doctor.

Nancy then sketched as briefly as possible the salient facts of the room's impregnable seclusion.

"Possibly," suggested Dr. Swift, "Miss Loring took it downstairs or to her room during her niece's stay. Wouldn't that explain her very evident recognition of the instrument?"

"No," declared Nancy, "such a recognition would not have had recourse to fainting. She fainted because she was afraid—

terribly frightened. Of what? What would be your supposition, Mr. Stebbins?"

Visibly flattered by this reference to his consideration, Stebbins replied thoughtfully: "I should say, if she fainted because she was afraid, then she had a reason to be afraid. People generally don't go crazy with terror unless they fear for themselves or some one who could drag them in."

His reasoning was shrewd.

"Precisely," agreed Nancy to his delight. "That is my theory exactly."

"But," protested the coroner, "you don't suspect the lady, do you? She hadn't the strength to drive such a blow. And she couldn't possibly have got in."

"No," Nancy argued, "I do not suspect her of the actual commitment of the crime. But, frankly, I dislike this telltale act of hers. To my mind, it plainly tells her horror for fear that in some way the knife will incriminate her. I haven't yet proceeded beyond this point, to be sure. I think, however, that she has secret information of great value which she might disclose were she not afraid of her own safety."

"You don't suppose," drawled Stebbins, "that there is some secret passage in this house to that room, do you?"

"Absolutely impossible," affirmed Nancy. "I've accounted for every inch of space. The house is constructed simply, with no peculiar spaces. I have sounded the room, too."

"Nancy," I appealed timidly, "may I ask a question?"

She nodded.

"You remember the Densmore stabbing. In that a stiletto was used and—"

"And," concluded Nancy, with asperity, "the nephew of the old gentleman climbed to a shed some feet from his open den window and fitted the thin bladed knife into a queerly contrived, powerful bow. Literally he shot the knife like an arrow, thereby precipitating the whole police force into a most obscure mystery.

"If you are trying to intimate that Miss Loring was killed in that way, you are mistaken. You forget that there isn't a ghost of a footprint around the only possible point from which the shot could come in such a supposition. Furthermore, she could not be seen from a point under the window. Farther away the tree foliage effectively screened the window against any long distance shot."

A ring at the bell announced Miss Loring's lawyer. As he entered, a tall, grave-looking man with spectacled eyes, carrying a neat black leather portfolio, he observed seriously:

"I was notified over the wire that my client was dead. Now may I ask how she died so suddenly when she has been in good health?"

He looked at our sober faces uneasily, apprehensively.

The doctor responded: "She was murdered, stabbed to death."

Lawyer Downing's face whitened. He rubbed a hand across his forehead.

"She—she must have had a premonition. For not a week ago when she made a new will, she instructed me, by word of mouth and by her own written order on the document, in these words: 'If I die suddenly, go to Voodoo Manor the moment you have the information of my death, and read my will before whomsoever you shall find assembled there. The peculiar necessities herein stated demand that my last request be carried out to the letter.'"

CHAPTER X.

MESSAGES FROM THE DEAD.

AS the servants were being summoned, Nancy asked: "Do you know the contents of the will?"

"I do not," the lawyer replied. "Miss Loring drew this one up herself, simply asking me to have her signature properly witnessed, and to take charge of the document until I should be apprized of her death."

"You had drawn up others for her, then?"

"Yes, and she kept the last one prior to this that no legal phrase should escape her. Then she tore it up in my presence."

Lawyer Downing cleared his throat explosively. He laid the long legal envelope with its heavy red seal and bearing the superscription *The Last Will and Testament of Felicia Loring* tentatively on his leather

brief case. In his hand he held a second sealed ordinary sized envelope.

Looking down at it he read:

"After my death this sealed envelope is to be given with all expedition to Dr. Nancy Dayland, the famous mystery investigator. About it and its information, she will please act as her best judgment dictates, either withholding or disclosing the nature of my written statements as she deems advisable.

"(Signed) FELICIA LORING."

In the heavy silence Lawyer Downing passed over the sealed letter to Nancy seated beside me.

Quickly she broke the seal. My heart gave a quick bound of appreciation and greater devotion at the unconscious and instinctive compliment Nancy paid me quite unsolicited. For as she broke the seal and spread open the letter, she leaned toward me, holding it so that my eyes should share with her the secret, sealed contents. So with Nancy I read:

DEAR SOLVER OF THE ENIGMATIC:

I do not know what hovering thing has to-day actuated me to rewrite my will and to set down this letter for your eyes. I only know that for the past week, in fact, ever since the arrival of my niece, Blanche Pembroke, I have felt strangely ill at ease and distrait. Mayhap the presence of a total stranger in the house of one who is reckoned a recluse may be the answer to this strange feeling. It is there, nevertheless, and daily it grows stronger. Since I do not believe in presentiments or "that coming events cast their shadows before," I am at a loss to explain my extreme mental apprehension. I cannot but feel that the presence of this woman, whom a facetious Fate has made my niece, is at the bottom of my mental perturbation.

I hope I am not wronging my niece by thus prejudicing you against her, should some untoward, unexpected thing reach out and claim me. Yet why should this hovering disquietude haunt me after this woman has entered my house, unless it be connected with her? I feel sure that some evil *human agency* is at work. I am exceedingly sensitive to the thoughts of people. And Blanche Pembroke had not been in my house a day ere I sensed the unpleasant, odious caliber of her shallow, mercenary mind. I know that it has been fed on many shameful things. The personality of the woman breathes it. It is inescapable.

Therefore, I feel that her pretended rest here is the hollowest shell of mockery. For I know that she is here for some ulterior motive. What it is I am frank to say I do not know. If she seeks to penetrate the secret of the locked room, she is doomed to failure; if she hopes to surprise elsewhere my considerable fortune of pearls, in that she is building her hopes on sand. For I know the woman is here for no good to me, and wholly in her own selfish, grasping interests. This feeling on my part has not only actuated me to write this letter and to set down a new will, but it has also forced me to write to you inviting you here.

In your coming and by your sentient intuition, which you must possess to be the woman that you are, I feel sure that you, too, will quickly sense anything out of the ordinary or evil at Voodoo Manor. You are the bulwark which I seek to set up between myself and *it*.

Nancy's beautifully cut mouth quivered as though the voice of the dead had spoken to her in gentle reproof that the thing which hovered close had not been checkmated. Then she read on:

When you discover in my trunk what I have meant for you to find, you will seek further. I have hidden most securely a fortune in the reputedly unlucky stone, the pearl. I have put it away where "neither moth nor rust shall corrupt; nor thieves break through and steal," so confident am I that the stones will not long remain lost in case of my death.

Indited with deep admiration and confidence.

FELICIA LORING.

I felt an unaccustomed blur across my eyes. The gentle dignity and resignation of that really big character, Felicia Loring, stood forth stark and unashamed through every line of this letter which was like a message from the Great Beyond.

Nancy's eyes still traveled over the sheet, and her mouth had not yet resumed its habitual curve. I knew how deeply the poignant message struck home to her. Yet that great conscience of hers ought not to berate itself so soundly. I am no fatalist, yet what had happened had been ordained.

Even Nancy's astute mind was powerless to circumvent the occult, hidden forces of evil. She could throw light on them, but she could not always prevent their black hands from falling.

Nancy folded the letter, reincased it in its envelope and deposited it inside her blouse.

The act signalized to the lawyer and those about her the course she had chosen to pursue. Silence.

Over his heavy-bowed spectacles Lawyer Downing glanced speculatively at the attentive circle. It was a motley assembly gathered there by the last unusual request of the deceased woman. There were Julius, Thomas, the two women servants, Blanche Pembroke, the coroner, Constable Stebbins, Nancy, and I. The servants sat motionless.

But the sharp face of Blanche Pembroke was limned out ruthlessly by the avid greed behind it. She leaned forward, one leg crossed with rampant ill-breeding, her chin on her hand.

It seemed to me that I had never been present at so impressive a ceremonial. Here in the house of mystery, with its ominous fatal room No. 13 and the pitiful secrets of its years of silence, where the hand of death still brooded in the poignant symbol of its autocratic power, lay the body—the violently taken body—of the hapless mistress of Voodoo Manor. And below the chamber of death—of mystery, of ill-omen—we sat in solemn session awaiting the words that were so strangely and prophetically indited.

Again the lawyer cleared his throat peremptorily. Perfunctory instrument of justice that he was, he was not unmindful of the dramatic and tragic situation about him. Then he broke the heavy seals of the will. Almost reverently he spread the heavy, crackling sheets, and read:

"Know All Men By These Presents—That I, Felicia Loring, of Graylands, in the county of Hepworth, in the commonwealth of M., do make this my last will and testament, revoking all wills by me at any time heretofore made.

"1. I constitute and appoint Hezekiah Downing and Nancy Dayland, Ph.D., executors of this will, and direct that they be exempt from giving a surety or sureties upon the bond required of them in their capacity as said executors. I give my said executors full power and authority to sell both real and personal estate by public auction or private sale, if in the settlement of my estate they deem it advisable, and to convey the same by such deeds or other instruments of transfer and conveyance as may be necessary and proper.

"2. In case of my death by natural means, I give, devise and bequeath to my only surviving relative, Blanche Pembroke, the house known as Voodoo Manor and the grounds thereof, with the exception of room No. 13 in aforesaid house, which room and its contents are disposed of as hereinafter named. In case of my death in any other way whatsoever than by natural means, I do hereby revoke the first part of this clause and give to the aforesaid Blanche Pembroke the sum of twenty-five dollars only, with the injunction that such indeed is payment in full for the manner of relative she has proved herself to be."

The woman thus mentioned uttered a harsh exclamation. A look of hate and scorn transfixed her cold face with an expression both ugly and revengeful.

"That's just like a lunatic!" she burst out. "What could one expect of a woman who shut herself up in this dungeon of a house with her bats, her cats, and her unholy secrets—"

How she would have raved on I do not know. I have seldom seen Nancy more moved by intense indignation. Her eyes flashed ominous fire and her voice came out with withering scorn.

"Miss Pembroke," she remarked, "this is hardly the time or the place to pour forth such discourteous condemnation of the dead. Miss Loring was in nowise what you called her. Her mind was fine and gentle and far above that of those who seek to criticize her. We all possess our idiosyncrasies. And there are few of us, I fancy, who work so little harm in the world by our own pet hobbies, be they pitiful or foolish, as did poor Miss Loring."

"That's right," rumbled the lawyer. "Kindly do not interrupt me again as I read the will of my testator."

Blanche Pembroke had the grace to obey this reproof.

Mr. Downing continued:

"3. I give, devise and bequeath to Dr. Nancy Dayland the entire contents of room No. 13 in the house known as Voodoo Manor. I make this bequest with the confidence that she will carry out my further desires in the disposition of certain property in the aforesaid room.

"4. I make the following bequests to my servants: To Thomas Jefferson Johnson Jones and Julius Cæsar Augustus Smith I give each outright the sum of ten thousand dollars. To any servant or servants who at the time of

my death shall have been in my employ for one year or more, I give each outright the sum of five hundred dollars for each and every year of service in my employ.

"5. When the riddle of the pearls is solved, it is my wish that the money realized from their sale shall be invested to a dual end, one-half of the proceeds shall enhance the fund already designated for the founding of a certain chair as hereinafter specified in my will. The remaining half of the proceeds shall be invested for the furtherance of education against foolish, harmful, and weakening superstitions. I would suggest that this superstition banishing course be broadcast by means of competent free lectures in the open forums provided by certain buildings in our land. I believe that the facts and the truth regarding the foolishness of omens will do much in banishing superstitions, which have from training and environment altogether too deep a hold on the minds of many. In connection with this form of education I also suggest that the manuscript contents of the trunk in room No. 13 be published in pamphlet form for free distribution. Since this written manuscript represents the conscientious research of a lifetime into the history of the development and the cause and effect of many common and lesser known superstitions, I feel that the free public distribution of the results will not be without interest and benefit.

"6. In the case of my sudden or mysterious death by violence, I hereby set apart the sum of five thousand dollars if need be, for the furtherance of Dr. Nancy Dayland's investigations into whatever agency has been responsible for setting in motion such a thing. And I do hereby appoint the said Dr. Nancy Dayland as my emissary, trusting in her great knowledge and erudite understanding to run to earth the truth, that it may be a warning to the powers of evil in whatever form they may puerilely seek to cloak themselves. It is my express wish that to this end Dr. Dayland be given the co-operation and courtesy of my lawyer's help and that of the Graylands officials. And I know that she will neither rest nor go away until she has put an end to whatever mystery may hover about my death.

"7. All the rest, residue and remainder of my property, both real and personal, I give, devise and bequeath for the study of psychoanalysis, and criminal investigation. Such a course may be given at any university of learning which shall be decided upon by Dr. Nancy Dayland. This chair—to be known as the Nancy Dayland chair, if she so desires—is to be founded for the thoroughgoing study, research and insight into those regrettable instincts and characteristics which set out the criminal mind and its resultant crime. With the wave of misdeeds sweeping over our land at the present time, I feel that such a bequest is both stringently necessary and timely to cope with the perverted master mind, to recognize criminal tendencies, and to prevent their acts ere they are let loose on a helpless, ignorant and unsuspecting public.

"In testimony whereof, I hereunto set my hand and seal.

(Seal). "FELICIA LORING."

It was truly a unique document, pointing a significant finger of doubt and suspicion at Blanche Pembroke.

"How ridiculous," she began, "for her to hint that I came here—to—"

The words stuck in her throat before something in Nancy's glance. She lapsed into an angry silence, picking away at her hands and biting her thin lips for the control which had dropped away with the thin veneer of her courtesy and reverence.

"In what respects did this will differ from Miss Loring's last one?" asked Nancy.

Lawyer Downing shifted uneasily. He glanced from under his heavy eyebrows at the discomfited niece of the dead woman whom he had served for so many years and whom he obviously respected.

"The—er—previous will which I drew up a year ago added no provisional clause in the bequest of the house and estate to Miss Pembroke. It was given to her outright. Nor was there any provision made for any investigation into her death should it occur by violence."

"I think there is nothing more to be gained by remaining here," said Nancy, breaking the heavy silence. "Miss Pembroke, I want to talk to you in the room across the hall."

At a sign from Nancy I followed the two and closed the door behind me.

CHAPTER XI.

SINISTER INDICES.

"IT is time to speak with frankness, Miss Pembroke," began Nancy, "since your aunt has commissioned me to investigate the tragedy of her pitiful death. Either you will be a party to my investigations or an accessory to the crime—the matter will be of your own choosing."

"What do you mean?" asked the woman with thinly veiled sarcasm.

"Why were you skulking in the grounds the night prior to our holdup?"

"I had a headache."

"Indeed! How did your illness direct you then so fortuitously to a rendezvous with our masked assailant of the following night?"

"Why," sneered Miss Pembroke contemptuously, "I was as frightened as Miss Deming when I unexpectedly encountered a masked man. In fact, I was so terrified that I fainted, as your tale bearing witness will testify."

"Indeed," repeated Nancy with equal disdain. "Why, then, if you were surprised in your meeting with the masked man, did you subsequently creep back into the house without mentioning the fact to any one? As your aunt's guest, you would have alarmed the house had you innocently faced this marauder with no previous collusion—complicity."

"I was afraid to frighten my aunt, and watched the rest of the night lest the man work some harm."

"How did you know but that he would return some other night, robbing the house if he didn't do something worse?"

"I felt sure that he would be cowed into flight because two of us had seen him."

"If you were afraid of frightening your aunt—if you were innocent of complicity—why did you not come instantly to me and secretly narrate what had happened? You knew that my specialty was crime detection."

"Why should I tell you what you already knew?" shrugged Miss Pembroke.

"Your very desire to thwart rather than to assist any investigation makes your conduct most suspicious. Moreover, when you knew that we had gone to the city on very urgent business—how vital to your own interests you doubtless suspected—you were suddenly seized with another convenient headache and notified your confederate of our intended late return. He acted promptly, hoping to get our awkward knowledge out of the way until—what he purposed had been successfully consummated."

"And what did he purpose?" sneered Blanche Pembroke.

"Ah," flashed Nancy, "you shall tell us that."

"Humph," she scoffed, "a pretty little bit of fiction you have invented! You can prove nothing. Suppose the same sneak thief did have the nerve to return the next night and operate in the woods there, it was just chance that he held you up, and you recognized him. You can prove in no way that I was connected with him. You have nothing but theories to bear you out. My story is just as good as yours."

"You are forgetting," warned Nancy, "that around midnight your aunt was brutally murdered. Do you think for an instant that the suspicious acts of two previous nights will not be flayed by our investigations? Do you for an instant believe that I shall not consult with the proper authorities and tell them all we know?"

"How could that further anything?"

"How?" retorted Nancy. "Why, we should demand your inclusion—your custody as a person of the most dubious conduct—as an accomplice."

For the first time the woman whitened.

"You can't do that." But her protest was more of a question than a statement.

"I can and will, unless—"

"Unless what?" intercepted the woman eagerly.

"Unless you tell me the truth of your disgraceful conduct—the purport of the masked man's visit and his real identity."

With a pale set face Blanche Pembroke stared narrowly at Nancy as if seeking to discover whether she meant what she said. Her close scrutiny evidently proved the unflinching sincerity of the words.

"How can I tell you what I do not know?" she questioned stubbornly at length.

"If that is to be your line of defense, I have nothing more to say to you. I shall act and not talk."

"Act then," taunted the woman. "I suppose that you have even the right to incarcerate the servants if you so desire. You will learn just about as much from them as you will from me. I am but the victim of the thinnest circumstantial evidence, and you haven't the shred of a proof."

"That remains to be seen. You have forgotten the most incriminating act yet, the one which stretched you unconscious when you recognized the knife with the opal eye as the instrument which had killed your aunt." Nancy's words were bitingly insinuating.

If possible Blanche Pembroke turned a shade whiter. Her hands clenched until the knuckles stood out in knobby relief.

"What do you mean?"

"That you were familiar with the knife, that you had seen it before—you know when!"

The woman still regarded Nancy with wide eyes, wetting her blue lips.

"I—I never—"

"Don't," interrupted Nancy. "There will be plenty of time for you to perjure yourself later."

"Do you think I killed my aunt?" flared Blanche Pembroke fearfully.

"I am not confessing my beliefs. I am merely warning you that the facts I possess, together with your refusal to answer, would most unfavorably prejudice any jury against you."

"But I didn't kill her!" The words were shrill with terror.

"The only way you can make that statement effective is to confess then what you do know of the masked man's complicity—and of the part played by the knife with the opal eye."

"And if I am ignorant of these things?" queried the woman tentatively.

"You aren't," deposed Nancy. "But if you insist upon protesting your ignorance, you will only draw down a hornets' nest of suspicions against yourself. In other words, remain silent and you will probably be tried for complicity in the murder of Felicia Loring. Tell what you know, and you will be treated with far less severity."

A potent silence ensued in which conflicting emotions passed over the sharp features of the woman. There was fear for her own safety, terror and suspicion, so blended as to make her submerged in a welter of indecision.

She finally threw back her peroxide head. Her voice was as hard as steel.

"You're merely trying to frighten me. You can't possibly prove anything. If you could, you wouldn't question me. I am innocent of my aunt's murder. I know nothing whatever about it. You haven't the ghost of a clew against me. That is all I will say."

"You have told too much and too little. Your replies show your calloused indifference to the avenging of your aunt's death."

After this ultimatum Nancy and I left the room. She took me again to the chamber of crime. Nancy had already called up a lumber mill in the village, giving the exact dimensions for a new panel which Julius was to set in temporarily. The mere matter of matching wood was so insignificant beside the pitilessly revealed room.

It now took on a new meaning. Not only had it been the last silent witness of a dreadful deed, but it had likewise been so intimately intertwined in Miss Loring's unnamed dread as to actuate her to give it an important veiled paragraph in her last will and testament.

"I thought you had gone over everything here," I objected, my curiosity awakened by this unexpected visit.

"I want to examine the trunk."

"Why, Nancy," I exclaimed, "it seems awfully penurious, and it hasn't any connection with the murder."

Without answering she snapped open the little ebony box which Lawyer Downing had given to her and took out a key. I knelt beside her, watching in rapt speculation. The raised lid of the sturdy, brass-studded trunk disclosed only the customary tray, which was empty. Like earlier trunks it was lined with heavy paper rather than the now popular linens and other materials.

Lifting the tray, only a few things met our intent gaze. A row of six books, fat, dingy, leatherbound, were packed in one end. Across their backs they told us "Hindoo Superstitions."

Nancy smiled appreciatively. "Ah," she recognized, "a rare edition—one I have not yet run across. It will be a pleasure to examine it later."

A foreign looking black box with weird carvings and a silver lock invited her next survey. She picked out a little silver key from the receptacle in her hand and fitted

it carefully. The box was lined in dull red velvet, and on the crimson richness lay a magnificent string of pearls.

"Gracious!" I ejaculated. "It's rather a careless way to leave such a valuable possession."

"No," she reminded me; "this room was singularly guarded. Isn't it a beautiful thing!" she admired. "And worth many thousands. The main collection of pearls must indeed be superb if this is any sample."

Replacing the box thoughtfully, she examined the close written manuscript securely tied. Her fingers skimmed agilely through the pages as she evidently watched for some enlightening marginal references, some key which might have been written on a piece of paper and hidden between the leaves. Nothing rewarded her.

Evidently disappointed, she painstakingly tapped over the interior of the trunk, seeking a possible false panel. Not discovering anything suspicious, she even ran her fingers lightly over the heads of the brass tacks, as if they might cover a slide, a spring or some other contrivance. Again she was balked. Her minutest examination disclosed nothing.

Much amazed at this seemingly irrelevant delay while the murderer of Felicia Loring still roamed at large, I objected: "Seems to me it is rather a funny thing to hunt for pearls instead of the murderer at this time."

"I am not hunting for the pearls, Drusilla," she told me patiently. "I only wanted to be sure that she hasn't given some further intimation of a dread—of something she feared, perhaps, in connection with Blanche Pembroke's arrival. I cannot forget her manner and her words that night in this room. That she expected death is now certain. But whether it was only her morbid associations here—or some evil lurking about—I do not know."

Regretfully she replaced the articles and closed the trunk, locking it as she had found it. Slowly she walked to the window and gazed out again thoughtfully. She appeared to be looking straight ahead, her eyes wide and unseeing. Oftentimes, from these deep abstractions sprang inspiration.

For some moments she stood motionless. When she turned there was a little frown on her forehead as though something new had arisen—which she could not explain.

Silently she walked to the table on whose silver tray lay the knife with the suggestively stained blade. The coroner had removed it with a pair of pinchers lest the act should obliterate some vital persisting clew. She sank to her knees, using her microscope up and down the blade and over the top and sides of the dark hilt with its gleaming, baleful opal.

Then she cautiously used her little instrument to turn over the knife. She stared at the fatal weapon breathlessly, her eye close to it as though to wrest its secret from it. Then she uttered a little exclamation. The glimmer of a smile crept over her stern lips.

"What is it?" I whispered, much impressed by her strange movements.

Without replying she again stooped swiftly for a minute examination.

"Is it a finger-print?" I hazarded.

"No, Drusilla, it is far more valuable than that. I have made an amazing discovery."

"What—oh, what?" I breathed, hanging on her every word.

"The knife you see here, this knife which stabbed Miss Loring to her death—"

"Yes, yes—"

"—has added a very sinister clew."

She pointed one tapering finger toward the lethal weapon. I stooped over, much excited.

"Take this," she suggested, passing over her magnifying glass. "Examine the little area on the blade just where it strikes the handle."

A speaking silence ensued as I knelt over the knife.

"Why, Nancy," I said dully, "I see only three little scratches there."

"Exactly."

"B-but they don't seem very enlightening to me, or even important."

"Ah," she answered, "that is because you fail to grasp their language—their portent."

"Their language—portent," I repeated stupidly. "I don't see—"

" To me," explained Nancy, " they speak a fearful message. They whisper of a most startling and unexpected thing."

" What is that?"

" That I have stumbled upon the first tangible clew in the mysterious taking off of the mistress of Voodoo Manor."

CHAPTER XII.

JULIUS CÆSAR'S GHOST.

IN complete mystification I stared at the queer, microscopic lines which obviously told Nancy so much. To me they preserved a most baffling silence. A sudden and, I thought, clever idea seared my mind. " Do you mean that perhaps the scratches were made by the setting of Miss Loring's great opal—by the brooch in her lace fichu?"

My brilliant idea was doomed to ignominious failure. Nancy shrugged whimsically.

" No, not at all. If those very enlightening accessories to mystery, your eyes, have not already told you the truth, it is patent that your observation has not grasped the vital significance of these marks."

And not another word would she tell me.

Just then Stebbins of the village constabulary put in an appearance. His brows wrinkled in ludicrous bewilderment. He kept opening and shutting his mouth as if the act in some obtuse way might abet those mental processes which patently failed to function with any degree of clarity in the black business of the night.

" Wall, Dr. Dayland," his drawling voice began, " I've been over everything inside and out. And there isn't hide nor hair of a clew. If the guilty person came in a flying machine he couldn't have covered his tracks any more effectively. I admit it has me plain flabbergasted. Here is Miss Loring killed in a room as safe and sound as a new modern steel box in a bank. So far as I can see, there isn't a sign of how the thing was done. Even the open window shows nothing, not so much as a footprint. Yet here the poor lady sat when it was done. Do you know," he went on, " I've got a hazy idea of a theory."

" Yes?" encouraged Nancy.

" I'm not so sure but that the one who did it entered the house unobserved some time before midnight. Such a person would be very familiar with Miss Loring's habitual entrance of the fateful room at twelve o'clock. There are countless places where a criminal might hide until just before Miss Loring left her own room. Then he might have tiptoed after her into this darkened room, and hidden behind some of the heathen furniture before she switched on the lights."

" Wouldn't Miss Loring note such a pursuer?"

Stebbins scratched his head. " That depends on the state of the lady's mind. If it was full of other matters, she might not note anything. The floors are covered with heavy carpets which would deaden all footsteps. Then when Miss Loring seats herself between the casket and the window, still lost in thought, he could easily have crept up, picked up the dagger and stabbed her before she had time to cry out or even realize her plight."

" It is a very ingenious theory, Mr. Stebbins, but facts won't bear you out."

" What facts?"

" For one thing, the arrangement of the furniture here. There isn't anything which would offer a safe hiding place for such a prowler until you get over to the fireplace there with the chest of drawers and the trunk. And that, you will note, is in direct alignment with the position Miss Loring was obviously occupying when death came to her almost from out of the air. Were the assassin hidden in such a place she could not fail to see him when he tried to creep up on her. For she was facing the fireplace."

" Maybe she had fallen asleep," defended Stebbins stubbornly, " and just opened her eyes as it happened."

Nancy did not answer. She was frowning abstractedly. " I—I might be inclined to consider that theory, Mr. Stebbins," she confessed finally, " despite the irrefutable fact that the assassin had no way of exit from the room, leaving the door locked behind him—were it not for an amazing thing, which I have just discovered."

"What's that?" he asked bluntly.

She motioned him to the scratched blade of the knife. Silently he stared at it, but the shadow on his face only deepened. Again he scratched his head in sheer puzzlement.

"You've sure got me baffled. What's the answer?"

"Sorry," replied Nancy, "but the idea is too chimerical to cloak in words yet."

"Oh, all right," he answered casually. "But when the coroner calls the inquest, I shall stick to this idea I've just told you. Of course, it won't take us far in the catching of the criminal, but it's something to work on. It takes away the creepy, uncanny feeling that the thing gives you when you look at it from any other angle. Then it almost seems as though all the spooks, the hoodoos, and the jinxes she flaunted had had a hand in the queer business." He shook his head somberly.

"Then that will now," he continued uneasily. "Why, it is as plain as the nose on your face that Miss Loring was afraid of something, and that she expected death. Now what does that mean?"

Quietly Nancy replied: "Perhaps poor Miss Loring had at last grown morbid from her years of association with such things." She gestured about the room. "And yet, on the other hand, she may have gone down to her death a superskeptic to the last. Then her strange fear, so significantly prophetic, points in quite another direction."

"Meaning?"

"That no shadowy, spectral hand from the wraiths of ill luck troubled her. Something more tangible, more corporeal was in her mind—something decidedly human in form, monstrously human, I mean, but no subnormal thing, no figment from the supernatural—"

Stebbins nodded. "That's what I think. This idea of superstitious vengeance is too absurd. Solid steel blades aren't flung by any spectral hands. Only flesh and blood agencies are in back of the thing. But they have worked it up to perfection, so that all the mystery of the hocus-pocus will keep us guessing."

Nancy inclined her head. "It would be diabolically clever to cloak in mysticism and the supernatural any such deed. That is why I believe all the more that some very clever human intelligence is in back of it all."

"That will points pretty strongly at a certain lady." Stebbins looked at her keenly. "What are you planning to do next?"

"Have you any suggestions?"

"Yes, Dr. Dayland," he answered courteously. "I've got my eyes, ears and head full of just about enough chaos. You see, Graylands doesn't give much but ABC stuff for me to look into. This is quite out of my line."

I looked at Stebbins afresh. His frank confession of inability to cope with the case was admirable in its modesty.

"So," he went on, "I want you to go into the thing for the Graylands police. Thus you are doubly appointed, both by the will and by the local authorities. You have free rein. We stand back and await your commands."

Silently Nancy looked about the crime room. Then she said simply: "I deeply appreciate the spirit and the coöperation back of your words. Such an attitude will only redouble my efforts toward the solution of the mystery."

The country constable bowed like some gentleman of the old school.

"First," suggested Nancy, "I want to question the servants. They may throw a faint light somewhere, even though the scene of the crime and the outlying grounds seem to be without anything whatsoever to guide us."

So we went down to the living room on the first floor. The very air of the second floor corridor was heavy with the pitilessness of death, of mystery and the unseen. Nancy felt it, too, for she stepped to the windows and threw them high, sniffing in the air of the pine needles thirstily. Then she mechanically pressed a button and Julius Cæsar appeared.

"Yes, miss," he fluttered, in his inimitable drawl, "you rang for me?"

"Just take a chair there, Julius," answered Nancy quietly. "There are a few things I want to ask you."

Julius Cæsar's sable face turned the color of moist clay. "For the law sakes

of mercy, miss! You ain't s'pectin' me of nothin' about the poor missy's death?"

Very gently Nancy reassured him. "Oh, no, Julius. I just want you to help me by answering my questions. You want me to find out who did the dreadful thing, don't you?"

"Want you to find the devil who killed our poor missy! Well, you just show him to me, whether he's ghost or human, and I'll go for him like he was a rattlesnake."

"That's right," encouraged Nancy. "Then you'll help me by answering my questions."

"'Deed I will, miss."

"Now, has there been anything queer going on here before we came?"

"That they have, miss. And I reckon that's why the old missy sent for you—she felt it in the air, and suspicioned it, too."

"What do you mean?"

"It's been going on now nigh onto two weeks, ever since that niece of Miss Felicia came here."

There was no mistaking the scorn and antagonism in the old darky's voice.

"Explain just what you mean?"

"I knew something would happen when that woman came here."

"What made you think so?"

"She—she's always snoopin' around in those rubber heeled shoes of hers. And there ain't no hour of the day or night when you could tell for a certainty where she'd be. And she tried to pump me, too."

"Pump you?"

"Yes, miss. Hinted around and pretended she's an expert in gems and things. Wanted to know what I thought of the missy's pearls."

"What did you tell her?"

"I shut up like a clam. Told her pearls and such like never played much of a part in my ideas. Then she asked me where missy kept them."

"What did you tell her?"

"The truth, miss. That I don't know, nor nobody else."

"Anything more?" queried Nancy.

"The silver, miss. I've been missin' several pieces. I took it into my head to look special like because a collector of pearls might fancy the fine old silver of the Lorings."

"You found some missing?"

"'Deed they is, miss. I went and told missy, but she just laughed at me, and said I must have made a mistake. So I daren't say more of what I suspicioned. Then, miss, last night—" His voice sank to a hollow whisper and the whites of his eyes rolled.

"Last night?" repeated Nancy.

"Yes, miss. That's why I was so plum terrified when I found what had happened."

"Go on," she prodded.

"Well, as you know, miss, every one went to bed early. But I couldn't sleep. I kept fancying I heard noises. So I got up."

"What time was this?"

"A little before twelve, miss. As I looked out of my window toward the woods on that side of the house, I sees the storm clouds a-scuddin', half hidin' the moon. But when the light comes out again from the clouds I sees something movin', creepin' along beyond the wall. The thing was between me and the moonlight. But the light was fearful pale and ghostly, all sort of shimmery. I felt scared stiff, for the thing was all in black, miss, like the devil or some lost soul."

Beads of perspiration dampened his brow.

"And then, miss, as I watches, it sort of stands up and waves its arms as though beckonin'— As I sit here, miss, that thing wasn't human—it wasn't flesh and blood!"

"What do you mean?"

"As I looked at it, miss, the moon came out clearly. And it shone right *through* that thing, miss, just as if it wasn't there."

"Nonsense," chided Nancy. "Do you mean that it became invisible?"

"Not exactly, miss. It kept flutterin' and sort of swoopin' up toward the house, just like as if it were flyin'. I—I could see it and still I couldn't see it."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it was all sort of ghostly and shimmery and as thin as vapor, miss. *I could see right through its arms to the bones.*"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Deliverance

By ROBERT TERRY SHANNON

. . . I would like to be glad with the joy of God singing in my heart, but I can't any more. All I can do is just feel like a sick coward inside my breast. When I try to get hold of my faith that used to be so strong it slips away and leaves me empty. O God! Grant me deliverance—

THE bony, sallow face of Matt Hackburn relaxed into a mirthless grin as he read and absorbed the import of the writing on the sheet of paper he had idly pulled from between the leaves of the heavy book on the mantel. A darkening tide of color tinged his countenance; without further ado he crumpled the paper, wadded it—shot it out the open window.

From the lean-to kitchen of the cabin came the sound of his wife, Mary, getting supper. A half grown pup, yellow and gangly, ambled into the room; came within range of Matt Hackburn's long leg. For a moment the man contemplated the animal, then kicked it—his toe slipping under the belly, the buckled instep of his brogan catching it with a plunk in the ribs that lifted the animal, with a yelp, off the floor.

"You keep that whelp offen the place!" Matt called into the kitchen. "If you don't I'm a goin' to shoot him."

His wife came in from the kitchen, her young face flushed from the stove; a color which would soon fade leaving her clear skin with its natural ivory tone. That there was anything that might be called beauty in the violet pools of her eyes, her dark coiled hair, her fragility, Matt Hackburn had long since forgotten. Curiously, though, it had been her looks when she came up from the lowlands three years before to teach an Ozark school that had attracted him.

"I don't believe I'd let Abel Lorch find it out if you shot his dog—or kicked it, either," said Mary quietly. "Supper's on the table now."

Matt scraped his split-bottomed chair over the scrubbed white bare floor and drank off, despite the heat in the room, a half cup of steaming coffee without lowering his cup. For a time he ate rapidly and without talking.

"That feller Lorch," he remarked, after a while, "he was here to-day, wasn't he?"

Mary looked up suddenly. "He came to see if you wanted to sell the calf."

"Oh, he did"—the man's tone was sarcastic—"I s'pose he didn't notice that I druv right a-past his place this arternoon on my way to town. You don't s'pose him bein' a newcomer in these parts that he was too perlite to stop me in the road, if he really had any business to talk?"

His wife waited an appreciable instant before answering.

"He said he might come over this evening—it's only a half mile walk."

Matt lapsed into silence, finished his meal and lounged in the doorway with a pipe in his mouth while Mary cleared the table. The glow faded out of the twilight, evening came on, dry and sultry. Across the gap, the high shoulder of Pine Knob Mountain bulked blue-black like a huge lump of solidified night. From a distance Pine Knob looked cool, but Matt knew that there, too, among the wildness of uncut pine and ash and whilte oak the air was hot and rank, for the whole State was burning up from the lack of rain.

For a week the unprecedented August heat had been in his blood—to-night it seemed to be tingling in his brain. The smoke from his pipe was dry, acrid in his mouth.

"I ought to slap her face for her," he told himself silently. "Serve her right—settin' herself up ag'in' her own husband!"

The idea pleased him somehow, and he wondered why he had never thought of it before. There was, though, no hurry about actually doing it.

"Saw Ed Higgins in town to-day," he said conversationally. "Claims he saw deer tracks over on Pine Knob t'other day. Reckon he lied, though. They ain't been any deer for fifteen years round here. Seems like some people air natcheral born liars."

Mary hung up the last pan, took the kerosene lamp and moved toward the other room without answering. Matt followed her.

"Some folks I know air false all the way through," he persisted, a dull glow in his eyes. His wife had set the lamp down; impulsively she whirled and faced him.

"Don't beat around the bush, Matt!" she cried. "Speak out what you want to say. You mean *me*, I suppose—"

"Yes, I mean you!" His colorless lips were working. "I know what's on yore mind. For one thing this here Abel Lorch—"

Her sudden whiteness checked him momentarily.

"Oh, I found what you writ down on a piece of paper—a-prayin' to git rid of yore own husband. Wall—you cain't out 'ere." His voice now was hoarse. "I'll larn you to come any funny business on me! Yore a-barkin' up the wrong tree. Come here!"

Mary stepped back, ghostly vibrant. "Don't you dare touch me!" she said tonelessly.

"Come here, you!"

A harsh, sun-browned hand clamped around a slender wrist. Matt Hackburn did not speak. Slowly his pressure tightened.

"Yore a goin' to git down on yore knees and 'pologize. Down! Down!"

His grip bent her, forced a giving way at the knees—physically she was compelled to kneel.

"Now—'pologize!"

Mary's breathing was audible; a creeping darkness suffused her pallor. Matt's knuckles became white, bony lumps.

"You 'pologize!" Matt Hackburn lifted his free hand, palm open. "Afore I—"

He became conscious that a third person was present: that framed in the front doorway was the deep chested form of a man—Abel Lorch, solid, sandy colored. The flint blue of the man's eyes blazed with a thin, penetrating fire; gradually his face set, stonelike. He did not move.

Matt Hackburn, for a moment, held his gaze steadily against the grim stare of the other; sought to brazen out the situation. Suddenly he found himself growing cold—

realized that he was trembling; that Mary's wrist had slipped from his grasp. He was looking at her, not Lorch. She was still on her knees; moving to rise to her feet.

Lorch was speaking.

"What's a goin' on here, Hackburn?" The voice was low, keen-edged.

Matt's chest was rising and falling; his eyes drifted toward the door leading into the kitchen. There, he remembered, the long kitchen knife always was on the middle shelf. Uncertainly, he began to move toward the half light of the other room. If Lorch advanced, followed him—

Mary Hackburn was on her feet; her hand fell lightly upon his arm.

"Oh, good evening, Mr. Lorch—Matt was just—just showing me one of those wrestler tricks that he learned—one time up in the city. He thought maybe if I was ever alone in the house and a tramp came—"

Lorch's brow corrugated; his eyes shifted from the woman back to her husband, returned again.

"Did I give a pretty good imitation—of being hurt, Matt?" Mary Hackburn asked—almost lightly.

Her husband grinned; swallowed away the dryness in his throat. "You shore did," he laughed. His manner, he felt, was perfectly in key with hers.

Something that looked like a smile—a smile graven in stone—appeared on the lips of Abel Lorch. There was a slight movement of his head, the merest suggestion of a bow toward Mary Hackburn.

"I see—I see." Lorch's tones now were soft, drawling. A tension seemed to have disappeared from his face, body and mind. "I come over, Mr. Hackburn, to see if you wanted to sell that calf—"

Matt waved him to a chair.

"Set down. Shore, I'll sell it—if I git my price."

Mary Hackburn crossed the room, went up the steep stairs, and Lorch saw, as she passed his chair, that one hand was clasped over her wrist. Matt saw it, too; knew that his visitor had not glimpsed the marked, bruised flesh.

"Yes, sir," he repeated. "I'll sell you that calf, Lorch, if I git—"

Lorch forbore answering until the woman reached the top of the flight. When she was out of sight he leaned forward in his chair; spoke confidentially.

"I did come over to talk about buyin', but I reckon, Hackburn, I don't care particular now. There's somethin' else—I don't want your wife to hear us. Suppose we just step outside?"

Hesitatingly Hackburn waited while Lorch got to his feet.

"You needn't be scairt," remarked Lorch shortly.

Between the men there was little to choose in physical strength; what Hackburn lost in stockiness he made up in raw-boned ranginess—yet, mentally, computing his chances against Lorch, he was conscious that the other possessed something he himself lacked. Perhaps it was the essence of courage; Matt did not know—but the knowledge of the deficiency enraged him with the fury of the inferior. Carried by a smoldering passion he followed Abel Lorch outside.

"What I got to say is this—" Lorch paused, surveyed calmly the form of Matt Hackburn from his feet to his head. "She didn't fool me any—by what she said, I saw what you were doin'. Now listen: don't let it happen again, or—"

"Er—what?" Hackburn's voice was a rasp.

Lorch was slow to answer. "I ain't sure exactly," he confessed, as a man who considers an impersonal problem. "Maybe I'd kill you—in fact, I'm afraid I might. That's all, Hackburn. Good night!"

A chill, as actual as though he were suffering from ague, rushed over Matt Hackburn: the eyes of Abel Lorch were twin points of blue ice, freezing him to the marrow. Abruptly he was left alone. The bulk of Lorch clumped away into the night.

II.

After the manner of the young of his kind Lorch's pup ranged far and wide; and because he was a young dog he did not carry in his shallow brain the lessons of experience. Matt Hackburn, at the far end of his field which bordered the deep rutted

road, observed the dog sniffing along the base of the split rail fence.

For three days the threat of Abel Lorch had rankled in the consciousness of the man, had been with him at every task about the farm, had stuck like a burr in his subconsciousness when he slept. At the sight of the pup, he picked up a small yellow stone, poised to throw it—then lowered his arm as a far more satisfying idea crossed his mind.

Matt's lips puckered into a sharp commanding whistle: the dog foreswore the scent of a rabbit, stopped, and lifted a cocked head.

"Hyah, puppie—hyah, puppie!" Stooping, patting his leg in the fashion that is so irresistible to all of the canine species, Matt Hackburn drew the animal to him. Bounding, yelping with the exuberance of youth, the pup frolicked at the feet of the enemy. A cat under the same circumstances could not have forgotten for an instant—wherein lies, perhaps, the greatest difference between canine and feline.

Still holding the stone in his hand, Matt spat upon it, held it near the dog's nose and then, with a lusty sweep of his arm, hurled it through the air—far in the direction that lay across the field and away from the road.

With a yip of joy the dog was off, frantic with the instinct of the retriever. A slow twisted grin spread on Matt Hackburn's face; without hurry he followed after the streaking animal.

Three, four, five times the throwing of the stone, the wild chase, was repeated. The sixth flight brought man and dog over a rise in the land that hid from the road the far boundary of the field, marked by the inevitable zigzag of rails.

In a fence corner, Matt found, as he knew he would, a tangled snarl of rusted baling wire, which he picked up and threw across the fence, climbed over himself and began to uncoil the wire.

With the free end in his hand, he called the pup close, sat down with the lively youngster pawing in his lap and wound the wire around its neck, being careful that the noose was not too tight—yet, that it was sufficiently secure to prevent its slipping off.

To all of this the pup evinced no decided objection, regarding it, apparently, as some new game to be enjoyed for what it was worth. Working swiftly, smiling oddly, the man made fast the other end of the wire to the bottom rail; wound it and twisted it until it was as solid as a sailor's knot.

"Thar—you damned whelp," he muttered at last; "reckon that 'll hold you!"

Some psychic intuition seemed to set up a quick, unexpected panic in the breast of the pup. With a bound, a lunge, he threw himself forward—was jerked back twisting, with a gritty cry in his throat, as the wire tautened and strummed dully.

"Try it some more, young feller," Matt advised. "Try it as much as you like. It 'll be the sweetest day of yore life when you get away from that air halter!"

Touching the dog with the toe of his heavy shoe, Hackburn grinned at the futile efforts of the frantic animal to snap through the wire collar.

"Damn you!" the man said in sudden fury. "I wish to God that it was him that owns you I had tied up with a wire around his neck!"

The sun beat down on Hackburn's tattered straw hat, baked at the back of his neck, dried his face, his mouth and throat. The sky was bright and hot with no promise of rain in its glistening blueness.

"Listen, dog," he said suddenly with an egregious smile. "I'm goin' to leave you here to shrivel up in this cussed sun. I can't git at your master—yet—but I'm doin' this to you—understan'—'cause you're hisen."

After three days Matt Hackburn returned.

III.

THE soil underfoot lay harsh in dry and yellowed furrows; clods falling apart with little puffs of dust at the pressure of shoe or boot. Along the creek Matt had noticed the trees were thick with birds; that an uncommon number of hogs were seeking churning wallows; that the cattle were standing knee deep in the narrowing bed of the stream, their heads hanging low and listless.

Returning across the field he marked two

buzzards wheeling high in the thin, rarified blue.

"Flyin' high and pretty," he mused; "plenty fine pickin's fer the ornery critters if we don't git rain afore long—dry meat, but plenty of it—that's sure—onless we git rain—"

The dog lay flat on its side; its nose thrust under the bottom rail seeking the narrow strip of shade; a blue fly buzzed unmolested about its mouth. Experimentally, Matt touched the animal with his toe, watched it shudder, grinned at the nervous reflex that sent the uppermost hind leg kicking.

"Git up, Abel Lorch." he commanded in a hot, wiry voice; "git up and let's look at you!"

At the sound of the man's voice a stir animated the dog; slowly, painfully it struggled onto its legs—looked at him with stupid, blurred eyes—the dark tip of its tongue showing against white and shining puppy teeth.

"Pshaw, this ain't no fun!" Matt grumbled. "I reckon I ought to brought you a can of water to keep you smart an' bouncin'."

Stroking his unshaven chin he came to a decision.

"I could let you die here—but that 'd be the end of it. Reckon I'll just let you loose, an' git home the best way you can. Lorch won't know what's happened—er if he did git a suspicion—"

Matt reflected; flicked at the dog's hot nose with the pliant tip of a switch cut from the fence brush.

"I don't give a hang if he does!" he cried. "I'm as good a man as he is any day of the week! If he wants trouble he'll git it—fist, foot or firearms! This county ain't big enough fer us both and, thank God, I ain't a-scaird of no man whatever walked in shoe leather!"

The outburst stabilized him, gave temper to his metal and, strangely enough, brought, for the first time in weeks, a calmness. Slowly, like seeping waters, a sense of shame pervaded him; shame that he should have expended a vicarious vengeance on the dog when he might, as easily, have settled with the man himself. A little more thinking, concentrated and serious, and he might have —somehow—settled the score with Abel Lorch. In the thought was infinite gratification. It was something to be incubated with the greatest care.

"Dern me fer a low skunk!" he told himself. "Actin' like I was yaller all the way through—when I ain't a-tall."

Bending over he loosened the wire from the pup's neck; with a toe he hoisted the animal to its legs.

"Git along home now and tell yore daddy he wants you!"

It was amusing to watch the thing wabble about like a drunken man. Matt Hackburn laughed aloud; turned and started for the house. Before he had gone twenty steps he was aware that he was being followed—that the pup, weaving, staggering, was keeping to his tracks with the instinct that began when the first wolf left the pack for the hearthstone.

A sudden, overpowering dread, uncanny and alarming, assailed the man. In the red rimmed eyes of the pup he saw—or fancied he saw—the same lethal glow he had once met in the eyes of Abel Lorch.

"Go 'way!" he cried hoarsely.

The pup advanced uncertainly, its terrible eyes glinting. At the back of his head Matt Hackburn felt his hair stiffening; something ice cold twisted in his breast.

"Go 'way, or I'll—"

The small switch, he realized, was still in his hand. Heat waves lifted, danced across the sun-baked field; a spasm of terror raged, unreasonably, like electricity, in the man's every nerve. The muscles in his arm corded; the switch cut through the air —snaked across the uplifted nose of the staggering dog.

The stinging contact brought a sudden access of energy the the pup; filled its throat with a strident, unnatural howling. Hound blood leaped. Straight, as if catapulted, the dog launched at Matt Hackburn's throat—fell short and in falling raked the back of his hand with two teeth longer than the rest.

Abruptly, the dog ran, covered fifty yards across the parched field, fell motionless to the ground. Matt Hackburn knew it was dead.

" Thar now," he said, with a glance aloft at the two circling specks, " thar's yer dinner."

IV.

OBSERVING his wife carefully from day to day, Matt noted, as the dry spell stretched out into its second and then its third week, that Mary was beginning to droop. For his own part he seemed, if anything, to gain in nervous energy. Restlessly he attacked task after task; accomplished more in a day than, previously, he could in three.

" Cain't you do nothin' but mope round the house?" he inquired irritably.

They were sitting in rockers on the short, narrow porch at the front of the cabin. Behind them, at the back of the house, a brazen sunset was burning up the air; in the trees the leaves, yellowing at the edges, hung motionless.

One of the woman's hands, still delicate despite its sunburn, its callouses, rose, almost fluttered to her throat, faintly patterned with blue veins under the smoothly textured skin.

" I'd—I'd like to go home for a week or two, Matt. You're right—I'm not much good, but a change—even a few days—might stave off a sick spell."

" How much would it cost?" he asked.

" About twenty dollars would cover it."

" Cain't afford it." His tone was brisk, emphatic. " Take some quinine. Best tonic on earth. Another thing—"

He paused! half closed his lids—scrutinized his wife's face narrowly.

" Maybe you wouldn't come back. I ain't fergot what you wrote on that piece of paper—ner I ain't fergot that you didn't 'pologize, nuther."

Mary Hackburn gazed frankly at him; for an instant he fancied a smile was gathering on her lips.

" I'd come back all right, Matt," she said. In her voice the man thought he detected the same tone that she might have employed, as a teacher, in stating some colorless fact from a book. " All I want is a chance to keep well and strong—so that I can continue on. If I'm sick I'm no good to you."

A grunt came to Matt's lips. " Heap you care about me!"

" I might as well tell you," the woman resumed, without emotion, " that I've come to the conclusion that you were right—that night you twisted my wrist. I apologize."

" Why?" The query was as sharp as a rifle shot.

" I made my own bed and I've got to lie in it without complaining. Self-pity—that was my trouble. You need me, Matt, more than you know. I made the bargain when I married you—"

The man jerked throughout his long frame as though a raw nerve had been touched.

" You swore to love me!" he cried. " But you don't! I cain't come near you—I cain't—"

Rage swept through Matt Hackburn, savage and uncontrollable. Springing to his feet, he towered over Mary, his fists clenched, his teeth grating.

" It's that damn Lorch! But I'll git him—I'll git you, too. Sooner er later—you think I'm blind? Don't I see yore eyes git bright when he's round?"

Steadfastly the woman held his eye.

" Your danger," she said in a monotone, " is not from Abel Lorch, nor from me, either. You're your own worst enemy. Some day, brooding over imaginary wrongs, you'll overreach yourself—"

The face of the man flamed darkly; vainly he sought to find words to express adequately that which was seething in his soul. The inrush of a tempest in his breast left him mute. Furiously he whirled, strode away from the house—bore along aimlessly, any direction, until his feelings subsided.

V.

THROUGHOUT the night Matt Hackburn lay awake, a prey to the growing fear that his wife, despite her words, meant to leave him. Vaguely he felt that she, too, was awake, and once he got up and peered into the other room. Moonlight, pouring in the window, gilded her face and hair. Seeing that her lids were closed, that she was breathing regularly, he crept noiselessly back to bed.

In the morning she reopened the topic of a visit home.

"You didn't give me a chance to explain last night," she told him. "I said it would cost twenty dollars—but I can pay it myself. It's the money I've saved on eggs."

Again he felt his anger mounting, but some other force, cold and remorseless, pressed it down. Mary no longer was asking permission; calmly she was announcing an intention. A power of personality, puzzling in its elusiveness, seemed to emanate from the woman.

"You'll come back?" Matt found himself asking.

"Within a week—or ten days."

"You 'pear like yore feelin' better," he remarked half in wonder.

Her eyes were clear and steady.

"I am; I have hold of myself now and I know what I'm going to do. Actually, I need the rest. Then I'll come back and stick with you—till the end."

Matt got up from the table; reached down his hat from a peg by the door. "All right," he said.

As he strode toward the barn his brow was knit into a dark pool between his eyes; he whistled thoughtfully under his breath.

At noontime he came in; paced the floor while his wife set the meal upon the table.

"When you figure on leavin'?"

"There's a train at nine to-morrow morning," she told him. "I'd like to take that."

The uneasiness that was upon him became more pronounced; he was unable to eat and rose abruptly; left the house without a word. Moved by some unaccountable impulse he wandered to the barn and sat down in the darkest corner. For more than an hour he was motionless. Something akin to a stupor settled upon him; his mouth was hot and his tongue, oddly, felt far too large.

Later in the afternoon an intense desire to be in motion seized him and, although the mid-afternoon sun beat with glaring intensity upon the dusty road, he walked three miles into town. Loitering about without purpose he talked with a dozen or more men he knew, wandered into one store after another.

A grocer in shirt sleeves and plying a palm leaf fan offered him a drink of water from a bucket in which sat a rapidly diminishing chunk of ice. Matt refused.

"Me," said the tradesman, lifting a tin cup of the frigid liquid, "I cain't git enough of it these days. How's things out at yore place, Matt? Everything burnin' up, I reckon?"

The reply was unintelligible.

"Hear Abel Lorch is movin' out," went on the other. "Sorry to lose him—good customer."

Slowly, Matt Hackburn turned his listless eyes, now as dull as ditch water, upon the grocer.

"How's that?" he inquired in a strange voice.

"I said Lorch was movin' out. Reckoned you knowed it. Sold his stuff to a farm agent from Little Rock. I understand Abel's goin' to catch the plug to-night—goin' to settle somewheres down in the valley."

Matt passed a hand over his brow. "Much obliged," he muttered.

"Say—what's the matter?" The round eyes of the grocer grew rounder, questioningly. "What's the matter, Matt—ain't sick, air you?"

The visitor had been sitting on a box in the rear of the store. Now, as though he were a mechanical man in which a spring had been touched suddenly, he sprang up, stiff, bending sharply at the joints. Without replying he moved to the door rapidly, an unwonted rigidity in his step—a gait which gave him, somehow, the stride of some artificial creature of hinges, springs and wheels.

Thus, continuing toward his home in such an artificial manner of locomotion, Matt Hackburn covered the distance utterly impervious to the killing heat, untouched by fatigue. Halfway to his destination a neighbor in a ramshackle buggy passed, hailed him—turned in his seat to look back after the strange figure that had ignored the friendly salutation. "Full as a tick with corn juice," the farmer murmured to himself.

Passing his own place, Matt did not stop, did not even look toward the house. A

quarter of a mile farther on, however, he forsook the road, straddled over a rail fence and began picking his way slowly among the dust covered bushes and saplings that lined the highway.

His step and bearing now underwent a complete change; the jerky, spasmodic motions of limbs and body giving way to a limberness of carriage that was catlike, almost, in its stealth. Impeded by the brambles underfoot and the low-hanging and tangled boughs overhead he was compelled to move more slowly as he went forward, keeping always out of sight of any one who might come along the road, yet departing at no time more than fifty feet or so from the main line of travel.

Dust from the road now coated his face with a pale yellowness and settled upon his dry lips. His breath came in rapid gasps yet there coursed through his veins a flow of energy out of all proportion to his normal strength. And his head, miraculously, was as clear as a bell; without effort he was capable of thinking over a wide horizon, of estimating, weighing the most insignificant details.

Opposite Abel Lorch's house the land on Matt's side of the road rose in a steep plane heavily grown with walnut, in which a man, hiding, was thoroughly safe from detection, except by the merest accident. Finding a jutting ledge of rock that enabled him to command a full view of Lorch's house and, at the same time, remain completely concealed, Matt threw himself face downward and peered, for some minutes, across the road.

Every sight that met his eye confirmed the grocer's statement that Lorch was leaving. Roped from end to end a trunk stood outside the cabin door; later a strange woman appeared and went toward the spring with a water bucket. She was, Matt judged, the wife of the new owner or tenant. Lorch, he was sure, had not gone; presently he saw him coming in from the scraggly field with another man; saw them enter the cabin.

Matt pulled out his silver watch. It was near four o'clock. The plug, he knew, was due shortly after nine. In the five hours that remained he foresaw exactly what would happen. Lorch would remain for supper with the newcomers; explaining what there was to be told about the farm he was giving up. Then, around eight, the two men would load the roped trunk into a spring wagon and they would set out for town. Unless—

Matt grinned and in the gloom of the trees there came to his face an expression—a drawing back of thin lips over yellow fangs—more lupine than human. Reaching out he grasped a dry and broken piece of wood; a barked measure as long and as thick as, roughly, the handle of a broom.

Drawing one end of it close up against his shoulder, supporting himself on one bent elbow, he sighted down its crooked length with an eye that had the skill, the lifelong training to shoot the smallest brown squirrel out of the topmost branch of the tallest oak of the hills.

Satisfied Matt threw away the stick and, chuckling at some torrid, inward pleasure, got on toward his own home.

VI.

Mary Hackburn, outdoors in the shade of the cabin, peeled a pan of potatoes, finished them, entered the house as her husband turned in at the gate. A sound outside the kitchen door attracted her. A scream choked itself in her throat as she saw his face.

"*Matt!*"

One long arm shot through the door; like a steel clamp the long fingers of Matt Hackburn closed around her arm. A terrific pull almost threw her from her feet; as though she had been a child she was dragged out through the kitchen door and propelled along.

The fingers, like talons, closed around her flesh; steeling herself she refused to cry out. Matt's lips now were sealed, his jaw set. Between them there was no communication by word of mouth; yet each knew that the issue would be settled irrevocably and without further delay.

On the way to the barn Matt steered their course so that he passed his buggy that stood in the open. And passing he reached up and took from its socket a rat-

tan whip, long, keen and as tough as sole leather.

Within the barn the dark air was heavy with a commingling of many odors; of musty hay, of horse stalls, the pervading smell of harness oil and old leather. Whirling the woman from him, Matt pulled shut the wide door, cutting off all light save that which crept in dully through crack and crevice.

Motionlessly, silently they faced each other; the woman death white but erect, the man dark, indescribably venomous. With a tantalizing motion, he began to switch the whip backward and forward.

" ' A woman, a dog, an' a walnut tree—the more you beat 'em the better they be.' "

It was a half chant, wholly unmusical.

" If you touch me I'll leave you forever—if you touch me once."

" You'd leave me, would you?"

His voice had the quality of rusty metal. In the murky light Mary could see his eyes; make out that they were shining, blazing red rimmed and furious.

" Listen to me, woman, afore I beat you like I would a mule. I found out! You an' Lorch—a-clearin' out together! D'ye think I'd let you go? Not in ten thousand years—yo're mine, like my hogs air!"

The eyes of Mary Hackburn flashed superb defiance.

" You can beat me because I can't help myself—but you've already overreached yourself. Now—in here—you've killed the last hope that I had that I might ever grow to love you. But, even now, I'll stay—I'll make the best of it, if—"

A cackling laugh rose from Matt Hackburn.

" I guess you will stay 'cause I'm a goin' to tie you up—till arter I settle with this here Lorch. Fust, I'm a goin' to lick you and then I'm goin' to drill him clean through. You dasn't tell—anyhow there ain't no jury in this county that 'd convict me—"

For the first time, terror manifested itself in the woman. Wildly her voice rose in a paroxysm of entreaty.

" For God's sake come to your senses. I'll confess—I'll tell you everything. I sent Lorch a letter—I drove him away. He wanted me to marry him before I met you! He moved close to us because he'd heard—heard about your ways. But he's never said a word to me alone. We've both been—decent. He just wanted to protect me—"

The teeth of Matt clenched down upon his lower lip until the blood trickled.

" You love him?" he strained.

A still flame began to glow in the woman's eyes. Her voice was utterly calm. " I'm no plaster saint—of course I do. But he doesn't know it. And he's not a thief! Now—you know all there is to know!"

Methodically, Matt rolled back his right sleeve. For a moment he stood with the whip raised and in that instant of suspense the rain came; the roar as of bullets by the thousand pounding upon the roof of the barn—the deafening, sudden downpour that marked the break of the drought.

The heavens spilt with a crack of thunder; lightning ripped and rent the sky, and there came into the barn the fresh, the ineffable fragrance of a summer downpour on dry wood and dry dust. Inevitably the rain had to come; inevitably it did come with all of the bursting abruptness of the mountain deluge.

The sound of the water on the roof, the smell of it in the nostrils, gripped Matt, paralyzed him—struck into his heart some turning, awesome sensation of grisly aversion. Under a spell he dropped the whip, sprang to the door and threw it open.

" *Water—water!*"

The sheeted torrent drenched the universe. Already it was forming in puddles, gushing from every slope of the land. From the eaves of the barn it poured.

A rusted tin can outside, standing upright, was filled to overflowing. Matt, burning from head to foot, lost all cohesion of mind—was swept out of his senses by rabid, unearthly thirst. With a bound he seized the can, lifted it to his lips.

At his throat some invisible hand clutched it shut: the water filled his mouth to overflowing—gushed out undrunk as the terrible constriction, the coughing racked him with the pain of a thousand burning needles.

Once more he tried to drink—screamed aloud with the strident doglike cry of an animal tortured beyond endurance. His eyes fell upon the back of his right hand —the scars inflicted by Abel Lorch's pup in its last agony were suddenly red—burning coals, puffed, swollen.

A moment of understanding crept into the brain of Matt Hackburn. The pup for three days—in the blazing sun—without water—

Wildly he dashed into the dark, sought and found the long, rusted corn knife. Seeing him thus in his frenzy, Mary Hackburn closed her eyes and waited. And beholding her, Matt, for a moment, realized the possibilities of revenge that were open to him —for a moment only, before the deadly fear entirely took possession of his mind and all that remained of his soul.

"A mad stone!" he cried in no human voice. "In the seventh stomach of a deer —no place else. Over on Pine Knob . . . Ed Higgins . . . saw one . . ."

Running, weaving through the rain, he departed forever from the sight of Mary Hackburn; falling, as a dog with distemper falls, and running on again blindly, Matt Hackburn disappeared to keep his rendezvous.

ʊ ʊ ʊ

MY SON

HE knows that I am growing old and losing touch and step with him;
He knows it in his heart of hearts, 'tis shining from his eyes.
He knows I can no longer match my body strength and "pep" with him,
And yet his love for me is such he'd strangle it with lies!

Oh, youth, youth, youth,
Held in bondage to the truth!
Your tongue may strive to mask it with the tenderest of lies.
Yet above those gentle lips
Wet with fount-of-kindness sips,
The telltale knowledge shines from out your uncorrupted eyes.

He knows our palship's doomed; is striving loyally to care—
God bless the precious hypocrite who sees my heart so clearly!
Yet there are heights that he must climb and dangers he must dare
That he must face without me, though denying it sincerely.

Oh, youth, youth, youth,
With your ruthless use of truth!
Your mouth may make denial with the kindliest of lies,
Yet above your young, young lips
Damp with well-of-kindness sips
The undeniablest of truths is glowing in your eyes.

His God and I are proud of him; we know his naked soul.
We know his problem better than for years himself may know.
And both—I speak in reverence—can see his struggle whole;
So both of us shall love him wheresoever he may go.

Oh, youth, youth, youth,
Firmly welded to the truth!
Deny on, and dissemble with your lovingest of lies.
Yet above those young, young lips
All adrip with kindness' sips,
The everlasting truth of life is shouting from your eyes.

Strickland Gillilan.

Without Gloves

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Snowdrift," "Prairie Flowers," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II.

SHIRLY LEONARD, truck driver, enters the ring, fighting as Mike Duffy, under the management of Lefty Klingermann, a crooked East Side boss. Out for "easy money," Leonard agrees to the framing of a fight with Kid Morowitz, who must retire because of a bad heart, in which Leonard will win by a fake knockout. Leonard falls in love with "Dago Lottie" Rivoli, a shoplifter who aspires to be the wife of a champion and keeps both Morowitz and Leonard on her string.

Leonard plans to double-cross Morowitz, really knocking him out, and Morowitz, learning that Lottie is prepared to leave him for Leonard, also plans a double-cross. Leonard turns yellow before Morowitz's furious attack and is beaten. Lottie drops him for another fighter, and Lefty Klingermann, ruined, issues orders to gunmen to get both Morowitz and Leonard. Morowitz is killed, but Leonard escapes to Minneapolis. He learns that the police are seeking him as the murderer of Morowitz.

CHAPTER XI.

LEONARD GETS A JOB.

IN Minneapolis Leonard applied for a job, got it, joined the union, and went to work. For four weeks he drove one of the Regan Construction Company's big trucks rushing material to the job, a huge grain elevator, whose battery of twelve cylindrical concrete storage bins must rise to the height of one hundred feet before October 1.

Delays at the factories, and delays in transportation had set the work back so that by the middle of August "Young Tom" Regan, the firm's superintendent of construction, was straining every nerve to hurry the work along, for the contract carried a heavy forfeiture clause for non-fulfillment.

A human dynamo, Young Tom was on the job twelve hours a day, and spent half the night in the office. He drove the men unmercifully and they loved him for it.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 14.

The very force of his personality had them on their toes every minute. He was here, there, and seemingly everywhere at once, and under his direction the massive gray cylinders forced themselves higher and higher into the air.

It was not long before he noted that No. 8 truck, Leonard driving, was hauling one or two more loads each day than any other truck on the job. A night or two after making this discovery Young Tom casually strolled through the garage where the fourteen Regan trucks were housed. No. 8 was out on the floor, and Leonard was tinkering with the transmission.

"Trouble?" asked Young Tom, pausing for a moment to speak to the figure in grease-smeared overalls.

"Naw," answered Leonard, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. "Just givin' her a little goin' over. Saves time an' keeps her tuned up."

Regan glanced at his watch. It was nine thirty. Two nights later he again passed through the garage, and again found No. 8 out on the floor. A pair of legs protruded from beneath the truck, and Young Tom passed on.

Saturday evening when Leonard paused before the window of the little temporary wooden office that had been erected on the job, instead of handing him his pay envelope, the paymaster indicated a door with a jerk of his thumb.

"Mr. Regan wants to see you a minute. In there."

Half sullenly, Leonard stepped through the door. Young Tom Regan was leaning over a pine table, studying a blue print. After a moment he looked up.

"Well?" he asked sharply.

Leonard shifted onto the other foot.

"The guy there in the window says you want to see me."

"Oh, yes—Leonard." Regan crossed to a desk and picked up a slip of paper. It was a pay check, and he handed it to Leonard.

"This yours?" he asked gruffly.

Leonard took the paper and nodded.

"Is it right?"

The truck driver glanced again at the paper, and again he nodded.

"It ain't no such a damn thing!" Young Tom Regan was purposely ungrammatical, as he was purposely gruff, in dealing with his men.

"Do you think we're here to get somethin' for nothin'? You're haulin' more stuff than any man on the job. How much time have you spent nights in the garage tinkerin' with that truck? An' why ain't you turned in any overtime?"

Leonard shifted uncomfortably.

"I didn't figger to turn in no overtime. I like to keep her runnin' sweet, an' you was in such a hell of a rush with the job, I figgered it would save a little time."

"What would the boss of the union say if he knew it?"

"My time's my own after supper. It ain't no one's business what I do with it," answered Leonard surlily.

"It's my business," snapped Young Tom, "when you put it in workin' on my truck. How long you been doin' it? An' how many hours have you put in?"

"I don't know. I ain't kep' no track. 'Bout three weeks, I guess, every couple nights I slip over an' put in couple hours, maybe sometimes three or four."

Young Tom figured for a moment with a lead pencil, and stepping into the other room, returned a few moments later with a check which he handed to Leonard.

"Guess that 'll about square it," he said. "After this you turn in your overtime. Any one that tries to put anything over on me has got to get up a damn sight earlier in the morning than you do."

Leonard detected a twinkle in the gray eyes of the boss, and as he folded the two checks together and placed them in his pocket he grinned, and thereafter he turned in his overtime.

Leonard had been in the habit of attending the weekly meetings of his union which, with several other locals, shared a hall over a barber shop on Washington Avenue South. The social equipment of the hall consisted of a couple of pool tables, four or five card tables, a punching bag, and a few pairs of boxing gloves. After the business meeting it had been his custom to play a little two-bit Kelly pool, or an occasional game of poker.

The boxing equipment interested him not at all, until one evening he was bantered and badgered into putting on the gloves, huge padded affairs covered with sheep skin with the wooly side out. His opponent was a fellow truck driver, big framed and clumsy, who flourished his arms like frails as he lumbered heavily about the "ring" that had been chalked on the floor.

From the very moment the gloves were fastened, Leonard felt a sickening chill at the pit of his stomach, and cold fear gripped his heart at the first awkward lunge of the man who faced him with a loose-jawed grin. Like a flash it came upon him—that terrible eighth round. He saw before him not the clumsy, muscle-bound amateur, grinning and swinging his arms foolishly, but the sinister face of Kid Morowitz, the narrowed, bloodshot eyes, the lips drawn back in a snarl of hate, and the lithe arms that could lash out like lightning, and that landed with dizzying numbness. Without any thought of guarding, the man struck heavily, right and left. For a single instant Leonard stood as though paralyzed. A huge glove landed against the side of his head, more of a push than a blow. He staggered slightly, and then raising his arms to cover his face, he turned amid jeers and roars of laughter, and with the huge gloves of his opponent beating and mauling at the back of his head, he staggered across the chalk line.

He accepted the gibes of his fellows surlily, and thereafter drew more and more within himself. He attended no more meetings of his union. He was yellow clean through. He knew it. Every one else knew it. What did it matter? To hell with 'em!

Came a day when this estimate of others suddenly changed. August had slipped into September, and for the first time in months Young Tom Regan could see a chance of completing the work on schedule time. Factory delays were a thing of the past for the very good reason that all the material for the completion of the work was in transit, and the railways were delivering it with gratifying promptness. But everything must run smoothly. Days counted, even hours. An inclined track had been constructed to facilitate the handling of certain material. Switch engines shunted the loaded cars to the foot of the incline, from which point they were handled by means of a winch and wire cable.

Close beside this spur track, Leonard, his big dump truck loaded with sand, awaited his turn to unload at the mixer. Two hundred yards away, a flat car loaded with heavy steel I-beams was being winched up the incline. Close beside his truck a gang of twenty or thirty "wops" were unloading a couple of cars of cement onto a covered platform. The truck ahead dumped its load and moved off across the spur. Leonard started his motor, threw in his clutch, and as he moved up to the mixer, a wild cry sounded from up the track.

At the sound Young Tom Regan leaped from the little wooden office just in time to see the men of the mixer crew leap from their platform and take to their heels. The clang of the wildly racing gears of the winch engine drew his gaze, and in frozen horror he saw the flat car gaining momentum with each second, racing madly down the incline, hurtling its thirty tons of steel directly at the cement cars that swarmed with men. A wire cable had parted with the car at the very top of the incline!

A yell of warning froze on his lips as a new horror presented itself. A truck was just pulling up at the mixer, but instead of stopping, it moved past directly for the crossing! Hadn't the driver heard the wild cry of warning, or the shriek of the racing gears? Hadn't he seen the mixer crew quit the platform? Possibly he could make the crossing ahead of the flying flat, but if anything should happen—

And, then, something did happen. Directly on the crossing the truck stopped dead still. The driver raised in his seat and wrenched at his dumping lever. The body of the truck rose slowly. Young Tom Regan closed his eyes. Seconds passed—one—two—three. Each seemed a minute—an hour. Then it came—the crash.

Young Tom opened his eyes and forced his gaze toward the scene of the catastrophe. His face paper white, he stared, striving to take in the import of what he saw. The big mixer canted at a slight angle where the

car load of I-beams had knocked out of some of its underpinning. The car itself was upon its side, and beyond it a truck was slowly pulling away from the crossing. A few feet beyond a gang of twenty or thirty laborers crowded the unloading platform and swarmed in the doors of the cement cars, staring stupidly at the derailed car.

From all directions men were running toward the spot shouting to each other in whoops and cheers of sheer relief. Young Tom also ran, realizing that his legs felt weak and awkward under him, and that he was vainly trying to swallow a lump that had risen in his throat. A moment later he stood at the crossing, the yard boss at his side. The man pointed downward.

"Foor ton av sand, Misther Raygan—foor ton av sand on the thrack, an' foorty ton av ut in th' hear-rt av th' b'y thot laid ut there! God, sir, av he'd av be'n two siconts later—wan sicont, they'd be'n a string av dead wops from here to th' main thrack! An' a wreck t'would av took two days to clean up!"

"Who was it, Clarity? Who drove the truck?" The voice of Young Tom Regan sounded very gruff, and not quite steady.

"Who but that Leonard? Th' No. 8 thruck. An' he's th' b'y they're all sayin' is yallah. Yis, sir—yallah! B'cause he wouldn't stand up an' box wid thim big woolly gloves ag'in' me own son Dinny that drives th' No. 3 thruck. Yallah, is it? Wait till Oi lay hands on Dinny—thim's his own words—yallah. Oi'll make um take off his hat to No. 8 right here on th' job, or Oi'll yallah um—wid a crowbar-r!"

"Where is Leonard?" asked Regan.

Fifty pairs of eyes swept the roadway. The truck was nowhere in sight.

"Pulled out, Oi guess," answered Clarity. "Gone back f'r another load—seein' he wasted that'n."

Young Tom joined in the laugh that followed, and a few moments later under his own direction men were busy jacking up the mixer platform for new underpinning, removing scattered I-beams, and clearing the track of sand.

At the sound of the loud warning cry, Leonard had taken in the situation at a glance. He saw the car in its downward plunge from the incline, saw the mixer crew leap from the platform, and saw the unloading gang had given no heed to the cry. Fully half of the wops would be inside the box cars when that car of steel hit! With a vicious grinding of gears his truck responded to his action. The next moment it was on the track, and he was releasing his dumping lever.

The sand slid smoothly down the steeply inclined box, and he started his truck, just as the flying flat struck the sand pile. He saw the load shift with the sudden checking of the momentum. Saw it shiver as the wheels left the rails, and saw the rear end swing sidewise and bring up with a crash against the flying timbers of the mixer platform.

"It's a damn good thing for me that car didn't tip this way," he grinned. "Maybe I've raised hell, but if that load of iron had hit them box cars they'd of be'n dagos smeared all over the job."

He glanced backward. Men were running toward the spot. He could see Young Tom Regan just starting from the office. He accelerated his speed.

"Guess I better give him a chanst to cool off a little after he sees what I done to his mixer," he muttered as he disappeared around the corner of a lumber pile.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE NORTH COUNTRY.

RUMBLING northward on Third Avenue South Leonard's truck was held for cross traffic at Fourth Street. As the first two men of a little knot of pedestrians stepped from the curb to cross the street his grip tightened upon the wheel.

He knew those faces, Boyle and Barnes, of the New York Central Office. Together here as they were always together in New York. No one ever saw Boyle that Barnes was not at his side. And no one ever spoke of Boyle, or of Barnes, but always of Boyle and Barnes—not two personalities, but a single entity, and that entity by far the most feared of all police officers by a certain element of New York's underworld.

The men crossed the street and turned their steps toward the huge granite pile, whose tall tower reached skyward. As his eyes followed the movements of the two men, a furious clanging sounded near at hand, and a patrol wagon with its complement of uniformed policemen dashed through a granite arch from somewhere in the bowels of the huge building.

"Courthouse — jail," thought Leonard, "I wonder what them guys is doin' here?"

Then the answer struck him with the force of a blow, as he recollected the headlines:

POLICE SEEK DUFFY IN PRIZE FIGHT MURDER

The cross traffic had passed. The two officers had disappeared within the doors of the building and with terror in his heart, he started his truck with a jerk.

"I wouldn't have no show," he mumbled. "Lottie an' Bull an' Lefty 'd swear me to the chair!"

Instead of pulling on to the job with his load of sand, Leonard swerved into Second Street, and a few blocks farther on drew up to the curb in front of the garage where the Regan trucks were housed. Then very deliberately he clambered from the seat, glanced swiftly about him, and walked hurriedly away. Night found him in an empty box car of a Northern Pacific freight, northward bound, while Young Tom Regan was scouring the city in an endeavor to locate the driver of his No. 8 truck, who was to have started in the next morning as boss truckman.

At the same time Boyle and Barnes, of the New York Central Office, the formalities of their visit to the Mill City having been complied with, were comfortably seated in the smoking compartment of a Pullman on their return journey to the Metropolis. Between them sat a certain notorious bond thief who had been nabbed by the Minneapolis police while trying to dispose of certain securities that had been feloniously snatched from the hands of a messenger, a month previous, at the corner of Chambers Street and Broadway.

In the northern part of the State, Old Elija Blodgett was clearing the last of the pine from his holdings. Year by year his camps had crept farther and farther back from the great river that floated his logs to the mills. His problems had been simple, easily and cheaply solved by the construction of a few more miles of railway each year, upon which the logs were hauled and banked on the river.

But this year would see the last of it. When the Blodgett crews should come out of the woods in the spring, they would not go into the woods again until Blodgett had solved the problem of the back tract. This back tract was a big stretch of timber that Old Elija had picked up cheap in the early days—twenty million feet of pine, completely surrounded by miles and miles of almost impenetrable swamp, marsh, and bottomless morass.

The construction of a railway to reach it would involve nearly ten miles of "fill," and the driving of innumerable piles. The construction of a winter road for team hauling was impracticable for the reason that even during the coldest winters bog and swamp and morass do not freeze with any degree of uniformity. The saturated muck may freeze to a depth of from two to four feet for miles at a stretch, then suddenly thin to as many inches, or not freeze at all.

Blodgett's one hope lay in Wild Goose River, and at the mere mention of the name of Wild Goose River Old Elija Blodgett would purse his hard lips, clasp his bony fingers upon the front of his long black coat, and cant his face upward as in prayer.

On the evening of the third day out from Minneapolis, Leonard dropped to the ground as the train, with grinding and shrieking of brake shoes, drew to a jarring stop. He was not alone. Since morning of the previous day men had been crawling into that box car. One here, two or three there, as the train stopped to do its switching at little way stations. In the yards of a division point, six men had boarded the car together. And now of one accord these men were leaving the car. Some, like himself, were unencumbered with baggage. Others had sacks slung over their shoulders by ropes or straps. They referred to these sacks as "turkeys," and in them, Leonard perceived, they carried their belongings.

Most of these men were acquaintances, but whether acquainted or not, the talk was general, and he found himself drawn into it, albeit he knew nothing whatever of what it was about, except that he learned that these men were foregathering at a place called Thunder Head, where a man named Blodgett was hiring men for his camps. He learned also that the purpose of these camps was the felling of trees, and cutting them into logs.

On the whole Leonard rather liked these men, whose talk was of cross hauls, and cant hooks, and skidways and tote roads. They referred to him as the Greener, and when they found out he had no definite destination in view, urged him to join on with the crew.

The more he thought of it, the more the idea appealed to him. Surely Boyle and Barnes would never think of looking for him in a logging camp. They probably knew he had been a truck driver, and it would be among truck drivers in cities they would look for him.

So it was that when the train stopped at Thunder Head, and the men "piled off," Leonard "piled off" with them. The train started on, and as he waited with the others beside the track, to allow it to pass, he glanced about him. Nothing—absolutely nothing—was to be seen in the dusk excepting the scraggy skyline of low, bushy trees against the faint afterglow of the sky.

"I thought you said there was a town here?" he asked of a man who stood at his side.

"Sure they's a town. It's on t'other side the track."

The caboose, with its red lights showing bravely, rattled past, and the town of Thunder Head stood revealed in its entirety. It consisted of a single row of wooden buildings ranged along one side of a muddy street that paralleled the railway track. Leonard followed the line of men which straggled toward the largest of these buildings. Yellow lamplight streamed out at the opening of the door.

"Pat McCormack's hotel," informed the man who trudged beside Leonard. "Use'to be top loader fer Blodgett till he got his foot smashed."

A gust of rain-laden wind whipped down the street, and Leonard lowered his head. The interior of the hotel looked cheerful, as he ascended the wooden steps and scraped the mud from his shoes on the iron scraper. Not once in three days and two nights had he been really warm, and on the hard floor of the bouncing car he had slept miserably.

The door closed behind him and he found himself in the hotel office, a rather large room with a huge stove in the middle of the floor, conveniently near which was a wooden box half filled with tobacco-stained sawdust. In one corner was a pine desk that held the register, and a glass cigar case, whose top had been broken and mended with a bolt and a couple of iron washers. Seated on a high stood behind this desk, he saw a large, red-faced man, who greeted most of the newcomers familiarly as they scrawled their names on the register.

Leonard hugged the stove, in which a roaring fire of slabs defied the cold autumn wind. Steam rose from his damp denim jumper as the genial warmth penetrated to his body. A pile of turkeys littered the floor in a corner. Other men moved to the stove while they waited their turn at the wash dish, an iron affair that occupied a wooden sink in another corner of the room.

Leonard moved over to the register, the red faced man eying him as he wrote his name.

"Ever work in the woods?" asked the man.

Leonard shook his head.

"Tractor man?"

"Truck driver," he answered, and the next moment could have bitten his tongue off, as a vision of Boyle and Barnes flashed through his brain.

"Ut's all the same, I guess," the man was saying. "I knowed you was some kind of machinery man, wid yer overhalls all covered wid grease. Ye're a likely lookin' lad, fer all ye're a greener, an' Tim Neely 'll be after hirin' ye all right. He figgers on bringin' in a tractor."

"Who's Tim Neely?"

"Who but Old 'Lija Blodgett's foreman. He's eatin' his supper in there now. An' ye better be runnin' along an' git yourn.

I see Frinchy's t'rough wid the wash dish, an' be the looks av things you'll be wantin' to use ut."

The man was laughing, a laugh in which Leonard joined, as he gazed at his face in the little cracked and warped mirror that hung above the sink. Three days' accumulation of soot and cinders had left his face black as a Gold Coast negro's. Again and again he dumped the water from the iron wash dish, and refilled it at the pitcher pump. At length he was clean, at least as to visible portions of his anatomy, and as the red faced man motioned him to the dining room door he exclaimed: " Be gobs! Ye're a white man, after all!"

Where the office had been noisy with the babel of many voices, the dining room was silent as the tomb, save for the click and rattle of dishes as the men attacked the food. Never, he thought, had food tasted so good as he refilled his plate with savory beef stew, baked potatoes and steaming baked beans. One by one the men finished, and pushing back their chairs, returned to the office. When he joined them he was accosted by a huge giant of a man, who addressed him in a high pitched, almost squeaky voice that sounded strangely out of keeping with his huge bulk.

" Pat, here, tells me you're a tractor hand."

Leonard would like to have denied that he knew anything whatever about any kind of machinery, but he already admitted his vocation to the hotel keeper, and besides, he reasoned swiftly, there were thousands of truck drivers, and it was extremely unlikely that Boyle and Barnes would ever penetrate to such an out-of-the-way corner of the world as Thunder Head.

" Don't even know what a tractor is," he replied. " I've drove a truck."

" Same thing, I guess," answered the man. " I don't know nothin' about 'em neither. Some one's talked the old man into tryin' one out this winter. Claims they'll do the work of three or four teams. Mebbe they will, but wait till the snow gits belly deep to a gyraft, an' then see where this here tractor 'll be at. But we won't worry none about that. He ain't goin' to ship the tractor till the tote-road's built, an' if it don't work when it gits here I kin put you at somethin' else. Ever work in the woods?"

" No."

" Well, ye're husky lookin', an' you kin learn. But you can't go in with no such an outfit's that." The man indicated Leonard's clothing with a bob of the head.

" Come on over to the store an' we'll rig you out an' charge it up ag'in' yer wages. We won't have no time to fool with it in the mornin'. I want to pull out by daylight."

The teams were at the door next morning just as the first streak of dawn grayed the east. The cold, rain laden wind of the previous day had shifted into the southwest, and before it the clouds scudded in thick, ragged masses. Thirty-six men, all told, climbed onto the big wagons which had been loaded the day before with the necessary camp impedimenta, boxes, and barrels of food, bales of hay, and sacks of oats, kegs of nails, saws, axes, cant hooks, and chains.

Leonard found himself seated upon his brand new turkey on top of a load of baled hay. Beside him sat the boss at whose high pitched word of command the teamster clucked to his horses and the ponderous animals moved off, their feet splashing noisily in the well churned mud of the roadway. The other teams fell in behind, and at the edge of town the driver swung into a narrower road that wound in and out through the stumps and scrub of the pine barrens.

" This road ain't so muddy," observed Leonard, as the boss lighted his pipe and settled himself for the journey.

" 'Tain't never muddy offen the clay," explained the boss. " Didn't you see them stumps around Thunder Head was all hardwood? Wherever they's a clay ridge you find hardwood, an' when you git down onto the sand the pine begins."

Leonard grinned. " I don't know hardwood from any other kind. This is the first time I've ever been in the woods."

" You ain't in no woods yet. You don't call this here cutover woods, do you? Wait till you git into the big sticks. See all them stumps? A few years ago they was

all trees—pretty a stand of timber as a man 'd want to see—an' now look at it!" The man swept the horizon with a sweep of the arm. "Nothin' but scrub oak, an' popple, an' soft maple, with a few jack pine patches throwed in here an' there. It's a damn shame, that's what it is! The country's goin' plumb to hell!"

The man elapsed into wrathful silence, and Leonard pondered his words. Here was something he did not understand. He stared out over the scrub with its sprinkling of graying stumps that once were lordly trees. Here was a man taking a crew into the woods to cut down trees, and at the same time was angrily denouncing the cutting of trees.

The sun burst out through a great rift in the clouds and Leonard stared spellbound at the blaze of color that surrounded him. The whole country as far as the eye could reach flamed with crimson and gold, relieved here and there by the dark green of a jack pine thicket or a spruce swamp. There was a tang in the air that he drew deeply into his lungs. He felt strangely thrilled. New York seemed very far away—and he was glad. Something within himself seemed seeking to expand, seemed groping to comprehend the vastness of the gold and crimson waste.

With a heavy rattling of wheels the wagon jolted over the corduroy where the road crossed an outreaching arm of a spruce swamp. A rabbit hopped lazily from the roadway ahead of the horses, and a covey of grouse disappeared into the thicket with a noisy whirring of wings.

Leonard was conscious of a vast sense of well-being. Unconsciously he stretched the muscles of his arms. He was glad to be alive—glad that he was right here.

For the first time in his life he thrilled to the simple fact of living. Unconsciously this man who had known only cities had fallen madly in love with the wild country. Love at first sight—the wild country claimed him for her own. He knew nothing—understood nothing—of the wild country. Her secrets were to him a closed book. But he would know! He would open the book and would glut himself with her lore. Leonard glanced at the boss who sat staring out over the cutover. Here was a man who knew the wild country.

"But, the trees 'll grow up again," he ventured.

"Never in Christ's kingdom, they won't!" exploded the boss. "They won't let 'em! They can't see ahead of their nose. They ain't got no sense!"

"Who won't let 'em? And why?"

"The State, the timber owners—no one. The whole damn mess of 'em ain't got no sense. Fire—that's what keeps the timber down. Keep the fire out an' the pine 'll come back. Look all around you. See over there, an' there—them tall trees scattered through the scrub. Them's pines—Norway an' white, that for some reason was left when they logged this stretch. Some was holler-butted, an' some too small to cut an' was lucky enough not to git swamped out, or busted down. Most anywheres in the cut-over you can find them scatterin' trees. Them trees grows cones an' scatters seed, an' the seed takes root an' starts young pines.

"Then what happens? A dry spell comes along and some train scatters hot cinders, or drops hot coals out of the firebox, or some fool lights his pipe an' throws down the match, or throws his cigarette butt into the dry leaves, or some other fool builds a camp fire an' goes away an' leaves it fer the wind to scatter all over hell, an' it ain't long till they's fire a runnin' through the brush.

"If it was a fire in the big timber the hull damn country would turn out to fight it. The timber owners an' the State would rush all the men in they could git holt of. Why? 'Cause timber is dollars, an' dey kin see the dollars burn.

"But let a fire start in the cut-over, an' what happens? A ranger or two will come along, an' if they kin find a handy place they'll fight it a little. If it heads fer some settler's farm he'll git out an' beat it out. But the rest of the country sees the smoke an' they say, 'Nothin' but a bresh fire. Let her burn. It can't do no harm.'

"An' the little pines, one, or two, or mebbe three year old, that's started from the seeds that's blowed around offen them left over trees is burnt up or scarred so they won't ever amount to nothin'—an' there ye

are. That's the main reason they ain't no timber growin' on the cut-over—that, an' the timber owners bein' such damn hogs."

"Hogs? What's that got to do with it?" Leonard, drinking in every word the boss uttered, found himself thirsting for more.

"It's got a hell of a lot to do with it," answered the boss, biting the corner from a plug of tobacco. "S'pose they'd of logged right to start out with, what then? They wouldn't be no cut-over. They'd still be cuttin' timber, an' good timber, on the first land they ever worked. Timber wasn't all started the same year. They's big trees, an' trees from them on down to ones you can't see less'n you're lookin' for 'em.

"Instead of cuttin' everythin' they could lay a saw to an' swampin' out, an' smashin' down the rest, they'd of used common sense, an' kep' takin' only the good stuff as it came along, an' takin' care of the young stuff. They'd of had a crop comin' on every year.

"The first man that started out to cut timber said how they was enough timber in his patch to last the hull world ferever, an' every man that's cut timber sence has said the same thing an' run hog-wild an' cut an' swamped an' tore an' slashed an' gutted till they wasn't nothin' left but the sand it growed in. An' they call that business!"

Neely's voice had grown more high-pitched than usual, and he finished with a ludicrous squeak—that is, it would have been ludicrous if the younger man had noticed, but he was too intent on the man's words to note the tone of his voice.

"But, in this camp we're goin' to work different, eh? Only take the best of it?"

The boss favored him with a scowl. "Hell, no! We're a goin' to do it just like we've always done it. Git everything thet 'll make a log, an' bust down the rest. That is Old 'Lij' Blodgett's way."

CHAPTER XIII.

BLODGETT'S NUMBER EIGHT.

ON the edge of the "big sticks," as Neely had called the standing timber, a temporary camp of tents was set up, and under the directions of the boss all hands set to work building the winter camp.

While half the crew felled trees and swamped out a level space well within the shelter of the big timber, where a swift running creek burbled noisily over the stones of its tortuous bed, the other half, together with the teamsters, was sent some five or six miles into the cut-over to wreck the buildings of last year's camp, known as Number Seven, and haul the lumber to the clearing.

A week later the new camp stood completed, bunkhouses, cook shack, and stables, presenting a curious striped and patched appearance due to the fact that no attention had been paid to placing the boards weathered side out. The amateur carpenters nailed them into place as they came to hand.

Tents were struck, and the men moved into the buildings where roaring stoves and great swinging lamps gave promise of comfort in the short cold days to come.

During this first week Shirly Leonard worked with the eyes of the boss upon him. Something about the "greener" attracted big Tim Neely. It was not that the younger man's work was in any way conspicuous, for every man on the job was giving the job all he had in him. But Neely sensed that here was one who instinctively loved the woods as he himself loved them.

"It's hell, ain't it?" said the greener after supper one evening when the boss came upon him seated beside the creek.

"What's hell?" asked Neely curiously.

"Why, that guys like us—like you an' me, an' maybe some of the rest that likes the woods, an' likes to be in 'em, an' all that, has got to help cut 'em down. I never saw woods before, but I'd ruther be here than anywheres I ever was at."

Neely nodded slowly. "Yes, that's hell. But if it wasn't us, it would be some one else. When you come to think about it, the only job a man kin git that takes him into the woods is tearin' 'em down—that is, a man like me that ain't got no eggication to speak of."

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Leonard.

"Well, the government's got what they call National Forests. It's a mighty good thing, 'cause believe me, they'll be the only forests left in a few years. Men that gets jobs on them is tryin' to build up, instead of tear down. But they won't take on no one like me, that's worked in the timber all his life, an' don't know nothin' but timber. They want men that's got book eggication an' kin tell if it was Abraham Lincoln or General Jackson that crossed the Delaware, an' how far is it to the moon an' back. The State's kind of beginnin' to piddle around along them lines, too, but I guess they'll be wantin' the same kind of men."

"Wish I knew as much about the woods as you do," said Leonard, and the boss detected a half wistful note in the voice. "Do you know that up to the time I got off that freight back there at Thunder Head, I didn't know there was such places in the world. A man kind of feels different with these here big trees all around him."

"You bet he feels different!" exclaimed the boss. "You keep your eyes open, an' I'll learn you all I kin. I knowed the timber'd got you. You ain't never goin' out of the woods no more'n what I am—leastways, not till they're all cut down."

Leonard grinned. "An' by that time maybe they'll git some guy runnin' these here forests that won't give a damn who crossed the Delaware, or how far the moon is, just so it's far enough not to knock the tops off the big trees. Then maybe he'll give us a job makin' the cut-over look like this."

He indicated the mighty pines with a sweep of his arm.

Neely shook his head. "Some day the Minnesota cut-over will look like this agin—but me an' you'll never see it, son. The State 'll wake up, some day—when it gits a few million acres of this here cut-over dumped back on its hands fer taxes. It ain't fit fer farmin'. There's only one answer—timber. We'll see the start of it, but we'll never see the big sticks. An' in the meantime maybe we're boostin' the game by doin' our damnedest to help jest such birds as old 'Lij' Blodgett to get rid of what's left of the virgin stand. The sooner it's gone, the sooner the State will wake up to its job."

With the completion of the camp the work of the woods began. A log road, skid roads, cross hauls, and loading dump were swamped out. A tie crew was set to work and everything that wouldn't make a log was rough hewn into ties.

Into the midst of these activities came old Elija Blodgett himself. And with him came men who carried transits and levels and long rods painted alternately with red and white. Pending the arrival of the tractor, Leonard had been assigned to the swamping crew, and on the morning of Blodgett's arrival big Tim Neely paused to watch the younger man lop the limbs from a tree felled by the sawyers.

"Don't never bring yer ax down with yer leg where it's at!" he exclaimed, seizing the razor sharp, double bitted ax from Leonard's hand. "This here is the most dangerous tool used by man. They's be'n more men hurt with it than has be'n hurt by all the bullets ever fired on American soil. S'pose, now, that limb you was choppin' had be'n cut deeper than what you thought it was, or s'pose it was holler, or rotten on the under side, so the ax would of went through it like a piece of cheese. With yer leg where it was at, it would have sunk into it to the bone. They's two things you got to remember when you're swingin' an ax. The first is where's yer legs at? An' the second is what's behind you an' over yer head? Many a man's be'n hurt by havin' his ax ketch over a limb or a piece of bresh when he makes his swing—"

"Wasting time, Neely—wasting time!" Both men turned to meet the doleful face of Elija Blodgett which regarded them from the depths of his fur collar. "I can't afford to pay foreman's wages for the personal instruction of every green hand that comes into the woods. Men learn faster by experience, Neely. And they have reason to remember what they learn."

The pale blue, watery eyes were not upon the face of the men, but upon the tree.

"This here's the tractor man, Mr. Blodgett," explained the boss. "The tractor ain't here yet, an' I put him to swamp-

in'. I didn't want him to git laid up, 'cause there ain't no one else on the job that could handle the damn thing—"

"No profanity, Neely! I do not tolerate it in my camps. Remember the Lord's injunction to let your conversation be yea, yea, and nay, nay."

"Jest a manner of speakin', Mr. Blodgett. No harm meant. But, as I was goin' on to say, when this here yea, yea, nay, nay machine gits here, we got to have a man with two legs in under him to run it."

"The tractor is being unloaded and set up at Thunder Head to-day. I see you have the camp completed and a few ties out. Well and good as far as you have gone. But I wish you had more ties. I brought in the surveyors to extend the railroad from Number Seven to this camp, which will be known as Number Eight. There is another crew at Thunder Head unloading the horses and supplies for Number Nine—"

"Number Nine!" exclaimed Neely, in surprise. "You goin' to run two camps?"

"Yes. Number Nine will be located on the northwest forty, and I want you to put a crew to work at once building a log road to connect that camp with this. The road will serve also as a supply road—"

"Ain't you goin' to run the railroad on up to this here new camp?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Blodgett, impatiently. "The tractor will haul Number Nine's logs to the railhead which will be here."

"How about it when the snow gits four foot deep on the level?" asked the boss. "What's this here d—double yea an' nay tractor going to do then?"

"I am assured that with the aid of a snow plow the tractor will keep its own road open. The distance will be only about three miles."

"An' I've got to run both camps? Kind of a walkin' boss outfit?"

"No. I have employed a foreman for Number Nine. The man is Samuel King—"

"Sam King! Hell's bells—er church bells, I should say, I s'pose. Sam King was foreman for Peters & Halverson, an' it was him worked out the scheme where Peters & Halverson stoled old Jack McClung's timber, an' ruint him."

"There, that will do, Neely!" The voice of Blodgett was icy. "What you say is mere hearsay, and should not be repeated. Peters and Halverson are doubtless very honorable men. The grand jury ignored this matter you speak of when it was brought before it—"

"Yes, because they was greased!" exploded Neely. "It ain't no hearsay, Mr. Blodgett, that old Jack McClung is broke—an' him as square a man as ever lived—an' the money that his logs fetched is in Peters & Halverson's pockets!"

"Tut, tut, Neely," said Blodgett sternly, "I did not come here to discuss business ethics with you. You are to concern yourself merely with getting out the logs. I want every foot of timber on this tract at the mills by spring."

"I figgered it would take two years."

"And so it would with only one camp. That is the reason I am putting in another. The price of lumber has begun to rise. The war in Europe which started in July has created a demand for American lumber. War is deplorable—and unchristian, it seems to us in our limited understanding of the works of the Lord."

The eyes rolled sanctimoniously upward. "My heart bleeds for the poor fellows whose lives are being snuffed out by the hundreds, by the thousands even, if reports are to be believed. But it is the Lord's will."

The glitter of greed was in the eyes that returned to rest on the log on the ground and the ring of greed was in the voice. "But lumber prices are soaring. The trade is stimulated to astounding activity, and if the United States should be drawn into the conflict, as some people are predicting, lumber will go to unheard of figures!"

"An' if we do git in," cried Neely, "you kin hunt up some one else to run yer camp, 'cause believe me, if them da—them yea-yea, nay-nay, yah-yah Dutchmens think they can lick the old U. S., they got me to lick along with the rest!"

"Him an' I, both!" cried Leonard.

"There, there," conciliated Blodgett. "Doubtless there will be no need for us to

interfere. At least there is no tendency as yet on the part of the Administration to become embroiled in any way. But, we're wasting time, and time is precious. Get a crew onto the new log road until King's men get here, and you, tractor man, are to return with me to Thunder Head and run the tractor out."

Days of herculean activity followed the visit of Elija Blodgett to Number Eight camp. Neely's crew was doubled. Sam King took over the building of the log road, and Neely's men were divided between the grading of the railroad and the getting out of ties.

With the arrival of the tractor, Shirly Leonard assumed a definite place in the moil of the camp's activities. Prior to Blodgett's visit he had been simply " the greener," a raw hand, ignorant of the things those about him had known from babyhood; doing slowly and badly work that others did swiftly and well; fair game for the facetious, and a fair butt for many a rude prank and jest—pranks and jests that were without the sting of malice, however, for his unfailing good natured acceptance of the order of things early won the respect of the camp.

" Go to it," he would grin, when the roars of laughter had subsided that greeted his return from some preposterous errand. " Have your fun while you can. I won't always be a greener."

For his attitude of good natured acceptance of his lot, big Tim Neely was largely responsible. When the camp was but two days old, Leonard had hurried up to the boss who was directing the placing of a load of lumber for the bunkhouse, with the request that a dozen cross-hauls be sent at once to Jake Loomis on the log road.

The big boss smiled. " They've started in on you, have they? Well, let 'em have their fun. They went through it theirselves, an' so did I. A cross-haul, son, is a road that runs back into the timber for team-loadin' the logs onto the skidways or cars. You'll git sent on a lot of fool trips like this before you learn.

" But don't git mad. It's their way of jokin'. You'll be sent from one to the other to borrow left handed wedges, an' cant-hook keys, an' knothole covers, an' safety bits fer axes, an' the Lord knows what not. They'll generally be a bunch of 'em together when you come back an' they'll give you the laugh. Let 'em go. Laugh along with 'em, an' it won't be long before they'll git tired of it. Remember, whatever you do, don't git mad. You'll learn."

Leonard laughed. " Say, boss, when you come to think of it, who's the joke on, anyhow?"

" Why, I guess the joke's on you, but—"

" Not in a hundred years it ain't. It's on the man that's payin' me my wages. It's his time I'm wastin', not mine. The way I figure it, a little runnin' around on another man's time is a cheap price to pay for an eggication."

" Guess that's right," grinned the boss. " Better never tell that to old 'Lij' Blodgett, though. 'Cause he don't think no more of a dollar than what I do of my right hand."

So Leonard had returned to Jake Loomis, who with a half dozen swampers was at work at the head of the log road, and joined heartily in the laugh that was not wholly on himself when he reported that the cook didn't have the cross-hauls out of the oven yet. Many such errands he ran in the days that followed, and more than once, to the huge delight of the onlookers, he was able to turn the laugh upon his would-be tormentor.

In the evenings beside the roaring stove he would sit and listen by the hour while men talked. Stories of drives, of adventure, and misadventure, in the woods and upon the rivers, were told with simple directness, interrupted and embellished by oaths of approval at the recounting of some mighty feat of strength, or of skill, or of endurance that had become a northland epic. Stories these men had heard a hundred times were new and wonderful to Leonard, and the words of the tellers of tales sank deep within him, so that his heart thrilled at the deeds of the supermen of timber land. But not all the tales were of deeds heroic. Accounts of brutish debauches were told shamelessly even boastingly by men who had taken part in them.

Old Mort Mooney would hold forth for

an hour at a time concerning the doings of mighty Paul Bunion, the mythical logger. Stories, these, half humorous, half serious, wholly preposterous, half believed by the lumberjacks, half scoffed at, but eagerly listened to in the camps from Maine to California until the deeds of Paul Bunion and Little Babe, his ox that was four ax handles wide between the eyes, of the Tie Cuttin' Finn, and the Big Swede, have assumed the dignity of a folklore.

And as he listened, Leonard found himself comparing—rather contrasting—these men with the men who had been his associates in Union Market precinct—the men of the underworld. For many nights he pondered, and then gave it up.

" It's like a big river—life is," he decided one day as he stood beside the Wild Goose and watched its waters go tumbling down through the gorge. " Up here it runs smooth an' quiet for long stretches, an' then again it jumps into roarin' white water an' boilin' eddies. There's dangers all right, the rapids an' the eddies, but a man can see 'em, an' he can take 'em, or let 'em alone. But back there—it slips along slick an' oily an' innocent lookin' on top, but below it's black—undertows an' cross currents. A man never knows where he's at, or who's his friends.

" Not one square guy from de cops up —an' the molls is worse than the men. Not one of 'em ever had his mitts on an honest dollar—an' I was as bad as the rest—huntin' easy money, an' didn't care how I got it. Believe me, easy money ain't the kind that sticks to a guy. Take Mr. Regan—he's got more jack than any of them crooks, an' he ain't huntin' no easy money. He works for his—works harder than any man on the job. An' he's square. I didn't know there was any one would go out of his way to pay a guy more'n he knowed he had comin'. Kind of watchin' a man like him a guy damn soon learns it pays to work, an' it pays to be on the level, too."

Leonard's ride to Thunder Head with Blodgett in the rear seat of the garage man's wheezing, stuttering flivver served to vastly increase his respect for men like young Tom Regan and Tim Neely.

His familiarity with the mechanism of trucks simplified the garage man's task of explaining the manipulation of the tractor, so that the following morning Leonard pulled out of Thunder Head at the rear of the procession of teams that carried the men and supplies for Number Nine camp.

With the arrival of the tractor at Number Eight the foolish pranks at Leonard's expense ceased. Even Rene Brebout, the big Frenchman, who had been the most persistent of the jokers, accorded him a certain respect. For here was a man who could do a thing that no other, not even the boss, could do. The men voiced open approval at the ease and skill with which this greener handled the machine that could do the work of many teams. " Paul Bunion, she haf' to git de bigger ox dan Leetle Babe for beat de dam' trac'!" exclaimed Brebout, as it trundled off four big loads of ties.

The three mile log road to Number Nine was finished, and the railroad completed to Number Eight's banking ground before snow flew.

These were slack days for Leonard, whose work would come with the snow when his tractor should haul the wide bunked sleds loaded high with their pyramids of logs from Number Nine to the loading ground at the railhead. Under the boss's tutelage he learned to scale logs, and from the skidders learned many a trick of chain and travois, and the use of the big wheels. He found unfailing fascination in watching the mighty pines crash to earth as the sawyers " laid 'em down " with the precision of long practice. At Neely's suggestion he hunted, and many a meal of fresh venison was due to his persistence in stalking deer. And it was upon one of these hunting excursions that, having wandered farther from camp than usual, he met Mary MacAlister—met her while the memory of the perfidy of Lotta Rivoli still rankled.

CHAPTER XIV.

MARY MACALISTER.

PICKING his way across the river on a windfall, Leonard threaded a tamarack swamp and came out on the other side onto a strip of plowed land. It was a nar-

row strip, possibly two rods wide, that followed the contour of the swamp in either direction as far as he could see. His attention centered, however, not on the cleared strip, but beyond, where a veritable thicket of young pine banked fresh and green against the background of larger trunks.

Crossing the cleared strip, he pushed his way into the thicket of young stuff that fringed the edge of the forest. His search for deer was forgotten as he walked slowly among the big trees that towered above him, their high flung branches spreading an even shade over the whole forest floor. Stumps, here and there, showed where timber had been removed, old stumps, and stumps from which the tree had been cut at a comparatively recent date. The trees had all been cut close to the ground, leaving a low clean stump, and no waste timber.

Leonard's eyes swept the forest. Nowhere was visible any broken or twisted or crippled young stuff nor any dead or leaning trees. If young trees had been crippled by the fall of a big one they had been removed, leaving the ground clear for the young stuff yet to come. Every tree in sight, young or old, was a good tree. He seated himself on a stump and mentally compared this clean floored forest tract with the Blodgett cuttings, where a mass of tangled slash and twisted and maimed young stuff marked the wake of the sawyers.

A blur of motion caught his eye, and he reached swiftly for the rifle that lay against the stump at his side. But as his hand touched the gun, his muscles relaxed. The moving thing was a person walking slowly through the forest, subjecting the trees to close scrutiny. Pausing before a huge pine, the person submitted the trunk to minute examination, and retreating to about the distance from the base at which the top would come to earth, half circled the tree, apparently studying the ground. Then, walking deliberately to the trunk, proceeded to notch it. Leonard could see the white wood show as the ax bit in and the chips flew.

"Good hand with an ax for a light built man," he muttered as, picking up his rifle, he started leisurely toward the chopper. "Knows his business, too," he added, as he noted that the notch was so placed as to throw the tree clear of a group of young pines.

He paused a few feet distant, a dry twig snapping loudly beneath his feet, just as the last chip flew from the notch. Instantly the chopper whirled to face him. Leonard's jaw dropped, and seconds passed as he stared in open mouthed astonishment. He was looking straight into the eyes of a girl! For one swift instant his glance swept from the dark violet eyes that regarded him in surprise as evident as his own, to the checked shirt, the gray woolen trousers with their legs thrust into high laced boots, and the soft felt hat. Then his gaze centered once more upon the eyes of violet.

"Who are you?" she asked. "And what are you doing here in the timber?"

Leonard noted that there was neither friendliness nor hostility in the tone.

He answered: "I was huntin'. I come through the swamp from the river."

"We don't like to have people hunt here. But we've never posted the timber."

"I didn't shoot none of yer deers," he answered, rather sullenly. "I didn't see none to shoot. I ain't be'n huntin' any for the last hour. I be'n lookin' over the timber."

"Looking over the timber!" cried the girl. "What do you mean? Who sent you here? The timber is not for sale."

Leonard's forehead puckered into a frown. "How do you git that way, kid?" he said contemptuously. "What you tryin' to hand me? If you was tryin' to sell this timber fer a song, I couldn't do nothin' but croak. Do I look like a guy that could buy timber?" He paused and, drawing a long face, rolled his eyes upward. "I ain't got no fur coat to look out over the collar of, an' I don't believe in smashin' down little trees takin' out big ones, an' I ain't playin' the Lord fer a side-kick."

"Blodgett!" cried the girl, breaking into a peal of laughter. Leonard noted that laugh. It was deep, full-throated, genuine.

"Yup," he answered. "He might want to buy it, not me."

"He *does* want want to buy it. But we —we'll never sell to him."

"If it was mine," grinned Leonard, "an' old Blodgett wanted it, I'd be damn glad the big end of it was stuck in the ground. This timber wouldn't look like it does now after he'd put a crew into it. At that, though, I guess he's got the jack."

The girl regarded him with a puzzled smile. "I don't know what you mean. You ask me what I am trying to hand you, and I was not tryin' to hand you anything. And you ask how I get this way, and talk about a 'guy,' and 'side-kick,' and 'jack.' You talk funny. I don't understand."

"What do you mean—funny?" asked Leonard in surprise. "Where was you raised? I'm talkin' straight American. Funny—you'd ought to hear some of them guys over to camp spiel it off—Frenchy Brebout, an' Torger Bjorson, an' Micky O'Toole, an' Sandy McTabb. When they all git to goin' at wunst it sounds like hell broke loose fer recess."

"What camp is that?" laughed the girl.

"Old Blodgett's Number Eight."

"You work for Blodgett!" exclaimed the girl. "And you do not like him?"

Leonard saw that the smile had left her lips, and she was looking straight into his eyes as though to fathom his innermost thought."

"Yup. Tractor man. Waitin' fer the snow so I can begin haulin' the logs down from Number Nine."

"But you do not like him?" she persisted.

"He'd make a swell con man."

The girl shook her head in resignation. "It's no use," she answered, with a shrug. "Half the time I do not know what you are talking about."

Leonard laughed—a frank, boyish laugh that was in every way understandable and good to hear. "Say, kid, we don't make each other at all, but some time we will. The only molls I ever knew was gold diggers, right. They was go-gitters, all dolled up, an' playing both ends from the middle. They was shifters, an' dips, an' bag openers, an' stone gitters, an' all of 'em was snow birds an' hop heads, and rum hounds. They was out fer the jack, an' believe me, they got it. An' if they ever wore men's clothes it was 'cause they was hidin' out from the bulls. But, you, kid—you're different. You wouldn't double cross a guy, would you?"

The girl laughed. "I don't understand a thing you've been talking about," she answered. "But, tell me, you have not been long in the woods?"

"No, not long. Up to the time we started buildin' Number Eight I hadn't never seen no timber in my life."

"Never saw any timber!" cried the girl. "Where in the world did you come from?"

For just an instant Leonard hesitated. "Gypville," he answered solemnly.

"Gypville? I never even heard of it. And, there is no timber? Not even scrub?"

"Nope, not even scrub. Just folks."

"And, you've lived there all your life?"

"Well, not yet. The part of it I've lived is best fergot. The only part that counts is the part I ain't lived yet."

The girl smiled. "And you like it here? You are going to stay in the timber?"

"I'll tell the world I'm goin' to stay! That is," he added, "as long as there's any timber to stay in."

"That's just it," said the girl, her face becoming suddenly grave. "Logging like Blodgett, and all the rest of them log, it won't be long before all the timber will be gone. It's a wicked shame! That's what it is! Why, do you know that it takes God from fifty to two hundred years to make a pine tree?"

"An' it takes Blodgett from five to ten minutes to cut it down," interrupted Leonard. "All a guy's got to do is to count the trees an' set down fer a few minutes with a pencil an' paper an' figger how long it will take Blodgett to catch up with God. An', believe me, if I was God, when he did catch up, I'd haul off an' knock him fer a goal."

"Oh, don't!" cried the girl, crossing herself rapidly. "You mustn't talk that way. It's irreverent, and very wicked."

"Now look here, kid. I didn't mean no harm. My old lady's a good Catholic—figgered on makin' a priest out of me—but I liked truck drivin' better. Got off fer a while on the wrong road—a road that didn't lead nowhere—but I'm back on the main

drag again, an' hittin' on all four. I used to have to go to Sunday school when I was a kid, an' if God's as smart as the priest claimed He is, He knows I'm fer Him good an' strong in this here timber business. It don't stand to reason if it's took Him all them years to build up the big sticks, He wants any long-nosed, preacher-fakin' son-of-a-gun like Blodgett cuttin' it all down an' smashin' an' bustin' up what he can't use. Does it, now?"

"No—but I don't quite understand. You are working for Blodgett—helping to do the very thing you say you hate. That is not consistent."

"Whatever that is—maybe not. But, I make you, all right. It's like this. What you might say—an accident throw'd me into the woods. I didn't know nothin' about timber, an' don't yet—but I'm learnin' every day, an' I'm goin' to keep on learnin' till I know all any one knows about it. It might sound kind of funny—kind of foolish, maybe, fer a guy that never seen timber, but the first minute I set foot in the woods I felt to home. An' every minute since then I've felt more to home. I know, now, I'll never go out of the woods. I've be'n doin' a lot of thinkin' an' I figger that the only way I can stay in the woods is to hang onto my job, an' learn all I can about loggin' the way they do it. But all the while I'm goin' to keep figgerin' how the timber could be got out without skinnin' the country right down to the sand. Of course, it's got to be took out at a profit. But Big Tim Neely says it can, an' I believe it can."

"Of course it can!" cried the girl. "Look here! Look all around you. We're taking it out at a profit."

"Who's we?" asked Leonard.

"My father and I. He took up this land years and years ago—before I was born. He thinks of timber, and he speaks of timber as a crop to be harvested year by year, when it is ripe. For years men have laughed at him and called him crazy. 'Crazy old Paddy MacAlister,' they call him. But, it's beginning to pay, and pay well. It has been long work, and hard work. No one will ever know just how hard, but my father. But he knew he was right, and he stuck to it, and he has lived to see it pay."

"You say it's only just beginnin' to pay? An' how long did you say he's be'n at it?" asked Leonard, a note of disappointment in his voice. "I'm afraid there ain't no loggin' outfit that would wait that long fer their profits."

"Oh, but they wouldn't have to!" exclaimed the girl. "Dad wouldn't have had to wait either, if he had had any capital to start with. But he didn't—not one cent. He's had to do everything himself, with what help my mother could give him. Then I got big enough to help, and with three of us it has gone better.

"I've only been here part of the time, though. For twelve years, until this year, I have been away at school for eight months of the year. But now I am through, and this year we are going to hire a man to help with the sawing. In all these years, except for the drive, dad has not paid out one cent for wages. He didn't have it to pay. It has been a hard, hard grind for him, but he stuck to it. He has proved that he was right," she paused and her eyes swept with pride the surrounding forest area, with its low, neat stumps, its absence of slash, its plowed fire lines, and its stalwart young stuff.

Leonard nodded his understanding. "It was that I was lookin' at when I seen you comin' along," he said. "I'd be'n settin' on a stump takin' it all in fer a long while. It's what could be done in every camp, if you could only make 'em believe it."

"They never will believe it. A few of them have been over here to see for themselves. They all admit it is a fine piece of timber, but they all say the same thing. 'It may work out all right on a small piece, but you couldn't work a big tract that way.' They believe it, too. But we know better, dad and I. We know that it could be worked on a big tract better, even, than a small one."

"How much land you got here?" asked Leonard.

"Three hundred and twenty acres that we've worked. A few years ago dad bought the quarter section that lies west of us, but we haven't done anything with that yet."

"Gee!" exclaimed Leonard suddenly. "It's beginnin' to git dark, an' I'm a long

ways from camp! I got to be goin'. You see, I ain't hep to this here woods stuff yet so's I could find my way back in the dark. If I was through that swamp an' acrost the river I could make it all right."

The girl laughed. "I don't know just where this new camp of Blodgett's is," she said, "but you won't have to go out the way you came in. We have a road to the river and a foot bridge just above the ford. I'll show you the way, and from there it can't be over four or five miles to any part of the Blodgett tract."

At the foot bridge Leonard halted and looked straight into the violet eyes.

"Say, kid," he said abruptly, "I can come back sometimes, can't I? I guess there'll be times when I'll be caught up with the haulin'. The way I figger it, I can learn all about the wrong way to handle timber where I'm at, but I got to learn the right way, too. An' there ain't nowheres else I can learn it."

The girl hesitated, and Leonard persisted: "You might's well say 'yes,'" he smiled, "'cause I'm comin'. An' next time I'll be able to find my way home in the dark."

The red lips parted in an answering smile.

"I was thinking of dad," she answered. "I don't know what he'll say. You see, he don't like Blodgett. And now that Blodgett is logging off this tract, he'll be looking around for more timber. Dad has refused several offers from him, and he's afraid Blodgett will try to get the timber—some other way. He don't trust him."

"Him an' I both!" agreed Leonard. "Believe me, if I was settin' in a game with that guy four kings would look about as good to me on his deal as catchin' a black trey to a heart flush. Him an' Parson Reddick would make a swell team. Parson, his graft is to rig up like a preacher with a long black coat an' a dinky little black necktie, an' pull a long face. He works the hotels up around Greeley Square, an' grabs off the suckers that thinks that 'cause he packs a Bible around in under his arm he's simple hearted an' honest. It's a good graft. He turns up a lot of them suckers.

"But, take it from me, kid, when the piousness sticks out on a man so it's the first thing you notice about him—look out! It ain't there fer nothin'. It's property."

"It's so funny," laughed the girl. "I don't understand half the words you use, and yet I know what you mean. But, it really will be dark before you get to the camp if you don't hurry. Good-by."

"Good-by; see you later," Leonard called, and disappeared in the forest on the opposite side of the river.

For some time the girl stood staring into the darkening forest. Then she turned and made her way to the cabin that was her home.

"Who's Paddy MacAlister?" asked Leonard of big Tim Neely as he and the boss sat that evening in the little office that had been added as a lean-to against the end of the bunk house.

"Paddy MacAlister?" Neely removed the pipe from between his lips and spat into the sawdust filled box beside the stove. "Well, Paddy's a kind of an odd fish that settled down over on Wild Goose when I was a kid. Some says he's kind of touched in the head, an' some says he's jest nat'chly too lazy to farm. I don't know nothin' about him—ain't seen him fer years."

"Ever be'n in his timber?"

"No. Heard he had a patch of it that he was sort of nursin' along. That's why folks claim he's crazy."

"I wisht I was crazy—like him," Leonard grinned.

The big boss eyed him questioningly. "What you drivin' at? What do you know about old Paddy MacAlister an' his timber?"

"I don't know nothin' about Paddy. But I was through part of his timber to-day."

"Well?" Neely returned the pipe to his mouth and puffed it into full glow.

"Well, you'd ought to see it. That's all. Been loggin' a little better'n a livin' offen it for somewheres around twenty-five years, an' you can't see where he's took the stuff off except fer the stumps. He's got fire lines plowed up around it, an' the young stuff stands thicker'n the scrub does on the cut-over. An' there ain't no slash left on the ground, neither. Them woods is so clean fire couldn't run through 'em. Maybe he's crazy, but if he is, so are you. 'Cause

he's got just the kind of a piece of timber you was tryin' to tell me about."

"An' it lays clost to here?" asked Neely, blowing smoke ceilingward.

"Just acrost the river west of here."

For some moments the boss smoked in silence. Then, slowly, he nodded his head. "It would be that, an' nothin' else," he said, more to himself than to the other.

"What would be what?" asked Leonard.

Instead of answering Neely countered with a question: "You an' old 'Lij' must of got pretty well acquainted drivin' back to Thunder Head together. What do you think of him?"

Leonard winked deliberately. "If I seen him comin', an' I had a roll on me, I'd keep one hand on the roll, an' two eyes on his mitts as long as he stayed in reach."

Neely grinned. "Maybe he's all right, though. I've heard how he's the main squeeze in one of them big churches down to St. Paul."

"Sure he would be. That's part of his game. Believe me, boss, if he's square, so's the devil! Them there church folks is either an easy bunch of suckers to be took in by a guy like him, or else, the chances is, he's come acrost with the jack, an' they don't want to know nothin' about him."

"Guess we ain't so far apart about old 'Lij'. Which bein' the case, what you told me about old Paddy MacAlister's timber kind of gives me the answer to a p'int I be'n studyin' about sence a while back."

"What's that?"

"Why, maybe it's the reason fer 'Lij' hirin' Sam King for to run No. 9. 'Lij' ain't no fool. He knows as well as I do jest what kind of a damn skunk Sam is. Long's I kin remember Sam's be'n doin' the dirty work fer the big lumbermen. Whenever they was a dam to be blow'd up, or a piece of timber to be fired or stole, Sam was the man they counted on to do the job. An' it's said that they's be'n a time er two when he didn't stop short of murder, neither. 'Course they ain't never proved nothin' on him. The men that hires him 'tends to that."

"What would be his game?" asked Leonard eagerly.

Neely shook his head. "Search me. But I got an idee that if we keep our eyes on Sam King, it won't be no hell of a while till we find out which way the wind blows."

Leonard stood up suddenly, facing the boss. "Say, Neely, if Blodgett tries to gyp old Paddy MacAllister out of his timber, an' things breaks so we could butt in an' gum his game, where'd you stand?"

Neely regarded the speaker curiously. "Well, I ain't never helped any one steal another man's timber yet," he answered.

"That ain't what I said. What I mean is, would you go out of yer way, even if you know'd it would cost you you're job, to help turn Blodgett up? To save MacAlister's timber?"

Neely nodded. "Guess you could count me in," he said with a grin. "But what in hell are you so interested in old Paddy's timber fer? You be'n talkin' to him?"

"No, I ain't. It's the timber—mostly. It would be a damn shame to let a man like Blodgett turn loose a crew in that stuff. If you'd saw it you'd know what I mean."

"But how'd you know how long he'd be'n workin' it? An' about it's payin' out better'n a livin', an' all that?"

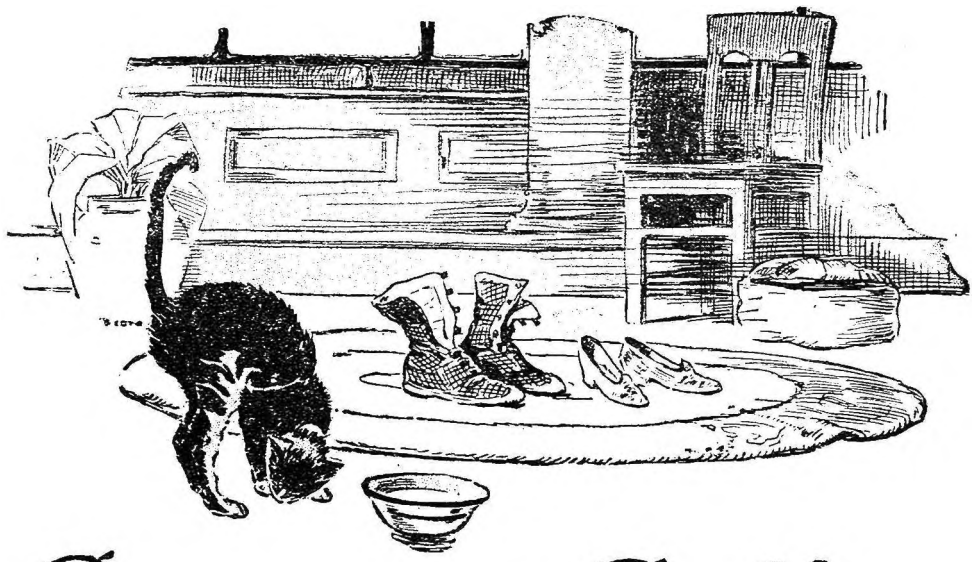
"His girl told me," answered Leonard, "an' say, bo, she's some queen! I never seen no moll like her before. Prettiest thing I ever seen. An' smart—knows all about timber, an' the way to handle it without rippin' hell out of the woods. Dresses jest like a man, an', believe me, she swings a mean ax! Watched her notch a tree to miss some young stuff. I ain't see nothin' on this job that would touch it fer good clean notchin'."

Neely laughed. "So, that's the way the land lays, is it? Well, good luck to you, lad."

"You talk like a fool. A moll gypped me wunst—gypped me right, too. Fer as that goes, I'm off 'em fer life—but jest the same, they ain't no one goin' to gyp her old man out of his timber if I can help it—not an' her with eyes like that, there ain't."

And without waiting for a reply, Leonard left the office, and made his way to the bunk house.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Romance and Rubbers

By BEATRICE ASHTON VANDEGRIFT

SUSAN JANE was beginning to be very much afraid that in marrying Chris Armstrong she had lost Romance. Now, this isn't at all novel, you know. Lots of folks have been married and thereby lost Romance, but the queer thing about this particular case was that the Chris Armstrongs were barely twenty-one apiece, that the young husband adored his pretty little wife and she him, and that they had been married only four months.

What was the trouble, then?

If you want to know the truth, it was because Susan Jane had been spoiled—completely spoiled—by Ted Smith during the roseate, head-in-the-clouds days of their engagement, before the quarrel which had ended in Mr. Smith's packing himself off to oblivion and Susan Jane seeking heaven in the arms of good old Chris Armstrong, her chum and classmate in public school days and her friend in woe.

She fled to him in a tempest of tears—having neither mother nor father to go to—declaring that "all men are alike," and before the day was over, found herself before a kind faced old man, Chris's hand in hers, and saying she "would." Chris had wired his college that he wouldn't be back to finish his last year—and here they were, in a stuffy little apartment on Amsterdam Avenue, trying to get along on the twenty-eight terribly ridiculous dollars Chris's hard hearted boss handed out to him each week.

Not that Susan Jane minded. In fact, she might have considered it "great fun" and "awfully romantic" to starve on twenty-eight dollars, but *not* on Amsterdam Avenue or with Chris Armstrong!

As she put the kettle on to boil, mechanically wondering if two people could manage on a dinner of three soggy potatoes and a slab of cold roast beef, she began to dream a bit—feeling very much of a mean little traitor to Chris—but to dream, nevertheless.

How wonderful were those sixty days when she and Ted Smith had spent their

evenings roaming hand in hand about New York—finding sermons in the subway, parables in the parks and romance in everything. For Ted Smith was also a poet, by expression if not profession. The thirty-two years of his life had been colorful. He'd been everything from an editor to a bartender and so was fully prepared to give an accurate and realistic description of the lights and shadows of life. He had his own ideas about it, too. The soul was the "effervescence of matter," so he said; life one long comic strip and death "after the ball is over." Only he put it in much more beautiful language than that and little Sue hung, wide-eyed, upon his words and found love very sweet indeed.

He would hold her hand by the hour, as they sat on the green turfed river bank, sometimes kissing each small, pink finger one by one, then pressing her palm against his cheek. "Girl of the Goldstone Eyes" he called her, and "My Little Shirred Egg" because her hair was such a fluffy mass of yellow. "Even though we'll be married," he would say, "we'll keep Romance alive. In fact, we'll be nothing more or less than married sweethearts. You will be my Lady Fair and I your Handsome Knight." Mr. Smith didn't mind admitting it.

"But have you ever loved anybody but me?" Susan Jane would ask tremulously and he would carefully brush back the long, black hair from his forehead before answering; "I have kissed a thousand girls, my sweet, but you are my one, my only love. You are my sun, my moon, my stars. You are my life, my death—my heaven, my hell!"

And here she was peeling potatoes for kind, good natured old Chris whose conception of Romance was a bear-like hug and a playful tug at her ear. In his most inspired moments he never called her other than "hon" or "dear."

She glanced at the sad faced clock and it told her that it was three minutes past six. And Chris not home! A sudden panic seized her. What if he had fallen off the elevated platform or been in an accident? There had been lots of accidents lately on that miserable old elevated. She could see him—lying stark and terrible, his shock of brown hair dark against his cold, white face, those big shoulders that had so often plowed to victory on his football team, quiet beneath a tangle of horrible wreckage. Oh, Chris! Chris!

The door opened and from the dark hallway emerged the big frame of her husband. She rushed to him frantically and as he lifted her from the floor in his strong arms she showered a rain of happy kisses upon his face. "Chris!" she cried.

"What's the matter, hon?" he asked, rumpling her short, tight curls. "Jelly wouldn't jell?"

"I thought you'd been killed," she laughed. "You're late."

"Three minutes. Supper ready?"

"In half an hour. You sit down and rest."

"Here's a letter for you, dear. Picked it up outside the door."

She turned it curiously in her hand. "From Leila," she remarked. "I haven't heard from her for a long time."

Chris removed himself to the living room-dining room, kicked off his thick boots and settled upon a rather dilapidated sofa to read the evening paper.

"See where Princeton's landed another victory!" he called proudly. "The old team's still in fine shape." His voice was wistful. "Listen, hon, let me come out there and finish up those potatoes for you."

"No, Chris. They're 'most done. You rest." There was a flush on her cheek not born of the gas stove's heat. The letter crackled maliciously as she turned it back to the opening sheet.

"My dearest Sue," it breezed. "Do you remember Ted Smith? Of course you do, as I understand you were engaged to him once upon a time. Well, my dear—we're married. Just got back to New York from Honolulu and it's been wonderful—and still is. That's the marvelous part. We're not going to let Romance die. Ted says we shall be nothing more or less than married sweethearts." Susan Jane's skin pricked with a feeling something akin to anger—or was it jealousy—and hot tears pooled in her eyes. "So Ted is staying down town at his Twelfth Street studio

and I have the darlingest little apartment up here on Park Avenue, only seven rooms. Every morning Ted sends flowers and a perfectly adorable note asking if he may take me to lunch that day, or dinner or the theater. We make a regular engagement of it. And the cute names he calls me! 'Girl of the Goldstone Eyes' and 'Little Shirred Egg.' I call him my Knight. I hear you're married now, too, Sue dear, and to Chris Armstrong. I always knew it would happen, from the time you were kids at school. I congratulate you. Chris is a dear boy, so steady and dependable and just the type for you. Will drop in on you some day soon and gossip a bit. The mostest love—Leila."

Susan Jane was sensible of a curious feeling of resentment—resentment toward her chum for being the recipient of an affection that had at one time seemed peculiarly hers—resentment toward her husband for being incapable of filling the empty spot of Romance in her heart; resentment toward herself for feeling resentful.

She stood in the doorway, silent. Then she broke forth. "I hate Leila!"

Chris looked up, surprised. "You hate Leila!" he repeated. "I thought she was your best friend."

"She is, but I hate her. Chris, you remember my speaking of Ted Smith?"

"I do," he answered, his eyes averted.

"Well, she's married him."

"She has? Then I think she's more to be pitied than hated."

"Chris! How can you be so catty about Ted? Just because I was engaged to him once!"

"I'm not catty, dear. But I have a hunch that Leila and this Mr. Smith—from what you've told me of his character—won't get along."

"Why, Chris! They're ideally happy. Just like sweethearts. He has his studio and she her apartment and they make engagements to lunch with each other and he sends her flowers every morning and—it's so romantic."

"Bosh!" commented Chris.

"I wish we were like that."

"Gosh, honey. That's not being married—really."

"I wish we weren't so—really married."

"What's the matter with you to-night, dear—headache? Lie down comfy on the sofa and I'll serve you dinner in great style, or, if you don't want to eat, I'll make a piping hot cup of coffee. The fellows at college said I was a pretty good hand at it."

"My head doesn't ache," she whispered, her eyes far-gazing, "but my heart does."

"Don't I make you happy, dear?"

There was something so boyish and wistful about him and his nice brown eyes were so hurt that a little pain tugged at her chest. She crossed the room and perched on his knee. For a moment she regarded him gravely, steadily, then with a cry buried her nose in the warm, rough tweed upon his shoulder. They were silent, he stroking the shining, spun gold of her bobbed locks while the potatoes boiled away to a pulp.

The next morning was Sunday, and Susan Jane awoke with dreams of fair ladies and brave knights still wreathing themselves in that busy little brain beneath the tousled thatch. Leila must be waking now, too, with the golden autumn sunlight pouring through the silken curtains of her boudoir. Violet and mauve her room would be, of course, and the sun would mottle the subdued tints with a warm, living glow of color. Sue looked about the drab walls of her own tiny room where the sun had not yet slanted the ten minute ray of light he allotted them during the whole dim day. But for Leila—soon her trim maid would enter, bearing flowers and a love greeting from her knight. So romantic!

Susan Jane reached forth a white arm from the patchwork counterpane and gave her knight a vicious dig between his broad shoulders. A startled but sleepy "umph!" was his greeting. She prodded him again. He stirred and muttered: "Wha's matter?"

"Eight o'clock. Time to get up!"

She suited the action to the word and scampered in her bare fet around to the other side of his bed, the better to rouse him.

"Why, honey!" he exclaimed, now thoroughly awake. "You shouldn't go around without your bathrobe and slippers."

"Don't say 'bathrobe'!" she admonished. "Say 'negligee.'"

"The same thing," he yawned. "Say, where's the paper?" he asked fifteen minutes later as she fried the morning bacon.

"On the sofa."

He carefully extracted the comic sheet and placing it upon the floor between his feet, perused it absorbingly as he laced his shoes.

"Aren't you ever going to get grown-up enough not to read the funny paper before the news?" she asked amusedly.

"Nope. I'm still a kid. You are, too. My kid."

"I'm not a kid!" she indignantly denied. "I'm twenty-one."

"Kid, just the same. Just a little baby, dear, as I always want you to be."

She said nothing.

"Are we going to church?" asked Chris after a pause.

"I suppose so. It's cheaper than the movies."

"Why, hon, I thought you liked church."

"I do, Chris," she said softly. "But I feel so bad and wicked and contrary this morning I don't think I ought to go to such a good, sweet place."

"We'll go just the same, hon."

As they started out Chris advised: "Put on your rubbers, Sue. The streets are pretty wet from the rain last night."

After a hurried search for gloves, clean handkerchiefs and small change they set forth, Susan absorbed in quiet meditation and looking very demure and wifely in her little blue poke with the blue veil to match, her hand resting lightly on the arm of her young husband. But her heart was seething. Chris got on her nerves so!

"Don't catch cold. Lie down and rest. Be careful with the gas stove. Put on your rubbers," was all she ever heard, morning and night. Put on her rubbers! She remembered that wonderful spring day when she and Ted had ferried across the river and hiked along the Palisades in a mist of cool, sweet rain. Rubbers! They had no thought of them. Romance beat high in their hearts and prosaic things were forgotten in the sweetness of the rain.

Rubbers! If any one ever told her to put on rubbers again she would scream.

"Where are your rubbers, dear?" Chris was demanding. "I thought I told you to wear them."

Susan Jane didn't scream. Instead something got very cold within her.

"I don't need them," she returned in a strangely hard voice. They listened for an hour to the sweet notes of the organ and the gentle monotone of the old minister, going home afterward to all appearances as happy as two newlyweds should be. But Susan Jane was quiet with a stern resolve. She would leave Chris.

II.

THE next morning when Chris started to work his wife clung to him almost frantically for a moment, then suddenly stiffened and his good-by fell upon a cold, unyielding cheek.

Susan Jane intended to leave her home that afternoon at four o'clock—long before Chris came back—to seek Romance. Where she could find it, she wasn't sure, but at any rate, it would be a wonderful quest. Romance to her did not this time mean love, personified by a handsome knight such as Ted Smith had been. Oh, no—for Chris was her love and would be, always, though she would never see him again.

No, it was Romance in the abstract that little Susan Jane sought—a life in which she would be free to wander alone through rainstorms without having to put on her rubbers.

So she intended going at four, but it took time to pack, of course, and then she bethought herself to make a pan of the fudge Chris was so fond of as a sort of consolation offering to his bereaved heart. Thus one thing led to another, so that it was almost half past five when she took her shiny suit case in hand—dropping it to run back and once more kiss the pillow where he had rested his curly brown head—and at last set forth.

As she reached the top of the stairs she heard some one coming up. Quickly she reentered the apartment, took off her hat and hid the suit case under the sofa. A light tap sounded at the door and she opened it to find Leila at her threshold—Leila charmingly gowned in gray afternoon frock and carrying a smart little walking stick. They

clung to each other for a moment, murmuring incoherent nothings, then Leila dropped wearily upon the sofa, whose springs snorted viciously at her weight.

"My dear!" she wailed. "I'm miserable!"

"Miserable—with Ted?" repeated Susan Jane incredulously.

"Yes, miserable with Ted. Susan Jane, it's—hell!"

"What is?"

"This idea of being married sweethearts."

"Doesn't Ted send you any more flowers?"

"Every morning. And I go out with him twice a week. But where is he the other five days—and with *whom?* That's what I'd like to know. You know we decided we'd be absolutely free and trust each other—everybody's trying it nowadays—and I do trust him, but all the same I can't help being jealous. Oh, I'm wretched, I tell you—just wretched. And the other night was the last straw. We had gone out to dinner and I ordered shrimps—you remember how I doted on shrimps?—and afterward Ted said he had to go back to the studio. So I went home alone, and in the middle of the night I woke up with the most awful cramps. The shrimps, of course.

"Well, it was agony. I just couldn't move. If I could only have crawled to the bathroom and filled a hot water bottle! But I couldn't stir. And where was my adoring husband—my knight? Away from me when I really needed him. I thought I should die. Don't know yet how I managed to live through the night. The next morning Caprice—my maid—came in with a beautiful bouquet of violets with the soul inspiring inscription upon the card: 'Oh, Lady Fair, arising from thy bed of roses (a bed of roses, huh!) wilt thou think to-day of thy lover knight who awaits the time when he may gaze once again on thy fair face? He salutes thee. He kisses thy hand!' My dear, I just screamed. I shouted at the ridiculousness of it all. I didn't want violets. I wanted a hot water bottle. I didn't want a knight—I wanted a husband. I didn't want Romance—I wanted care and consideration. And so I've left him."

As Susan Jane patted the bowed head of her friend, a delicious, warm feeling of joy crept into her heart. How wonderful it was that she had a Chris who petted and babied her, who came home each evening to her, who worked for her and lived for her and loved her in his comforting, quiet way. Poor Leila! Poor Ted! With their silly little scheme for perpetuating Romance.

Romance! What was Romance compared to the calm, sweet joy of companionship—the love that asked nothing more than to be ever at the side of the loved one—seeking no other happiness than that shared by the loved one. Chris!

Then she remembered, terror in her heart, that she had put a terse little note for him beneath their doorsill so that he might know on his homecoming that she had left him to seek the romance he had been incapable of giving her. She must get it back, quickly, and tear it into a million pieces.

So she left Leila, sobbing dismally on the sofa cushion, to make her way through the dimly lighted hallway to the door. In the darkness she bumped against a tall figure. It was Chris. He must have come in without her hearing him. Did he find the note, she wondered? Had he read it?

His arm half circled her, lightly, without the impulsive hug that was his customary greeting, and they went together in silence to the living room. Leila straightened up as they entered, dabbing apologetically at her eyes.

"Why, hello, Leila!" greeted Chris pleasantly. "Where've you been all this time? Sue tells me you're married."

"Yes," remarked Leila colorlessly, "after a fashion."

"Come on, stay to supper—that is, if it's all right for Sue," he added.

"Thank you, but I mustn't," she choked. "Have to be going right along Good-by, Sue dear. Bye, Chris. Come and see me s-some day." She went out, her handkerchief damp.

Susan Jane trembled with a terrible fear. Suppose that Chris had read the note? Well, it would serve her right—to lose the dear Chris who was so good to her, so kind—the Chris she had loved ever since she was

a little girl but hadn't found it out till now. Oh, dear! He was washing his hands, whistling a bit, but his face was grave. Sue watched him fearfully through the open door of the bathroom.

"Do I need a shave?" he asked, coming out with a towel upon his arm and his clear skin glowing with a soapy shine.

Susan was dumb. Then, "Chris," she blurted out at last, "did you find a—a note under the hall door?"

"Uhuh."

"Did"—her heart was pounding unmercifully—"did you read it?"

"Uhuh."

She was silent. It was all over then.

Chris had finished drying his face and with his wonted neatness put the towel carefully back upon the rail. Then he came to her and lifted her trembling chin so that he could look into her eyes.

"I love you, dear," he said, very slowly and very gently. "And that's all there is to it."

He clasped her close—not a bear hug this time—and their kiss was the longest it had ever been since the day they were married. After a blissful few moments Susan Jane skipped back to the kitchen where a fragrant slice of ham was soon frying merrily.

"Oh, Sue!" called Chris through the open door, settling himself on the sofa to read the evening paper. "Climb into your pretty blue dress after supper. We're going to taxi down Broadway, stop in at one of these 'greatest love stories ever filmed,' and hold hands through the whole blamed show. How's that for Romance? But say, hon it's sort of wet out. Be sure you wear your rubbers."

"I will, Chris. Oh, I will!"

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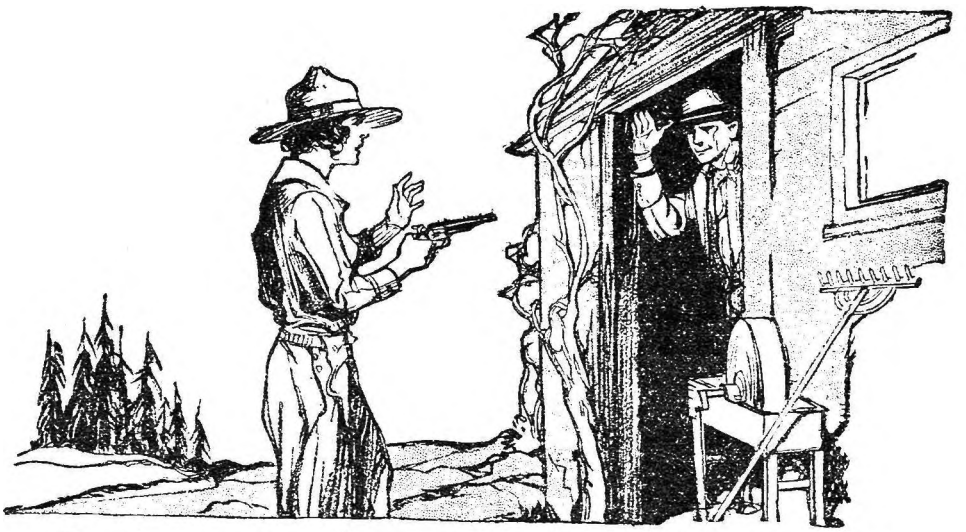
HOME-WAYS

NEVER road I wouldn't follow,
Far beyond the town,
Past the Mill and Deep Pond Hollow,
Fair ways winding down.
I'd have taken byway, highroad,
Glad I'd been to roam,
Only, one way—that was my road—
Always led me home.

Never day I didn't ponder
Where some new way led,
In what land of gorgeous wonder
Night might lay my head.
Often I'd have gone unheeding,
Horse or boat or train,
Only—one small green way's pleading
Led me home again!

No more shall you lure as strangers,
Beckoning Roads that wind;
Though to me you seem but rangers,
Following, I should find
Each is a familiar byway,
Men who go and come
Find it as my own heart's highway
Leading some one home!

Edna Valentine Trapnell.



Dan Barry's Daughter

By MAX BRAND

Author of "The Night Horseman," "Black Jack," "The Seventh Man," etc.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MIGHT OF INNOCENCE.

THEY poured outdoors, the four giants, the bespectacled student, and pudgy Guiness. Beyond the little stream they saw the black stallion: he was neighing to one of his old companions which was staked out in the pasture.

On the back of the Captain was a girl whose wide-brimmed hat was pushed back from a face that made their hearts jump. She waved gaily to them and sang out: "Is Harry Gloster here?"

There was no answer for a moment. In fact, not one of them could speak until Macarthur muttered: "Let me talk to her! This Gloster is worth somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand to the gent that turns him over to the law. And if she's looking for him, you can lay to it that he's looking for her!"

So saying, he stepped out in front of the others and approached her, sweeping off his hat.

"Harry's away just now," he said. "But he'll be back! Climb down and stay a while."

She slipped from the saddle. She appeared younger and more frail than ever, contrasted with the black horse towering above her. He flattened his ears and snorted with anger as Macarthur drew nearer.

"Look out!" he warned Joan. "That big black devil is getting ready to put his teeth in you—"

But at that she laughed, and to the speechless amazement of them all, she turned and, reaching up, took the Captain by the forelock and pulled down his head. And he, like some fierce Samson beguiled by a Delilah, pricked his ears and made his eyes soft with content.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 30.

"You see," she said, advancing toward Macarthur again, "he's really as gentle as a lamb."

Behind her came the Captain and Macarthur hastily gave ground.

"Keep that black demon away from me!" he pleaded. "He nearly took my head off once."

She regarded him with surprise, then stripped the saddle and bridle from him, patted his sleek neck and waved him away to go frolic with the other horses in the pasture. And off he went with mane shaking with his speed and the ground quivering under the impact of his hoofs. He threw three swift circles around the enclosure, to show his happiness in being home again. Then he went about to visit the other horses. Cunning cruel as he might be to the men who strove to ride him, he was perfectly gentle with those of his own herd.

"What did you do to him?" asked Macarthur, still gaping at her.

"I gave him his own way," she said. "That was all there was to it!"

The others had drawn near by this time, and it appeared to Joan that she had never seen or heard of such men except Lee Haines. Haines, who was wise and strong enough to defy Sim Hargess and the whole town and liberate a prisoner from the jail single handed, was dead, but in all of these men saving two she could see qualities just as strong.

There stood four men, shoulder to shoulder, who seemed capable of breaking through a dozen ordinary people. And as for Guiness and Dud Rainey, she changed her mind about their inefficiency as she came nearer and was introduced to them one by one. For Guiness, in spite of his good natured round face, had an eye as straight and cold as the eye of a bird, and about the lips of Dud Rainey there lingered a faint smile which, mild as his features were, gave a hint of quiet, limitless cruelty.

Yes, there was not one of the six who was not strong enough to be worthy of Lee Haines. And perhaps it was their sheer strength which had attracted Harry Gloster to them. They asked her how she had known that Gloster was one of them; if he himself had told her that he would meet her here, but she answered that she had simply deducted his membership in the gang from the fact that Haines had given his life to save him.

It was Fatty Guiness who suggested that she might be hungry. In an instant they were all busy. Some were cutting wood. Some were preparing food. All the old cabin was filled with bustle, half of which was the frantic effort to make the big room seem more presentable when Macarthur should bring the girl there.

In the meantime, fragments of the conversation between the chief and Joan were repeated, and the work of slicing bacon or brewing coffee, or sweeping out with a heavy pine bough, or kicking soiled clothes and tattered garments into an obscure corner, all ceased while the report was listened to which the last man to bring in wood or water had heard as he went past the couple.

"Macarthur is gone," was the first bulletin. "He's sitting there with a fool smile on his face. He looks like a six year old born without no brains. And he can't keep his eyes off'n the girl.

"'How long can you be staying here to wait for Harry?' said Joe. 'Till sometime this afternoon?'

"'Or longer than that,' says she. 'I'm in no hurry. It's so beautiful up here, I could stay a month and be happy.'

"Joe looks as if she'd tapped him between the eyes with a monkey wrench.

"'A month?' he croaks. 'Ain't your folks going to miss you a little bit before that time comes along?'

"'My father and mother are dead,' says she. 'There's only Buck Daniels to miss me. But then, you know, I had to leave him sometime. And why shouldn't it be now?'"

It was Lew Cambridge who repeated this choice bit of talk which he had overheard to and from the pond to carry water, straining, to catch the syllables, ears which had been nicely trained in the greatest of all schools for hearing—burglary! His report was greeted with a murmur of the profoundest interest.

"You heard that, boys?" asked big

Babe Cooney, his warrior face growing pale with emotion. "You heard that talk? She ain't had a mother and father to look after her. She don't know nothing about the dangers of the world. And now, damn my soul if she don't come up here and right in among *us* like a bird flying in out of a storm—but no harm ain't going to come to her! No harm ain't going to come to her!"

He repeated the solemn warning and rolled his terrible eyes around the room from face to face. But he found that all the others were equally busy scowling at one another as if to find some shadow of guilt revealed. All saving Dud Rainey, who was merely blinking behind his glasses, as usual, and rubbing the tips of his fingers carefully over his chin. Four suspicious glances centered sharply upon him. But, with a sigh, he resumed his work of sweeping again, unhurried, dreamy.

It was Sliver Martin who brought the next tidings. He staggered through the door with his face so lenghtened that his cheeks seemed to be flattened together. He let his armful of wood crash upon the floor.

"My God, boys," he groaned, "listen to what I heard! Macarthur was pumpin' her as fast as he could work.

"'You and Gloster been engaged quite a while?' he says.

"'Engaged?' says she. 'Oh, no!'

"'But ain't you come clear up here to see Harry?' says Macarthur.

"'Yes. Why shouldn't I?' says she.

"I tell you, boys, that skunk Gloster has been deceiving her. Besides, what gent with half a heart would keep right on making love to a girl like that when he was outlawed and a price put on his head?"

"A gent that would murder two stiff-armed old sourdoughs would do that same thing," remarked Fatty Guiness. "Why damn a low hound like him! But you heard the chief's plan, and I say it's a mighty good one. We keep the girl here for bait long enough to draw in Gloster. Then tap him on the head unbeknownst to her and go down, one of us that ain't known in the town, and collect the reward. That's good business. The best thing that can happen to that girl is to have Gloster wiped out dry!"

"You think she loves him?" asked the mild voice of Dud Rainey.

"Listen to old four-eyes!" sneered Lew Cambridge, who had a natural antipathy for the quiet voice and the careful diction of the little man. "Look at the old owl that sees everything by night and can't see nothing when the sun is shining on it for him. Why did she come up here if she ain't in love with him? You talk ridiculouser than hell, Dud!"

"You've learned a number of new words, I see," said Dud Rainey, and smiled upon him deliberately, showing every one of his white teeth.

And suddenly Lew Cambridge caught his breath and changed color. It was plainly to be seen that he knew he must resent this affront if he wished to keep his head high in the gang; and yet it was equally plain that he knew he was dealing with dynamite if he crossed the smaller man. But Fatty Guiness averted a crisis by stepping suddenly between the two.

"What d' you-all mean by this fool talk?" he inquired. "Are you going to spoil her party by starting a whole flock of shooting? If you scare her away, you'll have Macarthur himself in here with two guns ready for work."

"I said that anybody could see that she was in love," remarked Lew Cambridge, leaving out his former emphasis.

There was a general murmur of assent, but Rainey answered: "Perhaps she does. I don't know. But for my part, I don't think that she *could* love a man. She has a long-distance look in her eye—"

"What the devil are you driving at now?" asked Babe Cooney.

"Nothing," murmured Dud Rainey, and went on with his work.

Yet he had said enough to make them all watch her like hawks when at length she was called in for her dinner. It was noted that Joe Macarthur did not sit down with her to the table, although as chief of the band he had the right to assume the place of host.

Instead, he wandered out of the house into the open, wearing an expression half strained and half gloomy as if he had been brought in contact with something which

he needed time to think over. But though they saw this to begin with, and they noticed Dud Rainey standing apart and studying the girl's face with his peculiar cold smile, as if he were striving to remember it for a drawing, the four others could see no reason to think Joan other than a very young, very innocent, and strangely charming girl.

She made herself as perfectly at home as if they were all old friends sitting at the table in her own ranch. She chatted away busily, and they watched her slim brown hands and the change and shimmer of light in her hair and the blue of her eyes with a hushed fascination.

She told them how she had won the black stallion, and then how he had brought her through the mountains, picking his own way, while she sat in the saddle and let him go where he would. She told them how he had watched her fish, and how he had stood over her and observed the process of building a fire and cooking with a scrupulous interest as if it were something which he wished to learn for his own sake.

She told all this, moreover, with such enthusiasm, with such graceful and eager little gestures, that they laughed when she laughed and smiled when she smiled. They were so rapt in her words that they quite forgot about serving her and left it to Dud Rainey quietly to refill her tin cup with coffee and place more crisped slices of bacon on her plate.

Certainly there was nothing peculiar about her, except that she was more lovely, more naive than any girl they had ever dreamed of, far less seen. And then, in the very midst of a sentence, she stopped speaking, straightened a little, and stared far off before her. They glanced hastily around at the doorway. But it was empty.

"What is it?" asked Babe Cooney, his rough voice reduced to a whisper.

"Hush! Don't you hear?" she asked them.

They heard it then for the first time, the faint dissonance of wild geese crying out of the heart of the sky. They heard it and looked back to the girl and now they saw the shadow of a smile beginning on her lips but never growing, a smile which was neither sad nor happy.

But suddenly every man looked thoughtfully down, and into their minds rushed the same picture of a wedge of the wild geese streaming north and north to a land of blue lakes and shadowy virgin forests and mountains from whose heads the snow never melted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNEXPECTED MERCY.

PRESIDENT OSCAR FERN of the Wickson Bank was one of those persons who are envied not for their brains, but for their luck. He controlled the banking business of the rich little irrigation district not because men believed in his business intelligence, but because there was a vast confidence in his good luck. If luck served Oscar Fern well, it must necessarily serve his depositors well, also.

When his career was mentioned, it was always recounted how he "just happened" to have bought one of the largest of the old cattle ranches in the valley just before water was brought in. And again, he "just happened" to have good fortune and hang onto his lands after the first water boom had failed and men were selling out right and left because of the terrible pressure of the water taxes.

Oscar did not sell, not because he saw through the present difficulty into a radiant future, but because he had not the energy to split up his big property and get rid of it in small parcels. So he survived the blue days and became wealthy.

When he established his bank there was no competitor. As a matter of fact, people have a greater respect for luck than they have for intelligence. They respected not Oscar himself but the quality which had fallen from heaven upon him.

And as Samuel Carney, the lean and gray headed, terrierlike man who was cashier of the bank, walked down the street this morning, nearly every man who passed him said: "There goes the brains of the Wickson Bank. Fern is a mighty lucky

fellow to get such a man for mere wages! One of these days Carney will be made a partner, and then watch his dust! He's got the genius!"

Such was the atmosphere of adulation through which Samuel Carney walked. It had lightened his step on many a day back and forth from the grind of the work at the bank. But to-day it did not help him. The morning was very hot, although the spring was not yet old and the hour was early; but here was a little foretaste of the blast of the summer sun, and the sidewalk burned Carney's feet through the thin soles of his shoes.

He hurried on to get out of the heat, and yet as he found that he was coming so rapidly to the bank he slowed his pace again. The bank had suddenly become like a plague house to him. In that building he had built his reputation. In that bank he had established himself as a man of spotless integrity, of sound mind, and scrupulously honest business methods.

It had been the great jewel of his life, this repute for honor and honesty. His neighbors had brought to him their little fine points of behavior. He split the straws for them and showed them the right path. He was surrounded, in the eyes of the good people of the town of Wickson, with all the solemn atmosphere of a judge.

This was the thing which had been enshrined in the bank. Now he was to throw the idol away. He was to deceive his very employer, share in the loot that a band of ruffians secured, and afterward he must continue in his place, wear a solemn face about the crime, and in a year or more, perhaps, gravely accept the place of partner in the firm from which he had stolen.

As he thought of all this he grew cold at heart in spite of the heat of the day, and he went on with his fighting jaw thrust out. And, like a cunning man, he began to prove to himself that he had made a bargain worth while, after all, by estimating for the hundredth time the gains as contrasted with the losses. To begin with, there was the vital need which he had had to meet.

There was the musical training for which Clare had eaten out her heart in yearning, and yet in silence, since her childhood. There was the privilege of sending his wife to New York for the best medical treatment which might, even now, save her. Yes, fifteen thousand dollars would easily do all of these things.

The fifteen thousand, being spent away from the home town, would awaken no suspicions. Moreover, who could ever connect him with such a crime? It could not be! His position in the town of Wickson was a brazen tower of strength. No eye would dream of looking toward him. And, therefore, no eye would see him.

He saw, then, as a result of his connivance at the theft, a solid financial gain which would be an inestimable boon to his family and which would in no wise endanger his position. But could the taking of a hundred thousand dollars from the bank be really looked upon as a barren theft? No, he felt that it was not.

In the long course of his connection with the bank he had surely given them a hundredfold more than the salary which had been paid to him. He could point back, during the last three years alone, to definite places where his advice had been sought for and accepted and out of which the bank had actually gained more in solid cash than the hundred thousand of which he now proposed to deprive it.

Fortified with these thoughts, he advanced more easily toward the bank and opened the door, whistling softly, as was his custom, through his teeth. He almost ran into the president himself as he stepped inside, and he gasped with a touch of horror. The swelling form and the rosy, smiling face of Oscar Fern might have been a nightmare. This was a whole hour earlier than the time at which the president generally appeared.

What could have brought him here this day of all days? A fire of shame and terror penetrated to the heart of the cashier.

"What's wrong, Sammy?" asked Fern. "You look like the devil—all shot, for a fact. No sleep?"

"No sleep," muttered Carney, his eyes on the floor. And although he fought to look up he could not.

"This damned touch of hot weather was

what did it," Fern declared; "kind of bothered me myself!"

And he laughed apologetically, as if there was something ridiculous in the thought that anything could really trouble him in his sleep. Carney glanced up, curiously. No, nothing could bother Oscar Fern. No qualms of conscience, at least, would ever stab his brain in the middle of the night and make him stare into the dark with a weakly fluttering heart and a sense of mortal shame and fear.

He tried to rouse his own anger. This man should have doubled his salary three years ago—and should have doubled it again.

"What you need to do is to take a day off," Fern suggested. "Damned if you don't look hard hit!"

"A day off?" said Carney, seizing easily on grounds which would serve as a basis to work himself into an anger. "A day off? Where the devil would things be?"

The president caught his breath, frowned, and then looked somewhat agape over the head of his cashier.

"Doggoned if you ain't right, Sammy," he murmured. "Matter of fact, you never do take a day off, do you?"

"If a vacation came up and stared me in the face," said Carney, "I wouldn't know what to call it."

"That so? I was talking to Green on the phone. He says it's true. The F. L. and M. is going to build a branch line into the valley."

Carney listened with half his mind. It was well enough to turn the subject, but he brooded savagely on his injuries as he went on into his room. They had brought it on themselves, he vowed. And then he flung himself into his work with a savage energy.

But, in spite of himself, he found himself coming to a pause every now and then, his eye possessed with a hazy vision of his wife, Agnes, meeting him at the door some night with a white face and saying: "I know it all! I know it all! Oh, Sammy dear, we won't talk about it. I don't accuse you. I know it was for Clare's sake and mine—but, oh, God, Sammy, we've thrown away our honor and we can never get it back again! We've thrown away our honor and nothing in the world can ever bring it back!"

Always he came out of this dream to hear his assistant murmuring beside him: "I say, Mr. Carney, if you'll excuse me for interrupting you, I want to bring this little matter to your attention and—"

When noon came he did not eat. Instead he took a walk through the fierce sun. He filled his lungs to the bottom with air. Then he came back and went at his work again.

The heavy footfall of the fat president entered the bank an hour and a half later. Oscar Fern kept Paris hours as far as the noonday meal was concerned. And Carney ground his teeth.

"You fat faced fool!" he snarled to himself. "You have the front. But who does the work? Who has the brains? Who's holding you up? I do it! I do it!"

Here there was a murmur from the little muffled bell in his room. It was a summons from the president, and he went in slowly, gathering up on the way two letters about which he must consult Fern. What jokes those consultations were! For five years he had never been crossed.

He found Fern tilted back in his chair with his thumbs hooked into the armholes of his vest, his rubber heels on the top of the desk, and a fat cigar in his mouth. He was frowning at the ceiling and rolling the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, champing at it nervously. He paid no attention to Carney as the latter entered.

"Here's another letter from Dundee about the terms," began Carney.

"Damn Dundee!" said Oscar Fern. "I want to talk to you, Sammy."

"Heard a good yarn?" asked the cashier with a secret contempt.

"How much money have you saved?"

It was a bolt from the blue. Persipration stood out on Carney's upper lip. He wiped it away with the tips of his fingers.

"Why—a few thousand—"

"How's Agnes?" blurted out the president.

It made Carney start, almost rise from his chair.

"She's the same."

"You ought to get her out of town."

Silence.

"Carney, you have to get her out of town. I saw her while I was going home for lunch. She smiled at me from your door. She looked like the very devil, Carney. I—her face has been haunting me!"

"And me!" groaned Carney.

"Ah, lad!" murmured Oscar Fern, and laid his fat hand on the shoulder of his cashier. "And never a word from you about her. That's what's been eating your heart out? But no talk; no complaining!

"Sammy, there's going to be a change—a great big change! In the first place, you get a bonus of five thousand in hard cash payable in ten minutes to yourself. In the second place, you get a raise. You could use another fifteen hundred a year.

"My girl tells me that your Clare has always wanted to go away to study music. I dunno why. Seems to me that she plays real pretty on the piano the way it is. But if she's got her heart set on it—why, she ought to go! And go she shall, Sammy.

"And there's another thing—when I seen you this morning looking so damned thin and black around the eyes, it hurt me, Sammy. My God, am I a slave driver? Are my dollars just drops of blood? No, sir! I'd throw the damned money into the river first! I'd give it back to the place it came from. And one of the places is from you.

"Sammy, you pack up to-night and hop a train to-morrow. You're going to take Agnes to New York. You're going to get her cured and you're going to take in the sights for yourself—"

"Wait—" gasped Carney.

"Well?"

"Oscar—Oscar—"

His face had convulsed. A shuddering weakness entered him. He hid his face with his gnarled fingers and the sobs swelled in him. He fought them back, and they choked him.

"Good God! Good God!" whispered Oscar Fern.

He stole tiptoe to the door. He locked it, and as if this were not security enough, he put his thick shoulders against it, and turning, stared at his cashier, sweating. Was this Bulldog Carney? Was this the man of iron?

He went back and put his arms around the thin, labor-stooped shoulders.

"Sammy!" he whispered. "Don't do it, Sammy! It makes me sick! It makes a fool out of me. Don't do it, Sammy!"

Tears began to roll down his fat, rosy, face.

"I ain't through, old friend," he gasped. "I never thought of it before. I never thought about what *you* might be needing. But just ask me what you want. I don't care what. I'll give it. The whole damn bank ain't worth a thing like this—"

A choked, groaning voice from Samuel Carney answered: "I'm a dog, Oscar. I'm a low hound. I'm worse than that. I'm lower than a snake—"

"You?"

"Listen to me. I got to tell you, Oscar. I'll tell you the truth and then get out!"

And tell the truth he did, haltingly, without excuses, the whole horrible tale of how Macarthur had approached him, of how he had been talked into a plot, of how he had given the combination of the safe, of the fifteen thousand dollars he was to get.

He told it all with his face still in his hands, his head bowed low, and after he had ended, for some time, he heard the thick, hurried panting of Oscar Fern. Then that familiar, fat hand reached his and took the screen away from his face.

"Dear old Sammy!" he heard Oscar say.

He looked up, mortally ashamed of his tears, but he was comforted by the gray face and the trembling lips of Oscar. And there was something so childish in the fat man's staring round eyes of horror and grief, that he almost wanted to laugh.

"Man, man!" gasped Oscar Fern. "I dunno how you could of been tempted like that and not fallen. Thank God, you were strong enough to tell me—out of your own free will—"

"Don't say that!" groaned Carney. "You forced it out of me with that great kind heart of yours, and—"

"Hush up! Shut up, damn it! Why, Sammy, I feel like this here thing had made us brothers. That skunk—that snake Macarthur—we'll be ready when he comes—"

"Not that, Oscar. I'd be a murderer if I let him walk into a trap."

"When was this to happen?"

"To-night."

"Then warn him off. Can you send a messenger?"

"Yes."

"Do that. But just in case the messenger doesn't reach him in time, we'll be ready, Sammy! I'll have guns enough ready to blow them to bits!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WILD HEART.

"AT least this is sure," said Buck Daniels, "she's riding one of the finest hosses that ever stepped and she's riding it like it wild woman!"

They had come to a small stream in the evening of the day. The prints of a pair of real hoofs were deep in the bank beneath them, there was a polished streak on a big rock in the middle of the stream as if a shod hoof had slipped, and on the farther bank they could see where the horse had landed again.

"She jumped her hoss across that!" breathed Harry Gloster.

Then, in silence, they hunted for shallow water, crossed the ford, and returned to the trail.

"And you can't guess where she's bound?" asked Daniels. "No idea at all? I know that she's never been up here before. She's just wandering. And what I'm surest of is that she'll never come back."

"We'll find her, though, and bring her," insisted Gloster. "We'll use force if we have to. But we can't let her—"

"Force?" cried Buck Daniels. "Son, don't you know that she's Dan Barry's daughter?"

"Who was Dan Barry? And what does that mean?"

"I'll tell you about Dan later on. But it means that I'd rather handle a raw lightning flash than try to *make* her do anything."

He let Gloster brood over that until in the twilight, they halted and cooked their meal. They had become good friends in a few hours of trailing this day. As for Gloster, he was as open as noonday. He described frankly all his adventures from the moment he returned from his hunting trip and found his two partners at the mine dead, to the time he heard the girl singing near the schoolhouse and how he had talked to her and tried to find her which was like chasing a shadow.

"But since then," he went on, "I've been through a couple of kinds of hell, yet I've never had the thought of her out of my mind."

"Then," said Buck, "I'll tell you about her father; that'll cure you, son."

There by the fire, as they finished their coffee, he told the story of Dan Barry, how he had come out of the south, drifting north and north, how Joe Cumberland had taken him in and had to keep him by force, of how he grew up to love Kate Cumberland; of how, at last, he married her; of how a girl was born to Kate; of how they lived happily in a cabin among the mountains with Dan tamed at last, so it seemed; of how he had taken up the defense of a fugitive from justice and by that had been led onto a long blood trail and into becoming a leader of outlaws.

"Until at last," said Buck Daniels, "Kate saw that there was a wildness in him which would never go out. She could see that Joan had the same spark in her. She had no fear of animals, just like Dan; and she could do all sorts of queer things with them. Finally she made up her mind that for Joan's sake, she had to leave Dan.

"Dan had taken Joan, that wee mite of a girl, up into the mountains with him to the cave he was living in. Kate trailed her baby there. And she found Joan as wild as a little rabbit. She stole Joan away and brought her down to the ranch.

"I and a couple of other men stayed there with her. We knew that Dan would come for Joan sooner or later, and we knew that we had to try to keep him away, and we knew that we didn't have a ghost of a chance to do it, him being a tiger in a fight.

"So finally one night when we were all sitting around the fire and Joan getting sleepy, she raised up her head with a queer look. Then she got up and went over to the window and pulled the curtain aside and looked out into the black of the night.

It sure was a ghostly thing to see a mite of a kid do.

"And pretty soon we heard that whistle of Dan Barry's coming away off in the night and we knew that Joan had heard it first. It gave me the horrors. Kate sent one look at her baby and knew that it was either Joan or Dan that had to be sacrificed.

"She ran out of the house and met Dan coming down the path. She told him to go back, that she still loved him, but that he would ruin all their lives if he didn't go away. I was looking out watching with a gun in my hand and my hand shaking like a leaf.

"I seen Dan standing in the path with his hat pushed back from his face smiling at her. He started walking toward her. She warned him. He kept on. And then she fired.

"His wolf-dog stood over his body and snarled at us until Dan was dead, and then the dog and the black hoss went tearing off through the night. I picked Dan up in my arms. He'd been a lion of a man when he was alive. But being dead, he wasn't hardly no more'n a boy in his weight.

"But that was the end of Dan Barry, Gloster. And what I've been waiting for all these years has been in fear that the same wildness would come out in Joan. And it came! It started the night she talked to you at the dance.

"And now she's cut loose from me and gone off by herself, she'll never come back and nothing can make her. It's a wild goose chase we're following, Gloster!"

The big man had listened like a child, and now he sighed and looked down to his hands, as though he found a subtle comfort in the contemplation of the strength which was in them.

"I'll find a way," he said at last.

Buck Daniels shook his head.

"Because," said Gloster, "no matter what a man may be, a girl is different. The woman in her makes her different."

They did not speak again, but by mutual consent they packed again, put the saddles once more on the weary horses, and pushed on. So it was that they came, when the last of the sunset light had faded out, to a rough cleft in the face of the mountain which lifted its head a full five hundred feet above them.

It was too dark to follow the trail farther, and Buck Daniels suggested that they camp for the night where they were. Accordingly, there they put down their blankets, and in five minutes Buck Daniels was snoring noisily.

But the thoughts of Harry Gloster gave him no rest. The bright shining of the stars became entangled with the wild tale that Daniels had told him. The full horror of it had only gradually sunk in upon his brain, but now he could not tell which was more blood-curdling—the slaying of Dan Barry by Joan's mother, or those first stirrings of mysterious wild instincts in Joan herself.

He saw, at length, that there was no sleep for him on this night. So he pulled on his boots and stepped away for a walk and a quiet pipe by himself. He turned down the narrow defile. At the place where the rock walls came together, he could find the perfect seclusion which he wanted.

But the rock walls did not join. Instead, the narrow defile twisted to one side and presently he found himself in a large hollow carved mysteriously out of the mountain, a sort of natural fort with solid cliffs for walls. There were trees scattered here and there. He saw horses grazing, and, above all, his eye caught a gleam of light.

It was a startling thing to know that there was a human residence here in the heart of the mountains, but he now made out the big outlines of the house and he approached at once, not boldly, but with a sufficient stealth, for there might be reasons enough why the man who dwelt there chose to live in solitude. There were the horses, too, which must not sight or scent him unless he chose to be betrayed by their neighing.

The door of the house was open. All was silent within, and the smoky lantern, having been turned down low, threw the feeblest of lights. He stole past the door and, glancing within, he made out two or three bunks against the farther wall, with a man in each. He could see enough of the rest of the room to make out that it was

furnished in the most primitive and makeshift fashion.

He had seen enough, moreover, to make him understand that it would be very wise if he did not venture in among these men or wake them with questions. Men did not sleep with rifles leaning beside them if they were of a pacific character.

He retreated a little into the deeper darkness to think over his position. Some of these fellows might well have seen Joan if she had come this way. But it took time before he could make up his mind to risk inquiry.

Then, at a little distance from the larger building he saw a second which was a small shed, and, starting to investigate this also, he found that the door of the shed was likewise open. No sooner had he approached it than he inhaled a fragrance of evergreens.

He leaned in. A bed of evergreens, in fact, had been piled on the floor, and the pine boughs had been leaned against the corners of the little room as if by way of decoration. By the time his eyes were a little more accustomed to the murkiness, he saw that the blankets on the bed were tenantless.

Whoever had been sleeping there had risen and gone out, it appeared. In that case, he was in the most imminent danger of being discovered when the other man returned. And in the case of such a discovery he had no doubt that the challenge he would receive would be an unheralded bullet without a word of warning.

He was wrong. For at the very moment of his withdrawal, before he had time to turn, he heard a voice murmur behind him: "Who's there? Put your hands up and don't turn around! Who's there?"

The words were formidable enough, but it was the voice which had a meaning for Gloster.

"Joan!" he gasped. "Joan!"

He whirled upon her. She slipped away beyond his arms. He blundered a pace after her and then saw that it was useless to pursue a phantom.

"It's Harry Gloster, Joan!" he pleaded. "Don't you understand?"

She was silent, leaning her back against the trunk of a small sapling that deepened the shadow of the night upon her. Yet, Gloster could feel her eyes watching him.

"Joan!" he repeated in a wild alarm, as she neither stirred nor spoke. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

He strode into the shadow of the tree, but her voice stopped him short.

"Don't come closer. Stay there, Harry. I—it chokes me to have you closer!"

And, with a sickening of the heart, he knew that he had lost her indeed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE UNTAMABLE SOUL.

He stepped back out of the deeper dark under the tree as though there had been a poison in its influence, and, when he had waited for her to speak, he said at last: "Will you come out here where I can see you, Joan? The starlight is dim enough, but it may help me to understand what's wrong."

She waited another moment, and then she came slowly toward him. When she paused, he could see her face, half by guess. And yet he could not understand.

"I know," he said at last. "You've finally believed the lies they tell about me. You believe that I killed Nichols and Springer. Is that it, Joan?"

She shook her head.

"It isn't that, Harry."

"Then what have I done?"

"Nothing. You see, all that's wrong is wrong in me."

Her voice was half sad, half wondering. "Don't ask me any more," she added.

"Tell me only why you're here?"

"I came up here hunting for you."

"Joan!"

He would have gone to her, but she stopped him with a small gesture.

"But I know now that I was really hunting for something else. After Lee Haines set you free, every one knew that you belonged to his gang. And I thought that his horse might guide me up to the rendezvous, where I'd find you. He brought me here—"

"Is that the gang of Lee Haines in the big house?"

"Yes."

"God in heaven! You're in their hands?"

"There's no harm in them for me. From Joe Macarthur to—"

"Who?"

"Joe Macarthur."

"He's there?"

"He's the new leader. Don't you know that?"

"I've never been one of them. Did they tell you that I was?"

"Yes."

"It was a trap, Joan. Macarthur hates me. I never followed Haines. I never knew him until the day before he freed me from the jail. But we'll talk of it afterward. Now we must go at once—quickly, Joan, before one of those sleeping tigers in there hears us!"

She shook her head.

"I can't go, Harry."

He said the words over to himself. Then a possible explanation came into his mind.

"You've found a man here that you care for!"

"Not one, but all of them—"

"Are murderers!"

"They're free men," said Joan.

"What lies have they been telling you about themselves?"

"It's in their faces, Harry. It's in nothing they say."

"Joan, some strange idea has come to you. Come away with me. We'll talk of it when you're back in your father's house. And I'll teach you to care for me again. Believe me, Joan, by all that's holy!"

"I care more for you now, Harry, than I ever did."

"Do you mean that?"

"Ah, a thousand times! But don't come near me! Don't come a step nearer!"

"Joan, you drive me mad! Why must I stay away?"

"Because, if you touched me, something would break in me. I'd laugh—I'd cry—I don't know what. But my heart would nearly break, Harry. I know that!"

He could not help but come close. She made no effort to escape him and so, suddenly, she was in his arms. But when he leaned to her he found he could not touch her lips. It was as if an arm stronger than his held him back.

"Let me go, Harry! Let me go," she was whispering.

"Not if God can help me to keep you!"

"God would not bring that unhappiness into your life."

"Joan, have you gone mad?"

"I've seen the truth about myself."

"Let me tell you that truth. Here I can see only a shadow of all that you are. But even that shadow is beautiful as a bright morning. No king in the world is as great a man as I if I can hear you say that you love me."

"I do love you, dear."

"Then come with me."

"It would ruin your life. You don't know me, Harry. My heart is aching to let you take me away with you, and to give up thinking, and to put all the burden of my life on your shoulders—"

"They're strong enough to hold it. Listen to me, Joan, I've never fought for things worth having. I've played along through my life. But now I'm ready to work, and what I'll do for you—Joan, I'd tear the hills up by the roots for your sake!"

"We would have one month of happiness, Harry, and then all the rest would be sorrow!"

"Give me your trust, and I'll build happiness for both of us and base it on solid rock!"

"It's that which I dread. What would you do, Harry?"

"Make you a home for our family."

"That's what I dread. I want to be free to ride north in the winter and south in the summer. I don't want to be rooted in one place like a tree."

"Then we'll live in a camp wagon—or we'll live in the saddle."

She freed herself from his hands. And he felt that it was a hopeless battle after that instant.

"Will you let me try to tell you everything?"

"For God's sake, do."

"When I went on the trail with the Captain, I thought that I was trying to find you. But I was wrong. What I really was hunting for was what I guessed at when I

first saw you—strength, strong enough to be free and to stand by yourself. And I felt that there was something behind you—that wild freedom into which you could take me with you. But you came to-night claiming me, reaching for me—"

"My head's spinning like a top, Joan. I'm fighting hard to understand, but I never said that I wanted to own you."

"You don't call it that. But you want to marry me."

"God willing. And then work for you with all the strength of my soul and my hands."

"Ah, there it is! Every bit of work you did for me would be another anchor weight around my feet keeping me with you. I'd owe you gratitude and pity for your pain and trouble."

"I'd have servants for you, Joan. There'd be no drudgery for you."

"Do you dream that I dread just physical work? No, no! Not that, but the freedom, Harry. Every spring and every fall when the wind blows in a certain way and the wild geese are crying, there would come a time when I would wish to go."

"Then you could go, Joan, and come back again."

"Leave you—and you not knowing where I had gone? Harry, I could do it—but, oh, it would kill you! I know it would. I was never meant to give a man happiness. I was meant only to find the one man I could love—one whom I loved more than myself—one whom I loved enough to give up my dreams."

"For what, Joan?"

"Ah, if I understood why, I could conquer it. But all I know is that sometimes when the geese are flying it seems to me that I shall die unless I can follow them to some glorious place—and now that I've started to follow them, Harry, I'll never turn back!" Her tone was dreamily inexorable.

Had he been a smaller man he would have stormed at her. But as it was he waited for a while, realizing the inevitable, determined to battle against it still, but bowing to it for the time being.

He said soberly, after a moment: "Good-by, Joan, for a little while."

"For both our sakes, Harry, it's good-by forever."

Instead of answering he stepped closer to her and, taking her face between both his big hands, he tilted back her head and kissed her lips. They were as cold as her cheeks, and her eyes, he thought, looked up to him as if he were as far removed as the stars above them.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FOURTH WHITE PEBBLE.

HE went back to the entrance to the hollow and, looking around, he saw Joan still watching him. So he went on to Buck Daniels sleeping at the mouth of the gap. He shook Buck into wakefulness, and when he was sitting up in his blanket, told him briefly and clearly everything that had happened. When he had finished he waited for a reply.

But, first of all, Buck found his pipe, filled it very slowly, and lighted it. He puffed away at it for a time.

"I knew when I hit the trail," he said at length, "that it ain't no good. It was the same way with the trails that I took after Dan Barry. Once I tried to bring him back to Kate. And the way I worked it was by insulting Dan. I hit him across the face in front of a lot of other gents.

"Then I turned and ran for it. He came fast, but I had a relay of hosses fixed up, and they got me back to the ranch in the nick of time. And handling Joan is like handling the ghost of Dan. There ain't nothing we can do for her. Our work is ended, Harry."

"We leave her here with this gang of cutthroats?"

"She's safe enough with them. There ain't a man born that wouldn't go barefooted to Jerusalem for her if she asked him to."

"You're going back to the ranch?"

"I dunno. It sort of takes the interest out of life for me. I was fighting all these years to keep away what's happened. Now it's here. She seen the wild geese flying. She's listened to them and she's heard things that you and me and nobody else

could ever understand. Let her go her own way, Harry. You'd just be spoiling her life to follow."

Harry shook his head.

"I can't give her up," he said. "And the farther she is away from me, the more I want her. Buck, I've got a plan that may sound crazy, but it's one I'm going to stick to."

"Lemme hear it."

"I'm going to join Macarthur's gang."

"You'll join a slug of lead out of Macarthur's gun, you mean."

"I don't think that he can turn me down. The rest of his men will want me, simply because I'm outlawed. They'll think I'm more valuable than I am. And they'll vote Macarthur down and take me in.

"That way I'll be close to Joan while she's with them. And when she leaves, I leave! And suppose that you, Buck, hung around in the offing and waited for a chance. I don't know what might come up, but there's always a chance, you know. Two men can do a lot. You and I might be able to get Joan away. Does it sound good to you?"

"To me," murmured Buck, "it sounds like fool talk."

He added: "But I was always nine-tenths fool myself. If you want to take the big chance, I'll take the little one. But nothing will come out of this but a considerable bunch of hell fire for all of us. You mark my words, Harry!"

But the big man could not be moved. He saddled his horse, while Buck did the same and started off down the mountainside to find covert. Gloster himself, mounting, rode straight back through the defile and into the hollow. Joan had disappeared from the door of her hut. No doubt, by this time, she had shrugged away the thought of him and banished whatever regrets might have lingered in that strange, cold heart of hers.

Indeed, as he thought of it and grinding his teeth, he swore that he would not go another step on this wild trail. But still he went on. For the more distant she became the more all the man in him rose up in a fierce determination to fight the great fight until he had won her. And as he remembered her slender grace and thought of his own huge power which nothing in his life had ever fully taxed, it seemed impossible that he should fail.

Straight to the door of the hut he went, dismounted, and striding into the room, stamped heavily upon the floor. Six figures started up. But only five guns glistened. For Gloster had stepped to Macarthur in the farther corner and, as the chief started up, his wrists were caught and his arms were twisted up behind his back.

He was only momentarily at a disadvantage, of course, for the guns of his followers were trained on his assailant. But in the meantime, this was a shameful thing, to be mastered by the hands of any single man. He writhed with all his power. The answer was merely an increased power.

"Be quiet, Macarthur," said Harry Gloster. "Be quiet, or I'll break your arms for you. Boys, hold off with your guns till I have a talk with you. Macarthur here has a grudge against me. But I've come up here to join you if you'll take me. My name's Harry Gloster. And the country's too hot for me. What do you say? Do I get a hearing?"

"Take him off!" groaned Macarthur. "Blow his head off, Babe. The skunk took me by surprise—"

"Wait a minute," said Babe, stretching the sleep out of his arms and deliberately dropping his gun back into his holster. "If there's only one, I guess that there ain't any need of making a hurry call on the lead. What are you aiming at, Gloster?"

"At a chance to talk without having Macarthur blow my head off."

Here he shifted both of Macarthur's arms, held them with the mighty grip of his one hand, and then snatched the weapons from the holsters of the leader, for Macarthur wore two guns.

"That's a lot better," he declared, and rising, he stepped away from his victim.

Macarthur leaped to his feet with a yell of rage and whirled at Gloster. But his own weapons covered him, and the rest of the gang stood by, if not indifferent, at least more than a little amused. They respected the fighting qualities of Joe Macarthur. Yet they were not at all unwilling to see him somewhat humbled.

"Damn you all!" shouted Macarthur. "What d'ye mean by it? Dud, lend me a gun and I'll—"

"There ain't anybody else in sight," declared Sliver Martin, coming back from the door. "We got this game in our hand. Might as well let him take a trick or two to begin with. What you after, Gloster? A place with us, d'ye mean?"

"What else is there left for me?" asked Gloster with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "I'd hunt up a crew where the leader didn't hate my heart, but I want to work with *men*, and that's what Haines's old crowd is made up of by all reports. What I say is: give me a chance, fellows. You'll find I'll go as far as any of you!"

"If that's the run of it," said Macarthur, "we'll talk first—and you and me 'll have our little party afterward, Gloster. You say you came up here to join?"

"No, I came up here on the trail of a girl."

His frankness staggered the leader.

"Talk straight, Gloster. You came for the girl and you didn't find her—now you want to join us?"

"I found her. And I found that I wasn't wanted." He managed to smile. "I found that out and I found out who you fellows were. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, old son. Will you give me a try?"

Macarthur spoke slowly.

"This gent comes up here," he said, "talks to Joan, finds she don't want nothing to do with him, and then comes begging us to take him in. What he wants ain't action, but just a chance to be near her. Ain't that reasonable? Besides, what I say is that we don't want to have in the gang any skunk that would murder two harmless old sourdoughs. Am I right?"

"Right!" blurted out Babe Cooney.

"Right!" chimed in the others, with the exception of Dud Rainey. The latter, as usual when he was most thoughtful, was rubbing his finger tips lightly over his chin.

"If he killed the two old boys," he said quietly, "we certainly don't want him."

"*If* he killed them?" roared Macarthur. "If he didn't, who the hell did? Ain't they got a price laid on his head? Did he stand his trial or did he cut and run for it?"

"Does he look like murder to you?" asked Dud, as quietly as ever.

It was only a small argument, but it came at exactly the right time and, in contrast with the heap of damning statements from Macarthur, this suggestion had a peculiar weight. All eyes swept to Harry Gloster, and the sight of his frank and open face told heavily in his favor.

"Besides," went on Dud, "what have *you* got against him, Joe?"

It was another facer for Joe. He considered Dud with actual hatred for a moment and then, thrusting out his jaw, he turned on Gloster.

"You tell it," he said.

"We had a little argument," said Gloster. "That was all. But Macarthur took it to heart."

The leader lost some of his purple color of rage. He had not expected that Gloster would fail to take advantage of this chance to tell how he had floored the gunfighter.

"We'll vote on this thing," he said. "Don't have to do it out loud. Pick up some pebbles, boys. White ones let him in and black ones turn him out. There's my hat to drop them in."

Pebbles were immediately at hand, for most of the floor of the building was gravel. The site had been selected for the cabin because it was near wood and water, and the frame had been built even around two or three large stones which cropped out nearer the western end of the apartment.

The voting idea was eagerly taken up by the gang. They hurried to pick up their particular choice, And going to the hat they dropped in their votes. Macarthur raised his sombero and poured out the contents into the palm of his hand.

"Three of us have voted him in," he remarked, "and there's three that want him to stay out. I'm one of them, and since by rights I ought to have two votes anyway, and vote again and that vote is to—"

"Wait a minute," broke in Gloster as he saw the tide turning against him. "I've got something to add."

He went to the end of the room and leaned over a projecting rib of limestone which the soot from the fire had only succeeded in turning a dark gray. Over this

he bent, laid hold upon it with his hands, and began to lift.

But the rock was lodged deep in the earth, and that earth had been tramped solid as stone itself. Yet he increased his effort instead of giving up his purpose, whatever that might be. The members of the gang gathered to watch, half in wonder and half in appreciation.

For they needed no scales to tell them that Gloster was attempting to budge a great weight. Even the mass of stone which projected above the ground appeared more than any one man could stir and there was an unknown portion of the whole mass hidden from sight, besides which, it was fixed in its place.

"Don't try to pull the mountain up by the roots," cautioned Dud Rainey, but the chuckle which followed this sally was very short.

They were far too much interested in the effort of Gloster. Their faces worked with the pain of sympathy and their hands closed. He had sunk to a half-crouching position, now. His back bowed with the immense pressure. His arms quivered under the strain as ropes tremble when horses pull against them, yet still that pressure was being increased.

It was as thought there was a fountain of power in his body and this was being drained to the last drop. Now his shoulders began to rise. His head bowed between them and his swelled neck was purple with congested blood.

There was a slight noise.

"It's started!" gasped Babe Rooney who, strong man as he was, was gazing now as a child stares when it hears a fable.

But it had not been budged. The noise had come from the ripping of Gloster's coat over one shoulder. The swelling, iron-hard muscles had parted the stout cloth as if it were tissue paper.

He sank a bit lower. The ground was not particularly moist, but his feet were sinking into it. The seam of his trousers over the bulging thigh parted. Now his whole body jerked up a fraction of an inch —the stone had budged!

"By God!" whispered some one. "He's winning!"

There was not a man who had not crouched in sympathy, saving only Dud Rainey, who was still rubbing his finger-tips across his chin.

"Now!" they muttered in a faint chorus.

For suddenly the stone had risen six inches. They were beginning to guess at the full hugeness of its mass. But it caught again and then with a great wrench, Gloster tore it out. The entire lower section of it was gleaming white, a deep and ragged hole hole was left in the floor, and walking as though he were carrying a mere armfull of wood, Gloster crossed the room and cast down the mass at the feet of Macarthur.

The very ground quaked under the impact. Gloster stepped back, his purple face distorted with the effort.

"You were wrong, Joe," he said. "There are four white pebbles instead of three! And I stay in the crowd, eh?"

Whatever hatred Macarthur might have felt for the new applicant, he was swept away for the moment by his enthusiasm for Gloster's physical power. He clapped him heartily on the shoulder.

"Harry," he said, "you're one of us, and as good a one as any!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

BLOOD BROTHERS.

SO Harry Gloster became a sworn member of the band. It was a curious ceremony, the taking of that oath. Macarthur called upon Dud Rainey to administer it for the very good reason that slang cannot be a solemn medium, and there was no one but Dud capable of speaking pure English.

But if the others had not the language for their parts, they at least made an effective background. They took off their sombreros and put on grave frowns as they stood about in a semicircle facing Gloster, each man with his eyes riveted upon the face of the new member. Upon his good faith all their lives might depend, for all they knew, before that very night was ended.

They, who would have thought nothing

of perjury in a court of law, would sooner have cut off their right hands than break the word pledged to their fellows in crime. For if faith in such cases began to be broken, there was no holding together, and if they could not hold together, they would be hunted down like dogs by the servants of the law.

They were putting their lives into the hands of this new man. No wonder, then, that as they faced him, they searched him to the very soul.

"Gloster," said Dud Rainey, "there's no Bible in this oath. There's not a word about God. We put a man upon his own honor, because we know that no matter what any of us may have done, every man here has that honor. Keep that in mind. And then listen to me and repeat after me."

He began speaking, making a pause here and there so that Gloster might repeat what he had said.

"I, Harry Gloster, give my honor and pledge my word that I shall truly and faithfully live with all the men who are now with me. If I have any old quarrel or grievance against any of them, I shall bury it and never bring it to the light again.

"I shall hold the safety of the man I least care for among these men before me to be of greater importance to me than my own safety. I shall never fail them in danger, but with all my strength and with all my ability I shall stand at their sides.

"What the chief commands me to do, I shall do no matter what I may think of it myself with one exception, always, that he shall not have the right to order me to kill any man, and understanding that in a vote the majority of the men will overrule the command of the chief.

"With all these things in mind, I give my honor and I pledge my word that when there is work to be done, whether we are fighting or fleeing, I shall hold every man here as if he were my dearest brother."

Here he ended and Gloster, having repeated the oath to the last word, considered that the ceremony was at an end. But Dud Rainey now turned to the silent witnesses, and propounded the same oath to them. And every man answered, slowly, solemnly, his eyes never leaving the face of Gloster for an instant, as if to drive every word deep in his mind. He watched Macarthur particularly, as the big chief was repeating after Rainey:

"If I have any old quarrel or grievance against this man, I shall bury it and never bring it to the light again."

Here Macarthur made such a long pause that the others had finished speaking the sentence before he began. His brow was as dark as thunder and his eyes flashing, yet speak it he did in a strained and halting voice which grew smoother with every word until at the end he gave an emphatic nod.

It was a solemn thing to Gloster. He himself had repeated the oath hardly knowing what he did. His mind had been too filled with other things—the strangeness of his situation, and the thought of Joan. But now he realized what he had done.

Even Joe Macarthur, malignant as a plague, had buried the hatchet, and he could not doubt that the big man was sincere to the bottom of his heart. So were all the others. Their gravity was written deep in their faces.

And now, last of all, Dud Rainey himself repeated the oath which he had been giving to the others. That faint smile which never left his lips was gone now. A frown gathered in his forehead. He removed his glasses as though there must be nothing artificial between his eyes and the eyes of Gloster. When he was ended, he shook hands. The others came up one by one and followed his example.

Macarthur was the last, and his grip lingered in that of Gloster for a long moment. Finally his hand fell, and Fatty Guiness broke the strain of the moment by saying:

"The hell of it is that when I'm taking that oath I always see myself already dead for the sake of the new gent. I feel like a funeral for two days."

"You seem to be tolerable alive under the fat," remarked Sliver Martin.

"I'll never die for you, blast you," Fatty retorted. The laughter went around, but not loudly, as the hand of Macarthur was raised and he cautioned them.

"We got to get out of the hollow without waking Joan, boys. We're going to be back here in the morning before she's more'n up and got her breakfast."

It caused the sweat to start from every pore of Gloster's body. They were to ride that very night, then! But, looking down to the floor so that none of them might read the horror in his eyes, he set his teeth and decided that he would find a way of withdrawing before the actual scene of the crime to be was reached.

"Go out and saddle, one by one, boys, so's Joan won't hear," went on Macarthur. "Lead your hosses down through the gap and wait out there until we all are together, then we'll start."

They began to follow his commands while Macarthur drew Gloster to one side and explained to him in detail the plan for the robbery of the Wickson Bank. Two men at the most would be all that were needed to make an entry into the bank. But the other four would be posted at intervals here and there to guard against any possible danger. Now that Gloster was there, it meant that there were five extras.

"An easy job for you this time, Gloster," said Macarthur. "And you'll hook in on your full share of the coin. You ought to be more'n ten thousand dollars to the good before morning!"

Gloster nodded. After all, the thing could be managed. As Macarthur pointed out, this was an inside job and there would be virtually no risk attached to it.

He need not keep the stolen money which fell to his lot. He could simply leave it behind him at the camp when he departed. Or, better still, he could send it back to the Wickson Bank. He would have no actual share in the crime.

And when the good time came and he found that mysterious murderer of Nichols and Springer, he could return to the ranks of law-abiding men with a reputation unstained. By that time, too, he should have found some way to convince Joan that she could not lead the wild life which she had chosen.

Macarthur broke in upon his thoughts. He had been watching carefully the rapt face of the new recruit.

"That's the way it always is," he said. "It's hard to take the plunge. But once you're in the water the swimming is fine. I'd a pile rather have a man that goes at the work slow and with regrets than a gent that makes a game of it right off from the start."

He beckoned Gloster to him, and going to the wall he took down a bridle.

"Gloster," he said, "what you find out in this here gang is kept secret. You know that?"

"I know that."

"It ain't to be used against any man. You've swore to treat the worst of us like he was your best brother."

"I've sworn," said Gloster gloomily.

"Then, look at this."

He tossed the bridle to Gloster.

"What about it?" asked the latter.

"Look it over."

He obeyed, scrutinizing it carefully, but on the outside it was certainly the most ordinary of bridles in appearance. He looked on the inside, and at the top of the headband, half obscured by an incrustation of horse sweat, he found the initials "H. S." cut into the leather.

"H. S.," he muttered to himself. "Who's that? H. S. Hal Springer!"

He jerked up his head.

"Good God!" he breathed.

Macarthur had folded his arms. But although he had to set his teeth to force himself to it, he managed to meet the eye of Gloster.

"Yep," he said. "I done that job."

"And tried to make me swing for it?"

"I'm a hard man, Gloster," said Macarthur, but a faint flush of shame had appeared in his cheeks. "I'd of let you swing and been glad of it. When one gent swings for a killing there ain't any looking for another killer. But now you're one of us. I've swore solemn that I'd treat you like you was a brother of mine. And I'm telling you the truth."

Gloster groaned. There was such a mixture of astonishment and anger in his heart that he was breathing hard.

"I didn't go up there to do no harm to Nichols," Macarthur went on. "I was flat and I wanted to touch the old boy—but

he seen through me, and that made me mad. There wouldn't have been no more than words, though, but when I got mad Nichols got scared and being scared he reached for his gun.

"Then hell broke loose. In a couple of seconds I come back to my senses. And there they lay dead on the ground. I grabbed what was worth grabbing then, being flat, and beat it.

"Gloster, that's the whole yarn. It's the worst thing that I ever done. And the way I let 'em hound you for the job was worse still. But—I'd of let you go to the gallows right up to the time that you got to be one of us. Gloster, if you don't want to serve under me after hearing that, you're free to go where you want to go. If you'll stick with us in spite of that, there's my hand!"

For the split part of a second Harry Gloster fought his battle with himself. But after all, there was no choice. He was free to leave the band, to be sure, but if he left them it meant that he left Joan.

And, in another moment, he found himself shaking hands with the murderer of his two old partners!

CHAPTER XXXII.

RIDERS IN THE NIGHT.

THERE had been no truth in the supposition of Harry Gloster that Joan had gone back to her hut to sleep as soon as he left. Strange as she was, she had been profoundly stirred by the quiet and the dignity of her lover as he left her. And never had her new choice of a way in life seemed so hard to her as when she saw him striding away toward the defile.

Had he paused and turned back to her with a final appeal, she could not have resisted. She would have run to his arms and gone out with him to take his way in the world, no matter what it might have been.

But he went on steadily, with no sign of faltering, and when he had disappeared she was filled with a desperate sense of loneliness. Worst of all, she knew at once that the companionship of the men who were now sleeping in that big house near by could never make up to her for what she had lost in losing Harry Gloster.

She went to the Captain, and when she was still fifty steps away he scented her coming and raced to meet her like a great happy dog when it sees its master. He threw a swift circle around her, then came to a pause in front of her with his head tossed in the air and his eyes shining.

They had a talk together after their own way. She whispered to him while she rubbed his nose, and he whinneyed his reply no louder than her own hushed voice. Of him she asked her questions—where were they going? What would they see, and what would they do on the long trail which they were starting together? And then a gust of wind struck them and brought the stallion's head up, pointing north, and the cry of an owl blew vaguely and mournfully to them on the breeze.

That was the answer, as she had known even before she asked. They were bound north and north.

She went back to the hut, and there she sat cross-legged at the entrance like an Indian under the flap of his tent. So she saw Harry Gloster ride back in the hollow, saw him dismount in front of the cabin door, saw him stride inside.

Instantly she was up and after him, and from the outside she spied on everything that followed. She saw him holding Macarthur, and she noted with wonder and awe how impotent were the struggles of the chief in Gloster's grip. She heard the denunciation. She saw Harry Gloster tear from the earth his own "pebble" and cast the vote for his admittance. She saw the crowd swept off its feet.

And then she understood what it was all about. He had asked to join simply that he might be near her. It could be for no other reason. They were fools if they looked into that frank and open face of his and did not see that he was not of their kind and never could be like them.

She herself could see it clearly enough, just as clearly as she knew that he could never have been guilty of the murder of the two old miners. And, being confident, she did not even ask to hear an explanation.

He had joined that crew in order that he might be near her. That was the meaning of his quiet air as he said good-by that night. It was not to her that he was saying farewell, but he was leaving his old life in order to enter a new one with her.

It touched her to the heart. She was on the verge of running in and warning him back from the step he was about to take. But she kept herself in check. She must not interfere now. Her care must be to remove herself from the hollow and ride off to the north so fast and so far that Harry Gloster could find no trace of her. And when he found that she had left the valley, she was confident that he would leave the band.

So, with that resolution, she watched until the oath had been taken so solemnly. Then she hurried away and found the Captain, led him by the mane to her hut and, beyond the farther side of it where eyes from the larger house could not perceive her, she saddled and bridled him. It was not necessary to warn him to be silent and cautious of his movements. The great horse had fallen into the very spirit of the thing. Her stealthy approach and her whispering voice had been enough to make his steps as careful as that of a stalking cat.

She had saddled him and was ready to mount when she saw a man carrying a saddle go through the starlight into the pasture. She reined the black horse back into a copse and there waited. She saw the fellow—it was the familiar bulging outlines of Fatty Guiness which she recognized—saddling his horse and then riding out of the hollow. He was no sooner gone than another man went out from the cabin, and then a third.

One by one they were capturing their mounts and departing from the hollow; and the meaning of it gradually came to her. This was the reason they had retired so early that night. There was a midnight ride ahead of them. And would Harry Gloster be one of the party?

The hope that he would not was hardly born when she saw two men whose height and bulk showed them unmistakably to be Gloster and Macarthur, leave the door of the house and go out into the pasture. In another few moments, they were riding out of the valley. What was there that she could do?

She must simply wait until they were gone, of course. Then she could ride north as far as she pleased and before Harry Gloster and the rest came back to the mountains she would be far away beyond their ken. No horse of theirs could ever keep pace with the stallion once they were started!

She went out to the defile and looked north in the direction she must journey. But yonder the noise of seven horsemen was going down the mountainside, and all of her heart turned strongly after them. What was coming to Harry Gloster on this night of nights?

She had heard Buck Daniels describe a train robbery, at one time, and she had never forgotten the tale of how the great engine had been brought to a screeching halt at the turn, and how the robbers had rushed out from the place of concealment, and how one man went to help that member of the gang who had boarded the train at the last station, then worked himself forward over the roofs of the cars until he dropped down into the cab and with his gun at the head of the engineer had forced that poor fellow to stop the train at the appointed spot.

When the train was halted, some had gone to keep eyes and guns over the passengers and make them come out and stand in an orderly line beside the track that they might be most conviently robbed. Others made the engineer flood the firebox, so that after the robbery the train could not rush on to the next station, give the news and spread the alarm by telegraph through the mountains and start five hundred armed men swarming on the trail.

Then the gang had approached the mail car, the door had come open, and from within, two men with double barrelled shotguns began to pour out a withering fire—and when she came to that part of the picture it was harry Gloster whom she saw receiving the bullets in his breast and falling on his face—there to lie in the mud until his body was kicked out of the way!

She drew a great breath. The North

Star was as bright as ever, but for Joan, it had lost some of its power. If she could not prevent or help, as least, she could be a witness. And if they fled again, she might help them flee!

She turned the head of the Captain to follow, but as she did so an eighth horseman started out of the woods just beneath her and began to wind slowly along the hillside. Was this some man of the law, trailing the band? She stared until her eyes ached, but she could make out nothing more than his shadowy outline. He disappeared into the trees, and she followed. She could not keep away, now!

From a hill top, she marked out the course which they must be taking. They were crossing the summit, and dipping down on the father side, heading almost due west. She took a different course, so that she might not be heard following them, and she sent the Captain in a wide detour to cut in ahead of them.

It was wonderful, indeed, to be on his back as he worked through the mountains by night. There was no need of sunlight for him, apparently. One might have thought that this was the trail to home which she had put him upon. Through the trees and over the rocks he picked his steps, plunging down wild slopes which brought Joan's heart into her throat.

They came to the ravine which she had selected as being the one through which the riders must pass. And, ten minutes after the Captain had brought her there, she saw them pass.

They rode in single file on account of the broken nature of the ground with Macarthur, as his duty was, leading the way and making the trail. Behind him came the six, and last of them all was the bulky form of Harry Gloster. She could almost have reached out and touched him!

They passed on, but still she did not ride out. For there was yet another man to be watched, and this was the one she had seen on the mountainside following the others. A full ten minutes she waited, and then he came, jogging his cow-pony steadily along, a man who wore his hat in a strangely familiar way, canted to one side. He passed, and his horse stumbled.

"Steady, boy!" muttered the rider, and rode on.

But he left Joan stunned behind him, for she had heard and recognized the voice of Buck Daniels.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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GIRLS IS QUEER

I KISSED her in the moonlight. . . . Boy! She didn't move away;
I put my arm around her, held her tight. . . . You bet!
I certainly felt funny, sure! And acted like a jay.
And then I kissed her more with all my might. . . . Gee whiz!
I really can't describe it and I thought it very queer. . . . Whoops!
I guess I held her tight as tight could be. I did!
And so, quite confidential, she asked me what I meant. . . .
I don't know, good land below us, don't ask me!

I took her to the movies. . . . Gosh, at fifty-five a throw;
The subway fare . . . we got there two for ten . . . we did,
We ate at a table d'hotey: zicks, cost two bucks of real dough,
And on her birthday spent right smart again . . . sure enough!
I took her out to Coney so that we could shoot the chutes. . . . Whee!
And eat and see the freaks and watch the sea . . . swish . . . swish!
And last night, when I met her, she asked me kinda queer . . .
If I was sure I loved her. . . . Hully gee!

N. Brewster Morse.

The Search for William Classon

By ELNA VALENTINE TRAPNELL

"BUT I don't know what mother'll say to our getting married, Ward: you never know how she's going to take things. She—well, she's sort of queer sometimes. She always expects me to tell her everything, but there are lots of things she doesn't tell me. Why I don't even know where we lived when father was alive, before we moved to Hempstead. Are you sure you want to marry such a mysterious person, Ward?"

Her teasing mouth was silenced with kisses. Any peculiarities of Louise Classon's relatives would fail to move her lover now. The mild dislike he had felt for her mother had failed to prevent his falling most completely and madly in love with Louise the first moment he saw her. This had happened when, searching for rooms for himself and Enrico Murphy, a South American friend of Spanish and Irish ancestry, he had come to the Widow Classon's in the quiet little town of Hempstead, about twenty-five miles out from New York. He had seen Mrs. Classon, prim, painfully neat in black and white gingham, which matched her pepper and salt hair, had noted and shivered at the meticulous orderliness of her first floor—and had as promptly forgotten it all at sight of Louise's golden hair and cornflower eyes.

For Louise there was the glamour of the new about Ward. She liked his deferential manners, she liked his car, she liked the way he made love. Youth, propinquity, and for each the charm of novelty—only one result was possible.

This was hastened by the return of Enrico, who had been absent on a business trip when Ward took the rooms. Enrico combined Irish susceptibility with Spanish haste in his heart affairs.

"But I did not know she was your girl," he answered Ward good naturedly when they went to their rooms the first night of his return. "As soon as I saw her I say

to myself, 'There is Señora Enrico Murphy —that is to be!' How was I to know that I make the mistake and that it was Mrs. Ward Allen that I see? Tell me that, eh?"

"I'll tell you that to-morrow night," promised Ward, and proposed to Louise when he took her to a dance at the Blossom Heath Inn the very next evening.

"Do you think anything at all could keep me from marrying you, sweetheart? I'd like to run off with you right now. What do I care how many secrets your mother has or where you lived when you were teething? You're going to live with me the rest of your life."

"But not here," Louise reminded him when her lips were her own for speech again. "We left the dance early, but we've been parked here for ages. Mother'll be sitting up for us, and you know how she'll act if we're very late. Let's go."

After an interval becomingly short, considering the circumstances, they were making up time along the level and deserted Long Island highway. Louise drove. She had learned to drive his car even better than Ward could.

Under a single dim light in the dining room they found Mrs. Classon before a cleared space at the long table writing up her accounts in an angular and minute hand. She got up and began to unfasten Louise's wrap.

"Were you warm enough coming home, daughter? I hope you did not sit in a draft after dancing. Is that a run in your new stocking? Oh, my, isn't that too bad—"

Louise threw both arms about her neck. "Oh, mother, don't scold about that now. Ward and I are engaged."

Mrs. Classon held up both hands, but it was more like a gesture of thanksgiving than surprise.

"And I'm to have a ring, mother, bigger than Beth Gilbert's—"

Her mother turned upon her sternly.

"Hush your talk about rings! Such things do not matter. Ward, I am perfectly willing for you to marry Louise, but you must win her. You must do something for me first. Louise has no brother, and this is a man's work. Twenty years it has been waiting for some one who could do it—twenty long years."

She stopped, and suddenly Ward felt something closely akin to fear. Such speech from the usually meek and drab little woman was like the withdrawal of calm waters, disclosing underneath a great rock, firmly imbedded and dangerous to approach.

"Louise has always thought her father dead. He isn't. He is alive now somewhere down in South America. Alive, not dead, or I should know it. He couldn't be dead, or I would feel it, here in my heart! What are twenty years—a hundred years—to such love as ours? But I cannot wait longer, and now there is no reason to. Ward, I want you to go down there and bring William Classon home."

Ward did not voice his question as to why Mr. Classon couldn't bring himself home, and Mrs. Classon hushed Louise's little cry of "Mother!" with uplifted hand. This was her hour.

"You were a year old, Louise, when the bank where your father was cashier was robbed. He was accused and he signed a written confession of his guilt—but I knew, I always knew, he couldn't be guilty. Because he came of an old family, well known and respected in the town where we lived, he was allowed to go free on condition that he leave the country. This he did, but he persuaded the young son of the bank president to go with him, a fine young fellow he was, just out of college, and his father was very angry, and they searched for your father everywhere. At first I knew where he was; later—I am not sure.

"The president's son did not come back, but a little while ago they had a letter from him. He told them that your father did not take the money, but that his confession was to shield some one else. They must have believed it, for they wrote me that he would not be touched if he returned, and I have written again and again to the last address I had. Oh, I always knew he couldn't have done anything wrong. Why, he was the gentlest man, always so mild and kind. He was too good, too fine to face such a disgrace. There wasn't a thought of his that I didn't know. Every night when he came home we used to go over

what had happened that day at the bank, and he told me everything I asked him.

"Oh, I can wait no longer. No one can tell what may happen down in those awful places. I know he would come to me if he could—if he knew he wouldn't be thrown into prison. We were all the world to each other—just as you and Louise are going to be, Ward. But before you can marry her, before you can take William Classon's daughter to the altar, you must go down there and bring her father back."

II.

WELL, with that woman that had been the end of it. There it was, a secret she had guarded during all of Louise's lifetime. Now she thought the duty of the man who was going to marry Louise to go down into that fever infested country, to the head waters of some little known river—she had found out that much about it in twenty years—and search for a man who might be living or dead.

It was so preposterous an idea that at first Ward did not give it serious thought. Louise's father, whom Louise had thought of as dead, whom she did not even remember, was not the concern either of Louise or Ward that he was to her mother. But day by day, under the constant dripping of the mother's talk, William Classon grew into a presence that must be reckoned with. He began to take shape to his daughter and to Ward as a very living personality.

And it was all accomplished by the words of this drab little wisp of a woman. It was as though her secret, carefully guarded through so many silent years, had at last burst through its dam of silence and, after the first rush of waters was over, the stream had kept flowing, flowing steadily toward an appointed end.

William Classon became a constant topic of conversation among the three. Louise and Ward learned that he had blue eyes and thick, reddish gold hair like Louise; that he was five foot nine and wore an eight shoe, and liked low soft collars; that he had loved solitude; even preferring long, lonely walks or reading in his own room to the companionship of his wife. The latter brought out a picture of him in a faded linen frame and set it in a place of honor on the parlor table.

He was a large, fair man, not very robust looking. Mrs. Classon said that he had been troubled with facial neuralgia and indigestion and suggested that Ward obtain a supply of the charcoal tablets her husband was accustomed to use, lest he had found them impossible to procure in that remote place.

There were times when Ward felt like choking her for her certainty that he was going to look for a man who was probably dead long ago. But Mrs. Classon, faded, quiet, persistent, little by little brought new life to this unknown being. By a few words here, a sentence there, she made them see what to her had been his pitiful failure to cope with stronger natures, the great injustice life had done him. The extraordinary thing, to Ward, was that never once after that first time did she display any emotion concerning him. He might have been some article of furniture of which she had been deprived years ago and now wanted back for reasons best known to herself.

Louise perforce must be on her mother's side. Louise was at home during longer hours to be talked to. What sort of wife would she make if she did not now think first of her father suffering torment of mind and perhaps of body—what sort of husband would any man make who did not look upon such a journey as a sacred trust?

Enrico came in like a Greek chorus and, apparently unwittingly, helped matters along. He had heard of that place, Vibico. It was a trading post near the head of navigation on one of those South American rivers scarcely known to the outside world. Boats went down from it, and mule and llama trains went up across the mountains. He himself would glady go down there—it was such an adventure as appealed to him—and then, too, that poor old man longing for home!

Enrico's conversation became interlarded with strange words—peons, lianas, llamas, ariranhas—the last animal, from Enrico's description, appeared to be a cross between a weasel and a hell-diver. Enrico brought home new maps each night. Yes, he was

familiar with that country and used to its ways, but he wished not to interfere—it was Ward's business. Mrs. Classon began to take a great interest in Enrico.

"The old man, he has hands that chap very easy, and he does not care to wash them in hot water," Enrico informed Ward one night. "I say to Mrs. Classon that cold water anyhow is easier to get down there and doubtless he is cured by now. Also he wears a ring like that of Mrs. Classon, a heavy ring of gold on the middle finger of his hand because the other fingers are too small for it."

"The deuce he does! Sort of a brass knuckle, I suppose. How did you acquire all that information, son?" Ward was elaborately casual.

"This afternoon I come early from the office, and Mrs. Classon has confided it to me. To-morrow you are invite to go with us into New York to One Hundred Fifty-Fifth Street, where they keep many maps. I know the place because it is near the Spanish church where I go. I shall gladly show you."

That evening Ward told Mrs. Classon that he would sail as soon as arrangements could be made. Mrs. Classon kissed him, but he did not mind greatly. He was beginning to accept her dominance in his life. All three, Mrs. Classon, Louise and Enrico, came down to see him off.

Enrico and Louise explored the ship together while Mrs. Classon made sure that her last minute messages to her husband were fastened securely in Ward's memory. He had only a moment alone with Louise.

"Darling, you'll write me just as often as possible, won't you? Remember, it's for your sake I'm going to this God forsaken place."

"Oh, Ward, how can you say that? *I* didn't want you to go—it's mother. But Enrico says there is really no danger. And you're so sensible I know I needn't worry about you. It's sweet of you to let me use the car while you're gone—but I think mother's mean not to let me have the ring now. I'd feel as if I belonged to you so much more if I had it. But you'll bring it when you come back—blue white, remember, and a platinum setting. Of course I love you, but I hate having my hair all mussed. There, mother is calling us, and you know how she acts if you don't come when she calls."

III.

To-night Ward lay on his camp bed burning with fever, under stars of new constellations, by a South American river whose ceaseless murmur and the rapid speech of his Indian boatmen were the only sounds to be heard. But even in this place he seemed to hear the voice of a small, grayish woman, to see before his fevered eyes a drab form, quiet and unimpressive, but as immovable as the everlasting hills.

The next day they continued on toward their goal, Vibico. The forest lined the river bank on either side. The trees met overhead, and it was like crawling through a black, steaming drain. Wild things came down to the brink of the river and peered through the lianas to watch them pass, but they were not molested; it was as if the forest regarded them as too unimportant to destroy.

The bare backs of the Indian boatmen glistened with sweat as they bent to and fro to the oars. It made Ward sick to watch their slow movements, and there were yet two more days to go ere they would reach their journey's end.

At the end of the second day Ward, swaying on his feet, walked through the one dirty street of Vibico, inquiring in his American high school Spanish for Señor Klass, the name in which William Classon's letters had been sent.

There were deprecatory shrugs and shakes of the head. The men at the river did not know that name. He was told to inquire of Señor Beel, the blacksmith. He knew every one. The men at the horse sheds where the pack mules and a few llamas stood in shifting clouds of dust said there was no such person in Vibico, could be no such person, or they would have heard of his coming in. There had been—one, two years ago—a thin, sickly person of foreign blood, likely an *Americano*. He had died—alas, yes, rest his soul—and suddenly too. Señor Beel, the blacksmith, was his friend. He could tell more. Go to

Señor Beel, who had lived in Vibico time out of mind. Señor Beel was the biggest and strongest man in Vibico—likely in all the world.

Señor Beel's house was over a hill at the side of the town. From there the trail went out and the mountains began. Before Ward had gone far toward the summit the roaring in his head and the leaden weight of his limbs forced him to sit down on a stone by the wayside. He leaned his head on his hand, unable to force himself farther.

"Is the *señor* ill?"

He raised bloodshot eyes and saw the pitying face of a young girl looking down on him. Her black hair was twisted in two braids around her small, lovely head. A white, chemiselike garment hung to her knees and was belted in by a frayed cord. Her brown legs and feet were bare like the Indians', but the liquid Spanish could come from no Indian throat nor did she look like one. Ward staggered upright, wavering weakly on his feet.

"Señor Beel," he said; "I want Señor Beel."

She made a soft pitying sound like a mother animal and placed his shaking hand upon her shoulder.

"Come with me and I will take you to him. I am Señor Beel's adopted daughter. Do not be afraid to lean hard. It is the river fever. I know all about it. Marina will cure you. What is your name, *señor?*"

He told her, and she repeated it softly after him like a child. "Ward—Ward Allen. Señor Allen. I like it much. When you go back down the river, Señor Ward, I desire that you take me with you."

Ward gazed down in stupified dismay at this assured child to meet trusting eyes turned up to his and, wonder of wonders, they were blue. The skin of her throat, too, where it was untanned beneath the chin, was creamy white.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Felipa, *señor*. I am an American." she replied serenely. "My father, who died at Señor Beel's, was also an American."

It came to Ward like a blow that this was the end of his search. This beautiful trusting girl would be the daughter of Classon by some half-breed mother— Classon who had died at Señor Beel's. He groaned.

"Poor, poor Señor Ward, I know how you feel. I, too, have had the river fever. But we'll soon be there and Marina will take care of you. Marina knows all about sickness; her father was an Indian medicine man."

"Marina?"

"Marina is Señor Beel's wife. We arrive."

A collection of small buildings, lean-tos, huts and sheds, loomed up against the side of the hill. Horses squealed and nickered in a corral to one side; swarthy half-breeds and Indian vaqueros went to and fro among them. In the largest shed was a blacksmith's forge and the smith himself, in a dirty leather apron made of an untanned hide, stood in the doorway against the background of the glowing fire within.

To ward's fevered imagination he appeared terrific, huge. His bare, reddish-brown arms had muscles like a prize fighter's, his hairy chest was thewed like an ox's; grizzled hair and bushy red beard covered head and face. He stood erect on stocky, leather-wrapped legs and watched their approach out of squinted, half-closed eyes.

Felipa showed no fear of this savage.

"I bring you a visitor, uncle. He wants to see you about something, but he is very sick so I think I shall take him to Marina."

Ward felt it was time to take matters into his own hands.

He stood before the smith, steadying himself with a hand on the shed, swaying on his feet and seeing the red glare at the back of the forge and the burly smith burned a red brown by the heat of it, as figures in a disagreeable dream.

"I have come here to find William Classon. I have reason to believe that you can tell me of him." He found that he was speaking in English and would have begun again in Spanish but the smith answered him in English.

"I was William Classon," he said slowly as one not quite sure of his words. "What do you want with me?"

The last thing Ward thought of as he collapsed in a heap at the smith's feet, was that the man was lying.

IV.

THAT thought persisted during the days following when he was capable of any thought. Mostly he was not. He was conscious of the passage of days and nights; days when he lay burning with fever and parched with thirst in one of the huts facing the forge. He heard its wheezing bellows through his dreams and the strokes of the smith's hammer seemed to be driving the nails into his aching head. Every little while a big, unwieldy woman with two or three children peering from her skirts, came to him with cooling drinks or medicines. Her touch was tender and she knew the things to do that bring comfort.

She was Marina, the smith's Indian wife, brown as the earth, heavy and formless. Her hair hung in two immense black braids as thick as a horse's tail at either side of her broad, good natured face. All that Ward remembered of the nights were fragments of delirious dreams and the flicker, flicker, flicker of those heavy braids between him and the red smithy fire as Marina moved to and fro tending him.

Ward came to believe that Marina stood between him and death and he was probably right, but it was to Felipa that his delirium called out and Felipa who sat by him fanning him or soothing him with words or low crooned songs.

Sometimes he confused the two, Felipa and Louise. Once he had drawn Felipa's face down to his and pressed hot, fevered lips to her cool, child's mouth.

"Felipa, forgive—forgive me," he begged, coming to his senses enough to realize what he had done.

Felipa's cheeks burned scarlet through their tan; her blue, candid eyes were veiled by curling black lashes. She knelt beside his pallet and kissed his eyes shut.

"Sleep, Wardo, sleep," she murmured, her fingers brushing his forehead in long even strokes; "sleep—sleep—sleep—"

When Ward awoke it was a new day and his fever had broken.

After that he lay for days on his shaky cot. Marina came and went, always smiling, slow and happy; always with one or more children about her skirts, her heavy braids swinging, her bare feet shuffling in heelless slippers. She was as elemental as the earth and as restful.

At first Ward did not live beyond the day and the hour. Waking, his past life was dreamlike and unreal. All he wanted at this time to make him content were the ministrations of Marina and the presence of Felipa. He could not bear Felipa to be out of his sight, but he could not have told if she were mostly child, comrade or sweetheart to him. She was each in turn and she mothered him as well. She took possession of him, chattering by the hour, making him comfortable and with shy or fierce demonstrations of affection binding him more closely to her each day.

It was a week after his fever broke before Ward had any conversation with the smith.

They were outdoors, Felipa by his side, watching a swarm of white and lemon-yellow butterflies against the rocky hillside when the smith came out, carrying a wooden bench upon which he seated himself.

"Now we'll talk," he said, and to Felipa: "Clear out, youngster."

Felipa stamped a foot, pouted and slipped a hand in Ward's.

"Not unless Wardo tells me to," she asserted. "I will not have it that you trouble him with talks, Uncle Beel.

"I want to hear him, Felipa." Ward pressed the clinging fingers reassuringly and Felipa stooped suddenly and kissed the top of his head.

"But he is going to take me to the States, uncle Beel. Don't forget that." She walked away with her head held high.

Ward took a picture from his pocket. It showed a well built, straight young man dressed in a fashion of twenty years back. He passed it to Señor Beel.

"That is William Classon," he said noncommittally, "you do not resemble him."

Señor Beel looked long at the photograph.

"Not now," he admitted cheerfully, "but it was a good likeness when it was

taken. I had it made for Louisa before we were married and afterward it used to stand in a linen frame embroidered in blue forget-me-nots on a damned old teetery table between the parlor windows."

Now Ward himself had seen Mrs. Classon remove that picture from such a frame—and the parlor table was still rather uncertain on its legs. As the smith reached out to return the picture Ward saw a seal ring on the little finger of his left hand so deeply imbedded in the flesh that it would have had to be cut to get it off.

"But—I don't understand."

The smith laughed. "I was thirty when that picture was taken; I looked twenty-five. But years did not matter. In experience, in any sort of living contact with the world except through a few books I was an infant. I had done somebody else's bidding all my life—and after my marriage it was worse, but I didn't know how to get out for myself—I wonder now how I had gumption enough to seize the opportunity that came." He rose up, stretching his great arms and standing like a rock on his rough shod feet. "For twenty years I have lived like a savage in these wilds. I like it. I've lived like a man, not like a cog in a machine. I've lived as I wanted to live with no petty restrictions hampering me at every step." He whirled to face Ward, lips drawn back in a snarl over unlovely teeth.

"What do you want of me, eh?" What are you down here for?"

"Your wife sent me," stammered Ward, "she wants you to come back—there is no longer any reason why you shouldn't—"

Señor Beel chuckled and sat him down again.

"Never was. I knew that. I wanted to run away then—just as I want to stay here now. I'm never going back—do you get that? Why, I've got a wife and five children here. You know that—Marina took care of you."

Ward could think of nothing adequate to say.

"I want to stay, I tell you. What in hell should I go back for to that jumping gibbet of a woman as narrow and cramped and bloodless as her own stay laces? She lives in a pint measure and you couldn't move her from a stand she'd take on some little unimportant detail any more than you could the Andes mountains. She smothered me—I had to run away or commit murder. I was glad to take the consequences of poor Phil Jordan's moment of folly on my own shoulders. Old Jordan knew I didn't do it. What he didn't know was that Phil's conscience would make him come away with me. Poor old Phil! At that I believe he had a happier life than if he'd stayed home. He married a Chilean girl and he adored her.

"Felipa's very like her mother, but she has Phil's eyes. He put her in a convent school after her mother's death, but he often brought her up here with him and she has been here since he died. I've had no way to send her out to Phil's people in New England where she ought to go. Her mother left her some money and she has uncles and cousins up there somewhere. Are you in love with her by any chance?"

Groping through a maze which he was scarcely able to penetrate himself, Ward tried to explain his position in regard to Louise and her mother—and his affection for Felipa.

In the midst of his efforts, Señor Beel let out a great roar of laughter.

"Heaven help you, boy, you're in love with both of them as far as I can figure it. You'll have to work it out yourself; I shan't mix in but—" triumphantly "you see what the old lady's like. Couldn't get out of coming after me, could you? Well, do you see me going back to that? Not in a thousand years—if you've got any sense, you won't either."

And as far as William—"Bill"—Classon was concerned, that ended the matter. He himself was not going back and Ward might tell Mrs. Classon anything he pleased. Marina was the only wife he wanted: lightheartedly he shifted any responsibility in the affair to Ward's shoulders. Ward could take Felipa to her father's people in New England and settle his love affairs to suit himself. They were none of Classon's concern. He returned to his forge.

Two weeks later Ward and Felipa went out over the mountain trail. It was a much shorter and healthier way than the river,

Classon told them, and once the west coast was reached the remainder of the journey would be nothing. To Ward the remainder of the journey was the hardest as well as the happiest part of all. Before they were aboard the northbound steamer he knew that it was Felipa who held all his heart.

Felipa had got from him—if she had not already got it from her uncle Beel—the story of his engagement to Louise and, like a young lady of spirit, she stood up for her rights and made no secret of her own feelings.

"I love you, Wardo," she whispered as they stood side by side in the bow watching the harbor lights pick up. "Louise must see that it was a mistake. She cannot still wish to marry you when we love each other. Better truth and a little unhappiness now than lies and much unhappiness always."

But Ward was thinking of Mrs. Classon more than he was of Louise. Looking back over their short courtship, he had an idea that Louise's feelings might be very much like his own; but Mrs. Classon was a different problem.

He left Felipa at an old French hotel in New York while he went out to Hempstead to interview Mrs. Classon and Louise.

Felipa stayed in her room and tried on new clothes, watched the clock and walked from the window to the mirror and prayed. There would be many more hours like this before she could hope to hear from Ward. She debated the advantages of trying to take a nap and had arrayed herself in a new negligee of Chinese embroidery when the telephone bell rang. It was Ward and he would be right up.

Felipa replaced the telephone gingerly and tried to stay her heart's beating with two hands pressed above it—there had been that in his voice—

A moment later and she was in his arms.

"Felipa darling, get ready quick before they close up at City Hall—"

Felipa stayed his kisses with a brown hand over his mouth. "But tell me—what did Louise say. What did that Mrs. Classon do?"

"Nothing that we ever thought of, darling. Mrs. Classon was evidently afraid that I wouldn't be the man for her job. She changed the plans and Enrico and Louise were married two weeks ago. All three of them have gone to Vibico to find Señor Beel."

Felipa stroked Ward's cheek while she thought this over.

"Señor Beel knows how to take care of him, but it might be well, my Wardo, to send one of those cable messages to him."

"I have already sent one," said Ward.

LOVE

A LITTLE fame is mine, a little joy,
A hope for things to come from God on high,
A gratitude for every pretty toy,
A patience when the plaything is put by—
And yet I have not anything, it seems,
Except thy love and all thy lover's dreams!

Thy love alone makes straight the crooked way,
Thy love alone lends courage for the strife,
Thy love it is that floods my night with day
And lifts my eyes to Splendor and to Life—
Until love came I wondered and was sad,
But now I only know that I am glad!

Lloyd Roberts.

Pit of the Golden Dragon

By WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY

Author of "February-Third Joe," "Watch the Yankee," etc.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN EVIL BARGAIN.

IN another room of Lee Lung's establishment, beyond a dark corridor far in the rear, wholly removed from any sound of the disturbance in the front, three white men sat about a table, whose top was foul with the slops of drinks.

The first of these was a great brute of a man with matted black whiskers and a ghastly glass eye. He wore a short reefer coat and seaman's cap and his vest was putrid with the stains upon it. Two seamen of lesser bulk, brutality and rank were with him, oaken men with the knuckles of bruisers. The man with the ghastly black eye was clumsily trying to figure out some sort of account between the three of them and the task was not to his liking, involving much argument, blasphemy, liquid inspiration and near murder.

A Chinaman slipped in and smiled at the quarrel with the suavity and philosophy of ten thousand years. At a psychological moment he scuffed forward and bent his mouth down near the first seaman's cauliflower ear.

"You ship sail when come daylight, maybe?" he interrogated.

"What th' hell business is it of yours when my ship sails, you yeller—" The glass-eyed man whirled angrily.

"You ship sail when come daylight, maybe? Sure! I tell you something. You want buy girl, yes? Melican girl. Sellee cheap."

"Do I want to buy an American girl cheap? What the hell do I want of a girl—me with two wives already!"

"You buy white girl," the Oriental urged. "Takee way off somewhere on ship daylight sure. You say you likee buy girl. Foo Choo Hi remember. You comee see!"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 7.

The three white men exchanged glances. With a raucous laugh, the leader demanded:

"Where the hell is she? Let's have an eyeful and see is she worth it!"

"You come. See Lee Lung. I show you."

The three forgot their quarrel. They kicked over the chairs and stumbled out.

Along the dimly lighted corridor the Chinaman led them, and down a flight of moldy stone steps. They turned a corner along an underground passage toward where a light was burning brightly in a compartment opening at the end. The smell of rotted planking and earth damp was acrid in this poorly ventilated place. Joss and ether and opium fumes came down. The flagging was slimy underfoot for some distance. On either hand doors of heavy timber opened into cell-like rooms.

At the western end of the passage, however, when other doors of intervening iron bars had been unlocked to permit their entrance, they emerged into a great, cavelike underground apartment—a place of greasy walls and ominous fittings, of queer shelving and dramatic lighting, a great plank dungeon beneath the ground where but three exits opened: the passage down which the sailors and their Oriental guide approached, a low door in the north wall out into a labyrinth of other catacombs that ended ultimately in an old bulkhead up into an alley, and a door in the south wall that gave upon a spiral flight of stairs and brought up in the rear of a wholesale teashop, one of Lee Lung's various enterprises that served as a blind for the deviltry below.

It was the pit of the Golden Dragon—whose existence in police circles was only a sinister rumor—where few white men had ever entered and fewer white women had ever emerged alive. A strange, dark shaft, bored up through the earth overhead, supplied ventilation. But where it ended—why no light came down in the daytime—was conjecture.

In this dungeon, as the sailors entered, were already a dozen men. But for the instant the men paid no attention to the newcomers. An object laid out on the bench table in the center riveted and held them.

That object was a white girl, beaten or drugged—a comely girl with ashen face and mass of loosened golden hair which flooded over her shoulders and breast. Her hands were securely bound behind her. Only an ankle-length cape coat of blue serge, red lined, protected her from the adamant roughness of the planking. Her figure was limp, her head slightly twisted.

At one side of the table stood old Lee Lung Fang himself—a bent, shriveled figure in a rich mandarin robe, over the front of which a ragged, moth-eaten beard fell down in greasy strings. Only his tiny red eyes testified to the dynamic individuality of the brain and soul behind.

At one end of the table, near the lost Hadley girl's head, stood a tall, cold faced figure in a purple turban, none of his inward perturbation visible on his cameo-chiseled features. The Hindu gripped the edge of the table top tensely and kept careful scrutiny of the position of every evil visage in the hellish place.

As for the others, they did not count—except as a formidable bodyguard of demoniacal ruffians, ready in an instant to do the bidding of the aged Chinaman. The light over the girl's body fell on their faces like the phantasmagoria of a vicious dream.

Lee Lung Fang turned his beady eyes upon the quartet. As they paused at the sight, he spoke. His voice was like a file.

"You want buy girl?"

It was the same demand of his henchman. But there was a difference. The first, over the seaman's shoulder, had been fawning, solicitous. The tone of the dictator was harsh, deadly, final, permitting little bartering or argument. Plainly, he had done his business with the Hindu. The bargain rested on the girl's disposal—if the victim could be successfully carried away.

The seaman did not answer at once. He took his eyes from the prostrate woman with an effort, rubbing his black beard and mouth with the back of a filth-caked hand.

"I hadn't thought much about it," he answered. "But I might. How much?"

"You ship get out of harbor—sail off China some place, when daylight come—yes?"

"We're clearin' at six o'clock, soon as we can get a pilot and permission."

"Where you go?"

"Hongkong and Vladivostok."

"You take girl to ship now. Keep till day come. Carry off. Nobody see. Fifty dollar."

"*What?* Fifty dollars! Her? What ails her, anyhow? Fifty dollars for a good-looker like that?"

"Mind own business. You carry off, pay fifty dollar. Never bring back. Bring back, anybody know, go to jail. Fifty dollar. Make answer at once."

"Fifty iron men! Wow! What's the big idea?"

"Make no questions. Take. Ver' good girl. Wash. Cook. Sew. Love. Fifty dollar. Go out that way to street." And the claw of the old man raised slightly toward the unlocked barrier in the north wall.

Unconsciously the seaman hitched up his trousers and rubbed his filthy hand across his mouth again. He turned with perplexed smile and surveyed the bank of evil faces. His eyes came back to Gertie Hadley.

"She ain't dyin' or nothin', is she? She's all right?"

"Girl no sick. Go sleep. Wake up all right maybe two, three hour. Fifty dollar. You hurry up."

"What becomes of her if I don't?"

"We fix so police no can find."

"Ah! Th' cops is after her, eh?"

"You take. Fifty dollar. Get out quick."

Again the three sailors exchanged glances. One of them nodded to his chief.

"Go to it, Syke! She's a peach," he whispered hoarsely. "If you ain't got the jack, I have."

In a brittle silence greasy money was produced, counted out, handed over. Lee Hung Fang indicated a bargain was a bargain. He motioned his men to stand back. The Hindu gave signs of visible relief. He straightened and backed away from the table. Syke gave a foolish laugh, advanced toward the unconscious girl and hitched up his trousers preparatory to lifting his burden.

Under her shoulders and knees he slid his powerful hands. His iron biceps swelled and he straightened.

A smash came somewhere, a shivering of glass and timbers. Then down the flights of moldy steps the ratlike figure of an Oriental came flying.

"Police!" he howled. "Police break in everywhere!"

The roomful shifted forward. At the instant a knot of ruffians appeared in the passageway from a general tumble and scuffle down the stairs. They had a burden they were half lifting, half dragging. Into the light they came. The limp, bleeding figure of Wilse Dilling was thrown on the floor.

"He tell police!" cried a panting Oriental. "We drag him out as police break in."

Only two men in that room retained their wits in the moment which followed—old Lee Fang and the Hindu.

"Come!" ordered the aged Chinaman to the Indian. At the door toward the spiral stairs he turned.

"Wait until way is cleared," he ordered Syke and his companions.

CHAPTER XIX.

"THERE IS THE MAN!"

INTO the Golden Dragon the officers came smashing. The Chinese quarter was a mob of shrieking, scurrying, shooting figures, clearing the open spaces, dodging the light splotches, diving for cover.

Window glass crashed. Doors gave way. Women shrieked and furniture went over. Against the liquor bar of the Dragon the Abaddonic clientele was driven.

Guns cracked in that mêlée. Men groaned and writhed in the wake of the spurts of vivid flame. Hatless and bleeding, using their emptied guns as bludgeons, the officers felled those who sought to block their way.

But after the first three minutes of entrance, a greater barrier halted them.

They could not find Wilse Dilling; of the lost girl there were no traces. They caught a sniveling Oriental and tortured him by twisting his arms. But he supplied nothing.

Through the rooms the officers tumbled, led by men who knew Chinatown as the Chinamen themselves knew it. One of them came face to face with his chief.

"We're on the right track, all right. I can tell by the way these yellow birds are acting. The girl's probably somewhere underground. The passages below have got to be found. There's doors somewhere. Tell the men to pound the walls until they find 'em!"

The men pounded the walls. They dragged out the sordid, depraved occupants of strange rooms. They pummeled unexpected attackers. They shot first and investigated afterward.

But the officers did not find the secret doorway down into the underground tunnels that led to the room where Syke, his companions, the girl and the unconscious cripple were all temporarily abandoned.

Up the spiral stairs the aged Chinaman climbed without a visible trace of nervousness, the Hindu close behind him. They passed through the rear of the tea store, through a low aperture behind a pile of crates and bundles. Along another passage they made their way, up a flight of four steps. The skinny hands of the yellow man fumbled for a latch. He swung back a door.

"We may watch," he suggested.

The brother of Runjeet Singh lowered his head and looked. The Chinaman had pulled back a little barred door opening for the purposes of hidden observation high in the east wall of the big room, among its arabesques. Below them the tumult raged. Men wrestled and fought and rolled on the floor. Some crawled from the mêlée and shot from the corners.

And back against a wall, horrified into aphasia and helplessness by the struggle surging around him, a white man in civilian clothes with bleeding mouth and popping eyes, clung as though crucified there.

The brother of Runjeet Singh saw and uttered a wild exclamation.

"There is the man!" he cried. "There is the missing one! Bags of gold, chests of jewels, anything! If he is brought to me!"

Old Lee Lung Fang glanced up in senile surprise.

"He and not the crippled one brought the police," averred the Hindu. For the first time his poise was gone utterly. "It is not too late. My mission is not yet failure. Bring him to the room underground. A fortune for you if you bring him!"

The Chinaman shrugged his shoulders. He closed the aperture and turned. Down the steps he trotted and back through the wholesale tea store.

Jack Cooper, pressing insanely against the wall, transfixed and unable to move a muscle in the carnage around him, suddenly felt the wall give way behind him. He fell backward. One flash of light and then darkness flooded down and smothered him.

Hands like talons seemed to have hold of him. He screamed, but it brought no rescue. Along a Stygian tunnel his unseen foes bore him swiftly, bumping him over stones, caroming him against corners, dragging him down lower and lower mercilessly.

Then light! The upper tumult heard only faintly! Men! Demons! The waiting Nemesis, the man from Bakir! A realization of all he had feared for weeks—*Gertrude!*

CHAPTER XX.

A NEW PERIL.

INTO the center of the inquisition room the man was bundled and thrown across the table. Blood spurted from a flesh wound at his temple. He clawed to save himself, fell, rolled over, and struggled up again.

Only vaguely he grasped that he had sprawled across the unconscious body of Wilse Dilling, pushed aside into gruesome shadow.

"Arise!" ordered the voice of the Hindu. He was smiling strangely. His black eyes glistened. "At last we meet again, you and I. And we have our reckoning."

"Let me go!" the young man cried hysterically. "Let me out of here! Police! Police!"

But no police could hear. No one above could have heard even though no battle had been in progress. Temporarily the forces of law and order had won. But still they stood checked. They could not find the panels in wall and alley that they wanted.

The Hindu laughed. Lee Lung Fang stood watching the drama, motionless as one of his own Buddhas.

"My time is short," cried the Indian, his voice breaking with repressed tension, bloodlust, fanaticism. "God is good. He has rewarded my quest and given me victory from failure." He made an imperious gesture to Syke, the seaman, who held the limp Gertrude. "Put the girl before us!"

Slightly mystified, Syke obeyed. Courageous to fight if he understood why he was fighting, he felt at the instant that circumstances were out of his control. There were too great odds against him. Besides, he could not interpret the sudden advent of this white stranger who slobbered in terror.

On the crude pallet under the light, the girl was stretched out. At a sign from the Hindu, rough hands seized Cooper from behind and held him.

"What are you going to do?" he cried wildly.

The Hindu might have answered. But nothing he could have said would have been as terrifyingly effective as what he did. From under his coat he drew a knife, the short, curved dagger of the Malay. He held it up. The light flashed upon it. The bared throat of the helpless Kansas girl lay directly beneath.

"I give as I have been given!" he declaimed. "From across many waters I come, to avenge the defilement of my house and race. An eye for an eye—it is written—a tooth for a tooth and a life for a life. With woman's blood shall woman's blood be paid and my honor satisfied."

It was a sickening scene. A flash of ferocious hatred twisted the Hindu's features. He laughed a wild, triumphant laugh. Cooper screamed—the hoarse, ghastly scream of a man. But the knife descended. With a demoniacal strength behind it, the stab was made.

Yet human flesh was not beneath it.

A full inch into the planking of the table its razor-sharp tip was driven. The Hindu emitted a ludicrous grunt. The hilt of the *kris* was yanked away from his hand.

An arm had suddenly locked about his throat and head from behind. He was twisted around with the dead weight of a sagging body loaded on him. His heel caught. He went down with a smash.

A second later Wilse Dilling was tearing at his throat. The cripple had regained consciousness.

Wilse's fight with the Chinamen above stairs had been nothing compared to the battle which now ensued. Lee Lung Fang screamed an order but it was not obeyed. Then he began to claw at the door that opened onto the spiral stairway to escape.

Cooper was borne down in this fresh mêlée. The Chinaman's henchmen fought each other while the hanging droplight rocked drunkenly. The crypt was a chaotic mass of struggling, threshing, cursing, blood-smeared humanity. There was no sense or order in that fight; it was primal. To get away, was the only objective of each individual fighter. Yet to cut loose and get away from it was impossible. The combatants milled around and around in that whirlpool.

Wilse, with an arm locked in a death grip around the Hindu's neck from behind, protecting his face with the other, suddenly felt the man's body go limp. Who had done the deed was never known, but a sailor's knife had been buried to the hilt in his heart, and for Cooper's Nemesis there was no more struggle.

Over and above the human maelstrom the hulk of a great gorilla seaman swept the unconscious girl from the table.

"Hold 'em, mates, till I get her out! Gimme a start and meet me at the ship! My money bought this jane—if there's murdering of her to be done I'll do it myself!"

"*Wait!*" It was the cripple's despairing cry from the floor as he unlocked his arm from the murdered Indian and tried to reach the north door before the sailor passed through. But the seaman evidently took him for one of those arrayed against himself. Wilse lunged across on his huge arms with all the agility of which he was capable, but just before he reached the man clutching the limp body of the girl, a terrible thing happened.

The massive plank table upon which the girl had been stretched, was torn from its fastenings and raised upward by mighty

hands; borne above the mêlée, it was sent sidewise. Two hundred pounds of lumber came down with a sickening crash upon the lower half of the telegrapher's body.

It finished him. With a piteous cry of agony, he was compelled to relax his hold upon the sailor's leg. The man dealt him an additional kick in the chest and then fought his way into the north passage.

Then he was gone. And the girl was gone with him.

CHAPTER XXI.

"ONLY A MIRACLE."

JACK COOPER dragged himself across to the cripple. Wilse Dilling sat up groggily. The pains were so intense through his body that they made almost no impression upon his brain.

"Where is she?" he cried brokenly. "Somebody was stabbing at her!"

"Gone!" choked Cooper. "She has been carried off to the waterfront!"

"We have got to get out of here!"

"We can't—someone's locked us in!"

It came to Wilse then that he and Cooper were alone—the nightmare passed. The fighting bodies, cursing throats, the battered, blood-smeared faces—all had dissolved away. He might have been unconscious half a minute or half a day. Somehow all the Chinamen had made their escape and the doors all around them were closed and securely fastened. As the cripple's vision cleared he saw a horrible thing on the floor.

"Some one stabbed him!" declared Cooper thickly. The boy was so ill that his knees were on the point of giving way beneath him.

Wilse tried to rise, but his agony was so great that he almost drifted off into unconsciousness again. He uttered a hoarse, inarticulate cry.

"My legs!" he groaned.

His legs! They had always been useless, but never so useless as now. The telegrapher's great hands clutched at the top of the overturned table and he sought to hold himself in a sitting posture until the excruciating agony had passed. For a moment he bowed his sweating forehead upon his hands.

It was deathly quiet now down in the pit. If the battle still continued in the Golden Dragon on the street level, no sounds of it reached down here. It had come to this, then; Chinamen had died—so had white men, yet nothing had been gained. The missing Hadley girl had not been saved; Lee Fang had slipped away. Even though the Chinese might be rounded up later, what criminal evidence was there against them with the girl still gone? The Hindu had been removed from Cooper's trail, but that was small consolation compared with the greater calamity toward which Gertie had been carried.

Whether the seaman had succeeded in making the street and getting a conveyance to the harbor was something the two men had no way of learning. How far the north passage led before it started upward toward the daylight was something only to be learned by exploration. How far northward it led or whether spiral stairways wound upward immediately like those upon the south passage was likewise indeterminate. Nothing but black gloom and ghastly silence was in evidence beyond the great doorway which made the pit a prison.

There was something portentous and ugly about the circumstance of their having been locked in. Who had locked them in, and why? Did it mean that Lee Fang's villains were coming back to execute their vengeance on the two luckless white men who had come through the awful mêlée alive? Cooper started sobbing openly.

Wilse finally found the strength to drag his mangled limbs to each of the doors and to beat upon them desperately. They were securely fastened.

Again and again he cried for help in his great anguish. Those who might have come to their rescue were too intent upon grim business elsewhere. Or perhaps the police, not having found the entrance to the crypt, were content to allow its existence to remain a sinister rumor.

Yes, the only profit which had come out of the night's abomination had been the elimination of the Hindu with the twisted soul, and the taking of heathen lives. But

again that was little enough. Old Fang had escaped, and for every gnarled, perverted character who had perished in his defense, or the defense of his property, a score were ready to spring to fill their places. A thousand girls had disappeared, as the Kansas girl had done; a thousand others would yet disappear—as long as the great metropolis of the western coast lay at the mercy of whatever iniquity the Orient exported.

The imprisoned white men faced one another with the mute admission that only fiasco had resulted from their best intentions and desperate effort. On the brink of seeming success, after days of anxiety and heartbreaking search, they had lost everything. The girl had been torn from them in those last bloody moments beyond any further attempt at rescue.

As they beat the barred doors of the crypt they had to endure the thought that with each passing moment the one they had loved was being borne farther and farther away—to a black, hideous schooner in the harbor, whose decks were already slippery with crime, which would clear the port with the coming of daylight and bear away the helpless white girl to a fate beside which the Indian's kris would have been a blade of mercy.

Wilse moaned again and again. In vivid imagination he saw the cab already on the eastern side of the street turning down unspeakable back streets, alleys and lanes of abomination. Twisting amid lumber piles behind wharves, it would be but the work of a few moments to bear the girl across the gangplank and down upon ominous decks to a hatch where stairs opened.

"Oh, God!" Wilse buried his face in his hands.

Neither thought to question the other now or satisfy trivial curiosity as to activities since they had been apart. The great, grim reality of the loved one lost was too much of a tragedy. Their helplessness was the thing that overwhelmed them—the cruel evidence that whatever they now did there wasn't time enough left to save the girl. Cooper could not forego the cry:

"We found her! We got so near to her as this, and everything goes for nothing! Wilse, Wilse, what can we do? It is more than I can bear!"

Cooper proved then that he was not wholly bad by the crazed tears that flooded down his twitching face.

The cripple drew himself up, his elbow on the side of the table which had broken his legs. He raised his face, closed his eyes, hardened his jaw. So tightly did he clutch the timbers that his finger nails scarred the wood of that massive piece of furniture.

"The situation's got beyond ourselves," he said. "Maybe we *are* helpless, but yet—there's still time—for faith!"

"Faith!"

"Yes, for faith," the cripple whispered, fighting the while to overcome the agony in his broken body. "It's all we got left now," he repeated. "Faith!"

"To hell with faith! Gertie's being kidnaped—taken to the water front right this minute, while we are locked down here!"

"I know! That is why I say only something stronger than ourselves can save her now."

"We need guns, crowbars, freedom—and you talk of faith! Faith in what! God? I would have more faith in myself if I could only get out of here and stop that ship from sailing!"

"I wonder—if we had faith enough—if a miracle could happen?"

"You had better save your breath and brains and yell—maybe the cops would overhear—if they are still above us."

The cripple was breathing with difficulty. So tightly were his lips pressed together they were ghastly. He seemed striving to collect himself—command himself—to bend all his will power and personality to some fine, high purpose.

Cooper stopped beating the bars of their prison. Something about the broken man down there in the pit caused him to gaze fascinated. What was Wilse doing? What was happening?

Was the cripple's sudden calm the quiet of utter despair, or was it vast inspiration, a fixing of his mind on something which the lad could not comprehend? Cooper drew away.

He was suddenly frightened—frightened

as he had not been all that terrible night. The green shaded electric drop light which had hung above the table now streamed down on the stone flagged floor. In the center of that dramatic illumination, eyes raised upward, Jack Cooper saw the telegrapher with shoulders thrown back, face uplifted, lips half parted in prayer.

Wilse prayed a prayer. Cooper could not follow the words; he could only gape at the change which had suddenly come upon Dilling's countenance. Despite the inhuman suffering in the man's great black eyes, they began to glow as though beholding a vision the other could not see. It was as though his gaze had suddenly pierced the ceiling of that evil crypt and he looked upon something that left his face transfigured.

Latent powers fathoms down in the innermost recesses of the human spirit were being summoned to the cripple's aid—powers no science had ever charted, powers never yet recorded with accuracy in any books of human knowledge—a concurrence with the Master Mind of all the universe of matter so great that as he watched the lad began to feel a living something growing in that cell—a presence issued from the cripple's individuality, a force omnipotent to break its locks and rend its bars—something created by the mountainous powers of unleashed mentality.

" Into Thy hands I commend her. Only a miracle can save her now, and Thou canst work that miracle. I believe that Thou wilt work that miracle. Save her and protect her! Deliver her to those who will restore her! Let my faith be strong enough to turn her over to Thee. I believe! I believe! *I believe!*"

I believe!

What forces may lie in the depths of the human spirit, unscratched as yet by the mental tools of little shallow man, presented by that sentiment *" I believe!"*

Can a human heart feel so terrifically, one human mind function so tremendously, that mountains *do* move, that waves *do* rise and permit chariots to pass through unscathed, that miracles *do* happen—or the effects unexplained by ordinary causes we term miracles for want of a better word? Does concrete matter obey psychic power?

Who shall say what faith may be, from whence it comes or where it ends? Who may define the strength of mute prayer and positively claim that mountains move by a response divine or some galvanism within ourselves?

Or may the Almighty answer prayer best through human agency—reactions set in motion long before our definite actions brought the prayer or need for prayer about?

Who can say?

As Cooper's stare continued, the cripple sank back. He smiled a wonderful smile.

" It's all right," he said.

" What's all right?"

" The whole situation. Gertie will be taken care of."

" How do you know?"

" I *feel* it."

Somehow Cooper could not refute the delineation of sublime faith on the telegrapher's suffering face.

" Wilse," he exclaimed, " you're hurt. Terribly hurt!"

" The table! It broke—my—legs!"

" Wilse, I'm sorry. Terribly sorry. I'm to blame for everything. I should pay. Not you!"

" It isn't for either of us to say who pays. A fix like this is bigger than ourselves. You tried to make amends. That try makes everything right. If you hadn't tried it would all be different. I like to think the Almighty judges us for the things we would like to do, not what we accomplish."

" She belongs to you, Wilse," the young man sobbed in honest renunciation. " You are a better man than I am—you deserve her more."

" It isn't for us to say who deserves her or who wins her. She must decide for herself."

" She can't choose me if I am never around again to choose," Cooper declared grimly. " I'll go away. I'll never see her again. I haven't the right."

" That's unfair to her, Cooper. If she wants you it's up to both of us to make her happy."

They spoke as by an understanding that somehow the girl had already been saved.

She had not been taken to the ship—it was inadmissible.

"You've got to have attention, Wilse. You'll die here like this."

"If it's right that we should be rescued, we will be," the cripple declared. "Some one will come. We can wait."

And they did. But long before they were taken out, time had ceased to exist for them. And when the pit of the Golden Dragon was finally located it ceased to exist also.

CHAPTER XXII.

GERTRUDE LEARNS THE TRUTH.

OUT of evil cometh good and out of suffering, cleansing. So the Psalmist sang two thousand years ago. So the law goes down for all eternity.

It was the middle of May before the Hadleys came back to Galesburg. They brought home a daughter whose sight was restored. But through May and through June she remained ill from the ordeal she had suffered, the strain she had endured, the danger she had contacted and the horror of her experience.

One night during her convalescence in July, Mrs. Pease, who ran the rooming house next door, called in at the Hadley home and asked to see Gertrude Hadley alone. In the girl's hands the good hearted widow placed a packet of correspondence—letters tied around with a lavender ribbon.

"I guess there ain't much chance now of Wilse ever being found in the land of the livin'," she explained timorously. "He warn't so lucky as you, Gertie, escapin'. And so, packin' away his things that he left when he went to the coast so hurriedly to look for you, I come across these envelopes in the drawer of his desk. Seein' he's gone, it's only fair and right that you should have them. That much is due to his memory. He was a good man, Wilse Dilling, even if he did have to get around on crutches."

"What are they?" the wan girl demanded anxiously.

"Deary, they look to me—like—love letters—mighty fine love letters he must have been writin' to you all along, and did not have nerve to mail. You see, he never could ask you to love him back, him havin' no legs worth speakin' of. So he just loved you quietly and spoke all his feelin's in letters."

The girl took the packet wonderingly, tears very close to her own eyelids. The news of the cripple's love for her came as no shock. Through her mother and father she had learned of the telegrapher's altruism, effort and loyalty. But here were messages direct from the soul of the man himself. They were terrible somehow, like a voice from one dead.

There were dozens of them—all the letters Wilse had composed on lonely nights, pouring out his affection and heartache to the girl he idolized from afar, never dreaming her eyes would ever read them.

Addressed to her—from a dead man apparently—the girl believed she had a right to read them. She did read them. She passed one afternoon and most of an amethyst twilight learning the kind of man the cripple had been in his heart.

All was revealed to her there, his mental and spiritual agony, his faith in the Ultimate Good, his gift of tongues, his hopes, his aspirations, his sacrifices—even the sacrifice of his bank account that he might restore the sight he excoriated himself for taking. She was almost stricken anew when the full import of those letters was revealed to her. The fever returned.

In that fever many times she called Wilse Dilling's name. For at last she sensed something in the telegrapher's character for which she had hungered blindly in the ill-fated Cooper.

When she arose again from her bed she laid the letters away as things which were sacred—not to be profaned either by crass handling or introspective reading. Like a voice from the dead they came to her indeed, bringing the great, sweet assurance that she had been loved with an unrequited affection for herself alone.

The world is still a stage and men and women in it only players, even as a great dramatist wrote several hundred years ago. Silently, inexorably, the great composition of earthly existence unfolds, act by act and scene by scene. And parts of the play

are tragic and parts are rich with comedy. Whole sets may be sordid and depressing. Yet continuously throughout the whole there are sweet passages also—sacred tendernesses of word and deed, bits of unapplauded by-play which only angels may interpret, sacrifice and love unfathomed. Everlastingly the presentation flows along: ". . . Like rivers that water the woodland, darkened by shadows of earth yet reflecting an image of heaven." And as an act and sequence in the mighty drama flavored full with such sacred tenderness, unapplauded by-play, sacrifice and love unfathomed, the strange chronicle of Wilse Dilling, crippled telegrapher in a little town out in Kansas stands as an epic.

This *is* a world in which action and reaction are equal, in which there are still rewards and fairies, in which beautiful devotion and cruel sacrifice do not go unrequited. God is not mocked. Those whose faith is abundant and perfect may yet work miracles. "Arise and go for thy faith hath made thee whole" *is* as applicable to the twentieth century as it was to the first.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A QUEER YARN.

IT was the end of an August twilight, deepening into starlit summer night. Again the little shuttle train came up from the valley, bringing three people. But this time the three did not occupy seats in different parts of the coach. In two seats facing each other the three rode up to Galesburg.

Two of them were coarse featured, lumberous men in rough clothing and heavy sweaters. They were securely shackled together. The third, who had them in charge, was a big ox of a man with a silver badge under his coat and a derby hat pressed firmly down over iron gray hair.

The trio created a sensation when they alighted from the train. They crossed the muddy square, but instead of making for the hotel the officer took his men to the local lockup. A crowd gathered quickly outside.

"It's the two yeggs that blew the Hadley Bank," was the news that sped from lip to lip. "The dicks got 'em in Frisco and brought 'em back to stand trial."

The editor of the local paper hastened down to the jail and secured the complete story, including an interview with Sawn and Horrity—the two crooks whom Wismer, the bank examiner, had mentioned in his telegram.

It was a strange story they told and one which was quickly discredited by the townspeople.

"Anybody 'd do wot we did if they found everythin' ready t' hand," Horrity argued with much coarse abuse for his captors. "We wasn't de only 'soup balers' in dat hick bank dat night. All we did was t' walk in an' finish up wot some other guy started. When we got in we found a place in de money can all bored, but the dam' ol' fuse had gone dead. All we did was t' give it some expert attention—it needed some professinnals t' do de job right!"

"You might as well save your breath," the sheriff snapped as he listened with the others. "You can't make us believe that you two birds would walk into that bank the very night and hour that some other yegg had started the job and been scared away."

"All de same it's de trut'—you c'n believe it er not. We gits in an' sees de fuse gone dead—we fixes it an' makes de blow. We puts de job on right!"

It was pure braggadocio on the yeggman's part—pride in his perverted calling which was bringing out this incriminating confession. But try as he would, he could not get one of his auditors to believe his story.

"Anyhow—never mind who supplied the materials—you're responsible for the explosion which destroyed that vault, wasn't you?"

"Yah, begad, an' we did a good job!"

"Then you go up for it and what you say will be used against you."

"If you dicks was as smart as you thinks youse are you'd get the other guys as well."

"There wasn't any other guys. You're havin' a hop dream, both of you. Anyhow, we got *you* and that's enough."

The sheriff withdrew into his office and

lighted his corncob reflectively. The detective who had brought the two yeggs back from the coast sauntered in. With complete self-satisfaction he closed the door.

"Dam' funny about the yarn they tell," the sheriff observed.

The other laughed.

"Forget it," he advised. "When you've had as much experience with snow birds as me, you won't be surprised at any old kind of an alibi they try to spring." Again he laughed. He lighted a cigar. He spent the remainder of the evening with the sheriff.

"How'd you nab 'em?" the latter asked.

"Well, it was kind o' strange," admitted the officer. "'Fraid if I tried to tell you, you'd think it was me had been takin' hop as well. You got a girl here by the name o' Hadley, ain't you? Banker's daughter. Well, you know the account she give of how she was rescued. These are the same two birds."

"How she was rescued? Same two birds? She ain't told us how she was rescued. Bein' unconscious, don't think she ever knew. What the devil you talkin' about—same two birds?"

"That had the girl in the cab. She's told you that, ain't she?"

The two front legs of the sheriff's chair came down with a thump.

"She's told us she remembers somethin' about bein' kidnaped by the chinks and faintin'—down in some underground room the night o' the raid when Wilse Dilling disappeared. When she come to herself she was in a cab outside the police station, and a funny old guy that drove the bus was tryin' to explain how he come to bring her there to the cops. But they lugged her off to a hotel and her folks immediate. Ain't heard nothin' about who was with her. An' you mean to say it was the same two yeggs?"

"Yes, it was the same two yegs. There was a chink joint in San Francisco where a lot o' their kind hung out. They'd made the coast, and as near as we could dope it out, was planning to get out o' the country on an old tramp schooner. Had it all fixed shipshape with the captain — who slipped through our fingers. Anyhow, they was in the Chinks joint that night, disguised as sailors, and when the cops began raidin' the place, they tried to make their get-away by a tunnel underground."

"Did you read all this in a story-book?"

"Naw, I didn't read all this in no story-book! Things happen like that in life a good many more times than you'd accept if you did read it in a story-book. Them two birds was makin' their get-away out of the country when they run kerslap into the same dam' girl whose eyesight they'd took back here in Kansas. Don't know whether they knew her or not at the time, but it was the same dam' girl.

"The captain was buyin' her, accordin' to the yarn he tells, and plannin' to make his getaway to sea. They got into a whale of a fight underground, fought clear, left the rest carvin' each other up and tried to make the street, the captain carryin' the girl in his arms."

"But how did the cops catch 'em? And where they been all this time? The Hadley girl's been home two months."

"They been in the San Francisco hoosegow, that's where they been! For bein' mixed up in that underground fight. The boys in Frisco never dreamed who they had. I was lookin' over their bunch o' rogues couple o' days back and spied my men."

"But how did the cops catch 'em, I ask you?"

"When the captain and the two yeggs finally made the street, directly across the way was standin' a cab. They piled the unconscious girl inside and started off the driver with orders to drive like hell to the wharves."

"Well?" The sheriff was leaning forward intently.

"But he didn't obey orders, the cabby didn't. He drove like hell, sure enough. But it was to headquarters."

"The police?"

"Exactly."

"With the girl?"

"With the girl, o' course. Unconscious! If the Hadley jane never knew, must be the cops had already rushed the three roughnecks inside before she come to her senses."

"But why the devil should an ordinary cabby disobey orders like that, and drive

the crooks to headquarters? Was he a dick himself?"

"If you can explain that, you can explain a lot o' queer kinks in human nature. He was not a dick. He was just a plain, old, brokendown bum. And when he sees the three get abroad his bus with the limp form of a female, he decides there's something wrong somewheres. He whips up the old nag, and before the guys inside knows what it's all about, the green lights of the station house is shinin' in their battered faces and fifteen cops has 'em surrounded."

"Darned funny an ordinary cabby should do a thing like that!"

"Queer old cuss he was. Sort o' religious. All hopped up with some queer kind o' thumb nail remorse. Human nature's funny, anyhow."

"Remorse over what?"

"Had a lot to say about bein' in a Salvation Army joint one night and bummin' seven dollars off a poor cripple with a fake story about a daughter o' his bein' ill. Old galoot never had a daughter. Wanted seven dollars to get just plain good and drunk—because somebody 'd levied on his horse and rig for a board bill and put him out o' business."

"Well?"

"And when the cripple, whoever he was, shoved the seven dollars into his hands thinkin' he was honest in the daughter it got the old cuss by the throat. He thinks twice about gettin' drunk. It gets to his manhood somewheres. He decides to see if the creditor won't take the seven on account. He goes and offers it and is surprised to get his horse back, and he earns the dough to pay off the rest."

"But what the devil does that explain?"

"Just this: He was so sorrowful over the way he'd bunked a cripple that when he sees the three crooks gettin' away with the dirty work, he decides to come clean. Says it reminded him of the hard luck story the cripple told him in turn. The cripple had lost a sweetheart by some such crookedness and the recollection of it got the old gink by the throat. He saved this strange girl to somehow square himself with God. Funny thing human nature!"

The sheriff stared at the detective for a long time without comment. In fact, for a full ten minutes a prolific silence ensued in that little jail office.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I LOVE YOU."

THE Hadley home was unlighted. Old Micah, whose bank had been reimbursed for its losses through its burglary insurance and reopened, with never a breath of suspicion resting upon himself, had not come home from his office. Mrs. Hadley was absent at a neighbor's.

The telephone had rung and Gertie had answered. It had been the Pease woman in the house next door. She wanted Gertie to come over at once. It was urgent, terribly urgent. Gertie had complied. But when she opened the light screen door and went in without ringing or knocking, as was her wont, no evidence of Mrs. Pease was visible.

The girl frowned and moved toward the opened double doors of the front living room. That, too, was unlighted and empty of any one—or it seemed so. Then a movement came in the afterglow and proved that she was wrong. The room was occupied. Some one sat in a chair by the bay window—waiting. *It was the figure of a man.*

She could not see him distinctly at first, only his involuntary start in the dim lighting. But as she poised there between the double doors she heard her name called softly:

"Gertrude! Is—it—you?"

Then she knew.

She uttered a hoarse cry and put out a hand to the door casing to steady herself.

"Wilse! Wilse Dilling!"

"Yes," the other replied.

Her vertigo passed. The girl moved forward. And from his chair the cripple waited for her hand, his own outstretched.

The Pease woman in the goodness of her heart and matronly wisdom had fled the house and left them alone. The afterglow died on the hills and the prairies to the west. The Kansas stars grew brighter. Alone in the room the man and the girl sat almost motionless. But the girl was on the floor at the man's feet, an elbow resting

on his lap, her hand in his. Her eyes were staring into the dark.

"I had to tell you," the cripple was saying. "I had to come back and say it. If it ever came out that I was in the bank that night, I couldn't bear that you should go all your life believing you lost your sight on account of me. And what I've told you is the truth."

"You tried to make it appear you robbed the bank for father's sake—and the very night you did it, others were in the bank all the time?"

"All the time, Gertrude. They entered the place after my fuse had gone out. They set it right, so it would really do the damage that it did. They used their own explosive. They heard you coming in and hid. They really rifled the vault before help came, while you and the policeman lay unconscious on the floor—two crooks just out of the penitentiary at Leavenworth. I had to come back and confess it, dear. I wanted you to know.

"Oh, Wilse! And Jack?"

"He stayed with me until help came. He got his senses back, but he was changed. And so I've come back here, Gertie, to ask forgiveness for him from you. He cared for me when they found us—he paid my expenses out of his own money. And he wanted me to tell you he was sorry."

"And he's *alive?*"

"He's alive and gone to Singapore, Gertie. He said he felt he had no right ever to speak to you or see you again."

"Wilse," whispered the girl brokenly, "I believe I know everything now. There's nothing more to be explained. But there's something you don't know, that I must tell you."

"Yes?"

"I've read your letters, Wilse. I know the things you tried to do for me, and failed. And I can read what lies behind your voice right here to-night. Wilse!"

"Yes, Gertie!"

"You love me very dearly—you've always loved me very dearly—haven't you?"

Something very like a sob escaped the cripple's lips at that. He closed his lips tightly and dropped his head.

"I know," the girl went on. "That's a cruel question. But the thing you don't know is this: You've thought all along you had to keep your love hidden because you were handicapped—physically handicapped. You thought you had no right to tell me how you loved me because most women are loyal only to physical strength and normal manhood. You did me an injustice, Wilse."

"You mean—"

She turned her flaming face up to his in the starlight. Her eyes were shining, though her voice was mellow.

"I mean, dear—it doesn't make any difference. It wouldn't have made any difference. It never will. And all the love you've given me has been creating a counterlove since I came back home and learned the truth."

Her voice dropped lower, almost a whisper. "You have fought desperately for me. You never wavered. Your faith you kept. Dear man of mine, I love you, too. Regardless of any physical handicap, the day you will let me become your wife will be the proudest of my life!"

"Gertie!"

The man controlled himself with difficulty.

"It doesn't make any difference?" he choked.

"Not the slightest. It's yourself, the man inside, that has won my love—a greater love than I had for Jack because my love for you is founded on a loyalty proved. Oh, Wilse! How could you ever think I could be so mean and selfish and base as to let your body make any difference?"

It was brittle quiet in the house and neighborhood. Two figures were tense in the darkness. The man spoke.

"Then I may tell you something else, dear. There is one other thing yet you don't know. I asked Mrs. Pease that I might see you like this until I knew how you felt about Jack. I didn't want to force myself upon you or take advantage of what you'd endure. But, Gertie—"

"Wilse! What's the matter? You're holding something back!"

"Yes, dear. I am holding something back—the biggest thing in all my life up until you spoke those words: 'I love you!' Gertie—I—"

"Yes, yes! Go on!"

"You remember the cabby who brought you to the police station that awful night?"

"Yes."

"You know the story he told?"

"I have only learned all the particulars recently, Wilse."

"It made them investigate the Golden Dragon and they found Jack and myself down in the pit."

"Yes."

"When the table went over in that fight it broke my legs. Jack stayed with me, I say, until help came. He paid my expenses out of his own money. He remained with me all the time I was in the hospital. They reset my legs, and when the bones had knit again—"

"Wilse!" The girl fell back. Beyond the startled cry of his name she was speechless.

The man removed the shawl thrown across his legs. He arose. Straight, strong, normal, he stood before her.

"When the bones had knit again I was no longer a cripple. The awful nightmare of helplessness is gone. Dear girl, I am cured!"

He reached and lifted the stunned girl in strong arms and gathered her to him. On his powerful shoulder her slender body went suddenly limp.

THE END.

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TEMPERAMENTAL

SOME mornings I awaken feeling dreadful, dreadful blue,
The world looks dark and gloomy, and I don't know what to do;
I grope and mope, I scowl and growl, at all my friends I hiss,
I'm done with life, and want to die.

I'm
down
and
out
like
this!

But joy! On other mornings when I get up it is fine,
The world is full of beauty, lovely flowers and sunshine:
I spring and sing, I prance and dance. Oh, all is bubbling bliss!

this!
like
climb
spirits
my

And as the hours go whizzing by,

Next day I may be normal, full of common sense and sane,
And find the world an int'resting, dependable old plane:
I work away, perhaps I play, in all I do I miss
ups-
The and- and placidly, I r-u-n a-l-o-n-g l-i-k-e t-h-i-s!
downs.

Margaret Wheeler Ross.

The Repatriation of Lias Olie

By PAUL SEVERANCE

AS Timothy Guilfoyle, chief mate of the Eastern Breeze, strode aft along the steamer's main deck, the pulsing rustle of his rubber boots set a strident tempo for his irritation.

"'Tis th' way wid Shwades," he sputtered. "Yit th' auld man cud 'ave waited a bit. Sailin' wid no carpenter! 'Tis meself that knows there'll be no ind av trooble!"

The splinter in the craw of the mate's libido was that the ship's carpenter had not been on board at the hour of sailing. In stern accordance with his boasted regulation, Captain Elknur had refused to hold the gangway. So they had sailed shorthanded, and it was a long voyage that stretched before them with much work to do.

In this prickly heat of thought the officer assailed a jumbled heap of stores that had been dumped on deck at the moment of departure.

"Whir's thim rat guarrds?" he complained, tugging savagely at a huge coil of Manila rope. "Now, phwat th' hell!"

He had uncovered a foot. It was a real live, human foot, generously proportioned and embellished with a highly ornate yellow Oxford. Above it there was a wrinkled purple sock, a stretch of bare, black shin, and a trouser leg of boisterous blue. This protruded unaccountably from beneath a conelike mound of the steward's onions. There was no dallying with conclusions. The chief mate poised and his great boot swung.

"Cum out av ut!" he bawled. There was a second swing and the thud of emphatic impact. The yellow shoe moved lazily. "Cum out av ut before I shtart pershwadin' wid a marlin shpike!"

There was a leonine sound of yawning. "Go 'way, whi' folks! I 'clares, you 'sturbs mah slumbahs!"

There was a violent action in the heart

of things, and, like Pallas from the head of Zeus, there emerged a crinkly dome, two swollen eyes, a pair of arms and a giant torso. It was a magic incarnation.

"Th' divil himself!" exclaimed the mate, and he gave the yellow shoe another kick to assure himself of its reality.

The stranger stretched. He moved to speak, but the great lips fouled. With obvious effort he worked them free, out and around—ungluing, adjusting.

"Whin we-all 'rives 't N'Orleans, Cap'n boss man?" he managed to articulate. He stretched again, not waiting for an answer. "Don't reckon you cud tell a cullud man whah he's git a fresh drink of watah? Suttunly craves mah lub'ication. Lightnin' hootch dey sells up heah in Noo Yawk whut call itse'f lickah. Sho' is mighty pow'ful dry!"

"'Tis water ye're wantin'? 'Tis bread ye'll be gittin' wid ut f'r manny a day t' cum!" But the terseness melted from the first mate's tone. Pity had its roots in understanding.

The seaman indicated a faucet by the galley door. He watched the thirsting pilgrim rise and shuffle stiffly toward resuscitation.

"Here—kape yer mouth off that! Shtop ut, I say!"" He pointed emphatically to a tin receptacle on the hatch. It was filled with potato parings. "Over th' side wid th' p'alin's an' put th' ugly face av ye in th' bookut!"

"Ugly? Wish de womin shared yo' 'pinions. Might let me 'lone."

But the mate was deaf. Across the active panorama of his mind there whirled a kaleidoscopic jam of detached ideas. There was the carpenter, Olie Olson, who was left behind. That much was certain. Besides, he must admit to Captain Elknur that despite his vigilance a stowaway had put to sea with them.

"There'll be th' divil t' pay all 'round." he predicted gloomily. "'Tis well I know th' immigration officers will be after finin' th' ship at Caapetown. Either that, or there'll be th' sendin' av th' man back t' th' States, company's expense!"

"Reckon I's de drinkin'ist cullud man you's eveh seed!" came a gurgled interruption. A dripping jowl came up for a breathing period only to submerge again. "Reckon I eats worser'n I drinks." But an anxious eye ranged out across the uncertain vista. "'Pears turruble rolly-lak, cap'n, suh. Ain't got no fon'ness fo' dat elevatah feelin'. Got all de circus ridin' I crave whin I wint t' France t' fit de Booshes. Whin you sez us 'rives 't N'Orleans?"

"Noo Orleans?" The mate's belligerence returned. "This packut's bound f'r Caapetown!"

"Whah at, you sez, cap'n?"

"Caapetown! Caapetown!"

"So 'tis? Reckons you mean we-all stops der 'fo' us gits t' N'Orleans?"

"Caapetown's Africa, ye h'athen! Africa! Africa! Ye're goin' back whir ye belong—back whir yer ancisters air swingin' in th' trees!"

The inquisitor's eyes bulged with untrammeled wonder.

"'Fo' Gawd, cap'n, you ain't gwine t' take dis cullud man back t' no Af'ica, is you? Fo' if you is"—he stretched his neck and swallowed with a labored effort—"if you is, please suh jus' drap me off at de nex' station whah us 'rives at. Um-umh, Af'ica! I knows I's a triflin', no-'count niggeh, but I don't 'zerve no sich tormintation. Af'ica! An' I give dat watchman man ha'f a pint of good co'n lickah t' put me on a steamboat whut was gwine t' N'Orleans. Reckons he mus' 'a' bin bofe deef an' bline!"

"Cum along—ye can tell yer troobles t' th' captain."

"Thought you was de cap'n man!"

"Make knots, or I'll take a reef in yer skys'ls!"

"Yassah, bossman. You leads de way, I follows—sudden! Me an' you travels t' de cap'n."

The two strode forward and climbed the ladder to the upper deck, where the mate knocked deferentially at the door of the master's office.

A gruff voice answered: "What is it, mate?"

"Sorry t' be disturbin' ye, sorr, but I've a man here, a stooraway, sorr."

"A stowaway!" Captain Elknur stood

glowering in the doorway. He was a tall man with sunken cheeks. His thin lips were somewhat softened by a close-cropped, gray mustache. Great veins laid pulsing ropes across his temples. There was a glitter in the large, dark eyes that was almost feverish. His hard gaze bored the mate's apologetic countenance, then turned its searing focus on the source of trouble.

The unbidden guest bowed extravagantly. His broad smile would have disarmed a kaiser.

"Mornin' t' you, cap'n, suh! Pow'ful proud t' make yo' 'quaintance. Tol'able warm, suh!" He fanned vigorously with his hat.

"The hell it is!" The master gave no quarter. "What are you doing on board my ship? How'd you get here? What's your name?"

"Calls me Sass'fras, cap'n, suh."

The skipper frowned, but a faint smile struggled for expression.

"Sassafras?" he echoed. He turned to the mate. "What does this mean, Mr. Guilfoyle? Haven't you been a deep-water sailor long enough to know where a stowaway is liable to hide—and a landsman, at that?"

"I have, sorr. But this was a most uncommon place, sorr. I found him shleepin' undern'ate th' shteward's onions!"

The master's scowl grew deeper. "You haven't found Chips tucked away in a ventilator or a lifeboat?"

"I have not, sorr. He's not aboard."

The skipper turned again to the newcomer. "What do you do for a living? What's your trade—when you're working?"

"Well, suh, cap'n, I's a all-'roun' man, suh. Come 'long de season I picks a little cotton."

"You're from the South, eh?"

"Yassah, boss, I's S'uth'n."

"Why didn't you stay where you belong—picking cotton and raising watermelons?"

"Don't do much good wid de melons whah I lives at, cap'n, suh. Groun's too rah."

"Rare?"

"Um-umh! Yassah. Plan em in de big of de moon an' de vines grows somethin' scan'lous."

"That's what you need, isn't it?"

"No, suh, cap'n. Too hard on de melons."

"What are you talking about? You want them to grow!"

"Too rambunctious! Vines grows so fas' dey weahs de melons out draggin' 'em 'roun'."

The mate coughed softly, avoiding the master's eye.

"Well," the skipper voiced at length, "we haven't any melons or cotton to pick. What else can you do?"

"Now, le's see, cap'n, suh. I—I drives a Fowd."

"Talk fast!"

"Den I works in de micah mines fo' a spell."

"Mica mines—in Louisiana?"

"No, suh, dese was up in Georgie."

"Mica—mica?"

"Micah, yassah, cap'n. You knows, dey uses 'em in de micahscopes. Leas', dat's whut de whi' folks tell me."

This last was too much for Captain Elknur. "Put him down with the black gang shoveling coal!" There was a tense finality in his tone.

"Lak t' forgot t' tell you, cap'n, suh. Las' job of work I had was in mah whi' folks' sawmill, down home in Alexand'a. 'Sides dat, I does a lil carpenterin' whin things gits dull."

"Carpentering?" The master glanced inquiringly at the mate. "Come in, Mr. Guilfoyle."

The door slammed, leaving Sassafras to his own conclusions. An occasional sound of laughter drifted out through the open ports. Then, there was much low-toned conversation, and a third voice joined the conference—a voice that was strange to Sassafras's ear.

"Wondah now whut dey's gwine t' do t' me?" the uneasy listener fretted. "I's hear'd turruble tales."

The master and the mate returned. Captain Elknur was carrying a copy of the ship's articles, which he was studying intently. "Sassafras, Sassafras?" he mumbled. "I don't see that name here, mate."

"An' have ye got th' shpellin' av ut, captain?"

"Carpenter—didn't he say he was a carpenter?" The skipper rubbed his chin with a thoughtful air. "Do you suppose the man's been drinking?" He looked up challengingly at the smiling Sassafras, who suddenly sobered. The master studied him intently, then returned his gaze to the paper in his hand. "Here's 'carpenter,' all right"—his lean finger traced the line—"but the name is Olson—'A. Olie Olson; nationality, Swede; hair, light; eyes, blue; age, thirty-two; sex, male.' It all seems to fit. Look here," he snapped, "did you sign that? What about it? This says your name is Olie Olson."

The persistent smile faded slowly from Sassafras's face. He stood dumbly blinking his bewilderment.

"Don't know nuthin' 'bout no papah writin', cap'n, suh. Down home dey calls me Sassafras—Sassafras Beleau, suh."

"But, here, you signed this, didn't you?" the master insisted. "Last night—before we sailed?"

"Well, suh, cap'n, it's a case of mout an' moutn't. I 'fess I mout—thin agin I moutn't. Fac' is, I don't 'zactly recomembah whut I done las' night, suh." He edged over shyly to inspect the evidence. "W'ich one you sez I scribe mahse'f, cap'n, w'ich one you sez?"

The dialogue was interrupted by a young man who stepped out of the master's office.

"Hello, Olie," he greeted, glancing casually enough in the direction of the gasping Sassafras. "Thought we'd left you behind."

"'Fo' Gawd, whi' folks, you-all ain't projecin' wid a po' cullud man, is you?"

"This man Olson seems a little muddled," Captain Elknur explained. "Says his name is Sassafras, or something like that. You saw him sign articles, didn't you, super?"

"I was right there with the commissioner, captain. Why, Olie, what's the matter with you? You remember me, don't you? You know the captain here and Mr. Guilfoyle, the mate?"

Sassafras blinked more violently and a puny smile came and departed as it warmed no welcoming response.

"Sort of 'pears lak I is seed you-all b'fo'," he wavered. "Then, too, seem lak I ain't. Whut you sez, cap'n, I's a Swede man?"

"That's what it says here on the paper," came the master's uncompromising response.

"Why, certainly," put in the supercargo. "That's all right, Olie. There it is in black and white—'A. Olie Olson.' That's Alias Olie—"

"Haw, haw, haw, haw—I gits y', whi' folks!" The great black frame rocked back and forth with laughter. "You means I's 'Lias? Now I knows mahse'f. Da's whut de jedge call me!" A cataract of laughter broke its bondage and poured forth without restraint.

"Take him forward, mate," directed Captain Elknur as he sought the shelter of his quarters. "Let him build himself a bunk in the carpenter shop."

"Suttunly 'bleeged to you, Mistah Cap'n," the newly christened 'Lias Olie called after the retreating figure of the skipper. But he swayed slightly as he spoke and placed a steadying hand on the thwartship railing. Again his anxious eye swept out across the lazy, tumbling ocean. "Sho' 'pears turruble rolly-lak," he lamented as his free hand felt vaguely for the solar plexus region. "Whah he sez I 'recks mah baid, Mistah Mate, suh? Um-umh! Ain't dey no way I kin git back home on de kyahs?"

For three days that followed 'Lias Olie was about as useful on the Eastern Breeze as a sea anchor aboard a prairie schooner. Gibes, entreaties, threats of violence—none were sufficient to evict him from his bunk. But on the fourth day the clamorous pangs of hunger began to work their magic, aided by a breeze from astern which wafted the faintest aroma of cooking toward the fo'castle head. 'Lias Olie sniffed, but weathered the breakfast hour without breaking his hibernation. Noon came, and the clatter of the dinner bell had scarcely sounded when there was a plaintive solicitation at the galley door.

"Mistah Cook Man, please, suh, I craves mah rations."

It was 'Lias Olie, smiling, though he was still a bit uncertain in the placing of his feet. The second cook, a wizened man of mongrel nationality, turned defiantly.

"So it's you, is it?" he whined in a rasping tone. "Pity y' couldn't have died, so there's be one less of you t' bother with!" He grasped a platter. "Beans?" he said in a voice that was never designed to convey inquiry.

"Um-umh! Me an' beans dig de trinches in Flandahs!"

"Spuds!"

"Go 'long, whi' folks, 'fo' I plum forgits mah stomick mis'ry!"

"Pork?"

"Um-umh! Whut I does t' po'k an' gravy! Reckon you ain't got no co'n braid?"

The lean cook chuckled, breaking a New Year's resolution. He took a soup bowl from the rack and filled it brimming full of coffee.

"No corn bread," he emitted, spearing three liberal slices of a pale variety with a vicious knife.

The ceremony of assimilation was little more than under way when the mate hove in view, coming down from the bridge where he had "shot the sun" for a noon position.

"'Tis yerself, is ut?" he exclaimed, drawing alongside the feasting carpenter. "Now ut's a shame ye can't take no nourishmint at all, at all!"

"I's jus' tol'able, Mistah Mate, suh, thanky. Mendin' slow. Specks by t'-morrah or mebby nex' day—"

"Or this afternoon, if I was t' tell ye I'd break that leather neck of yours."

"Um-umh! I sees you's 'sistent!" A slice of bread made a sweeping circle of 'Lias Olie's plate. "Whah de work at, boss man? Reckon mebby I kin manage t' han'le a lil light labah t' sort of buil' up mah appetite fo' suppah. Suttunly mighty hard on a po' travelin' cullud man. Um-umh! Han's, prepah yo'se'f fo' mo'tal labah!"

Sparks, the radio operator, came out of the saloon, followed by Morgan, third assistant engineer.

"Hello, Olie!" Morgan sauntered over and seated himself to the windward of the convalescent carpenter so that Olie was afforded full benefit of the fumes from a socially exiled corncob pipe. "Called off the food strike, I see," the engineer went on. "That's the way to do it. I could tell you were a sailor by the wave in your hair!"

'Lias Olie blanched and ducked the smoke screen. "Onsatisfyin'ist watah I'se eveh seed," he managed to articulate. "Don't crave no sailor ridin'. Wunst I gits back t' N'Orleans I neveh wants t' look no watah in de face—'ceptin', of cou'se, mah Sund'y baf."

"You must write the folks at home, Olie, and tell 'em what a good time you're having. Let's see, Sparks, we haven't passed that mail buoy, have we?" Morgan's emphatic wink was covered by a guarding hand.

"No," came the prompt intelligence. "I've got some letters of my own that I want to get off. Ought to be there to-night or to-morrow morning."

"Does w'ich, whi' folks? You all ain't tellin' me dey's got a mail man out heah in de middle of de 'Lantic Ochum!"

"Sure thing, Olie! Didn't you know that?" Sparks's countenance was grave. "First class service, I'm here to tell you. Mail buoy floats around with a flag and a light on it, so you can see it day and night. You drop your letters in and the fast mail airplane comes out and picks them up. By George, what's that now!"

There was a general movement toward the rail as Sparks pointed. "No. Guess that's not it." He moved forward slowly and up the ladder. "Think I'll get my letters ready," he called back. "Keep your eye peeled for the buoy, Olie. We don't want to miss him!"

"Whut de man mean, 'mail boy, mail boy'?" 'Lias Olie inquired earnestly. "'Pears t' me it's a man-size job if dey eveh was one. Um-umh! Floatin' roun' heah wid a flag an' a lante'n! Dat's one job I sure ain't got on hankerin' afteh!"

"May th' saints forgive ye!" The mate could contain himself no longer. "Go below in th' engine room, Olie, and ask th' first assistant t' give ye th' key t' th' anchor watch. Be careful, now, he don't

h'ave no left-handed moonkey wrinch at ye!"

There was a general demobilization as Olie grinned and set out on his endless quest.

That evening after supper Sparks retired to the shack to listen in on the universe. He had scarcely settled himself, chanting mild oaths against the cause of static, when there came a cautious, scarcely audible, rapping at the door.

"Who is it?" called the operator.

"Nobody, 'ceptin' 'Lias Olie, suh!"

"Come in, Olie. What's pressing on your brain?"

Olie entered cautiously, shying clear of the imposing array of wireless paraphernalia.

"Mail boy done pass', Mistah Sparks, suh?" he inquired at length.

Sparks cleared his throat impressively and adjusted his countenance to the proper mien.

"Not yet, Olie. Got your letter ready?"

Olie hung back shyly. "No, suh. Ain't got it 'zactly writ out on papah, suh. I kin write, Mistah Sparks, suh, whin I has to, but somehow I jus' natu'lly ain't got much fluency. 'Sides, suh, I'se got a mis'ry in mah lef' han'."

"I see—takes you a long time."

"Da's it, boss man. You writes it fo' me. Jus' scra'ch off a line or two fo' a po' cullud man, so we kitch de mail boy!"

"Sure thing, Olie." Sparks produced a pen and paper. "What's her name? We'll start it proper!"

"How come you knows I wants t' 'municate wid a woman? Um-uhm! You's de turrubilist w'ite man!" He vented his emotion with a convulsion of volcanic laughter.

"Man done read mah pulse an' foun' mah ailmints! Reckons I betteh tell you confidenshum-lak, jus' how I stan's." He edged closer. "Den you 'ranges de writin' propeh.

"You see, boss man, it's dis-a-way: I 'taches me a woman. Name's Benedicta. Whi' folks name her. I calls her Big Ben fo' showt. Gran' woman, Mistah Sparks, suh. Sort of cinnamon-cullah an' built stocky. Cooks fo' mah whi' folks down in Alexand'a. Um-umh! Cookin'ist woman! Da's how come fust I choose her.

"Well, suh, ever'thing pretty. Woman 'cepts me wid de limitation. 'Fo' she marry me I got t' git up fifty dollahs t' git a 'vorce fr'm her fust husban'. I argues he don't count, nohow. Bin gone fo' yeah. Reckons he done got kilt in de wah or bootleggin' some'ers. Turruble no count niggeh. But Benedicta, she 'sistent. Sez all her life she bin honin' fo' t' be a grass widdah woman. Sez she got de heart of a flappah, but ain't neveh had no chanst t' show her style."

'Lias Olie paused and registered a pained expression.

"Yassuh, gran' woman, boss man, 'ceptin' she got one turruble ailmint. Onreasonablist talkin' mouf! Starts it goin' an' walks right off an' leave it. Sometimes I thinks she oughter be in a sanitution. Wunst dat woman start dey ain't no stoppin'. 'Speck if Gabri'l blow his trompet she'd keep on talkin' 'til she finish whut she got t' say!

"I stan's fo' it—far's I'se able. Workin' in mah whi' folks' lumbah yawd an' puttin' fo' dollah an' a ha'f a week in de niggeh Trus' an' Temperance Bank whut dey organize las' fall.

"Turruble misname! I trus' 'em too fah. Dey ain't got no temp'ance. 'Cumulates mah fifty an' leaves it in de bank t' git de 'vorce fo' Benedicta come cou't time. Den I goes roun' t' de cashier an' axes him fo' mah lucre. Man figahs all oveh 'bout six piece' of papah, den tell me how he's turruble sorry dey ain't notify me in time so I could 'a' met mah obligation.

"'How come?' I ax him. Int'ist money, he sez, done et up all mah 'posit. He splains all 'bout how it works, an' I jus' fool him an' let on lak I undehstan'.

"Well, suh, I don't min' so much 'bout de money part, but do you know dat Benedicta woman wouldn't b'lieve me whin I tol' her! Sez I'se a bunglin' fool whut done sp'ilt her widdahin' chanstes. Lament she done condense her eyebrows, bought de spo't shoes an' roll 'em down stockin's. Sez it's mah fault she done cut her bes' Sunday dress off at de bottom in preparati'n fo' her deboot as a secon' chil'hood flappah. Accuses I ain't neveh put no money in de

trustin' bank. Intimates, point blank, I los' it learnin' de ivy twins de fox trot movemint. Talk? Boss man, you ain't neveh heah no conversashum! Reckin she talkin' yit!

"Da's how come I travels, Mistah Sparks, suh. Swea's off on de womin folks, but dey pesters me worser 'n de flies pesters a hoss whut ain't got no tail t' bresh 'em off wid. I goes t' 'Lanta. Der an ol' yellah featured blon' gal jus' waitin' t' pounce on me. Stockinist woman! Periwinklum, bonñah raid, whi' folks naked cullah—eveh day she weahs 'em diff'nt!

"I pass 'long t' Burnin'ham. Der I meets ol' heavy smoky! Woman so 'ligious eveh time I kisses her she hollas hallelu-liah! Al'ays beggin' fo' small change whut she sez she give t' de Lawd. I kitches him one evenin' onexpected, an' fin' him weahin' mah silk shirt whut dat woman done stole out of mah lawn'ry. I done her de favah t' let her wash fo' me.

"Trails 'long t' East St. Loois. 'Nother widah woman waylays me, whut sez her husban' got kilt in de masicree. Sez she done pick me t' venge his murdah. Plan out how I was t' 'sassinate a' Irish police, thin she 'ward me by marr'age an' me an' her leaves town. I lef' right den widout waiting fo' no futheh 'splainin'. Ain't no woman gwine t' make no crime wave out o' me an' keep mah picher settin' in de 'lect'i-cutum chair!

"Drifts on t' Noo Yawk—wea'in' blind-ahs fo' t' shiel' me fr'm de whiles of womin. Um-umh! Worstest place of all! Reetch out an' grabs me on de walk as I passes. One of 'em let on lak she gwine to take care of me 'cause I'se fr'm de s'uth whur she used t' live at. Sez dem nawth'n niggehs gwine t' gol' brick me outer mah money. I goes 'long sort of resistin' lak. Woman got a 'partmint whah dem trussel-runnin' trains pass right by de windah. Eveh time she axes me a question, 'fo' I kin say 'no,' de train come by an' she let on lak I sez 'yes.' 'Nounces our weddin' an' all 'fo' I'se 'quainted wid de situation.

"I 'sides dey ain't no use, 'cept I kin git me a woman-extracted island. 'Termin's I go back t' Benedicta 'fo' she take up wid some no 'count niggeh, talkin' lak he's gwine t' capitalize her 'vorce. 'Sides, I done got turruble lonesome fo' mah whi' folks down in Alaxand'a. Reckons I mus' be some kin-ship t' a honin' pigeon; gits t' honin' fo' de home surroundin's eveh time I gits away.

"Dat's how come I wants you t' write de placifyin' words t' Benedicta, Mistah Sparks, suh. Tell her if I don't git et up by de lions and tigahs whah we all's gwine at, I speck I come back t' Alexand'a.

"You knows how t' reach de womin! Make lak it's turruble dang'ous. Tell her I feels I'se done bin 'posed on an' set off to Af'ica t' git mahse'f trompled on by de elephan's. Tell her I might reconsidah if she was t' pa'ch up dat ol' house whut her onkle lef' her, an' set up de propah sort of 'stablishmint fo' de return of de projeckin' son. Tell her I'se constant, ain't neveh sacrifice mah disrespeck."

He concluded with a sigh, deep seated. "Reckon she's gwine t' git it, Mistah Sparks, suh? Reckon dat mail boy ain't done drown hisse'f?"

Sparks meditated. "Olie," he said, with the sudden impetus of inspiration, "you can't afford to be bothering with a mail buoy on a matter of such importance. Takes too long. I'll just shoot this in by wireless. Benedicta will get it to-night.

"Of course, you understand, under normal circumstances it would be pretty expensive. But you and I being friends, I think I can fix it up with the president of the company so it won't cost you anything. You can sort of show your appreciation by cleaning up the shack occasionally. I'll get right in touch with Benedicta. Alexandria, you say? That's near New Orleans, isn't it? Leave it to me, ol'-timer, I'll explain it better than the banker did about your interest money. Everything will be pretty when you get back. They'll meet you at the depot with a band and flowers."

"Sho' nuff!"

"War veteran stuff won't be in it alongside the great African lion tamer! Catches lions by the tails and snaps their heads off! Well, here goes."

'Lias Olie's bulging eyes spread wide with wonder. "You means you's gwine t' hol' speech wid Benedicta through dat 'range-mint on yo' haid?"

"That's the system, Olie. You just stand there a minute while I put in the call."

"Kin I hear dat woman talkin'?"

"Well, not exactly. But I'll write out the words for you—just what she has to say."

"Kin you stop her whin us wants t'?"

"Just like turning off the water—cut her short any minute we don't like the tune she sings!"

'Lias Olie rocked with volcanic laughter.

"Sho' got dat woman whah I wants her! She gwine t' fly up an' bust whin us onhooks her speechafyin'! Bust so loud we's gwine t' heah her clean out heah in de middle of de 'Lantic. Go 'haid, Cap'n Sparks, suh. Tell dat woman whut I sez!"

The operator made some quick adjustments. "*Da, da-a, da, da, da, da,*" sputtered the sending instrument.

"'Fo' Gawd, boss man!" 'Lias Olie was backing through the door. "I stan's outside, suh! Um-umh! Whut I can't see is how dat Benedicta woman's gwine t' comprehen' dat sawmill soun'?"

So on that night, and the nights that followed, elaborate messages cluttered the atmosphere between the Eastern Breeze and Benedicta's private receiving station. There were times that the gush of sentiment completely gummed the heavens. There were lightning flashes, too, and occasions when Sparks was forced to sever diplomatic relations due to Benedicta's vitriolic tongue. At such times the hapless woman was invariably cut short in the middle of a sentence, while 'Lias Olie rocked with laughter.

"Hol' her, Mistah Sparks, suh! Don't let dat varmint woman open her mouf wid no sich ruckus talk!"

But there were unexpected developments. Not content with the success of his achievement, Sparks tapped the occult. Harnessing impetus waves of ether he penetrated the mists beyond the Jordon, interrupting 'Lias Olie's forbears as they were strumming banjos in the celestial jazz orchestra, feasting on ambrosia! 'possum and sweet 'tatahs, or joy riding behind white chauffeurs—the souls of the damned—along traffic-copless streets of milk and honey.

The dead responded nobly, supplying the most startling information and advice. But 'Lias Olie's lack of appreciation was surprising. He developed no spiritualistic affinity.

"Don't want no conversashum wid no hant niggehs!" was his sweeping denunciation. And on evenings when Sparks was especially in tune with the souls of the departed, Olie invariably slipped away where he could not be found.

Yet there was one message that was repeated with such persistence that even 'Lias Olie was forced to take cognizance of its import.

"I'se Amazwazi," it read. "I'se yo' fo'-father whut was wunst king man of de Zulu nation. I 'vises you to return yo'se'f back t' Africa. Go claim yo' 'cendency. Repatriate yo'se'f!"

"Whut dat daid niggeh mean by 'patriatin' mahse'f?" Olie's brow bore the furrows of consternation.

"That's his way of telling you to go back to the land of you forefathers," Sparks explained. "Spirits always use big words like that."

"Newnited States is whah I lives at. Reckon dat fool hant thinks he's gwine 'tice me t' git mahse'f kilt by a pasel of mission'ry-eatin' Zulums! I'se done heard 'bout 'em! Tell dat man t' lay off pesterin' me 'bout mah 'patriatin'. Um-umh! Speck I look cozy in a stew!"

On the evening of the twenty-eighth day of the voyage, Captain Elknur sent in a radio message to Capetown announcing his anticipated arrival on the morning of the thirtieth day. There was an immediate response, embracing unforseen instructions. A railroad strike was in progress in the colony. The cargo of the Eastern Breeze, motor spirits and case oil for transshipment to the interior, was to be landed at Durban, port for Natal.

There was a flurry of figuring on board—the checking of food stores, fuel and fresh water, but as the change called for only three days' additional steaming, Captain Elknur altered his course and rounded the Cape. In due time they made fast to the Durban dock. Immigration officers came aboard with the doctor and promptly asked

that the crew be mustered for inspection. Greeks, Poles, Swedes, Spaniards came forward sullenly in answer to the malpronunciation of their names.

"A. Olie Olson!" called the officer as he ran hurriedly down the list. "Carpenter—Swede—hair, light—eyes, blue—who the 'ell!" He suffered violent interruption as 'Lias Olie hove in view and smiled.

The supercargo leaned over and whispered in the ear of the dumbfounded officer. "Old Man would like to talk to you about this Olie Olson—understand?"

Being an immigration officer and not a New York prohibition agent, the man in the king's uniform comprehended the drift of the remarks. Visions of cartons of the much-coveted American cigarettes floated tantalizingly before his mental vision.

"Jolly well right I understand, Ol' Fruit!" He directed an emphatic nudge just above the starboard shortrib of the unsuspecting super. "Always glad to 'ave an hopportunity to accommodate an American skipper!" A second nudge would have proved fatal, but the supercargo dodged. "Omar Ayhzam—messman!" the Britisher summoned, and 'Lias Olie passed unmolested on his way.

It was well into the afternoon when these formalities were concluded. There was no thought of working cargo until the following day. There was a general exodus shoreward which 'Lias Olie watched with loose-lipped longing. Mustering his courage he retired to his quarters and soon emerged in the full splendor of his suit of blue. The yellow shoes shone joyfully. In his hand he carried the master's shark-backbone walking stick.

"Dis heah Af'ica?" he broadcasted as he stood firmly on the dock and gazed dubiously down the long row of concrete warehouses and railroad tracks. "Don't see no lions or beahs or ostrimiches! Uhuh! Powerful proud t' stan' whah mah feet tetch bottom!"

He moved off cautiously, the whites of his great eyes making conspicuous highlights as his apprehensive glances swept from side to side.

"Ain't takin' no chanstes," he soliloquized, then paused and promptly became absorbed in another problem. "I jus' stan's heah an' sees if I kin count mah money."

He extracted several bills and some small change from his pocket. "Dis heah's a poun'. Don't seem neah so heavy. Mus' be wah-time measure. Sho' scan'lous de way dey does!"

"Dis heah's a shillun. Pass 'em off fo' two-bit pieces, de cap'n tell me. Dis heah little 'n—whut he calls it? Look lak a dime whut ain't growed up. Small change, I disremembahs yo' title! Reckons you's so 'significan' ain't no 'casion t' be powerful 'ticular—da's it! 'Ticky.' Dat whut de whi' folks calls it. Ticky! Mos' curious name fo' spendin' money. Wondahs if dey—"

'Lias Olie stopped—sudden. His great jaw dropped and he began to stare. Approaching from the direction of the city, unconcernedly trotting between the shafts of a ricksha, came a husky Zulu. Crowning his head, Mephisto fashion, spread two majestic horns. Between them bristled a galaxy of bright colored quills. He wore a sleeveless jacket with a gay bandana pattern, short running pants and a belt from which there dangled a heterogeneous assortment of souvenirs. His feet and legs were bare, chalked white in imitation of socks. Above the knees were crude designs, inexplicably savage.

'Lias Olie stood his ground though the prod of flight was strong within him. The Zulu also was impressed. He brought his ricksha to a sudden standstill and dropped the shafts. He muttered deep-toned, intangible phrases. His voice was strangely vibrant.

The carpenter of the Eastern Breeze began to side-step. He moved cautiously, keeping the freedom of the open road before him. Round and round they circled like fighting cocks before a barnyard battle. But curiosity won.

"'Fo' Gawd, blacker'n I is," Olie voiced at length. "How come you grows dem hawns on yo' haid?" The sound of his own voice magnified his courage. "Runnin' roun' heah wid yo'se'f hitched up t' a baby buggy—Mistah Ringlum brother circus done come t' town!"

"Lopiside, dunghow, huhu!" came the unencouraging response.

"Jus' sidetrack dat foolishnus, niggeh. I knows you fo' whut you is. Talk Newnited States 'fo' I busts you loose fr'm dat mardi-gras raimint! Stan' roun' heah w'ilst I sees how you looks whin you's gwine. Um umh!" He extended a cautious hand, fingering the trinkets that hung from the Zulu's waist. "I 'clares, you's worser'n a postum stamp collectah!"

There was a small bell, several tobacco tags, a brass cuff-link, a nail file, a shoe horn, a bottle opener, an iron washer, a spark plug and a small white button bearing the imprint of a familiar face. "Vote for William Jennings—" 'Lias Olie spelled out the words laboriously.

"Go 'way fr'm heah, Af'ican, you ain't even a 'publican! Ise got mah 'pinion of a black man whut'll vote fo' a polititian whut sez it take sixteen niggehs t' make one w'ite man."

But the poignancy of Olie's admonition was lost on his companion. The Zulu picked up the shafts of his vehicle and wheeled it into reverse position, facing the town. He stood pawing the dust with an impatient movement.

"Me beeg-a-boy! Me beeg-a-boy!" he managed to articulate. It was his first intelligible utterance.

"You ain't no bigger'n I is!" came Olie's prompt rebuttal.

"Me beeg-a-boy!" the Zulu calmly repeated. He lowered the shafts of his ricksha, pointed to the seat and grinned.

"You wants me t' mount dat v'locipede?" Olie's tone bespoke his righteous indignation. "Gits me in dar an' dumps me back'ards! I knows you' game. Don't have t' come all de way t' Af'ica t' git dumped out of no go-cart."

A jangling bell announced another coming. Olie turned. A second Zulu, clad much like the first, came running gingerly between the shafts of a ricksha in which two white men sat complacently.

"Reckons dey is meant t' p'rambulate 'bout in! I mounts mah chariut!" He clambered aboard, poised and held fast to the armrests as the seat swung backward. It was a sensation similar to riding a camel. But Olie was no camel driver. He remained tense, carefully guarding his stick and his balance and making a desperate effort to appear at ease as he was whisked along the road then into the more important streets and to the heart of Durban.

It was early twilight when the captain and the supercargo strolled out of the Hotel Royal and across the park before it. Attracted by a crowd that had gathered in a far corner of the parkway, they sauntered over, mildly curious, when their attention was arrested by a familiar sound.

"Um—umh! Who fades dis Swedish cullud man? I shoots two shilluns 'g'inst dat bracelet in yo' ear!"

The master led the way, edging slowly through the cordon of curious spectators.

"Shoot, Blacker'n-I-is! Eight's yo' point. De bones bounce agil'. Iv'y may come fr'm Af'ica, but its done forgot its home!"

Close enough, at last, to catch a glimpse of the inner circle, a curious spectacle met the seamen's gaze. Crouching on their haunches were a dozen or more great-horned Zulu ricksha runners. Their eyes, wide with curious interest, focused upon one 'Lias Olie Olson, who, resting on one knee, had a mound of gaudy trinkets piled before him. His hat, turned upward on the ground, held a tempting heap of coins and dirty paper money. Beeg-a-boy was shooting.

"Lopiside! Ewe! Boomshang! Donga!" The dancing ivories spun and skidded to their rest.

"Yo' money. Um—umh! Big Zulum boy done make three turruble passes!"

"Kopaja! Koekerbloom! Klook! Induna!"

"Um—umh! Onst mo' Miss Phoebe tresspass' on mah 'fections!"

"Labola! Ou! Pa! Mowa!"

"I shoots de hat you can't six, Blacker'n-I-is! I shoots de proceeds 'g'inst yo' chariut wagon, yondah!" 'Lias Olie pushed the hat of money forward into the arena. He pointed to the Zulu's ricksha that was parked near by.

Beeg-a-boy rose to his feet, still shimmying the ivories. He glanced hesitatingly in the direction of the ricksha and shook his head.

"Puts in mah buckeye!" came Olie's swift concession. "Brings me luck if I wins—luck's yourn if I loses!"

Beeg-a-boy pointed with his foot to the gaudy mound of ornaments.

"I sac'ifices de jool'ry!" Olie swept the trinkets forward with a grandiloquent air.

The Zulu stooped and rolled. 'Lias Olie's tone grew plaintive.

"Beeg-a-boy can't six! Three ways t' make it. Eight she lay! Um—umh, I'se turruble far fr'm home. Fo' she clattah! Learn a man a game and he's sho' t' run you raggid. Hot man! Done fo'd ag'in. Um—umh! Seben done 'cended! I owns de liv'ry! Stan' 'roun' heah, horse-man, I craves t' ride!"

For two days that followed 'Lias Olie basked in the sunlight of fortune's favor. But on the third night he announced he would never again set foot on the African shore. His buoyancy had departed. The looseness of his under lip and the drag of his heels accented his dejection.

"Whi' folks, I'se ruint!" he confided as he drew close to Sparks and the supercargo who were leaning against the rail.

"What's the matter, Olie? Lost your money shooting craps?"

"Lawd no, Mistah Sparks, suh. Neveh frets mahse'f 'bout mah finance. Plum cluttered up wid de money lucre. Iv'y tumblahs 'splies mah spendin'. Womin's mah downfall."

Beyond this Olie was noncommittal. It was only in response to the most subtle leading he was at length induced to divulge the secret of his unrequited love.

"I see a woman," he warmed eventually to the confidence. "Wouldn't 'a' took no notice 'ceptin' she look so much lak Benedicta. 'Sembles two gochers in de shell—'ceptin" of course, dis Af'ica woman somewhut mo' brunettified. I see her on de street weahin' one of dem gunny-sack kimonahs—hole cut in de top t' poke de haid through, two slits fo' de arms an' a string 'round' de middle! Reckons you all done seed 'em. Had her hair done up lak a' ice-cream cone. Does 'em up wid mud. Uh—uh! Sho' stan's up gran'!

"I pass' her by. But de woman neveh pay no 'tention t' me. Pass' her by ag'in. Coughs sort of 'er—hum', lak. Look' right on th'u me lak I was glass. I ain't ustin' t' no sich treatmint. Makes ol' Blacker'n-I-is ride me out whah she live at. Sort of make out lak he' got person'l 'jections, but I flash mah lucre. Takes me t' a pasel of haystacks. Crawls, dey calls 'em. Got a' crawl in a hole t' git inside. Niggehs runnin' 'roun' 'mos lak dey was borned. Womin folks weahin' dese 'celsior dresses lak de hoolum dancers weahs.

"I makes de 'quaintence of dis Benedicta-lookin' woman. Couldn't talk none, 'ceptin' de bat-her-eyes-an'-grin langwich. Turruble curi'us feelin'. Sort of 'barrassed me at fust. Jus' lak havin' Benedicta wid all modern 'provemints—shock absorbahs on her conversashum. Y'all 'stan's whut I mean!"

'Lias Olie wagged his head in full emphasis of his appreciation. But the pall of gloom again descended.

"Da's far's I travels. Can't seem t' git no toeholt on dis woman's 'fections. Done swore off womin, but I jus' can't stan' t' be 'tirely overlook' lak I ain't got no winnin' qualities."

"I'll tell you, Olie, you'll have to resort to a little strategy," the supercargo advised after a moment's meditation. "Now, for example, women like clothes. It doesn't make much difference whether she's a Zulu or an Eskimo—give her a feather and she'll stick it in her hair. I'd suggest you buy—"

A messboy was passing, carrying a bag of flour from the storeroom to the galley.

"I've got it!" came the supercargo's inspiration. "Wait a minute. I want to see the steward."

He darted off across the deck and was swallowed by the shadows of the passage. He returned shortly, carrying something on his arm.

"Here you are, Olie!" he called. "Grandest assortment of the latest Paris models! Gunny-sacks, flour-sacks, meal-sacks that are guaranteed to run any Zulu woman wild!" He spread his showing carefully along the railing. "There, now. Here's one marked 'Purity.' Handsome big red letters! If that doesn't win a heart I don't know women!"

A broad smile spread itself across 'Lias Olie's features.

"You means I s'plies de raimints?" he warmed. "Um—umh! She' pow'ful gran' sacks. Likes dat 'Pur'ty 5 one de bestis—specks I calls her Pur'ty whin she weahs it. Ain't got no itheh name. Y'all reckon its long 'nuf, whi' folks? Dis Zulu woman ain't no Noo Yawk flappah!"

Sparks interrupted. "Ollie," he pronounced solemnly, "I got another message from Amazwaza last night. Says he's going to send down the wrath of the Lightning Bird on your head if you don't fulfill your mission!"

'Lias Olie squirmed uneasily. "Ain't payin' no 'tention to no hant niggeh, Mistah Sparks, suh."

"You're making a mistake. Remember, you're a king! Repatriate yourself! Go ashore and show these Zulus what sort of kings they turn out down New Orleans way. Then everything will be pie. What you need is some little thing that will convince them of your kingly power. I can fix that for you, Olie, if you'll just do what I say."

Only with the greatest persuasion was Olie induced to submit to the installation of the paraphernalia necessary to carry out Sparks's plan. It consisted of a small storage battery, carried in the pocket of the coat, and wires that concealed themselves beneath the lining. The result was that a tiny carbon lamp was made to flare most unexpectedly from the bosom of the carpenter's shirt.

But here again, Sparks would not rest with a partial victory. By two connections down the sleeves, terminating at metal bands about the wrist, 'Lias Olie himself was converted into a human battery. The program was that by the laying on of the hands Olie should demonstrate his kingly power. It was a severe test.

Three perfectly good batteries with their supplementary equipment were completely demolished by Olie's vigorous contortions when the current was turned on. A fourth trial and the potential ruler was induced to stand the pressure. The shocking power of the battery was, in fact, insignificant. Its potence lay in its unexpectedness.

The night was consumed in experimentation. On the next day, Sunday, 'Lias Olie stepped ashore. There was a new assurance in his bearing. Beneath his arm he carried an assortment of gunny-sacks a dusky Queen of Sheba would have prized.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday came and Olie had not returned. Two days more and the Evening Breeze would sail. Sparks and the super grew a bit uneasy. Perhaps they had overdone the game!

They devoted the following afternoon to the solution of the mystery. Visiting the largest kraal in the vicinity of Durban, they began their search. There were some two hundred units—inverted cones of straw—scattered about with no regard for order and dotting a bare, smooth campus that had been beaten hard by the tramping of naked feet.

Women, clad in short grass skirts, stared with immobile features from kennel-like doorways. Nude children trooped curiously in the wake of the strangers. There were occasional adult males, sleek, stalwart specimens of nature's artistry. Some carried long, tapering hunting spears and cowhide shields that were striped across in a crude expression of the decorative instinct.

Sparks was for giving up the quest when the supercargo's attention was attracted by a hut, larger than the rest. It stood a little to one side and was encircled by a six-foot fence of split bamboo. It was shaded by a giant pepper tree. Squatting on their haunches in a semi-circle before the entrance was an audience of perhaps a hundred silent men. As the white men stared, 'Lias Olie himself stepped boldly into the foreground. His arms were folded with Napoleonic majesty.

It was an imposing sight. Olie had turned his coat so that the lining of the sleeves was outward. This was red, striped with yellow. His stiff straw hat had shed its top and brim. The remaining upright band was cut in saw-tooth fashion, resembling a crown. He retained the prided yellow shoes, but the trouser legs were rolled knee-high, exposing two grotesque calves, highly ornamented by strange white markings. Even in the light of the tropic day the lamp flared intermittently on his breast.

Modestly in the background, her hair done high in its mud coiffure, sat Purity. She was resplendent in a prim, new frock-de-gunny—the grace and chicness of its lines bespeaking importation! In her eyes there flared that adoration that has inspired all art, that has builded Romes and has been responsible for men's stiff collars. Leaning against the pepper tree, frankly disconsolate, was Beeg-a-boy. Close by, a chariot awaited the king's command.

Sparks and the supercargo concealed themselves behind a tree.

"I'se 'Lias Olie!" came a bellowing sound. "I'se 'Lias Olie fr'm Loosiana! Come heah t' 'patriate mahse'f! Gwine t' king oveh you common Af'icans!"

He paused impressively to let his words sink in.

"I knows you's ign'ant. Can't even understan' whut I sez. But I'se gwine learn you t' speak Newnited States. I'se gwine t' learn y' de shimmy dance. I'se gwine t' learn y' how t' cook co'n braid an' sweet 'tatahs, N'Orleans fashion!

"Meantime, all you got t' do is tote me high. I eats lions an' tigahs fo' bre'fus. Sometime I eats 'em 'live! Brung up as a baby on rattlesnake pie! Now I shows some mo' mah powah!"

'Lias Olie began to gyrate in fantastic circles. Before his awe-inspiring advance his audience prudently retreated. There was one exception—a wizened veteran who sat astride his spear.

Olie circled closer. He closed in, moaning after the custom of a bull that has lost its way. His white-palmed hands waved above the squatting Zulu's head. They descended slowly, one finding rest on the naked, sweating shoulder, the other grasping the metal spear.

There was a jolt and then a shriek that frightened the birds from the topmost branches of the pepper tree. Sparks and the supercargo were never certain whether it was Olie or the Zulu who bellowed louder. But it was the Zulu who put his impression into emphatic action. With a bound that spilled the unsuspecting Olie in a most unkingly attitude upon the palace ground, the veteran took an unceremonious departure. Hurdling high, he disappeared through a hedge of prickly thorns—headed junglewards!

The effect was dynamic. There was a milling among the Zulus and a babble of excited voices. It was obvious that the tones expressed both awe and unqualified approval.

Olie gathered himself together and regained his feet. The spear was still in his hand, but he flung it wide. Inadvertently enough it stuck, quivering, in a tree. This added to the general impression.

"'Fo' Gawd!" 'Lias Olie exclaimed in an undertone as he hastily disconnected the battery. "Sho' turruble med'cine! Hopes I don't have t' put on no mo' matinees t' keep dese triflin' Zulums placified!"

At this point the white men showed themselves. 'Lias Olie tipped his crown.

"Come fo'ward, whi' folks," he summoned solemnly with a strenuous effort to maintain a sober mein. He led the way into the welcome shelter of his kingly dwelling.

Secure within, Olie muffled his mouth with a flour sack he had conserved from Miss Purity's wardrobe. His mirth at length subsided he came up for air.

"Gent'men," he began, "y'all sho' fix it right fo' 'Lias Olie! Ise got dat Pur'ty woman eatin' out of mah han'! Got six Zulum niggehs whut brings me a drink of watah. Boss yarb doctah fr'm somewhurs up in de junglums gwine t' be heah t'morrah t' tes' mah powah. Iffin I 'ceeds in placifyin' him, an' lives th'u it mahse'f, I gits de kingin' job fo' perm'nint! Mistah Super, suh, you tell de cap'n how come I ain't gwine back t' N'Orleans wid him. Mistah Sparks, suh, I counts on you t' tell dat Benedicta woman how I done 'patriate mahse'f!"

On the following morning the Eastern Breeze finished receiving cargo. Her bunkers had been replenished and at three o'clock a tug was alongside, the gangway up and the pilot on the bridge had shouted to let go all lines forward.

But there was a commotion at the far end of the dock and out of a cloud of dust there emerged two running figures. As they approached it was strikingly apparent that one wore strange red coat sleeves. The

other, a ship's length or more astern, was huge and very black. He was gaily clad as a ricksha runner and pranced, true Zulu fashion, branishing a wicked battle spear above his head.

"Heah I is, cap'n!" came the far-off breathless information. "Heah 'Lias Olie!"

But the tug whistled and the bow of the big steamer swung slowly out from the dock.

With one mighty leap the foremost runner cleared the widening chasm and clung, gasping, to the gunwale. He was dragged to safety just as the pursuing savage hurled his spear. The weapon clattered harmlessly upon the metal deck.

'Lias Olie slowly adjusted himself and stood industriously mopping a profusely perspiring brow.

"Reckons if I hadn't a'had de mor'l 'sistance of dat Beeg-a-boy behin' me I'd 'a' miss' dis steamboat!"

Sparks came forward hurriedly. "Why, if it isn't 'Lias Olie. We thought you'd decided to stay!"

Olie's grin was sheepish as he pulled a battery from his pocket.

"Tell you, Mistah Sparks, suh, dis heah thing quit powahfyin' jus' whin dat yarb doctah come t' tes' mah 'patriation! Um—umh! Dem Zulums is de turrublist ongratifying people—ain't got no company mannahs a-tall. 'Ceptin' ol' Beeg-a-boy, yondah. He seed me off t' de depot!"

Sparks took the battery. "Why you're burnt out, that's all. You're burnt out!"

"All? All's a-plenty! You 'scribes mah sent'mints. Burnt out? Sho' is! Rathuh be jus' plain niggeh in de Newnited States dan a king man down in dis Zulumpestered Af'ica. Um—umh! Neveh did care fo' dat Pur'ty woman, nohow. She too silentified. I lake 'em whut can chattah!"

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THE SILENT SELF

WHAT'S in my mind?
Have you the right to know?
A sacred thing—
To you most premature:
I would not bear it to the light
And air
Until its wings are strong,
'Twould be unfair.

Ah, yes, I married you—
Does that imply
I bartered off
The individual, I?
So you demand an answer?
Oh, how blind!
Can Love not tell you
What is in my mind?

Margaret Severance.

The Fenton-Acme Merger

By GEORGE C. JENKS

WHEN Dougal Brent first heard that the Acme Condiment Company was about to take over the Fenton Pickle Works, merging the two concerns into one, he simply refused to believe it. No matter that the information came direct from Perry Fenton himself, the thing was inconceivable. And so he told the young man who now was head of the firm his father had established more than half a century before.

Young fellows like Perry — he wasn't much over forty—made hasty statements of this kind on a very slight foundation. Of course Dougal, as confidential bookkeeper—he had always refused the title of "manager" — knew that the Acme had been making overtures for a year and more. But that the great Fenton Pickle Works, with its well-established, high-class trade covering the whole American continent and competing with the best of similar products in Europe—where pickle making is popularly supposed to have reached perfection —could be induced to lose its identity and pass out of its original ownnership, was not to be thought of.

It was true, business of late had not been up to its old standard. Since the elder Perry Fenton, founder of the enterprise to which he had given the family name, had passed away three years before, young Perry, with advanced ideas of "efficiency" —a high sounding word which meant only newfangledness after all—had endeavored to produce goods of the Fenton superlative grade by new processes with cheaper raw material.

The consequence of this false economy had been inevitable. The only one of the forty-five numbers manufactured in the Fenton works which did not show a heavy

falling off was the world renowned Rangoon Relish. This was a ketchup of singularly appetizing properties, made by a secret combination of which Dougal Brent alone knew the formula. When a fresh supply of the Rangoon was to be made, it was Dougal's custom not only personally to supervise the mixing, frequently using a thermometer in the simmering liquid, but to pass out the carefully measured ingredients one by one. Most of these could be recognized at a glance by the experienced factory employees.

But there were two articles in the mixture—rare herbs imported direct from a confidential agent in India — which were guarded so jealously that no workman in the Fenton factory could say what they were. Nothing could prevent their guessing, of course, but, as Dougal had remarked with a grim smile, more than once, to Perry, on coming back to the office after a day spent in the pungent atmosphere of the vat room, their guesses were always hopelessly wrong.

Rangoon Relish was the star number listed in the Fenton catalogue. A large number of gallons was bottled and shipped every week, and the demand from all parts of the world always remained about the same. When there was any variation, it was sure to be upward. And this precious item, which the Acme for years had been vainly endeavoring to duplicate, would go with the rest in case of a merger.

"Ridiculous!"

Dougal Brent was alone in the office he shared with Perry Fenton, but it relieved him to sum it all up aloud in this one scornful ejaculation. Since he had first heard of the merger, a week before, he had often used the word.

He lifted a gray head from the interior of his rolltop desk and glanced around the room wrathfully with eyes that seemed younger than his hair. Then he got up and walked to the window.

The ugly brick factory, with its tall smokestack and its many windows, lay before him. It was connected with the office building by a short passageway, so that it was easy for Dougal at any time to step to the door and look along a vast room in which bottles, jars and cans were packed for shipment. The boilers and big vat rooms were below, and other departments for the preparation of various sauces, condiments and preserves were in the upper stories.

A railroad spur ran through the spacious yard, and a freight car in process of loading lay against one of the wide doorways, the double doors flung open. On the side of the car was an immense four color poster, showing a picture of a bottle bearing on its label the legend "Rangoon Relish, the World's Favorite Ketchup." Above was "Made only at the Fenton Pickle Works, Rising City, New York." Dougal smiled affectionately for a moment as his eyes ran over the familiar picture and words. The poster had been designed by himself.

And to think of all this passing under the control of the blatant, upstart Acme Company! Why, Perry must be crazy!

Dougal went back to his desk in a shadowy corner. But though he took up some papers in his left hand and a pen in his right, as if he were going busily to work, he only stared sadly and motionlessly into the pigeonholes before him, as he murmured below his breath, again and again: "He must be crazy!"

He was brought to himself by the outside door opening with a bang. Simultaneously a harsh, domineering voice filled the office. Dougal's brows came down. If there was anything he hated it was a loud mouthed man. It was his conviction, as it had been that of the elder Perry Fenton, that business should be conducted in low or moderate tones, with decent pauses for the arranging of ideas—not forced along helter skelter, in a rude, disturbing bellow.

"All right, Fenton!" were the first words Dougal heard, obviously continuing a conversation begun outside. "We can settle the remaining details of the merger now, if you like. It's to be a clean sweep, so it 'll be very simple."

A clean sweep! Dougal Brent, in his darkened corner, winced. He knew that exasperatingly raucous voice. It belonged to Rankin Clarke, president of the Acme Condiment Company. For one ferocious

instant Dougal visioned Mr. Clarke's head, with its immaculate shining black hair, plunging into a vat of hot vinegar, with Dougal himself directing the process. Then, as the familiar creak of Perry Fenton's revolving chair mingled with the scrape of another chair dragged over the bare floor, Clarke went on, in a roar that Dougal mentally stigmatized as downright bullying:

"When we've come to a general agreement here this morning, I'll have my attorney draw up the transfer papers, with everything itemized, ready for you and your lawyer to examine. We ought to be ready to sign up some time this week. That's the way I like to do business—right off the bat. It's been my policy with the Acme since father died, and look where our company is to-day. Yours had been running forty years before ours started, and to-day I am buying you out."

"*Not yet!*"

Coming from the interior of a rolltop desk, the interruption sounded preternaturally hollow. Dougal Brent's white face, with its thin gray hair and heavy brows, as he turned in his chair, was distorted with passion.

He had not meant to break into the conversation at the large flat desk in the center of the room. But—he had helped the elder Perry Fenton to get the business going when Rising City was nothing but a hamlet, and he had become an integral part of the Fenton Pickle Works. The fragrance of hot vinegar was his breath of life. He had worked there every business day for more than fifty years, had given young Perry his first insight into the art and mystery of pickle making, and had been his tutor in bookkeeping and the routine of the office. The father often used to say that while young Perry would never be a first-class pickle man, what he *did* know he had gained from Dougal Brent.

"I beg your pardon," said Dougal, in response to the mute indignation in Rankin Clarke's hard face. "But, you know, Mr. Clarke, I have become so used to the Fenton Pickle Works belonging only to a Fenton, that the thought of its passing into other hands rather knocked me over."

"I should say it did," retorted Clarke. "But what did you mean by 'Not yet?' Do you control the Fenton works?" he added, with snarling sarcasm. He turned to Perry Fenton, who, middle-aged and square-jawed, was strangely deferential to the rat-like Rankin Clarke, at least ten years his junior. "Is there anything to prevent this deal going through right away, Fenton?"

"Not that I know of," answered Perry, with a touch of weariness.

"All right, then!" barked Clarke. "I suppose we can talk before—" He waved a hand at Dougal, who had returned to his desk and seemed to be busy with his work.

For an hour Perry Fenton and Rankin Clarke talked over the affairs of the Fenton Pickle Works. Dougal absorbed it all subconsciously. There was nothing new to him in Perry's statement. The Fenton works were doing a good business, Perry said slowly, in reply to a direct question.

"Not so good as two years ago—or even last year," chuckled Clarke in grinning spite. "What about the Rangoon Relish?"

"Selling more than ever," was Perry's ready answer. He was sure of himself there.

Dougal Brent could hardly help turning around to look at Rankin Clarke at this juncture. But he didn't. He kept on writing.

"I'll make a separate item of the Rangoon Relish," remarked Clarke, referring to some memoranda in a pocket notebook. "You will turn over the Rangoon formula with the rest of the papers of the Fenton concern, I suppose? Wouldn't care to let me see it now?"

"It is secret," was Perry's cold reply.

Dougal's shoulders had become tense when Rankin Clarke made his insolent suggestion. They relaxed as Perry's curt answer swept it away.

"That's all right," responded Clarke carelessly. "It will be our secret in a day or two. I thought it might be convenient to the Acme to have an idea in advance of the kind and quantity of material we shall have to order for it. But it isn't important. I suppose you have some on hand we can use until we lay in more."

Perry let this go by without comment. The conference, now drawing to a close, had been devoted to the gathering up of loose ends in connection with the impending buying up of the Fenton Works, so that the Acme Condiment Company's attorney would be able to prepare with completeness the bill of sale and other legal documents to be signed for the transfer.

Clarke snapped a rubber band around the papers, pocketed them and got up to go.

"Well, I guess that's all," he said. "The Acme takes over the whole Fenton plant, including the good will, stock on hand, machinery, recipes and so on, with the factory and office buildings, real estate and all other possessions involved in the manufacture of pickles, preserves, ketchups and other products controlled by you. Right?"

Perry Fenton nodded. Dougal drew a long hissing breath and broke the point off his pen.

Clarke had reached the door, when he turned to say with a grin: "By the way, I hear you have been after that L. & F. chain store contract. If you could have landed that, it would have put a different face on matters, eh? No chance, though! The Acme has a strangle hold there. You can stick a pin in that."

Dougal, fitting a new pen into his holder, became suddenly interested and his fingers ceased to move.

"A juicy contract too, I'll say," went on Clarke. "The L. & F. has more than a thousand stores scattered over the country. This contract won't cover them all, of course, but the factory that supplies them with pickle goods even in the Eastern zone will do more than five hundred thousand dollars' worth of business a year. That's what this contract means. I don't mind saying the Acme has this in mind in taking over the Fenton. We shall need all the facilities of the two factories to handle the L. & F. business, and in a very short time will have to put up new buildings. Well, good day, Fenton! I'm sorry you have got into this hole. But what do you care? You'll have all the money you need to enjoy life without working, and you know yourself you were never cut out for the pickle business. Good day!"

With a short laugh that was the quintessence of overbearing insolence, Rankin Clarke swaggered out, leaving the door wide open. He was the type of man who leaves doors open.

Dougal arose quietly and closed the door. Then he stood behind the chair in which Clarke had been seated, his long white fingers playing nervously on its back, and for a few moments regarded Fenton in silence. When he did speak it was to make a curious request.

"Perry, come and look out of the window, will you?" he said.

At another time Perry Fenton might have asked, somewhat irritably, why he should trouble to look out at a view with which he had been familiar from boyhood. But he had had more than an hour of Rankin Clarke, and his vitality and self-respect alike were low. He was in an unusually meek frame of mind. So, as there was a barely distinguishable note of authoritativeness in the summons, but one which Perry had not energy enough to resist, he arose with a jaded ejaculation under his breath and joined Dougal, who was already staring out through the glass.

"There's you factory, Perry—the one your father established before you were born," said Dougal, without turning. "I was with him when he bought the plant and installed the equipment. He knew good stuff, and much of what he set up then is in use to-day. He was progressive too, in a conservative way, and the Fenton Works have always kept up with the times. Fenton pickles are among the best in the world."

Dougal spoke evenly, as one stating obvious facts. If there was a quiver in his low voice, possibly the younger man did not detect it.

"I know that, Dougal," answered Perry softly. "And I'm sorry to let the business go. But what's the use? We could carry on for another year—perhaps longer. But we are steadily going down, and here is a chance to get out without much loss. In another year, we might not be able to make such good terms. The Acme is gobbling up our trade, and I can't help it. I'm *through*."

Dougal was not a profane man habitually, but the oath of impatience he spat out made Perry shrink as if dodging a physical blow.

"The Lord hates a quitter!" Dougal flung forth the rather shopworn dogmatism as a fitting addendum to the fierce "Damn!" he had been unable to restrain.

"I wouldn't quit if there was a chance," protested Perry.

"There's *always* a chance in a fight," Dougal snapped back. "Neither a man nor a business is out till the knockout punch comes. Very often it never does come. Anyhow, it's better to be beaten to the floor in the last round then to throw up the sponge early in the battle because you're afraid of punishment."

Dougal liked to read a well written account of a lively boxing match. In his younger days he had enjoyed putting on the gloves himself.

"I'm not afraid," was Perry's reply, and he flushed as he spoke. "But you know that we have been losing customers ever since father died. It was his personality that held up the business. When he had gone, our goods were compared with others on their merits, and the judgment was against us. We've been undermined, too—I'm certain of that."

Dougal shrugged incredulously.

"If we had turned out the same class of goods your father did, we could have held our trade on our merits," he declared. "Perry Fenton was popular, but not more so than his son is. I tell you, Perry, there is just one explanation of all this. That is, poor goods made from cheap materials, and false economy in the conduct of the factory. But there is no use going over that again. You know my sentiments."

"What did you bring me to this window for?" demanded Perry, abruptly changing the subject.

"So that you would be reminded of what you want to give up." Dougal's flash of anger had given way to a sadness that bowed his gray head. "Look at that factory. Your father built it, and he told me many a time he hoped it would never go out of the family. Who live in those frame houses on the hill? Fenton Pickle Works people. I know every one by name. They are our friends. They love the factory. Do you suppose they will ever feel the same with a strange firm running it? Of course, that may be all mush and gush, but I can't help it, Perry—I can't help it. Why, Rising City was built by your father, and he felt that it was his own. But he was a broad-minded man, and when the Acme people put up their factory just over the hill, in direct competition with us, he only remarked that it was another industry for the city, which would mean greater prosperity, and let it go at that."

"And the Acme has been undermining us ever since," commented Perry bitterly. "Now they are driving us out. Ah, if only we could have landed that L. & F. contract!"

"They couldn't drive us out if we didn't let them." Dougal placed his two hands on Perry's shoulders, as he went on pleadingly: "Won't you try it another year, Perry? We can carry on for that length of time easily. Don't let the Acme people pull the wool over your eyes. Those birds know the value of the Fenton Works. Inside of a year or two, if they got possession they'd be laughing at us because we were so easy."

"They'll laugh anyhow," returned Perry wearily. "Rankin Clarke says he has that L. & F. chain store business cinched. Half a million dollars a year! If we could have got that, you wouldn't hear me talking about selling out. You know that, Dougal."

"I know this Clarke is a bluff and a liar! He'll have to show me! Anyway, there are *other* big contracts, and we are due to land some of them if we keep on trying."

"It's no use, Dougal," declared Perry despondently. He turned away from the window, as Dougal's hands dropped. "The thing is settled. I expect Rankin Clarke in to-morrow with the papers ready for signature. That reminds me. I must go over and talk to VanAlen right away, so that he'll be ready if the deal should be closed."

Richard VanAlen was Perry Fenton's attorney. He was a young man, quite devoid of sentiment with regard to the Fenton Works, and only desirous of acquiring the sizable legal fee which would accrue from this big transaction.

Left alone, Dougal disposed of his modest luncheon, consisting of sandwiches and a choice pickle or two from the factory, with some hot coffee, and settled down to work.

He made notes of answers to letters and entered items in his carefully kept books quite as if there were no thought of the Fenton Works passing into alien hands. It annoyed him when a boy came stamping into the office behind him.

"Telegram!" shrilled the lad.

"Fenton?"

"No, Mr. Dougal Brent," was the reply. He placed the envelope in front of Dougal. "Answer?"

"Wait!"

Dougal's hand shook a little as he slit the envelope and spread the message out on his desk. Had he been expecting the telegram?

The message was commendably concise:

Meet me Hotel Rising eight to-night
JOHN STRONG.

"No answer," he told the boy. The youngster shuffled to the door, holding back a whistle till he should be outside. Dougal called him back and gave him a coin.

"What's this for?" asked the lad.

"Yourself."

Tipping was not a Rising City custom, but Dougal was pleased about something, and he seemed a bright boy. In his present humor, Dougal could not have been unfriendly to anybody—except perhaps Rankin Clarke.

It was precisely 8.05 that evening when a bellboy at the Hotel Rising conducted Dougal to one of the best rooms on the second floor, and saw John Strong grasp his hand with a heartiness that told of solid friendship.

"Mighty glad to see you, Dougal," were his first words. "Took that matter up personally about a week ago. Had to. Looked as if there were some monkey business going on." He chanced to notice that the bellboy had not departed, and seemed to be interested in his words. "Get out!" he ordered; and the boy slid away, but not before he'd heard Strong say: "So you've determined to hold on to the Rangoon Relish, eh?"

John Strong was a big, roly-poly man, with rather heavy features and a thick neck. His slow utterance might have been thought to indicate sluggishness of mind, but for the keen blue eyes, which, seldom still, were like sparks from flashing rapiers under the overhanging brows.

The two men talked long and earnestly. It may be remarked that Strong appeared to know a great deal about pickles and kindred goods, and he showed much interest in the business battle that had been waged between the Fenton and Acme factories for three years. But just what Strong and Dougal said to each other can only be surmised, since their conference was held in a locked and sound proof private room.

The same inquisitive bellhop who had been bounced by Strong chanced to be near the door when it opened to let Dougal depart, and he heard Strong exclaim in his slow, booming tones: "Of course the Rangoon Relish is the best thing of its kind in America to-day." Then, briskly: "You understand how you are to call up on the wire. I'll be here all day, but if you want me to hold off till you call, all right. Good night, Dougal! You and I have done business before. That's why we can do it now. Get me?"

The bellhop remarked that Dougal Brent laughed under his breath all the way along the corridor and until he got out of the elevator.

Dougal found it hard to settle down to work the next morning. Occasionally he emitted a low chuckle and sat back in his chair thinking. Then he would bend forward and resolutely attack his papers, working feverishly for a few minutes, until the urge for another chuckle overcame him.

Perry had not shown up by eleven o'clock, and Dougal looked at his watch, as he had been doing at frequent intervals all morning.

In the factory the usual industry prevailed, and great waves of vinegar laden vapors came to him through the short passage and by way of his half open window. He was glad it was not a day for the making of Rangoon Relish. He was not inclined to spend several hours in the vat room just then.

The railroad freight car that had been loading the day before had gone, and another was in its place at the wide doorway of the factory. This car, like the other, bore on its side the large poster emblazoned with a picture of a bottle of Rangoon Relish. Dougal, who had stepped to the windows, regarded the poster with a sort of fatherly affection. He thought of his interview with John Strong the evening before. Perhaps it was the Rangoon poster that brought it to his mind. Dougal chuckled again as he went back to his roll-top desk in the corner.

It was well into the afternoon when Perry Fenton entered the office. With him were Rankin Clarke, Richard VanAlen, and a tall, portly man, with a wide brimmed soft hat on his shaggy head, whom Dougal recognized as ex-Judge Tryon, legal representative of the Acme Condiment Company.

All except Clarke nodded to Dougal and said "Good afternoon." Then they drew chairs up to the big flat desk, and Judge Tryon produced an imposing sheaf of neatly folded papers.

"Dougal, bring your chair up," said Perry. "You have a part in this."

"In a minute, Perry," responded Dougal.

The four men were talking more or less loudly, and in the hubbub Dougal put his head into his desk to use his telephone. He called up the Hotel Rising and asked for room No. 24. There was a quick response and Dougal spoke one word: then he hung up and pulled his chair over beside Perry's.

"Now, gentlemen," began Tryon in his most impressive forensic tones, "I may say we are ready to sign—except for one thing." He turned his large head ponderously and looked at Dougal through his thick spectacles. "We require something from Mr. Dougal Brent."

"That's merely a matter of form, judge," put in Rankin Clarke with affected carelessness.

"What is it?" asked VanAlen sharply. As Perry Fenton's attorney, it behooved Mr. VanAlen to show himself on the alert.

"The mixture, listed as a ketchup, and known by the name and title of 'Rangoon Relish,'" came sonorously from Tryon. "It is the most valuable article manufactured by the Fenton Pickle Company. We have not yet seen the written or printed formula. Until we are assured that it will pass into possession of my client, the Acme Condiment Company, with the other property, separately and collectively named to be transferred from the Fenton Company to the Acme Company, this transaction cannot be consummated."

"Is that the only obstacle?" asked VanAlen.

"The only one I see at present," was Judge Tryon's cautious answer. "We are prepared to hand over a certified check for the amount called for as the initial payment as soon as we know the Rangoon Relish formula will pass into our possession forthwith—always provided we find everything else entirely clear. I understand Mr. Brent is the custodian of the formula."

There was dead silence in the office for at least a minute. The hissing of steam, the rhythmic throb of machinery, and occasional shouts of busy men came from yard and factory. Then Dougal spoke, slowly, and with the slight tremble that so often had crept into his voice of late:

"*The formula of the Rangoon Relish is not for sale.*"

"Dougal!"

It was Perry Fenton, his tone sharpened by terrified surprise, who broke the pause which followed Dougal's low voiced but positive declaration.

Dougal was looking at him wistfully.

Something like consternation had rendered all the others mute. But almost immediately Rankin Clarke blurted out with scornful truculence:

"What the devil does this mean? What has this man Dougal to say about it? Do you allow your employees to run your business, Fenton?"

"You will please explain, Mr. Brent?" judicially boomed Tryon.

"Has he any authority for what he says?" asked VanAlen, turning to Perry. "You did not expect this, did you?"

"Mr. Fenton did *not* expect it," Dougal interposed. "He knew no more of my intention than any of you gentlemen. I was not sure of it myself until to-day."

"Go on," ordered Judge Tryon.

Dougal passed a thin hand over his gray hair and again turned a wistful look upon Perry, whose eyes were fixed on the table before him.

"The formula of the Rangoon Relish is my property," said Dougal.

"As a wage hand with the Fenton Pickle Works, which has always manufactured it," sneered Rankin Clarke, "you'd have some difficulty in establishing your claim, I'm thinking."

Dougal ignored the interruption. "It was my father, Robin Brent, who discovered and first manufactured it. Except perhaps in the patent office in Washington, there is no written formula. My father gave it to me secretly by word of mouth, and I have never committed it to paper. After my father died Mr. Perry Fenton, Sr., contracted with me to make the Rangoon Relish, and it has been produced by the Fenton Pickle Works—under my personal supervision—ever since. I am paid a royalty, and have never given up my rights."

"That is true," acknowledged Perry. "But I took it for granted that Dougal would willingly agree to pass it on to any firm which might buy me out on the same royalty terms."

"You never took the matter up with him directly?" asked Tryon.

"No. I meant to do so some time, but always overlooked it somehow," was Perry's rather shamefaced answer.

Perhaps it crossed Dougal's mind that it was this tendency to "overlook" things which was the main weakness of Perry Fenton's business methods. But there was no suggestion of such a thought in his set face.

"Well, what's to be done?" roared Rankin Clarke. "If this Dougal Brent really does control the rights of the Rangoon Relish, what is his royalty figure? We want to close the deal this afternoon, and there is no time to lose over a silly detail like this. Ask him, please, judge."

"He has said he will not transfer the right to make Rangoon Relish from the Fenton Pickle Works," replied Judge Tryon in the cold, metallic tones of the seasoned lawyer. "Unless he will reconsider that resolve, it is useless to ask him his terms."

"Quite useless," put in Dougal. "There can be no terms."

"Dougal!" came pleadingly from Perry.

"I'm sorry," returned Dougal. "But the thing is impossible."

"Why?" asked VanAlen hotly, as he saw his expected big fee slipping away. "What difference does it make to you who pays you your royalty so long as you get it? The ketchup is made by you, I understand. You can make it as well in the Acme factory as anywhere. You will still remain in Rising City."

Dougal merely shook his head.

"There is one thing sure," bellowed Clarke furiously. "If the Rangoon Relish does not go with the rest of the Fenton property, the deal is off. The Acme gets all or none." He stalked angrily up and down.

"Is your decision final, Mr. Brent?" asked Judge Tryon.

"Absolutely final," replied Dougal.

"It looks like an impasse," observed Judge Tryon with a shrug. "Have you anything to offer, Mr. Fenton?"

"Unless Dougal will yield—and I assure him he will not lose anything by allowing his relish to be made by the Acme Company—there is nothing I can say."

"Well, you know your own business," snarled Clarke. "It seems to me peculiar that a mere employee can be allowed to stop an important transaction like this. But if you have no authority to give the Rangoon Relish to my company, we may as well adjourn. The deal is off."

Perry rose from his chair and beckoned to Dougal to go over to a corner, where they could confer privately.

But Dougal did not respond. Instead, he looked at the outer door and said quietly: "I believe I hear somebody in the other office. Will you excuse me for a moment?"

While the others all stared at each other in bewilderment Dougal crossed the floor with his usual shuffling gait and went out, closing the door behind him.

In less than a minute he reopened it and entered. Behind him was a big, rotund man, with thick neck and features and noticeably sharp blue eyes under heavy brows,

who took in the room and its occupants with one shrewd look.

"This is Mr. John Strong," explained Dougal. "Mr. Perry Fenton, Mr. Rankin Clarke, president of the Acme Condiment Company, Judge Tryon, Mr. VanAlen."

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen!" was Strong's perfunctory acknowledgment of the introduction, as the others bowed or nodded according to their several dispositions and looked questioningly at the newcomer.

"Has Mr. Strong any communication for us in connection with the matter we are considering?" was Judge Tryon's pointed query.

"I think so," answered Dougal.

"I have never met Mr. Strong," remarked Rankin Clarke aggressively. "I don't understand this."

"Nor I," added VanAlen. "I do not recall that I ever saw the gentleman before."

Perry Fenton was regarding Strong with a curious expression, but he said nothing.

"Mr. Strong is interested in pickles," said Dougal dryly. "He is an old friend of mine, and is in this office now because I asked him to come. I took that liberty, Perry," he added, turning to Fenton, who merely nodded.

"Oh! So that's it!" roared Rankin Clarke. "Now we see why the Rangoon Relish cannot be transferred to the Acme Company. This Mr. Strong—"

"Just a minute!" interposed Strong sharply. "It's true that I am interested in pickles, but I am not bidding for the secret formula of the Rangoon Relish."

"You're not?" bullied Clarke. "Then what—"

"I'll tell you if you'll give me the floor for a moment," interrupted Strong, a dangerous glint in his steel blue eyes. "I am vice-president of the L. & F. Company, controlling a few hundred chain stores in the United States."

"The L. & F.?" stammered Clarke, his bullying voice breaking.

"Yes," went on Strong calmly. "You may have heard of the L. & F., Mr. Clarke. Our main office has had some correspondence with your company, the Acme, and also with the Fenton people, in reference to a proposed contract for supplying our stores with about half a million dollars' worth of pickles and kindred goods yearly. The contract is to be for five years."

"But—but—our correspondence has not been with you," protested Clarke. "It is Mr. Milland I have been writing to. I thought he—"

"We took it out of Mr. Milland's hands," said Strong curtly. "We were not satisfied with his methods. We did not think he was inclined to be entirely fair. So, as vice-president of the L. & F., I took up the contract matter personally, made my own investigations, came across some proceedings that seemed peculiar, to say the least, and a few days ago, after a conference with our president, came to a decision."

"And who gets the contract?" broke in Clarke breathlessly.

"The Fenton Pickle Company," replied Strong.

"What?" Rankin Clarke's face and neck flushed in uncontrollable wrath and he brought his fist heavily down on the table. "It *can't* be! It was promised to the Acme, and, by the eternal, we'll get it or we'll tell—"

"What will you tell?" cut in Strong, his blue eyes blazing.

"I'll tell that I've been robbed, double crossed, by a man in your company, the L. & F. That fellow Milland! I've kept faith with him. He would have got his commission. He has it in black and white, and by Heaven, if he doesn't deliver the goods, he'll have to answer to me! Damn him! I'll—"

"He'll answer to *me!*" thundered Strong. "You admit that he was willing to accept a bribe, and that you agreed to pay it."

"Who said so?" snarled Clarke, terrified now that his first outburst of fury had passed. "I was mad—"

"And you let the truth out," retorted Strong. "Not that what you say matters much. We had discovered this conspiracy already. Your words only confirm it."

"But I tell you, this Milland—"

"Keep quiet, Clarke!" suddenly bellowed Judge Tryon. "There's nothing in all this, of course. But if it *should* come

into court, that is the place to talk, not here. I am speaking as your attorney. Let's get out."

Judge Tryon was a big, athletic individual. He had been a great half back in his younger days—and he literally lifted the ratlike Rankin Clarke out of the room and hustled him downstairs to the street.

"I guess that ends the merger business," observed Dougal with a happy grin.

John Strong fumbled in an inside pocket of his coat and brought forth two copies of a document, which, with the written and printed matter that filled a large page, and the flourishing "This Agreement Witnesseth," at the top, fairly shrieked "Contract."

He sprawled the two papers out on the table and beckoned to VanAlen.

"You are the legal representative of the Fenton Pickle Company, I understand," he said in a businesslike tone. "This is a contract providing for the supply by the Fenton Company to the L. & F. stores of not less than five hundred thousand dollars' worth of goods a year. Will you kindly look it over? Then Mr. Perry Fenton and I can sign it in duplicate. You and Mr. Dougal Brent can witness our signatures."

Mr. VanAlen, scenting a fee that would make up for what he had expected to get in connection with the merger, needed no second request. Ten minutes later the contract was signed and VanAlen had departed.

"Of course there were other pickle manufacturing firms after this business," remarked Strong, placing his copy in his pocketbook. "And I don't mind saying, Mr. Fenton, that it was my old friendship for Dougal Brent that turned a finely balanced scale in your favor. Of course Dougal wouldn't tell you, but I will. Possibly you don't remember that when I was running a struggling business in Cincinnati, some years ago, I got into a tight place and needed credit badly. Perhaps you would have granted it. I don't know. But I do know that Dougal Brent is the man who expressed confidence in me and was mainly instrumental in easing things so that I could obtain what I needed from your factory for nearly a year on very small payments. I pulled out of the hole at last, however."

"Of course," put in Dougal. "I knew you would. You were that kind of man."

"Thanks, Dougal!" Strong dropped one of his heavy arms affectionately on Dougal's thin shoulders. "Well, I made up my mind then that if ever I had the opportunity to come back on Dougal Brent, I'd do it. That is why I wired him that I was coming to Rising City to see him, and why I told him last night in the hotel what I meant to do to-day. Good afternoon, Mr. Fenton. Good-by, Dougal, old chap! I have to make the next train back to New York. I want to see a man named Milland."

He shook hands with both, and Dougal didn't get real feeling back into his fingers for nearly half an hour.

"Five hundred thousand dollars a year!" exclaimed Perry, when he and Dougal were alone. "I guess the Fenton Pickle Works is firmly on its feet now." He paused. "Look here, Dougal! We'll quit using cheap stuff and see if we can't bring our goods up to the old standard again. I know it's my fault the factory has been running down; therefore, after this, you'll have to be known officially as the manager."

"Don't talk rot, Perry!" rebuked Dougal, with a grin that somehow forced tears into his eyes. "How could a dignified manager go into the vat room and make ketchup?"

The Key

By BRYAN IRVINE

IF Emerson Hoppe had not picked a slow horse three times hand running, he would not have surreptitiously borrowed some of his employer's money to pay his honest debts. Then, if the unlucky Hoppe had, when he received his monthly pay envelope, quietly replaced the money "borrowed" from his employer, instead of shooting the works on another slow pony, he would not have faced the imminent peril of being found out and arrested. And, again, if Hoppe had not been certain that the shortage in the firm's funds was about to come to light, he would not have been tempted to steal.

All of which goes to prove that in attempting to right one wrong by committing another is very much like rolling a snowball down a snowdrift—it grows larger. And this brings us to the key.

Emerson Hoppe carried a number of keys on his person. There was the switchkey for the magneto box in his flivver, the key to his garage, the key to Otto Gottleib's jewelry store, where Hoppe was employed as chief clerk, the key to his apartment, a trunk key and last, but most important of all, the key to the jewelry vault in Mr. Gottleib's establishment.

There being only two keys to the jewelry vault, one being always on the person of Mr. Gottleib and the other in Hoppe's possession, it is obvious that Hoppe could not boldly select such articles of jewelry as could be easily converted into cash enough to cover his shortage. So Mr. Hoppe took his mind from slow ponies long enough to dope out a way of purloining a considerable quantity of jewelry from the vault without jeopardizing his liberty and pursuit of happiness.

The result of the chief clerk's scheming was so simple, yet to Mr. Hoppe's mind so bombproof, that he naturally saw no reason

why he should not clean out the vault entirely instead of selecting a few paltry baubles.

Alibis are tricky things, especially artificial alibis such as Emerson Hoppe constructed. Sometimes a good home-made alibi, like a bride's first biscuits, will get by in a pinch. Very often an alibi is "framed" only through long hours of intense concentration and deduction, every visible loophole plugged up as it were, only to blossom forth in the final scene with ragged edges and an aperture in it as large as a barn door. It is the simple alibis that win; and Hoppe's alibi was so simple that he could not for the life of him see how it could fail. In fact, it did not fail. It was a good alibi, served very nicely. But—well, what happened then?

Hoppe's first move was to select a confederate. This was not a difficult task, considering that there was only one other employee in Gottleib's jewelry store as crooked as Hoppe himself. Little, bald-headed, bow-legged, watery-eyed Hubert Delsey of the repair department was the man chosen by the chief clerk as his partner in the scheme.

Hoppe knew that Hubert Delsey was a thief because he had twice caught Delsey in the act of stealing. Yes, Hoppe "had it on" Delsey, and the only reason he did not have Delsey arrested was because Delsey knew that Hoppe was a thief and could prove it. Hoppe knew that Delsey knew that he, Hoppe, was as crooked as a ram's horn, and Delsey knew that Hoppe knew the he, Delsey, was as crooked as a pug's tail. So there it was: one endless little circle of "you know me and I know you." Naturally, Hoppe and Delsey were great friends—face to face. They trusted each other; yea, trusted each other about as far as either of them could throw the proverbial bull by the tail. It is such friendships that grow and inspire—and build penitentiaries.

Be it understood, however, that it was not Hoppe's intention to double cross Delsey in the proposed job; nor was it Delsey's desire to slip anything over on Hoppe. Each was too busy watching the other to attempt any funny business himself, and both needed the money, Delsey having followed Hoppe's hunches at the race track.

"Very simple, Delsey," said Mr. Hoppe, after Delsey had agreed to coöperate in any feasible and safe scheme to separate Mr. Gottleib from his jewelry. "Now, my vacation begins next Monday morning. Have already told Mr. Gottleib that it will be spent in the quiet little burg of Willow Ridge, thirty miles up the line. Fine fishing in and near Willow Ridge, Mr. Delsey.

"Now," Hoppe went on, "there are only two keys to the vault. Mr. Gottleib has one and I have the other. The vault has a very reliable and supposedly burglarproof lock. It is said by the manufacturers of this lock that it cannot be opened without the regular key. But then, there are many shrewd persons who specialize in opening vaults and things, who are always taking post graduate courses. So if we have an alibi, Mr. Gottleib and the detectives will be compelled to believe that some cute crook has graduated again. Very well. Saturday evening I will have my car parked in front of the store. I will slip the key to you and bid Mr. Gottleib good-by. Will make sure that he sees me off in my car. He will understand that I am going direct from the store to Willow Ridge, thirty miles away.

"Mr. Gottleib checks off the stock in the vault every Saturday evening after everybody else has left the store. He is usually in the shop more than an hour after we are all gone. I will drive to Willow Ridge in less than an hour, and immediately after registering at the one hotel there, I will call Mr. Gottleib on the 'phone, in the presence of the hotel clerk, and tell him that I forgot to leave my vault key with him as I usually do when going out of town. Understand, he will probably be in the act of checking off the vault stock or have just finished checking it off when he gets my call from Willow Ridge. It will not be the first time I have left the city with the key in my pocket, so he will no doubt tell me simply to take good care of it while away.

"I will lose no time in making myself popular with the hotel clerk and some of the guests at the hotel in Willow Ridge. Will even ask the time and set my watch.

"Now, here's where you come in, Mr. Delsey. I will unlatch one of the windows in the office, the first window on the left overlooking the alley. It will be dark when Mr. Gottleib leaves the store. You will go to your hotel, which is only three blocks from the store, joke with the clerk a while and tell him that you are going up to your room to try out a new record on your graphophone before going to dinner. Make sure that the clerk sees the new record, and be sure that he sees you when you go to your room, understand?

"Now, your graphophone, I have been told, is one of the kind that automatically plays one record over and over until the machine is stopped, winding itself automatically and shifting the needle back to the beginning of the selection in the same way. Very well, start your graphophone and slip out of the room. Leave the hotel by way of the back door and don't let any one see you leave. In fifteen minutes you can run down three blocks to the store, enter the office through the window, clean out the vault, close and lock the vault door, break the latch on the office window so as to make it look like an outside job, and be back in the hotel with the swag. Enter the hotel without allowing anybody to see you and hasten to your room. Hide the jewelry and stop the graphophone. Jimmie Ellis, the diamond clerk, is rooming next to you, is he not? Ask Ellis how he likes your new record. He will have been listening to it long enough to form an opinion, no doubt. Then—but what do you think of the plan this far?"

"Sounds very good indeed, Mr. Hoppe—very good," Delsey answered. "Please go on."

"But," said Hoppe, his face suddenly clouding with doubt, "supposing Jimmie Ellis gets tired of listening to your new record and enters your room while you are gone to ask you to shut it off?"

Delsey sniffed. "Jimmie Ellis dislikes me heartily. He has never entered my room. No danger on that point. Proceed."

"All right," Hoppe resumed. "Now, we have the jewels in your room. If possible, accompany Jimmie to the dining room after asking him about your record, and be sure that he or some one else sees you enter your room again after leaving the dining room. Then, when you can safely do so, slip out of your room again, go to the clerk and tell him to call you at seven in the morning, that you are going fishing. Let it be known that you are going right to bed. While he is still talking to you, enter your room again. Now, watch your chance, slip out of the hotel, get your car out of the hotel garage and drive like the wind to Willow Ridge. You can make the trip in less than an hour. I'll be waiting for you in the rear of the Willow Ridge hotel. Slip me the key without stopping your car, then return to the city. After putting up your car, enter the hotel and retire, making sure all the time that you are not seen by a living soul. Very simple—simple as the nose on your face."

The nose on Mr. Delsey's face was not simple; it had a deep concavity where the bridge ought to be and on the end of it was a large blue wart. However, Mr. Delsey agreed that Hoppe had done a fine bit of planning.

"According to my figures," Hoppe went on, "you should do your part of the job and be in Willow Ridge not later than nine o'clock in the evening. Plan your movements so as to be there at that time, because I want to be in evidence in the lobby of the hotel as much as possible. Don't want to have to wait more than five minutes for you when I go out to meet you in the rear of the hotel. When I have the key I will give it to the clerk to take care of in the hotel safe until I am ready to return to the city."

So Hoppe and Delsey discussed the plan forward and backward a dozen or more times and finally concluded that it was good.

Saturday evening just before five o'clock Hoppe passed the vault key to Delsey and, after talking with Mr. Gottleib a moment, left the store and clambered into his car. Less than an hour later he was registering in the hotel at Willow Ridge.

The 'phone call to Gottleib, in the presence of the Willow Ridge hotel clerk, caught Mr. Gottleib checking off the jewelry in the vault. As Hoppe had expected, his

boss merely cautioned him to take good care of the key until he returned.

Delsey worked like a clock, never taking unnecessary chances. At half past seven he returned from the jewelry store with the jewels, stopped the graphophone, talked to Jimmie Ellis and went with Ellis to the hotel dining room. Then at eight o'clock, after being certain the several guests had seen him enter his room he was in his car and speeding toward Willow Ridge.

Hoppe was not a stranger in Willow Ridge. He had been there many times with Delsey for Sunday outings. He knew every street in the small town. Even now he was not in the least nervous. Delsey would be along in less than an hour with the key and all would be jake.

But Otto Gottleib was a fussy old mortal. Hoppe's 'phone call had interrupted him while he checked off the stock in the vault. Mr. Gottleib disliked very much to be interrupted at that time in the evening. Therefore, at half past eight Mr. Gottleib returned to his store. There was just one chance in a million, he reasoned, that the interruption had caused him to make an error in his checking list.

Ten minutes after entering his store, Mr. Gottleib, wild-eyed, excited and incoherent, was pouring his story into the ear of a police captain at central office.

The captain asked a dozen questions in quick succession, got Gottleib's hysterical answers, then seized the telephone and called Constable Beavers at Willow Ridge.

"No, this ain't no constable," came Hank Beavers's voice over the wire. "This is the chief of police of Willow Ridge that yer talkin' to. What's wanted?"

The captain's orders were distinctly understood by Hank Beavers.

"Go to your hotel," said the captain, "and find Emerson Hoppe. Ask Hoppe to show you the key to Mr. Gottleib's jewelry vault in this city. It is a large flat Princeton key, about two and a half inches long, with the number five-seven-five-two stamped on it. Find out to the minute when Hoppe arrived in Willow Ridge. Whether he has the key or not, hold him until I come up there. Am leaving for Willow Ridge immediately. Got it all?"

"Princeton key number five-seven-five-two, about two and a half inches long—flat key. Is that right?" from Constable Hank Beavers."

"That's it. Hold Emerson Hoppe until I arrive."

It was fifteen minutes to nine and Delsey was one mile from Willow Ridge when a rear tire blew out with such a resounding bang that Delsey ducked low and stepped on the gas. He naturally supposed that a large posse was in pursuit of him with a four-inch gun. But the bump of the tire rim on the rough road returned his reason and he stopped the car and clambered out to put on the spare.

Hoppe sauntered leisurely from the soft drink room into the hotel lobby. He was on the point of sitting down when Constable Hank Beavers brushed past him and halted importantly before the hotel clerk.

"Is there a Mr. Emerson Hoppe registered here, Walter?" Hank queried of the clerk.

"Mr. Hoppe? Why, yes,"—looking about the lobby—"He was here just a moment ago. Mr. Hoppe! Mr. Hoppe!" the clerk called.

But Mr. Hoppe had sought the friendly darkness of the outside when he first saw the constable enter. Something was wrong, Mr. Hoppe felt. He hastened to the alley in the rear of the hotel. It was here that he was to meet Delsey at nine o'clock. Oh, if Delsey would only hurry! If the constable could only be called off for a brief five minutes; just long enough to allow Delsey to arrive with the precious key.

The clerk was bawling again: "Mr. Hoppe! Mr. Hoppe!" And Mr. Hoppe saw the constable come out of the hotel with a number of excited villagers in his wake.

"Spread out, you fellers!" the constable ordered officiously. "That Hoppe feller is a desperate criminal! Hunt him up, fellers! Git busy!" And the villagers scattered to take up the search for Mr. Hoppe.

Hoppe looked wildly about. What could he do? Then his eyes rested on the dark bulk of the town fire alarm tower across the alley. Fortunately for him, he remem-

bered how, on a previous visit to Willow Ridge, the alarm bell was started. An electric switch near the base of the tower had merely to be thrown in contact and the bell would do the rest.

Hank Beavers and his brave followers forgot the man hunt when the fire alarm bell suddenly clanged out on the night air and a voice—Emerson Hoppe's voice—screamed, "Fire! Fire!"

The hunted man dashed away in the darkness while the entire town turned out to look for the fire. Out on the road Hoppe waited in breathless suspense for Delsey and the key.

Some cool old citizen of Willow Ridge stopped the ear splitting clanging of the fire alarm and in the silence that followed, Hoppe heard again Hank Beavers's lusty command to the populace to find Mr. Hoppe. On every side of the jewelry thief were men's voices which seemed to be drawing nearer.

Then came to Hoppe the clatter and sputter of a speeding flivver and around a bend came Delsey. Hoppe stepped into the road, waved his arms wildly and the car came to a stop.

"The key, Delsey!" Hoppe gasped. "Give me the key and get back to the city as quick as possible! Bury the Jewelry somewhere near the road on your way!"

Hoppe offered up a silent prayer when his eager fingers closed over the bit of metal, warm from Delsey's pocket. Delsey turned the car around and disappeared.

A minute later Hoppe sauntered into the hotel lobby. "What's all the excitement about?" he asked of those who excitedly scurried about.

"There he is!" some sharp eyed yokel shouted, pointing an accusing finger at Mr. Hoppe.

Hank Beavers at that moment entered the lobby, whipped out a long six shooter and covered Hoppe. "Give me the key to Mr. Gottleib's jewelry vault!" Hank commanded sharply. "And hurry up!"

Hoppe smiled calmly. He was safe now. A perfect alibi! "Why, certainly, officer. Here is the key." But as Hoppe's eyes rested on the "key" as he took it from his pocket, his smile vanished and his heart went down and down; for—

Delsey, in the darkness and excitement and hurry, had handed Hoppe—the wrong key.

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