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The Popular Magazine

JAN. 7, 1924

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STARTING
"BILL STUART—
FIGHTING
MAN"

BY
A.M. CHISHOLM



SULLIVAN - WILDE - F. R. BECHDOLT - DWYER -
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Amazing Invention Does Away With Dirty Coal and Wood!



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3 Times the Heat of Coal

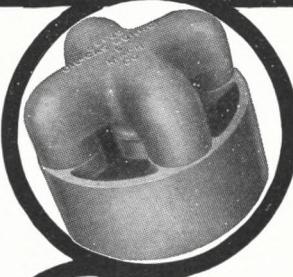
These extraordinary comforts and conveniences are only possible

through the wonderful discovery by Mr. Oliver of a way to combine 95% air with 5% oil, the cheapest fuel there is. This forms a gas that burns with an intense, clean flame and gives **3 times the heat of coal.**

58 Regional Managers To Get Established National Business

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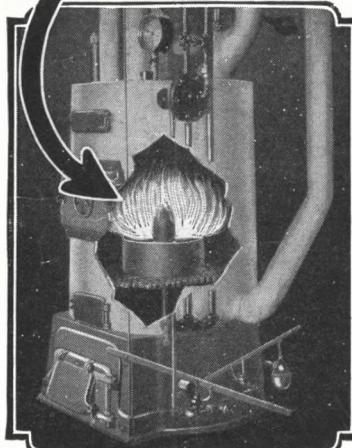
Oliver's liberal commission offer and tell you how you can get an exclusive territory. You must act quickly. Mail the coupon at once. Do not delay a single day. Live salesmen recognize this unequalled opportunity for big profits. Territories are being snatched up. Act quick. Mail coupon immediately.



Slips right into any furnace without change. 3 times the heat of coal. No motors, gas or electricity.

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OLIVER OIL-GAS BURNER CO., A-73 Oliver Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.

Canadian Distributor: A-73 Webster Bldg., Toronto, Ont.

Send me immediately complete details of your offer to prospective Oliver representatives, including your free book "New Kind of Heat" and full details of Exclusive Territory Franchise Offer. I am interested in proposition checked below.

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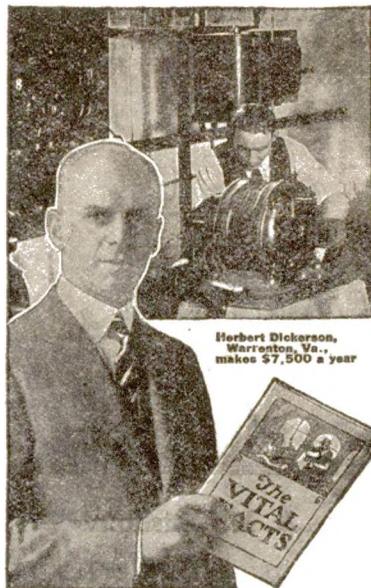
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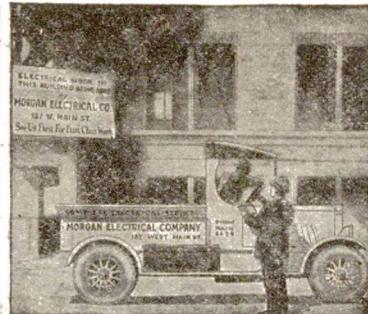




Herbert Dickerson,
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makes \$7,500 a year



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Chhalie, Wash., over \$5,000 a year



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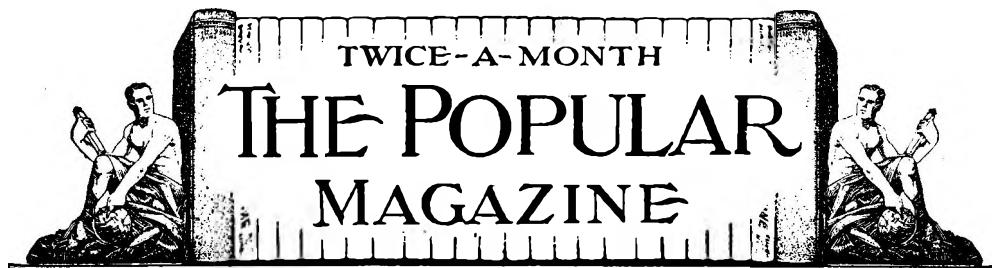
The "Cooke" Trained Man is the "Big Pay" Man

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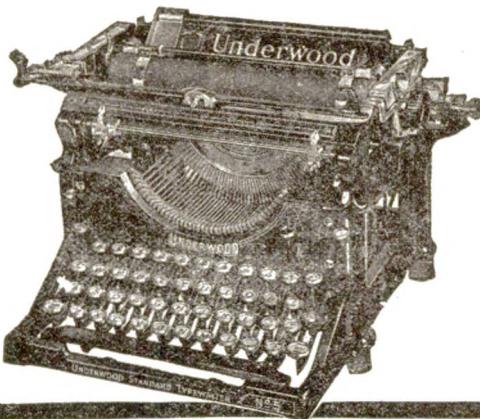
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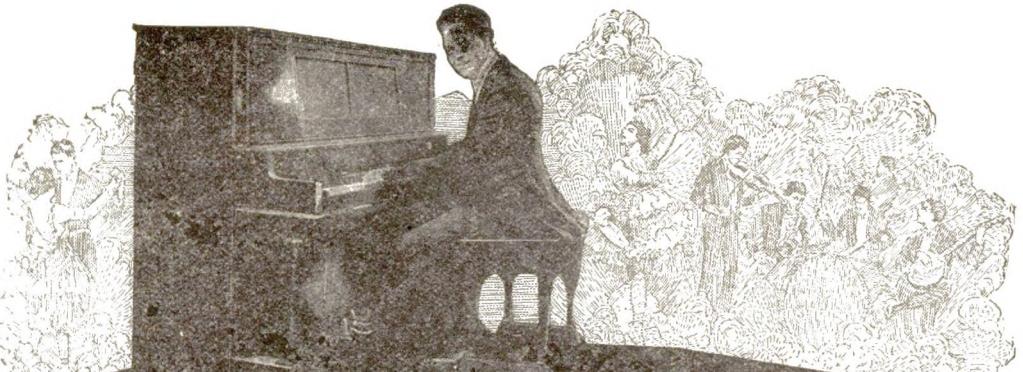
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\$6—\$18 a dozen decorating pillow tops at home, experience unnecessary; particulars for stamp. Tapestry Paint Co., 110 LaGrange, Ind.

EARN \$20 weekly spare time, at home, addressing, mailing, music, circulars. Send 10c. for music, information. American Music Co., 1658 Broadway, Dept. N-13, N. Y.

Help Wanted—Male

U. S. GOVERNMENT WANTS MEN. Railway Mail Clerk examination coming. Let our expert forms, Government Examiner, prepare you for this and also Rural Carrier, Post Office, Customs, Internal Revenue and other branches. Write today for free booklet. Dept. 114, Patterson Civil Service School, Rochester, N. Y.

EARN \$110 to \$250 monthly, expenses paid. Railways Training Inspector. Position available after completion of 3 months' home study course or money refunded. Excellent opportunities. Write for Free Booklet, CM-28 Stand, Business Training Inst., Buffalo, N. Y.

ALL Men, Women, Boys, Girls, 17 to 65 willing to accept Government Positions \$117-\$250, traveling or stationary, write Mr. Ozment, 308, St. Louis, Mo., immediately.

Personal

ART PHOTOS, Studies beauty of the Nature, post cards and large sizes. Great collection samples, splendid, for \$1.00, \$3.00, \$5.00. Editions d'Art, Neuilly-Plaisance, (S & O.), France.

Patents and Lawyers

INVENTORS desiring to secure patents should write for our guide-book "How To Get Your Patent." Send sketch or description for our opinion of its patentable nature. Randolph & Co., Dept. 412, Washington, D. C.

PATENTS. Send sketch or model for preliminary examination. Booklet free. Highest references. Best results. Promptness assured. Watson E. Coleman, Patent Lawyer, 624 F St., Washington, D. C.

PATENTS. Write for Record of Invention Blank and free guide book. Send model or sketch and description for free opinion of its patentable nature. Highest references. Prompt Attention. Reasonable Terms. Victor J. Evans & Co., 767 Ninth, Washington, D. C.

Stammering

ST-STU-T-T-TERING And Stammering Cured At Home. Instructive booklet free. Walter McDonnell, 80 Potomac Bank Building, Washington, D. C.

Vaudeville

GET ON THE STAGE I tell you how! Send stamp for instructive Stage Book and particulars. K. La Delle, Box 557, Los Angeles, Cal.

(Continued on third page following)

If You Want Bigger Pay *Make This FREE TEST*

There's a sure way to increase your earning power. And here is such an opportunity. Look into it—you may recognize it as your one chance to earn the biggest money of your life.



ARE you ready for a shock? Then, let me tell you that if you have average intelligence and can read and write, there is a quick and easy way for you to earn enough money to satisfy any average ambition. And after reading this offer, if you do not quickly make more money, you have no one to blame but yourself.

Don't take my word for it. By a simple test—you can make in the privacy of your home—you will know that every word I say is true—or otherwise. The test does not obligate you or cost you one penny. But make it! Then judge for yourself. It has proved to be THE opportunity for thousands. They have found the way to bigger pay—are now earning from five to twenty times as much as formerly. And the beauty of it is they enjoy every minute in the day's work. They are their own bosses.

The thousands who have made this test before you, and who are now making the money you would like to make, are now salesmen. Ninety-five per cent once thought they were not "cut out for selling" that salesmen were "born" and not made. They found it was a fallacy that had kept them in the rut. They discovered that anyone with proper training can sell, and they are making from \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year, because they had the vision to recognize opportunity.

Thousands Have Proved It!

For instance, Ellis Sumner Cook, 20 E. Jackson Blvd., Chicago, left a \$25 a week job and last year made \$9,000! H. D. Miller, another Chicago boy, was making \$100 a month as a stenographer in July 1922. In September, 3 months later, he was making \$100 a week as a salesman. W. P. Clenny of Kansas City, Mo., stepped from a \$150 a month clerkship into a selling job at \$500 a month. He is making \$850 a month now. M. V. Stephens of Albany, Ky., was making \$25 a week. He took up this training and now makes 5 times that much. J. H. Cash of Atlanta, Ga., exchanged his \$75 a month job for one which pays

him \$500 a month. O. H. Malfroot of Boston, Mass., stepped into a \$10,000 position as a SALES MANAGER—so thorough is this training. All these successes are due to this easy, fascinating and rapid way to master certain invincible secrets of selling.

Simple as A B C

Sounds remarkable, doesn't it? Yet there is nothing remarkable about it. There are certain ways to approach different types of prospects to get their undivided attention—certain ways to stimulate keen interest—certain ways to overcome objections, batter down prejudices, outwit competition and make the prospect act. If you will learn these principles there is awaiting you a brilliant success and more money than you ever thought of earning.

As you will see by the affidavit to the left thousands of reputable selling organizations in America turn to this Association for their Salesmen. We can never take care of all the demands made on us for this

better type of trained salesmen.

Make This Free Test at Once

Don't turn this page until you have clipped the coupon, filled it out, and sent it on its way. The test is contained in a free book, "Modern Salesmanship" which we will gladly send you without obligation. After reading the book through you will ask yourself the question it brings up. The answers will prove whether this is your opportunity or not. So mail the coupon NOW.

NATIONAL SALESMEN'S TRAINING ASS'N.
Dept. 4-A Chicago, Ill.

National Salesmen's Training Ass'n.
Dept. 4-A, Chicago, Ill.

Please send me without obligation on my part your free book, "Modern Salesmanship" which will enable me to test my ability at home, and full information about the N. S. T. A. System of Salesmanship Training and Employment Service.

Name.....
Address.....
City..... State.....
Age..... Occupation.....

WHY?

We receive many letters of helpful suggestion, coupled with applications for the privilege of making a better job of our advertising department.

Perhaps you too wonder why our magazines carry so little advertising. Let us take you into our confidence.

The real truth is that advertisers, almost as a whole, have hesitated about using fiction magazines because of a conviction that the purchasers of such magazines buy them for the stories they contain, and do not read the advertisements.

You, as readers, and we, as publishers, know this to be wrong. We know you read the advertisements in our magazines, and that you can help us prove it to the advertisers.

Therefore, if you will tell us why you think one advertisement in this magazine is better than another and if your letter proves to be the best one received on the subject during the month, we will send you \$15.00. We will pay \$5.00 to the reader who sends in the second best criticism, \$3.00 to the reader who sends in the third best, and \$2.00 to the reader who sends in the fourth.

This contest costs you nothing to enter. There are no conditions or rules to be complied with. Simply read over the advertisements in this magazine, being careful to state which magazine and number you are criticizing, and tell us which advertisement you like best, and

WHY?

Contest for this issue closes February 1st, 1924

ADVERTISING DEPARTMENT

STREET & SMITH CORPORATION
79 Seventh Avenue New York City

YOU TOO CAN PLAY THE HAWAIIAN GUITAR
JUST AS THE HAWAIIANS DO!
PLAY ALL THE LATEST HITS

After Your FIRST LESSON You Will Play a Complete Selection. We Guarantee That--

Our method is so simple, interesting and appealing that you begin in your first lesson to learn the famous Hawaiian Folk Song "ALOHA". Think how happy you will be when you will impress your friends by playing the fascinating Hawaiian Guitar.

Only Four Motions--
and You Master Them Quickly!

In a few minutes you acquire the four motions necessary to play any piece--after that a short period of practice and you will have mastered this wondrous sweet music. Complete course of 30 lessons includes 100 beautiful Hawaiian songs and dances.

No Previous Musical Knowledge Necessary
 If you need to learn musical note in your life--if you haven't even the slightest knowledge of music, we can quickly and positively teach you to play this wonderfully popular instrument. Don't be just a "Listener" when you can easily be the center of interest among your friends. Over 40,000 successful students.

Just Mail a Post Card for Details
 of our remarkable FREE Hawaiian Guitar Offer--simply write: "I am interested"---but do it today.

First Hawaiian Conservatory of Music, Inc.

Special courses on
 Violin, Tenor Ban-
 jo, Banjo-Ukulele
 and P'U'U'.



FREE
A Beautiful
Hawaiian
Guitar

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING—Continued

Short Stories and Photoplays

FREE to writers—A wonderful little book of money-making hints, suggestions, ideas; the A B C of successful Story and Movie writing. Absolutely Free. Just address Authors' Press, Dept. 88, Auburn, N. Y.

WRITE NEWS ITEMS and Short Stories for pay in spare time. Copyright Book and plans free. Press Reporting Syndicate (406), St. Louis, Mo.

WRITE PHOTOPLAYS: \$25—\$200 paid any one for suitable ideas. Experience unnecessary; complete outline Free. Producers League, 439, St. Louis.

WRITERS: Stories, Poems, Plays, etc., are wanted for publication. Literary Bureau, 175, Hannibal, Mo.

\$\$ FOR IDEAS. Photoplay Plots accepted any form; revised, criticized, copyrighted, marketed. Advice free. Universal Scenario Corporation, 217 Security Bldg., Santa Monica and Western Ave., Hollywood, Calif.

\$50 to \$150 **WEEKLY** Writing Jokes, Epigrams and Humorous Stories for Publications. Write for details. American Institute of Humor, Office W, 414 Park Bldg., Cleveland, Ohio.

BIG MONEY IN WRITING photoplays, short stories, poems, etc. Send to-day for free copy America's greatest magazine for writers. Filled with practical help and writing and selling. Writer's Digest, 605 Butler Building, Cincinnati, Ohio.

SHORTHORST Stories Criticized. Manuscripts given expert attention. Advice as to markets. Correspondence invited. Books for writers Catalog. Harry Rogers, 315 W. Second St., Dayton, Ohio.

JOURNALISM—PHOTOPLAYS—SHORT STORIES. Plot Chart and Copyright Book Free to those wishing to enter above professions or dispose of manuscripts on Commission. (The Service offered is given by Professional Authors and Editors of high standing.) Harvard Company, 437, San Francisco.

WRITE Successful Photoplays. Big Money. Free Book gives full Instructions. Successful Photoplays, Box 43, Des Moines, Ia.

SHORT STORIES and Photoplays Revised, Typed and Marketed. Send manuscript or write Hursh, Box 1018, Harrisburg, Pa.

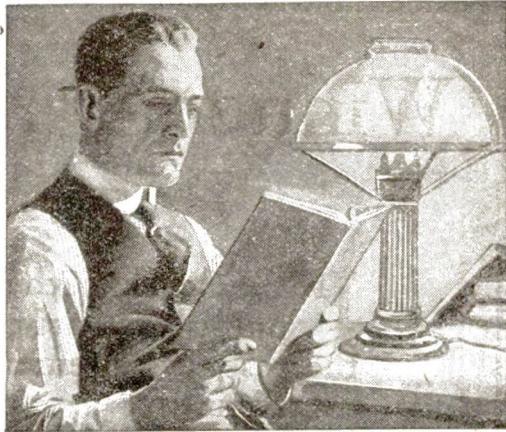
Songs, Poems, etc.

\$500.00 Prize Contest. If you write the best fourth verse for our song "Empty Arms" you will receive \$500.00. Send your name and we shall send you free the contest rules and words of this song. World Corp., 245 W. 47th St., Dept. 754B, New York.

WRITE THE WORDS FOR A SONG. We compose music. Our Chief of Staff wrote many big song-hits. Submit your song-idea to us at once. New York Melody Corp., 402 F. Roman Bldg., New York.

POEMS WANTED—Sell your song verses for cash. Submit MSS at once or write New Era Music Co., 104 St. Louis, Mo.

PROMINENT LONDON MUSIC Publisher is open for available songs by American Writers. Amateur or Professional; songs judged on merit, not writers' reputations. For further particulars write to American representative. Jack Mahoney, Dept. N, 145 West 45th St., New York.



\$95 An Hour!

"Every hour I spent on my I. C. S. Course has been worth \$95 to me! My position, my \$5,000 a year income, my home, my family's happiness—I owe it all to my spare-time training with the International Correspondence Schools!"

Every mail brings letters from some of the thousands of I. C. S. students telling of promotions or increases in salary as the rewards of spare-time study.

What are you doing with the hours after supper? Can you afford to let them slip by unimproved when you can easily make them mean so much? One hour a day spent with the I. C. S. will prepare you for the position you want. Yes, it will! Put it up to us to prove it. Mark and mail this coupon now!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS
 Box 2071, Scranton, Penna.

Without cost or obligation, please tell me how I can qualify for the position or in the subject before which I have marked an **X**:

BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES

- Business Management
- Industrial Management
- Personnel Organization
- Traffic Management
- Business Law
- Banking and Banking Law
- Accountancy (including C.P.A.)
- Cost Accounting
- Bookkeeping
- Private Secretary
- Spanish
- French
- Salesmanship
- Advertising
- Better Letters
- Show Card Lettering
- Stenography and Typing
- Business English
- Civil Service
- Railway Mail Clerk
- Common School Subjects
- High School Subjects
- Illustrating
- Cartooning

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

- Electrical Engineering
- Electric Lighting
- Mechanical Engineer
- Mechanical Draftsman
- Machine Shop Practice
- Railroad Positions
- Gas Engine Operating
- Civil Engineering
- Surveying and Mapping
- Metallurgy
- Steam Engineering
- Architect
- Blue Print Reading
- Contractor and Builder
- Architectural Draftsman
- Concrete Builder
- Structural Engineer
- Chemistry
- Pharmacy
- Automobile Work
- Airplane Engines
- Navigation
- Agriculture and Poultry
- Mathematics

Name.....

Street.....

Address.....

City.....

State.....

Occupation.....

Persons residing in Canada should send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada.

Winners of the Advertising Prize Contest

IN the OCTOBER 7th issue of this magazine the publishers invited the readers to select the best advertisement and offered *four prizes* amounting to a total of \$25.00 cash for the four best letters submitted on or before November 1, 1923.

The publishers take pleasure in announcing the following winners:—

<i>First Prize:</i>	\$15.00.	CLOA A. FULLER, 305 Elm St., Youngstown, Ohio. <i>For letter on Fairy Soap.</i>
<i>Second Prize:</i>	5.00.	JAMES V. SAMPSELLE, 1132 Columbia Road, Washington, D. C. <i>For letter on La Salle Extension University.</i>
<i>Third Prize:</i>	3.00.	R. W. ASHCROFT, 711 Canada Cement Bldg., Montreal, Canada. <i>For letter on A. S. Hinds Co.</i>
<i>Fourth Prize:</i>	2.00.	MRS. C. C. WRIGHT, 636 So. 10th St., Lincoln, Nebr. <i>For letter on Earle Liederman.</i>

A great many letters were submitted. It was a difficult task to select the winners, but it was a pleasure to know that so many of our readers took such a keen interest in the advertising pages. The Advertising Prize Contest will be continued each month, and the publishers would like to have all the readers enter this contest. See regular contest page. :: :: ::
Winners for November 7th issue will be announced in the February 7th issue.
We, of the Advertising Department, want to thank you for your great interest.

Advertising Department

STREET & SMITH CORPORATION

79 SEVENTH AVENUE,

NEW YORK, N. Y.

Write For This Booklet "The Way to Sure Success"

IT tells the story of Better Brushes, Inc.—how the business was established by experienced brush salesmen—how sales grew from \$2800 a month to \$80,000 a month in three years—how this fast-growing company has shared its success with its salesmen, and how these men have been promoted to better and better positions.

This booklet will be especially interesting to every man who is ambitious to get ahead, for we need more salesmen, group captains, branch managers, district superintendents, field managers and sales executives immediately in the great district east of the Mississippi, north of Tennessee.

If you want to earn more money—if you want to sell a line that you can be proud of—if you want to get into a business that offers as large a future as any business in this country, send in the coupon and get a copy of the interesting booklet—"The Way to Sure Success"—which tells the whole story. Mail the coupon to-day.



Stanley L. Metcalf, President,
BETTER BRUSHES, INC.,
52 Church Street, Palmer, Mass.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "The Way to Sure Success," and tell me how I may secure a position as a "Better Brush" Sales Representative.

Name.....

Address.....



Lack of Training Cost This Man \$47,424!

For forty years Sherman C. Wood, of Baltimore, Md., had been averaging less than \$24 a week, with the exception of two years when he was acting as foreman of a department.

Forty years is a long time to wait—but he saw, thru the failings of others, what would happen to him unless he found a way to train for larger responsibilities.

Wood took up home-study training under the LaSalle Problem Method, and within a period of ten months—and by "devoting only about four or five hours a week" to his studies—he was promoted from foreman to the position of factory superintendent, and his salary was practically doubled.

He writes: "I can truthfully say to younger men that if they would only profit by the experience of others they can gain more knowledge thru one year's training by LaSalle methods than can be obtained in ten years' practical experience on the job by hard work."

Mail the Coupon—Save the Money!

Better late than never—but—do you realize what that delay cost Sherman C. Wood and those who were near and dear to him?

For one thousand, nine hundred and seventy-six weeks he paid at least \$24 a week for the doubtful privilege of staying in the ranks of untrained men. His neglect of this one main avenue of business progress cost him—leaving simple and compound interest out of the reckoning—the appalling sum of \$47,424—a fortune in itself!

How much are YOU paying for your membership in the Regretful Order of the Untrained?

Below this text there's a coupon. It will bring you just the information you should have—it will place before you opportunities that for thousands and thousands of men have spell SUCCESS.

Fill it in, clip it, and place it in the mail today.

LaSalle Extension University

The Largest Business Training Institution in the World
Dept. 165-R Chicago, Illinois

Please send me catalog and full information regarding the course and service I have marked with an X below. Also a copy of your book, "Ten Years' Promotion in One," all without obligation to me.

- Business Management
- Modern Salesmanship
- Traffic Management
- Higher Accountancy
- Railway Station Management
- Law, Degree of LL.B.
- Commercial Law
- Industrial Management
- Efficiency
- Banking and Finance
- Modern Business Correspondence and Practice
- Modern Foremanship and Production Methods
- Personnel and Employment Management
- Expert Bookkeeping
- Business English
- Commercial Spanish
- Effective Speaking
- C. P. A. Coaching

Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

Name.....

Address.....

30 Other Courses

American School
Drexel Ave. and 58th Street
Dept. H-14
Chicago

American School, Dept. H-14 Drexel Ave. and 58th St., Chicago
Send me full information on the subject checked and how you will help me win success.

Architect	Lawyer
Building Contractor	Machine Shop Practice
Automobile Engineer	Photoplay Writer
Automobile Repairman	Mechanical Engineer
Civil Engineer	Shop Superintendent
Structural Engineer	Employment Manager
Business Manager	Steam Engineer
Cert. Public Accountant	Foremanship
Accountant and Auditor	Sanitary Engineer
Bookkeeper	Surveyor (and Mapping)
Draftsman and Designer	Telephone Engineer
Electrical Engineer	Telegraph Engineer
Electric Light & Power	High School Graduate
General Education	Fire Insurance Expert
Vocational Guidance	Wireless Radio
Business Law	Undecided



Behind Locked Doors



Ernest M. Poate

MAJOR CONFORD was murdered, stabbed with his own knife! Under the body was found a syringe loaded with deadly poison. The major lived with his niece, his crippled sister and her son. At the inquest, the major's will was read and it was found that his niece had been made residuary legatee.

Whose hand struck down the old man? How came the syringe beneath the body? Why did the counsel for Mildred Conford—the major's niece—produce the will at the inquest?

The answers to these questions form the plot of this, the most intensely thrilling and powerful detective story in years.

Price, \$2.00 net

CHELSEA HOUSE, Publishers

79 Seventh Avenue

New York City



\$1.00 Down

Just one dollar—the balance in easy monthly payments. Write today for FREE Book of Advance Watch Styles. Learn how, for only \$1.00 down, you can get—direct from factory—a

21 Jewel ~ Extra Thin STUDEBAKER The INSURED Watch

Choice of 54 newest Art Beauty Cases; 8 handsome dial designs. 8 adjustments, including heat, cold, isochronism and 5 positions; Insured for a lifetime. Direct from the maker at lowest prices ever named on equal quality. Send for the Booklet

Mail Coupon

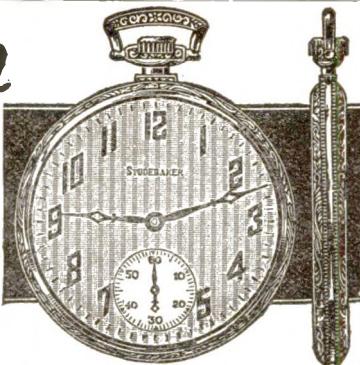
Send today for copy of this book—FREE! See newest Advance Watch Styles. Get \$1.00 down offer. Write

STUDEBAKER WATCH CO.
Dept. 301 • South Bend, Indiana

Fine Chain
FREE!

A limited offer. Free
with every
Studebaker In-
sured Watch a
beautiful gold
Chain. Write
for this offer

Name.....
Address.....
City.....
State.....



MAIL THIS COUPON FOR FREE BOOKLET

STUDEBAKER WATCH CO.
Dept. 301, South Bend, Indiana

Please send me your Free Book of Advance Watch Styles and particulars of your \$1.00 down offer.



S. S. MYSTIC CO. 15 PARK ROW, NEW YORK

Ford Runs 57 Miles on a Gallon of Gasoline

A new automatic and self-regulating device has been invented by John A. Stransky, 2032 Fourth St., Pukwana, South Dakota, with which automobiles have made from 40 to 57 miles on a gallon of gasoline. It removes all carbon and prevents spark plug trouble and overheating. It can be installed by anyone in five minutes. Mr. Stransky wants agents and is willing to send a sample at his own risk. Write him today.



Youth-Ami Skin Peel A New Scientific Discovery

which painlessly and harmlessly replaces the old skin with a new and removes all Surface Blemishes, Pimples, Blackheads, Discolorations, Sunburns, Eczema, Acne, etc. A non-acid, invisible liquid. Produces a healthy new skin, beautiful as a baby's. Results astounding. Booklet "The Magic of a New Skin" free in plain sealed envelope. YOUTH-AMI LABORATORIES, Dept. BIR, 30 E. 20th St., New York



Mandarin Luck Ring

The story of Aladdin, the ragged Chinese boy, who rose to the throne by means of the charm ring finds an echo in the claims of thousands who say that marvelous God Fortune, Love and Wealth come to them suddenly while wearing this world-famous Luck Ring with its quaint ancient symbols.

TRY YOUR LUCK!

Genuine Heavy Solid Silver \$1.50. Ladies' and Gents' styles. Money-Back Guarantee. BEWARE OF FAKE RINGS! ORIENT EXCHANGE, Inc., 21 Park Row, New York, Dept. S. S. 1

Relief for coughs

Use PISO'S—this prescription quickly relieves children and adults. A pleasant syrup. No opiates.

35¢ and 60¢ sizes sold everywhere

GUARANTEED
10,000
MILES

BIG MONEY

Sell Holyoke Cord Tires

No experience needed. Build up a business among your friends in your spare time. It's easy! You sell these first quality, over size cord tires at our LOW FACTORY PRICES.

Put them on your car FREE. Let your friends see them. Our high quality and low prices do the rest. Remember—our big 10,000 mile guarantee is good on every tire. Be first in your town. Write today.

NEW ENGLAND TIRE AND RUBBER COMPANY

Holyoke, Massachusetts

A 3 million dollar corporation. References—Holyoke, Mass., Nat'l Bank and Chamber of Commerce, Bradstreet's and R. G. Dun's Agencies.

PLAYS for Amateurs;

Monologs, Recitations, Drills, Minstrel and Vaudeville Jokes and Sketches; ideas for entertainments. Send for free catalog.

DRAMATIC PUBLISHING CO.

542 South Dearborn Street

CHICAGO



FREE a wonderful Book on Finger Prints

Full of thrilling crime mysteries solved through finger print evidence by America's greatest experts. Gripping illustrations. True stories.

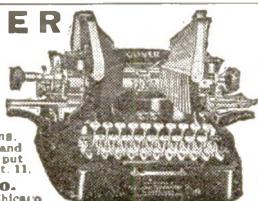
Special Offer You can learn the Finger profession at home in spare time. Write today. Get full details. Big surprise store for you. Book and offer Free.

UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Avenue, Dept. 14-11 Chicago, Illinois

TYPEWRITER BARGAINS!

A real writing machine, standard keyboard, all improvements, rebuilt like new in Oliver's own factory, for a fraction of what you'd expect to pay. Easy terms. Send now for new offer. Act quick, and get yours from 1,000 machines just put through Address—Rebuilt Machines Dept. 11.

Oliver Typewriter Co.
169 Oliver Typewriter Bldg. :: Chicago





Are You Earning Big \$100 a Week?

**J
O
B
S** Would you like to be a star salesman? Men who have mastered salesmanship — who are really proficient — name their own salaries. \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year and better not uncommon. Big money and opportunities in business always open to men who can SELL. Success in selling field leads to highest executive positions. Demand enormous. Old theory about "born salesman" exploded. Any man of average intelligence can now learn to sell thru scientific coaching. Training, the secret. Write today for free book, "MODERN SALESMANSHIP." It tells how you can quickly get into the selling game and win your way to the big-pay jobs. Learn in spare hours at home principles and methods of ablest sales organizations in America. Successful salesmen report sales doubled and trebled thru scientific study of salesmanship under LaSalle Problem Method. Low tuition fees — easy terms. Write now for information.

LA SALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
The Largest Business Training Institution in the World
Dept. 176-SR Chicago, Illinois

Gentlemen: Send without obligation to me information regarding courses indicated below:

Modern Salesmanship

LaSalle is the largest business training institution in the world. It offers training for every important business need. If more interested in any of these courses, check here:

- Business Management**
- Higher Accountancy**
- Traffic Management — Foreign and Domestic**
- Railway Station Management**
- Law, Degree of LL. B.**
- Commercial Law**
- Industrial Management Efficiency**
- Banking and Finance**
- Modern Business Correspondence and Practice**
- Modern Foremanship and Production Methods**
- Personnel and Employment Management**
- Expert Bookkeeping**
- Business English**
- Commercial Spanish**
- Effective Speaking**
- C. P. A. Coaching**

Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

EARN MONEY AT HOME

YOU can make \$15 to \$60 weekly in your spare time writing show cards. No canvassing or soliciting. We instruct you by our new simple Directograph System, supply you with work and pay you cash each week. Write today for full particulars and free booklet.

WEST-ANGUS SHOW CARD SERVICE LIMITED
Authorized Capital \$1,250,000.00
120 Colborne Building, Toronto, Can.

Will you accept a Big Pay Position?

**\$85⁰⁰ to \$200⁰⁰ Weekly
to SALES MEN**

You can quickly qualify to accept a sales position paying from \$85 to \$200 weekly with big, successful Corporations. I will train you quickly, in spare time, by my entirely different and proven successful method, the "Ward Actual Experience Method." Not a "college" or "book" course, the *real thing* direct from the "firing line."



I Pledge You Success

You get my personal directions, I let you in on "selling knacks" that enabled me to organize and train my own powerful sales organization. I also direct and guide you by weekly letters just as I do my own active road men, you simply can't fail to make good. Get my free book full of "Inside Facts" and latest Selling Science, it's FREE.

**JAS. P. WARD, Pres. and Gen. Sales Mgr.
"The man who makes money makers"**

**JAMES P. WARD, Gen. Sales Mgr.,
5031 Executive Offices,
1760-1774 Montrose Ave., Chicago
Dear Sir: Send me your book *Sales-Man-
Ship* and your special plan without cost or
obligation.**

Name.....

Address.....

City.....

State.....

Occupation.....

LEARN Electricity Great Shops of Coyne — complete in 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ months \$200,000 worth of electrical equipment.
Earn \$250 to \$600 a Month
Enter anytime. Special limited offer. Drafting and Radio Free. Send for big free catalog. Act now!
Coyne Electrical School — Dept. 14-11
1300-1310 West Harrison Street, Chicago, Illinois



Can You Draw a Little?

Then let us give you individual instruction by mail (or in our classes) and make you

A Commercial Artist

As we teach it, you learn commercial art quickly and thoroughly. Our Graduate Certificate is worth many times the cost of the course. Our BOOK, beautifully illustrated in colors, shows the work of our students. It's worth a dollar but will go to you for postage—6c. Remember it takes only \$9 to START in our correspondence course.

**National Academy of Commercial Art
Dept. A, 230 E. Ohio Street, Chicago**



-Uncle Sam

Courtesy of Leslie's
Copyrighted.

\$1200 to \$2600 Year
MEN, WOMEN, 18 up
U. S. Government Jobs

Common education suffi-
cient. Send coupon
immediately.

**STEADY
WORK**

This coupon, filled out as directed, entitles the sender to (1) free specimen examination questions; (2) a free copy of our book, "Government Positions and How to Get Them"; (3) free list of positions now obtainable.

COUPON

Railway Postal Clerk (\$1600 to \$2300) ... City Mail Carrier (\$1400 to \$1800)
Bookkeeper (\$1400 to \$1800) ... Rural Mail Carrier (\$1800 to \$2600)
Post Office Clerk (\$1400 to \$1800) ... Customs Positions (\$1100 to \$2000)

MAIL
COUPON

Franklin Institute

Dept. E283, Rochester, N. Y.

COUPON

Name.....

Address..... E283

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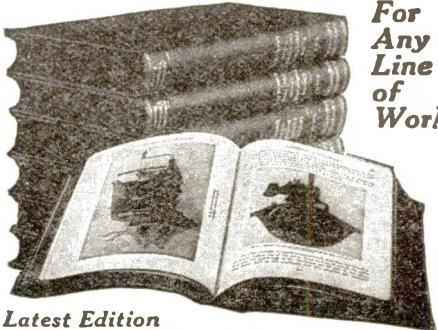
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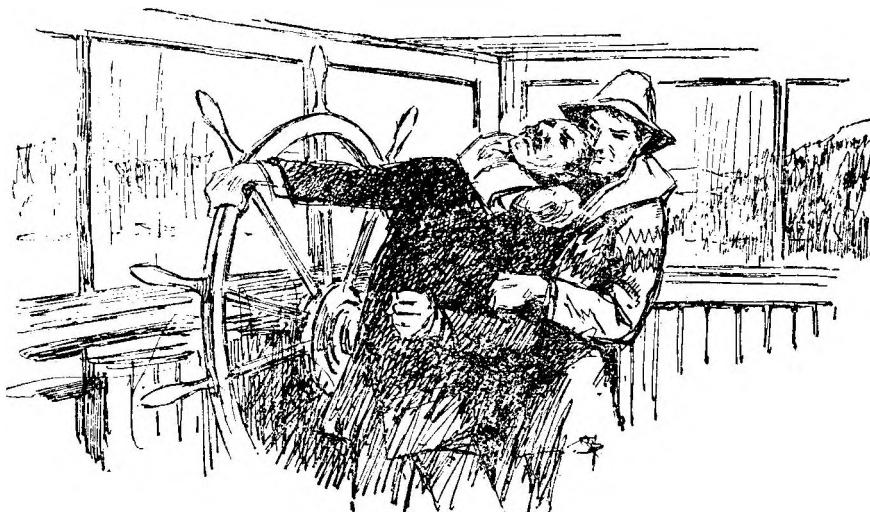
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THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

VOL. LXX.

JANUARY 7, 1924.

No. 6



Bill Stuart—Fighting Man

By A. M. Chisholm

Author of "The Country of Strong Men," "A Dozen Eggs," Etc.

Here is a story that Bret Harte might have written. We don't mean to suggest that this is an imitation of Bret Harte. It is anything but that. There is as much distinction and individuality in the work of A. M. Chisholm as ever there was in the work of any writer. This story proves it. But Chisholm and Harte have something in common. They write of similar things and similar people. Their favorite field is the West. And they are brothers in their penetrating sympathy with the strong, raw, vigorous materials that are molded into their stories, the new lands and the young peoples of pioneer life. Harte wrote of pioneering fifty and more years ago. Chisholm chooses the same fascinating subject, and brings it up to date. This is a story of the modern pioneers. But it loses nothing of dramatic force and romantic glamour through its proximity to our own times. The views that Chisholm paints do not need the spell of distance to render them enchanting. This author's incomparable style supplies more magic than distance ever furnished.—THE EDITOR.

(A Six-Part Story—Part I.)

CHAPTER I.

OLD Bill Stuart, of Stuart Mountain Lumber, was no convert to that modern system which places the desks of executive heads in full view of public and employees. Old Bill did not subscribe to the open diplomacy. He

believed in the right of the boss to employ his desk as a footstool if he saw fit. When old Bill desired to think he was wont to recline upon his spine, erect his feet, and browse upon a cigar. So he had his lair in the sou'west corner of the ground floor of his office building just outside his piling

yards, down a dark hallway which was reached only after running the gantlet of his office force. There, in an atmosphere of tobacco at all times and of freshly cut lumber when the windows were open and the wind right, old Bill dwelt ten hours a day on such days in such seasons as were unsuitable for trout fishing, golf, duck shooting or curling. On occasions when it was possible to engage in any of these pursuits old Bill was apt to be absent from business. But as he owned the business aforesaid, which paid in spite of this seeming neglect, criticism of his methods fell somewhat flat. Old Bill considered that he had earned the right to do as he pleased, and did so.

On a certain morning in late winter or early spring as you like to look at it, there being nothing to do but work, old Bill lay low on his spine, his feet mingling with his correspondence, and chewed a cigar while he reread a letter. Presently his thoughts, whatever they were, were disturbed by a timid tap on the door.

"C'm' in!" old Bill barked without moving. "Whacha want?"

"I trust I do not intrude upon your meditations, my dear father," said a voice with a mincing accent evidently assumed, for the voice continued without it: "Were you playing an approach shot or merely muddling over business?"

Old Bill, his face contorting in what he meant for a welcoming smile, turned in his chair at risk of dislocating his spine but without moving his feet, which were comfortably parked. He beheld a lean, wiry young man whose features were tanned to a deep mahogany by wind and sun and snow glare.

"Hello, Bill! Whenja get back? I thought it was Miss Burns."

"From the politeness of your greeting I imagined you thought I was a lady," young Bill commented with a grin.

"Can the sarcasm," said his parent, proferring an open box of cigars with a dexterous movement of his right foot. "Smoke!" He flung the tattered remnant of his mastications in the general direction of a brass office furnishing. "Gimme another. I hate to move."

Father and son lit up and regarded each other understandingly through the blue haze. At first sight there was little resemblance. The years had thickened and

grayed old Bill, had loosened and wrinkled and crow footed his hide. But he and his son had the same level gaze with the same level eye of raw gray. According to all modern story canons a rich man's son should possess merely potentialities of manliness. He should be a rotter and a waster till his father kicks him out to shift for himself. Perhaps old Bill was not rich enough for such a son. But at any rate young Bill was not that kind. He was on the pay roll as a timber cruiser, and he was a good cruiser. He knew standing timber and his estimates of quantity and cost of cutting were worth investing good money on. But before he had gone into the business which he would one day inherit, he had done a good deal of wandering, entirely on his own hook, and had made his own living in half a dozen unorthodox occupations, all in the open, because he wanted to. He knew the woods and the hills thoroughly, and he could have qualified as a packer, lumberjack, trapper, camp cook, or cow hand.

The attitude of father and son toward each other was that of close friends, and at times partook of the brutal frankness of such masculine friendships. In many things, including love of the open, their tastes were similar.

"Well?" said old Bill after a smoky pause.

"I turned in my report to Egan. It checks up with the reports of Wall & McIntosh's cruisers. Good stuff, but it won't be easy to log."

"Nothing's easy nowadays," old Bill growled. He regarded his son thoughtfully for a moment. "Bill, you're fired."

Young Bill elevated his eyebrows. "Me?"

"Yep. Off the pay roll. End of month."

"Oh, all right," said the young man with resignation. "There's been dirty work somewhere, I can see that. Of course, now, I'll get out for myself and make a million, if I have to hire an author to tell me how. Only thing is, I don't see how my poor old mother is going to pay her auction losses in the meantime, if my salary stops."

"You said something," old Bill grumbled feelingly. "They pretty near take a salary. The way women play cards now is just plain gambling. And your mother can't play. I've tried to tell her——"

Young Bill grinned.

"That's all right," said his father with dignity. "Maybe I don't know so much

about auction, but I was playing poker twenty years before you were born."

"I've heard you were playing it twenty minutes before," said young Bill. "Further, rumor has it that you stayed with the game, with a stipulation of a rake-off on jacks or better for my benefit. Only I never saw a nickel of it," he added plaintively.

"That's just a yarn," said his parent. "I quit when I heard. And I laid down a good hand, too," he concluded sadly.

"I suppose that's where I get my wild, devilish streak," his son speculated meditatively. "Heredity. Gambling blood, both sides. Sad to be the innocent victim of these prenatal influences. By the way, I got into a little game on the train coming down here and I——"

"You don't tap me for a red," his father told him sternly. "Half these smoking-car players are tinhorns. How often have I told you not to play with strangers. You'll find your friends crooked enough. Mine are."

"I don't doubt it," Bill conceded from a knowledge of his father's cronies, who were hard-boiled and remorseless to a degree in poker or business. "Yes, I guess I fell into the hands of tinhorns. At first they let me win about sixty dollars."

"Old stuff!" his father grunted contemptuously.

"And then I got off at the Junction," young Bill continued placidly. "Somehow I think they had the erroneous idea that I was going on through. They seemed surprised—and a little sore."

"If you've got sixty dollars in real money I've a notion to take you into partnership," said old Bill enviously. "The business needs it."

"No, you don't," his son returned apprehensively. "I prefer to lose it where I've got a chance to win."

"Roll the bones with you," the model parent offered.

"I said I wanted a chance, didn't I?"

"Well, you can buy me lunch," said his baffled progenitor.

"Not even a ham sandwich," his son refused sternly. "Being fired, I don't waste my substance in riotous lunches with your crowd. I must consider me unborn wife and che-ild."

"Unborn—blazes!" said old Bill. "Jane's three years older'n you are."

"Now you let up," said the young man,

flushing beneath his tan, "or the first darn thing you know I'll wish her onto you, and she'll be sitting on your knee and calling you 'father.'"

The lady in question, a kittenish bit of very light fluff in spite of the years aforesaid, had evinced a decided liking for the young man, much to his dismay and to his father's wicked glee.

"You won't be able to spare her from your own," said the wicked old gentleman. "And you know she's well fixed. Beauty, money, clingin' affection—what more do you want?"

"Now I get you," said his son. "You fire me to force me into a marriage unblessed by love. Make me a bird in a gilded cage, will you? Well, you slip up on it. Rags are royal raiment when worn for virtue's sake, and summer's coming anyway."

Old Bill grinned. "Want to know why you're fired?"

"I thought you'd get around to that if I didn't ask. Shoot."

"You see," old Bill explained, "I'm in a sort of a jam—me and a couple of the boys—and we need a young fellow of about your general style, so I've fired you so's you can give us your full time this summer."

"Sounds reasonable. And so clear!"

"It's this way," said old Bill. "We've got a bunch of land; and we've got a mine."

"Cuckoo!" young Bill commented musically.

"No, we ain't," said his father indignantly. "We didn't buy the darn mine. It was a forced play and we had to take it over to protect ourselves. The land and the mine are assets of Predie & Thompson."

"Like the rest of their assets?" young Bill queried.

The firm in question had blown up financially with a loud report, leaving a varied assortment of nominal assets for the satisfaction of their creditors, among whom were certain aged and hard-boiled gentlemen of business who had considered themselves too wise to be caught by anybody. But they were caught, much to their disgust. That had been three years before.

"It's those assets I want to talk about if you'll keep your shirt on," old Bill growled. "I know they did us up on their credit statement—no need to tell me. Of course we thought we had checked it, but they either fooled Hughes or greased him, and he's dead. Well, when the creditors

met we went over the whole thing and the size of it was we'd been trimmed right. Predie was dead, Thompson had skipped, and Hughes who had checked their credit statement was dead, too. So there we were! Their assets wouldn't have sold for enough right then to pay ten per cent all around. Nice fix. The meetin' adjourned without doin' anything. Then we—me and Tom Irwin and Jake Gilmour—got together. We were in deeper than the rest, and the bank could hold us if they wanted to, and it was a cinch they would. So we figured that bein' in up to our necks already we might as well swim. So we turned ourselves into a syndicate and got Andy McKellar to make the other creditors a twenty-five-percent proposition for us, so's we wouldn't show in the deal. They were glad to get it and assigned their claims to Andy. Then we made a deal with the bank, assumed a personal liability—because they could hold us anyway—and took their assignment. That way Tom and Jake and me own everything Predie & Thompson had."

"Congratulations!" young Bill offered heartily.

"You got a rotten fresh streak," his father growled. "Well, their mill on the Klammit and what was left of the timber there was worth something. We logged her bare, and shut down, and sold the outfit for junk. Then they had little bunches of timber scattered around all over the country, but nothing worth putting in a plant to cut. We've got to wait for some sniper that wants to put in a little mill. Then there was collateral of all kinds put up by P. & T. individually, mostly building lots that looked good in boom times but ain't worth a hoot now. May be some day if we can pay taxes. And then there was the stuff I'm coming to."

Old Bill rolled his cigar across his mouth and took a left molar grip.

"Ever hear of a place called Sitkum?" he inquired.

"Don't think so."

"It's up at the headwaters of the Big Canoe. In a way it's a new country, though it was prospected by the old-timers who came in with the old gold rushes. It's a steamboat and wagon-road country. No railway. Maybe it'll amount to something some day; maybe not. Anyway P. & T. got in there somehow, and they picked up ten thousand acres for about fifty cents an acre,

and the mineral claim I'm telling you about."

"Gold?"

"Nope. Silver lead. They had a group of claims and they did some work on one of them. They got out some ore and raw-hid it down. Then the vein pinched out or they lost the lead and they shut down."

"A low-grade proposition?"

"I guess so. But not on P. & T.'s telling. They said it ran high and they had assays to back that up."

"Hand picked?"

"Looks like it. A low-grade proposition wouldn't pay on account of transportation costs. The mine is away back on the roof of the world. They shipped some ore and their smelter returns showed a profit, but it looks as if they had hand picked the shipment so's the returns would stiffen their credit statement."

"Why don't you send in an expert?"

"Did."

"What did he say?"

"Said we owed him eight hundred and expenses. That was the only thing we didn't know already. Said maybe it was a mine, maybe not. Said we could find out by spending ten thousand."

"He played it safe," young Bill grinned.

"They all do," old Bill grumbled. "What makes me think maybe there's a coon in the tree is that we had an offer for it. Feller offered five thousand."

"Local man?"

"Lives there. Name is Orme."

"May know something about it."

"That's what we thought. We wrote to a feller name of Wills for dope on Orme. He said Orme dabbled in mines, but didn't seem to think much of his judgment. Said he was good for the money. Offered cash. We stood Orme off and he came up to eight thousand. We said recent 'vestigations property indicated presence c'nsid'rable body ore payin' values 'n' pendin' further 'nvestigation take matter under 'dvisement. Orme came back at us to close or the deal was off. Didn't reply."

"High finance!"

"Never let a feller stampede you," said old Bill from his experience. "Take time to skin your hand every time. That's all I can tell you about the mine. Now about the land. It lies in a block. This feller Wills that we wrote to about Orme is handling it for us. He lives in Sitkum and he's

in the land business and sev'ral other things. Andy checked up on him and says he's all right. He offered to buy this land at a dollar and a half all round, or sell on commission. We took him up on the commission offer and he's made some sales runnin' from two to five dollars an acre. Well, that's the way things are. Then I get this letter."

He held out the missive. Plainly it was written by one unaccustomed to that form of expression. Bill read:

DEAR MR. STUART: I guess you will be surprise to hear from me, but I have been living here in Sitkum for some time, where I have a job with the government, and I know that you and some others was mixed up with P. & T. that went bust. They used to own some stuff here, and if you are interested in it now I think it would pay you to send somebody in to check up on it. I would say it would be better if nobody knew you was doing that, and if whoever come did it as if he was looking for land for a little ranch or for a job or to trap or something like that so he could look around and nobody would think anything of it. My tumtum is the less he looks like he knows the better. Hoping you are well, and Billy, too.

Yours respectfully, E. WALSH.

"Old Ed!" young Bill exclaimed when he came to the signature, for in his boyhood Walsh who was then in his father's employ had given him many valuable lessons in the lore of the hills. "By George, I'd like to see him again."

"You will," said old Bill. "I want you to go up there. I don't know how old Ed knows I'm in on this. Far's anybody outside the bank knows Andy McKellar's the whole thing. Even our agent, Wills, don't know anybody but Andy in it. Never heard of me. You can use your own name when you go in. Find out what's being put over, if anything is. Ed'll be tickled to death to see you. I thought of you"—old Bill grinned wickedly—"soon as I read the style of feller he says we ought to send."

"The less he looks like he knows the better," young Bill quoted indignantly. "I'm elected on that ticket, am I? Just for that crack your soulless syndicate will pay me about twice what I was getting when I resigned."

"Resigned?" his parent snorted. "I like your nerve! Why, darn you, you were drawing about twice what you were worth as it was."

"Anybody who can draw twice what he's worth from you is worth twice what he draws," his son retorted. "Besides, out there

in the great open spaces where men are rough guys it is possible that I may meet some elemental birds who may resent my interference with their little game. They may desire to play horse with a young and innocent stranger."

Old Bill glanced with some satisfaction at the young innocent's lean, muscular figure. "Lord help 'em if they do," he said piously, for "playing horse" with young Bill, as his father knew, was considerably more than a pastime.

"That's no good wish, dad."

"Well, you know what I mean. Going to take that hell hound of yours along with you again?"

"That 'hell hound,' as you call him, is a perfect gentleman. You bet I'll take him. How about my terms?"

"You're a holdup," old Bill told him, "but we're stung anyway. And then you do fit the specifications so perfectly."

"It's just heredity again," his son mused. "'Like father, like son.' Funny, how these things run in families. I suppose grandfather had that same expression, hard-boiled if slightly vacant, the—"

"If you'd pulled stuff on your grandfather, *my* dad, you'd be looking for a tree to climb," old Bill interrupted.

"From what I've heard of him I don't doubt it," his descendant admitted. "Coming back to the main issue, I wonder if I could appear at this Sitkum place in the guise of a pilgrim—say just out from England."

"You've got an English accent like a Montana cow hand," his father ridiculed. "Forget it. You'd make a pretty fair hobo, though."

"Something in that," his son admitted. "I guess I couldn't get away with the pilgrim idea. All right. I'll go in packing my blankets and looking for a job."

CHAPTER II.

The upriver steamer, a shovel-nosed, wood-burning stern-wheeler, made deliberate progress against a slow current which slipped smoothly past dark root-netted banks surmounted by walls of the light emerald of cottonwood, birch, and willow in the opening leaf. These banks were in the nature of natural dikes, confining the sluggish current of the channel. Behind them stretched sloughs, some of them lakes and

others just then mud flats, for the month was May and the water low.

Back of the sloughs lay higher land, rising in great natural terraces to foothills dark with masses of fir and spruce. There great draggled drifts of snow lingered, feeding white little streams that combined in miniature torrents in the gulches. Behind and above the foothills soared the heads of the great ranges aglisten with crusted, polished snow glinting against the soft blue of the sky. Though the morning air was odorous with the scents of moist earth and opening buds it still held a tang. In the sun it was warm; but in the shade it was keen, invigorating, with the thin purity of the mountains.

Small life in the path of the steamer was plentiful. Geese, already paired, rose from sand bars or, following the line of the channel in low flight, swung wide from the terrorizing monster with smoking funnel and loud noises. Ducks gabbled in the sloughs. Fish darted for shelter from the dark bulk forging through their feeding grounds. Muskrats sitting at the water's edge dived hastily to escape the steamer's wash; and once a bank beaver on some urgent private mission rose to the surface and instantly disappeared with a slap of tail that cracked like a pistol shot.

As it was her first trip of the season the steamer had a heavy load of freight which, combined with low water, rendered her progress slow. This freight in boxes and bales and barrels and sacks was piled high on her single lower deck, for being perforce of shallow draft she had no hold stowage. Instead, the lower deck was built out in an overhang beyond the hull. Her upper deck was given over to small staterooms with two bunks each. Above this, rising grandly aloft, was the pilot house and captain's and mate's cabin. Nor was this altitude fortuitous, for it enabled the helmsman to discern the channel and to detect bars and other obstacles invisible from the lower decks. In high water the upriver trip would be made in one long day; but now, with little space between keel and river bottom, it took two.

Forward, on the morning of the second day of the voyage, a young woman reclined in a deck chair on the upper deck. She had a book but she was not reading. Her eyes were on the changing but changeless panorama of mountain, valley, and stream open-

ing before her with every twist and turn of the channel; but to a close observer they would have given the effect of looking through and beyond these natural beauties rather than at them. Their owner's body was relaxed in the chair, a posture which in spite of a voluminous coat of rough tweed revealed its long, graceful lines. The head, resting against the chair's back, was crowned with masses of glossy, coppery-brown hair bare to the morning breeze. Straying tendrils of it brushed cheeks somewhat pale and thin, as from recent illness, an impression borne out by the girl's hands which, lying on the book in her lap, were white and blue-veined, though shapely and capable. Indeed, eyes, hands, face and relaxed posture indicated recent illness or lack of physical energy, or perhaps both.

The young woman was in strange surroundings. To her it seemed that she had left civilization behind and plunged into primeval solitudes. She had seen no craft on the river, not so much as a canoe. If settlements existed they were masked by the trees which shut in the narrow, tortuous channel. Rare landings were marked by a stake or a blazed tree, but sometimes they seemed to depend on some extraordinary quality of divination of captain or purser. Seldom was there any one to receive the small consignments of freight. From these landings vague trails led back into the bush. But human life seemed to withdraw from the steamer's path.

To the city-bred girl her fellow passengers were as strange as her surroundings. She was the only woman on board. The men might be settlers, actual or prospective, ranchers, lumberjacks, prospectors, trappers. For the most part their clothing was the rough, serviceable garb of the modern frontier. Some had occupied cabins at night; but others, packing their own blankets, had bedded down in the neighborhood of the boilers which afforded warmth. Some were the worse for liquor; but all—and even especially the bibulous ones—were painfully respectful to the solitary woman.

From where she sat the girl commanded a view of the broad foredeck. It was piled with freight, interspersed with passengers who, presumably too modest to seek the upper deck and chairs, had disposed themselves on and among the freight aforesaid. There they smoked or slept and sunned themselves. One hospitable soul,

the possessor of a flaming red head and a supply of bottles apparently unlimited—this being before the era of the Great Drought—circulated painstakingly if unsteadily, offering refreshment. Acceptance pleased him, while refusal brought pain to his generous heart.

"C'm' on, partner," he said as he stood below the girl. "Jus' li'l' snort."

The man addressed shook his head. He was stretched out comfortably, his back against a pile of baled hay. By his side lay a canvas-wrapped pack and a hand-worn high-powered rifle. He was clad in a dingy Mackinaw, staggered trousers and nailed cruisers, the latter new and plainly of the finest and most expensive calfskin. A soft gray hat badly soiled concealed the upper half of his face from the girl's eyes, but the lean jaw was dark with the tan of the snows, which is deeper than that of the sun. At his feet, head upon forepaws, lay a great grizzle-coated dog. When the man moved hand or foot or shifted never so slightly the dog's yellow eyes opened with an alert twitch of shaggy brows. Just then the eyes fixed themselves with cold suspicion upon the perambulating canteener.

"Jus' li'l' snort," the latter pleaded. "For my sake. Be goo' feller!"

"Not in the morning, old settler."

"Sh—hic!—shure!" the other urged. "Morningsh besh time. Then you got all day ahead."

But the man with the dog was not influenced by this great truth. The tempter regarded him with sympathy.

"You shea-shick?" he inquired solicitously. "Mus' be shea-shick. Shtummick mus' be all shot. Poor ol' shea-shick partner!" Oblivious of the scriptural prediction concerning him who puts the bottle to his neighbor's lips he extended first aid in that direction, while he stretched out a muscular left arm to encircle the supposed invalid's shoulders. "C'm' on, partner! Brace—"

"No! Down!"

The sharp negative and command came just in time. The dog, eyes shooting amber flames, great fangs bared, in the act of leaving the ground for the throat of him who would lay impious hands upon his master, sank back rumbling harsh, deep protest. His master got to his feet, spoke soothingly and turned to the pest.

"Take your booze and roll your hoop," he

commanded, "and never try to paw a man over while his dog is around."

The inebriate, appearing to notice the animal for the first time, snapped his fingers enticingly.

"Goo' dog," he said. "C'm' 'ere!"

"Clear out!" said the animal's owner sharply. "Don't try to touch that dog if you want to use your hand this summer."

"Dogsh my friendsh," the bibulous one returned with confidence. "Dogsh likesh me. C'm' 'ere, purp! Goo'—"

The flashing snap of the great fangs grazed his fingers. With an indignant oath he drew back his right foot. As he did so he was caught, lifted, and swung back on the baled hay.

"You infernal fool!" the dog's owner exclaimed, "haven't you got *any* sense? If you'd kicked that dog he'd have killed you. And if he hadn't I would. Get out of here and keep away. I'm through with you, understand."

The pest, sprawling on the hay bales, collected and erected himself with some difficulty. Through these vicissitudes he had retained his bottle, which he now examined solicitously.

"You shpilt some," he accused the other gravely. "Jus' for that I got a notion to come down and kick the very Judas outa you 'n' your dog, both."

"You've got another notion that's got that skinned a mile," the young man replied, "and that's not to."

The gentleman on the baled hay considered this suggestion and its maker for a moment.

"Thash s'ficient 'pology," he returned haughtily. "Lemme tell you, though, you're grouch. You're not soshbl'. You got bad, vicious dog. You 'n' dog both go to blazes 'n' chasesh shpidersh!"

With which dignified reproof he descended with some difficulty on the farther side of the baled hay. The dog's owner looked after him with a frown that cleared to a grin, stretched himself again on the deck, and began to fill a pipe.

The girl above had been an interested witness. She had caught her breath when the dog had crouched and snapped. Now that the incident was over she leaned back and considered him and his owner as they lay stretched at ease among the freight.

"Good morning, Miss Campbell!"

The girl came back to realities. A man

stood beside her chair. He was tall, powerfully built, with somewhat prominent pale-blue eyes, a firm mouth and an aggressive chin. He looked like a prosperous man of business, but the tan which overlay his fair skin even in May indicated that his activities whatever they might be were not exclusively indoors. The girl had met him the day before, introduced in the easy camaraderie of the West by the captain of the boat. Vaguely she understood that he was a person of some local importance. She smiled up at him.

"Good morning, Mr. Wills. Won't you sit down?"

Wills accepted the invitation. He hoped she had rested well; spoke of the morning, the scenery. It was, she told him, her introduction to a mountain country. She asked if the peaks visible from the boat were named.

"Not yet," Wills replied. "Along the railway they have been christened for the benefit of the traveling public, but the habit hasn't spread here. Some of them have local names, of course. When we have a railway no doubt they will be named after directors and politicians."

"And when will that be?"

"I don't know. A line has been partly surveyed but there is no construction as yet."

"I suppose a railway would mean development and prosperity?"

"Theoretically—yes."

"Only theoretically? I thought there was no doubt."

"It was before your time and mine," he said, "but what happened to dozens of little lake-port towns back East when the railway came along?"

"Why—it killed them," the girl admitted. "For years they were sleepy little towns with vacant houses and rotting wharves. They're just beginning to pick up now. But that's not a parallel case. Shipping was their life."

"They were distributing points," said Wills, "getting-away points, jumping-off points to what lay back of them. But the rails, when they came through, carried the stream of settlers along and past these points. That's what happens still. Settlement in the West goes to the end of steel. People pass by districts already served by a railway. That's the fact. Before a railway people flock into a new district. They

hope to pick up land cheap, to get in on the ground floor. There's a boom. Everything has a speculative value. Business is brisk and money plentiful. Construction times are good times. But after that business flattens out. The chances are more than even that the advent of a railway means stagnation for a more or less extended period."

"In other words," said the girl, "it puts a district on a sound basis instead of a speculative one. It has to make good or take the consequences."

He stared at her for a moment in surprise. Her shrewd comment was unexpected.

"But making good is sometimes very hard on a district," he said.

"Of course. But it must come to that. Speculative values are bound to collapse sooner or later. They must settle to a sound basis and in that process they may dip below what the basis itself warrants. But they will always recover to that."

"You talk like a banker," he told her in genuine surprise. She laughed.

"You mean to be complimentary, I'm sure. But what I say is correct, is it not?"

"Somebody is always pinched after a boom," Wills admitted philosophically. "The thing is to know when it has reached its height, unload then, and stand clear. However, we haven't a railway yet." He dismissed the topic with a wave of the hand. "Are you staying in our country for any length of time, or are you merely a bird of passage? I don't want to seem inquisitive, but our accommodations for visitors like yourself are not all we could wish, and I wondered if I could be of service to you—if you had made no arrangements."

"That is very kind of you. But I intend to stay through the summer with my uncle."

Wills' face expressed surprise. "Your uncle? No doubt I know him. But—"

"His name is Gardner."

Wills shook his head. "That's funny. I thought I knew everybody. He must have come in very recently."

"Oh, no. He has been in Sitkum for over a year. He is a miner—or at least a prospector."

"Not old Dan Gardner!" Wills' voice expressed incredulity. "Is *he* your uncle?"

"My mother's uncle, to be exact. You seemed surprised, Mr. Wills."

"Oh, not at all."

"But you were. Why?"

"Naturally I didn't connect him with *you*. He isn't—I mean he's an old-timer. But of course you know all about him."

"I have never seen him."

"No?" His tone was carefully noncommittal. "Well, as I say, he's an old-timer. His ways may strike you as a little strange at first."

"I'm not very conventional, and I shall be disappointed if he is."

"You'll see when you get to Sitkum," Wills laughed.

"Now that," said the girl, "is an odd name—to me. I've wanted to ask somebody about it. Does it mean anything at all?"

"In the Chinook," her companion explained, "'sitkum' means 'half.' For instance 'sitkum sun' is noon—halfway through the day. 'Sitkum Siwash' is half an Indian—a half-breed."

"And so Sitkum City is half a city, a town. Is that it?"

"Not quite. In the early days the old prospectors—they came in here fifty years ago looking for gold—used to camp where the town now stands, that is, about halfway down Big Canoe Lake. The story goes that one of them, meeting an Indian, asked him where the other white men were camped. The Indian replied they were camped 'sitkum illahee,' or halfway along the shore. They called it 'Sitkum Camp' in those days."

"And did those early prospectors find gold?"

"Not here—that is, not in paying quantities. Most of the creeks have a little gold, but nothing worth while. Those old-timers were an overflow from the big placer rushes. The country was a wilderness then. Nobody knew when he might stumble on rich dirt."

"It must have been fascinating," the girl sighed. "Think of coming into an unknown country, of wandering among these great mountains, with a fortune always in prospect!"

"Gold fever. It was a hard country in those days. It may seem romantic, but it was plain hard work and privation. Romance always lies in the past."

"Because we are blind to the present. The present little things obscure the big thing. It is all around us, if we could only see it. This steamer is full of hopes and fears and ambitions, if only we knew them."

"If you expect to find romance on this boat I'm afraid you will be disappointed."

"I may not find it, but it is here, among our fellow passengers. Who are they? Where are they going? What do they do? For instance that big, bearded man who looks as though he had stepped from the pages of Bret Harte?"

"Well, Bret Harte might have got copy out of *him*," Wills admitted. "His name is Drader. He has prospected most of North America."

"And the young man with the cowboy hat and the buckskin shirt?"

Wills laughed. "That wild-and-woolly gentleman arrived six months ago direct from London. He'd get lost in a back yard with six currant bushes. The buckskin shirt is the unfailing sign of the pilgrim."

"But he thinks he's living romance. Who is the man with the dog, just below us?"

Wills looked down and shook his head. "I don't know him. Packing his blankets. Likely looking for a job."

She told him what she had just seen. "I like the dog. He worships his master."

Wills eyed the animal. "The brute is a mongrel. I'll show you a *real* dog. He'd throw that fellow into the air and break his back."

As if aware that he was the subject of discussion the dog on the foredeck lifted his head and eyed them. The action attracted his master's attention. He, too, turned his head and looked upward. As his gaze met the girl's a slight, half-humorous smile lighted his dark, tanned face. On an impulse she leaned forward.

"I was admiring your dog," she said, her clear voice carrying above the noises of the steamer's progress. "What is his name, please?"

The young man removed his hat, showing a closely cropped dark poll.

"Michael Donovan Fitzpatrick, ma'am."

The girl's pale cheeks flushed slightly.

"I meant the dog's name, Mr. Fitzpatrick."

"Michael Donovan Fitzpatrick. 'Fitz' for short."

"Oh," she said, "I beg your pardon. Thank you."

The young man smiled, bowed with a grace largely impaired by the baled hay, and replaced his hat on his head and his pipe in his mouth. Plainly he regarded the conversation as closed.

"What a name for a dog," the girl laughed, turning to her companion. "I thought that he thought I had asked his."

"It's just as well to have nothing to do with fellows like that. They presume on it."

"But he didn't."

"Some might. But suppose we go up to the pilot house. It's comfortable and you can get a better view."

"Is it permitted? I thought it was the holy of holies."

"The captain is a friend of mine. He won't object."

The captain, who was spelling his mate at the wheel, welcomed them cordially. He was a big man, with one ear thickened in that fashion technically termed "cauliflower," and a somewhat hard face which bore numerous slight scars. In fact Captain O'Halloran had a reputation as a rough-and-tumble performer. He diffused a strong alcoholic aroma, but though he was a good deal more than the proverbial three sheets in the wind he was quite able to steer. The wheelhouse was comfortable, with a broad-cushioned seat on which the girl reclined and looked abroad from her eyrie.

She found that the additional elevation made a vast difference. Now she caught glimpses of objects before concealed by the walls of green—an occasional clearing with a log house, a bunch of cattle grazing on the southern, sun-warmed slopes, the winding ribbon of a road. Looking down she could distinguish shoals and mud banks invisible before. In the shallows, where the current ran above bright sand, its rippled rows seemed to lie but a few inches below the surface, though the depth was actually feet.

But presently she felt a strange languor stealing over her. Her companion observed it.

"You look tired," he told her bluntly.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm not very strong—yet."

"You have been ill? I thought so. May I get you something—tea, brandy, Scotch? I'm afraid there's no wine."

"Nothing at all, thank you. It's nothing, really. I'm just tired."

"Then I won't disturb you. Make yourself comfortable with the cushions and sleep if you like. I'll be back in an hour."

With a word of explanation to the captain, who nodded, his eyes upon the chan-

nel, he departed. The girl leaned back with a sigh of weariness and closed her eyes.

Too much of everything, she decided. Too much journey, too much fresh air, scenery, talk. She couldn't stand it yet. Her illness had been prolonged, with complications. It had drained her once abundant vitality, sapped her strength. She must be more careful. However, there was the whole summer ahead.

She must have slept. When she awoke with a slight start it took her a moment to adjust herself to her surroundings. The steamer was still forging forward slowly. The burly figure of the captain, legs spread, was at the wheel. She looked down at the lower deck.

There, the young man with the dog had risen and followed by the animal was making his way aft. To avoid the freight he followed the outer edge of the deck, which was flush, without a rail, but strengthened by a running piece of timber some six inches wide. On this narrow path the young man trod, the dog at his heels, and their way led them past the gentleman who had been so insistent with proffer of liquid refreshment. As the dog passed him he extended his foot and shoved rather than kicked the animal. Thus taken unaware the dog lost his balance. His hind legs left the deck and hung overside. There he clung by his forepaws, scrambling furiously to regain foothold.

As he hung on the young man glanced back, saw his follower's predicament and stooped swiftly to aid him. But he was too late. The dog's hind quarters, finding no support beneath the overhang, overbalanced him. His forepaws lost their desperate hold. Before his master could grip them they slipped and he disappeared overside.

The young man leaned far over, watching for his appearance. Then he did what appeared to be a strange thing. He snatched off his hat, shook it for an instant and threw it in a sailing arc at right angles to the steamer's course.

"Fetch it, Fitz!" he shouted. "Get him, boy!"

As the dog swimming strongly toward the floating hat fought free of the forging hull the girl saw the reason for the action. Swimming alongside, clawing for foothold as is a dog's instinct when overboard, likely he would have been drawn into the big stern wheel. She admired the presence of mind

which had foreseen this danger and so promptly taken counter measures.

The young man turned and as he did so caught sight of a sadly inebriated grin on the face of the dog's assailant. Though he had not seen the latter's action he seemed to divine his responsibility. Without preliminary he planted his left fist solidly in the exact center of the grin, sending its owner backward among the freight. Then he mounted to the upper deck and thence to the wheelhouse. He glanced at the girl casually and addressed the captain with a directness which seemed a characteristic.

"Captain, my dog's overboard. Would you mind pulling in to the bank till I get him?"

But the captain, who had scowled upon this intrusion, shook his head. "Can't stop for dogs. Ought to have tied him."

"He was knocked overboard."

"Can't stop. Let him run the bank to the next landing."

"How far is that?"

"Bout five miles."

The young man glanced at the wild tangle of brush and sloughs and shook his head. "Too much to ask of any dog in strange country. I'll pay for a landing now."

"No, you won't," the captain returned, "because I won't make one. Now you get out of here!"

The young man glanced astern. The steamer was swinging around a bend and the change of course brought the dog into view. He had the hat and was seeking a place to climb a steep cut bank. In a moment he was lost to view. His owner's brow clouded.

"I want to get off here. Pull in and land me and go ahead."

The captain scowled. "I'm not making extra landings. I told you to get out of here."

"Now see here, captain," the young man urged in a curiously level, gentle tone, "this is a case with me. I think a lot of that dog and I just can't take a chance of losing him. Be a good fellow—let me off and put your own price on it. I'm paying cash. Please!"

"No!" the captain roared his face redening with rising wrath. "How often have I got to tell you? To blazes with you and your dog. If you're not out of here in the split of a holy second I'll kick you out!"

To the girl the situation from the young

man's viewpoint seemed hopeless. But the latter resorted to direct action with startling suddenness. Without further parley he brought the edge of his right hand into the angle of the captain's elbow in a short, chopping blow which momentarily paralyzed the arm. Almost before the amazed mariner realized that he was attacked an arm shot across his throat, a leg was crooked behind his and he was torn from the wheel by the impact of a surging body of tremendous dynamics. Half garroted, he was tripped, upset and flung through the door of the wheelhouse.

As instantly as he released his hold the young man sprang to the wheel and jammed it down. As the blunt nose swung toward the bank in response he proved a certain acquaintance with steamboating by disengaging one hand long enough to give the engine room a slow bell, followed immediately by a stop. This done, with a final glance at the swinging bow he released the wheel, and turned for an instant toward the girl.

"Had to do it," he said. "It was a case. Sorry." And he made swift exit by the starboard door as the irate skipper, breathing vengeance and an aroma of spent Scotch, reentered by that through which he had made undignified egress.

Torn between revenge and duty the captain hesitated momentarily. The sight of the boat's bow head on for the bank decided him. He grasped the wheel and endeavored to swing it away. But it was too late. The heavily laden boat with her power shut off forged slowly in, refusing to answer her helm in time. To the accompaniment of a belated reverse signal and furious curses from the wheel, limbs raked and slashed the upper deck. Stanchions snapped. In response to a bellow from aloft roustabouts grasped pike poles as if to repel boarders, in an endeavor to fend off.

The girl, behind a fount of lurid speech which ignorance prevented her from recognizing as a masterpiece of composition, combining as it did the best technique of both salt and fresh-water schools of oratory with a piquant dash of logging-camp imagery, saw the cause of it all leap lightly across the piled freight to his pack and rifle, catch them up and stand ready. The blunt nose took the bank with a glancing blow that shook the fabric from stem to budgeons. But just before the impact the

young man sprang from deck to bank, waved an arm in derisive acknowledgment of a final burst of objurgation from aloft, and disappeared in the brush.

Meanwhile the big stern wheel was thrashing in belated reversal. The nose was shoved off. The steamer swung to the current. The bell rang for full speed ahead. The steamer resumed her way.

As the girl abandoned the wheelhouse to its lawful occupant, whose mood seemed to demand the opportunity for untrammelled self-communion, she heard a clear whistle and a call from downstream, answered by a deep-chested bark. Her introduction to this strange land was, she reflected, if not precisely restful at least not at all dull.

CHAPTER III.

In the afternoon Wills left the steamer at an obscure landing. He had hoped, he told Miss Campbell, to go through to Sitkum City, but he had business along the route. That concluded he would come up by land. The purser would look after her. She thanked him. But she had written her uncle and had no doubt that he would meet the boat.

As the steamer resumed her slow course Graeme Campbell moved her chair into the sun and presently became lost in thought. Mentally she reviewed her own history. It was not especially interesting.

She was quite alone in the world. Save for this Dan Gardner, her mother's uncle whom she had never seen, she had no living relatives. Her mother had been dead many years. Her father, a lawyer who had lived up to his professional income and had no other, had died suddenly five years before, leaving an estate consisting of quite inadequate life insurance. At that time his daughter was at college. Confronted by the problem of earning a living at once she had abandoned hope of an academic degree and had acquired the rudiments of business training in a commercial school. Now, five years later, she had attained the position of personal stenographer, or perhaps confidential secretary, to the head of a solid financial house. Her mind, clear, logical, analytical marched very well with that of her shrewd employer. She was earning a comfortable salary. But that winter she had contracted pneumonia. There had been weeks of hovering on the borderland, slow

recovery and orders to take a complete rest in a high altitude in a dry climate.

She shrank from advertised sanitariums. Gardner, she knew, lived in a remote mountain valley in the dry belt. The idea of visiting her only surviving relative occurred to her.

His history, so far as she knew it, was that he had run away from home when he was sixteen and had headed for the then wild West. At long intervals her mother had heard from him. When he had learned of her husband's death and of the daughter's straitened circumstances he had sent money which, though he said nothing of his own circumstances, she had a suspicion that he could ill spare. This suspicion was confirmed a year later when as the result of an accident he became an inmate of a hospital. At that time he was broke, as he frankly admitted, but he would accept assistance from her on a "grubstake" basis only—that is, that she should have a half interest in any minerals he might subsequently discover. So, smiling at what she considered an old man's ruse to save his pride, she agreed and sent him money. She was amazed a year later to receive a draft for five thousand dollars, part proceeds of a claim he had sold. In vain she had protested. The old prospector stood pat on the agreement. He was now able, he said, to put into execution something he had had in mind for many years. He gave no details. His next letter was from Sitkum City. It was, he said, in the mountains, in the dry belt. And so when the physicians had delivered their ultimatum she had written him and followed her letter.

Now she found herself wondering what manner of man her relative was. His letters proved that he had never acquired more than the rudimentary education of boyhood. They were those of one who, if not exactly illiterate, was unaccustomed to the use of the written word. They were very brief and obviously written with effort. They threw little light on his character. But his actions proved that no matter what his shortcomings he was kindly, generous and straight in his dealings. That was a good deal.

As the steamer neared the headwaters her progress became more difficult. The channel shoaled. She began to encounter bars spewed out by the mouths of riotous mountain creeks. Now and then it was necessary to run a line to a convenient tree

and winch across a strip of sand. But at last the steamer won through and emerged upon a long mountain lake.

The effect, after the winding shut-in channel, was of breadth, of space. To the girl it seemed that the mountains withdrew. The sun was going down behind great ranges to the westward and their shadows crept eastward across the surface of the still waters; but to the east benchlands and foot-hills and ranges were bathed in a light of gold and green. Their images lay along the shore, reflected in color in the water. Here the floor of the valley was wider and ahead to the southward beyond navigation it seemed to spread still more. But the girl's eyes sought in vain for a town or any sign of settlement. The shores seemed deserted. Where, she wondered, were the people of the land?

But the booming blast of the steamer's whistle promised an answer to that question. They were drawing in to a wharf built on piling, back of which stood a large shed of unpainted boards. The shores were low and bushy but in the background rose high cutbanks of whitish yellow split by a wide gulch along one side of which a wagon road wound upward.

A dozen men were on the wharf. Back of it teams and saddle horses waited. As the steamer drew in the girl leaned over the rail and scanned the group curiously in an endeavor to pick out her unknown relative. But the majority of the upturned faces were young. Nowhere could she see features with the traces of some seventy snows. Was it possible that her letter had gone astray? Her uncle might be absent on some prospecting trip. In that case she would have to shift for herself as best she could until his return.

The fenders bumped the wharf, sending a shiver through the crazy structure. Passengers disembarked. The work of unloading began at once.

Feeling decidedly lost Graeme Campbell picked up her bag and prepared to go ashore. On the lower deck she paused to ask the purser for directions; but that individual, though busily checking freight, seemed able to hold converse with a lean, grizzled man of middle age whom she had noticed standing near the gangplank. The purser was relating with obvious glee the dog-overboard episode.

"This feller with the dog wouldn't be red-

headed and a mite cross-eyed, would he?" the elder man queried.

"No, his hair was dark and his eyes were a sort of raw gray, near as I noticed. He had a pack and a rifle."

"Leave them behind?"

"No, he took the works. He'll need the gun if the skipper ever runs across him again. He's sure hostile."

"Well, I'll be goin'. Guess my freight'll be along next trip. S' long."

"Can you tell me," Graeme asked the purser, "how I can get to the hotel? I suppose there is one."

The purser turned. "Mr. Wills told me you expected somebody to meet you, Miss Campbell."

"My uncle, Mr. Gardner. Have you seen him?"

"Your uncle!" In his voice was the note of surprise which she had noted in Wills. "No, I haven't seen him. The hotel—well, I'm afraid it's not quite what you're used to."

"But I must go some place," she pointed out. "I'm not particular, so long as it's quiet."

"Quiet? Well!" The purser's face and voice expressed large mental reservation. He called to the retreating man: "Oh, Ed, see here a minute." The man, who had reached the gangplank, turned. "Got your buggy here? Then that's all right," he went on as the man nodded. "This is Ed Walsh, Miss Campbell. This lady's uncle was to meet her, Ed, but he hasn't showed up, so she wants to go to the hotel for the night. You'll take her up, won't you?"

"Sure," Walsh nodded. "Glad to. Let me take your grip, ma'am. My buggy's right back of the shed." He led the way through a confusion of freight. As they emerged from the shed the girl's eye was caught by what was to her the strange spectacle of two mounted Indians, a man and a woman.

Both lounged in stock saddles, leaning upon their arms folded on the horns. The man was thick, heavily set, muscular. In the fading light his heavy face with small deeply set eyes appeared watchful, sinister. He wore a felt hat and chaps but his feet were incased in moccasins of golden tan. His companion was young and, unlike most of her race, carried the suggestion of a figure. Her black hair was bound by a gaudy scarf above a forehead broad but so retreat-

ing that in its shape and in the glitter of her intensely black eyes there was something almost ophidian. Graeme, looking at the pair with frank curiosity, thought she saw surprise on their faces as she appeared with her guide.

The woman laughed with the soft note of a sleepy bird, and spoke in clicks and sibilants to her companion, who responded in unintelligible gutturals. Then both laughed. Though the girl did not understand a word she divined that speech and laughter were a jeer and she flushed a little. Walsh glanced at the pair and for an instant the muscles of his mouth hardened. But beyond that first glance he paid no attention to them. He put the girl's grip in a light buggy behind a bay mare and cramped the wheel for her. When she was seated he got in beside her.

"Are there many Indians here?" she asked as they drove down a winding bush road.

"Some." Mr. Walsh seemed to be taciturn.

"These are really the first I have seen."

Mr. Walsh's conversational powers expanded a little. "Well, you don't need to fret about that."

Graeme laughed. "I don't think you like Indians, Mr. Walsh?"

"I don't like *some* Injuns."

Graeme did not pursue the subject.

"It's very good of you to look after me. I expected my uncle at the boat but he wasn't there, and as I don't know just where he lives, if you'll take me to the best hotel where I can get a quiet room I'll be greatly obliged."

A trace of a smile flickered upon Walsh's weatherbeaten face. "The hotels in this country ain't very good. There's only one here. There's quite a crowd there to-night and they're liable to be noisy. I could take you to your uncle's place just as handy if I knew who he was."

She told him. And as he said nothing she added: "I suppose you know him?"

"Oh, yes, I know him." He was silent for a moment. "Did he know you'd be on this boat?"

"I wrote him, but perhaps he didn't get my letter."

Walsh made no comment. They ascended a steep grade and were on the flat on which stood Sitkum City. In her mind Graeme had constructed an image in the likeness of

standards familiar to her. Naturally the town would not be large, but it would compare with small towns of her acquaintance, though newer and perhaps a little crude. There would be a dozen or so stores, two or three churches, a school, a business section, a residential section, sidewalks, electric lights. These things to her represented an irreducible minimum. It would be a thriving little community full of the hustle and bustle of the West.

The reality was very different.

Sitkum straggled upon an extensive flat. There was one main street, already deep in dust. Pavements, sidewalks, there were none. The street was bordered by buildings for the most part guiltless of paint, stained and weatherbeaten. Some were of boards, others, of an earlier date, were of logs. Houses, log or frame, stood here and there upon the flat, apparently placed at random without regard to street planning. Instead of the prosperous little town of the girl's imaginings it was scarcely a crossroads village by her standards.

As they drove down the dusty main street confused sounds of revelry issued from a two-story unpainted frame building. Just as Walsh and his passenger came opposite the broad shaft of light from the door which tunneled the growing dusk the uproar increased. Wild yells of laughter resounded, mingled with a curious but insistent staccato metallic clamor. A man staggered through the doorway. He presented an extraordinary spectacle.

His head was a mass of feathers. His face, contorted with drunken wrath, was a polished black and his nose a brilliant carmine. A flowing beard was intertwined with strips of red flannel and lace reminiscent of the edgings of garments feminine. An alarm clock securely fastened around his neck by strands of wire was beating a frenzied tattoo.

The lips of this bizarre figure were moving; but whether in prayer or anathema the result was drowned by the clamor of the clock and the joyous yelps of the crowd which issued in its wake. The man turned to face them, his hands falling swiftly to the flats of his thighs. Then he raised them and shook them clenched above his head in fierce but inaudible invocation or imprecation. Suddenly, with a bellow, he charged his tormentors.

Graeme Campbell heard or thought she

heard a muttered curse from the silent man by her side and she was jerked backward by a sudden forward spring of the bay mare's. But in fifty yards Walsh had the animal in hand.

"What on earth was that?" the girl asked. "It—it was a white man, wasn't it?"

"Uh-huh," Walsh nodded. "Just a little trick the boys play now and then on some feller that gets drunk enough. They put stove blackin' on his face, carriage paint on his nose, m'lasses and feathers in his hair, wire an alarm clock round his neck and wake him up. It's funny—if you're drunk enough yourself."

"I think it's shameful."

Walsh did not argue the point.

"I been thinkin'," he said, "that your uncle is likely off somewhere for a day or two, and his shack is locked up, of course. Instead of you goin' to the hotel for the night—that back there was the hotel—you'd better go to Mrs. McIlree's. It's quieter."

"Is it a boarding house?"

"No."

"Then of course I can't. I don't know Mrs. McIlree."

"I do."

"But—"

"Yes, that's what you'd best do."

Having settled her course in his mind he disregarded her protests and presently brought the mare to a halt before a whitewashed log house behind a whitewashed picket fence. A bed of tulips sprouted green against the freshly raked soil. Behind the house a small garden, as yet bare of vegetation, exuded earthy odors.

In answer to Walsh's knock the door was opened by a lady who almost filled it. She was red of hair and of face. Keen blue eyes, shrewd and humorous, regarded the visitors. Walsh effected introduction briefly and explained the situation. Again Graeme found surprise at her relation to Gardner.

"Old Dan Gardner's niece!" Mrs. McIlree exclaimed. Her voice was a heavy, booming bass. Walsh shook his head slightly and the lady turned to Graeme. "Come right in, my dear. You must be tired after two days on that old mud scow."

"It's very good of you to take me in."

"Why, I'll be glad of your company, my dear. Fay—that's my daughter—is away and I'm lonesome. Have you had your supper? On the boat! All them chinks do is spoil good materials. I'll rustle you a snack

in a brace of shakes. Tie up your mare, Ed, and come along in and I'll feed you pie."

"I guess I'll just nanitch around and find out if anybody knows where Gardner is," said Walsh. "I did hear"—he gave her a meaning look—"that he had gone out for a day or two, prospectin'."

"Why, come to think of it, I guess he did," that lady corroborated promptly. "I seen him buyin' a grubstake a week or so ago. He ain't around, that's sure, or he'd have met the boat."

"I'll be back and let you know," Walsh promised Graeme.

He drove back to the hotel. The hilarity had died down. He beckoned to the proprietor, whose name was Sloan.

"Where's old Gardner?"

Mr. Sloan grinned. "You saw him, did you? That was you passin' in the rig with the lady."

"We both saw him," said Walsh. "That lady is his niece."

"Th' hell!" Mr. Sloan observed, slightly disconcerted. "Well, of course, Ed, the boys didn't know a darn thing about any niece. They were just havin' some fun."

"It ain't right to play horse with an old man like that," Walsh told him.

"Well, he is sorter old," Sloan admitted. "I guess that's so; it ain't right. But when they get drinkin'—"

"And I dunno's it's safe," said Walsh.

"Safe!" Sloan frowned. "Does that mean you're makin' it your business?"

"No. I got troubles enough of my own. You take my tip, though. Gardner ain't a good man to run too heavy on, if he is old."

Sloan laughed.

"All right," said Walsh. "Did you notice what he done with his hands when he bulged out ahead of the crowd?"

"Shook his fists at 'em and cussed."

"Yes. But before that he dropped his hands—both of 'em to the flats of his thighs. He was drunk and he's old but he done it smooth and fast. Some time 'r other he's packed two guns."

"Him!" Sloan exclaimed in derision. "Old Gardner a gunman? Forget it!"

"All right," Walsh said again. "I ain't arguin'—I'm tellin' you. You can pass it on to the boys or not, just as you like. Now where's Gardner?"

"In the snake room." Thus Mr. Sloan indicated an apartment used for recuperative

purposes by too-zealous patrons. "He's dead to the world now."

"All the better," said Walsh. "I'm goin' to take him home with me. I don't allow that his niece—she's a *lady*—is goin' to see him till he's plumb sobered up. She's come to pay him a visit, but she ain't never seen him in her life, so like enough she won't know who the drunk was, fixed up like you had him, unless somebody tells her."

"I'll murder the man that does," Mr. Sloan promised with some contrition. "I'm real sorry about this, Ed, and of course I stand in to help any way I can."

"That's white of you," Walsh acknowledged. "I'm goin' now to tell her I've found out he's away and won't be back for a couple of days. Then I'll come back and get him. You might sorter cut that m'lasses and feathers out of his hair with some whisky, and have him ready to load in when I come."

CHAPTER IV.

As the thrash of the steamer's stern wheel was renewed Bill Stuart dropped his pack, sat down on it and began to fill his pipe. He knew that his dog would climb the bank at the first place that offered footing and follow the boat which presumably bore his master upstream. In a few moments he heard the sound of running pads and crashing brush. He whistled, and the dog appeared carrying the hat in his mouth. Having delivered the headgear to his master the animal shook the remaining water from the recesses of his harsh coat, made a gambolling leap or two and rolled among the last year's leaves. Thus warmed and sufficiently dried he sat up and regarded his master with grave expectancy. His attitude seemed to say, "Well, we're here. What next?"

Bill Stuart listened to the lessening noises of the steamer's progress, looked up and down the slow current, glanced disapprovingly at the dense brush and shook his head. He addressed the dog gravely.

"This, Fitz," he said, "is what comes of refusing a drink. It must be about twenty-five miles to Sitkum. Not that that's so much, but you couldn't cuss a cat through this brush and I'll bet we're cut off from high land with a bunch of sloughs. No grub, either. Well, let's see what we're up against."

He rose, slipped his arms through the

pack straps and began to worm through the dense brush that bordered the river. In a few minutes he emerged from it. He found that he was separated from the high bench lands by what appeared to be a level meadow half a mile or more in breadth. To right and left it stretched as far as he could see, its limits being hidden by the brush which followed the windings of the navigable channel. It was covered with brown grass beaten flat by the snows of the previous winter, new growth not having appeared. It seemed to offer an easy way of avoiding the hard going of the brush and a means of access to the high land. But looking at it Stuart shook his head. Still, he went forward.

But in twenty yards the footing became soft, spongy. A few steps more and the grassy surface began to shake, to undulate. The seeming meadow was merely a thin coating of vegetation overlying liquid or semiliquid. It opposed a barrier more effectual than open water. Stuart retraced his steps.

"Oh, sure!" he muttered resentfully. "I knew it. The bottom of the darn thing is merely the upper crust of Hades. All right, fair meadow, you win. Nothing for it but the brush."

For an hour man and dog skirted the brush when they could and wormed their way through it when they could not. But at last the slough narrowed. A line of high, hummocky grass topped by willow scrub appeared, trending toward high land.

"Old beaver dam," Stuart muttered. "Now we can make it."

It was in fact the contour of an ancient beaver dam. At one time the meadow had been a beaver pond of lakelike dimensions. Following the old dam Stuart at last struck dry ground where heavy spruce ran down to the bottom lands. There a little creek emptied and Stuart slipped his pack and drank deeply. He rested for half an hour, for brush-and-slough traveling is hard work, and then, warned by the downward slope of the sun, he struck upward through the spruce for higher ground. Soon he emerged upon a country of open timber with no hampering undergrowth. In this he made good time in spite of his pack, walking with the easy, hip-swinging stride of the seasoned woodsman. Now and then he came upon old cattle trails and followed them as long as they held in the general direction of his

course, which angled back from the river. Thus he finally came upon a wagon road, a narrow, winding track which followed the line of least resistance much as the cattle trails had.

As the sun was going down the dog flushed several blue grouse which took to trees. The animal looked up at the birds and back at his master.

"I guess it's a case," the latter admitted. "It's naughty to kill grouse in the spring, but hunger knows no game laws."

He regarded his rifle for a moment, and then laid it down. From his pack he produced an automatic pistol and a clip of ammunition. Then he walked slowly toward the treed birds. As they began to show signs of uneasiness he halted and fired twice, apparently without aim; but one bird fell straight down, and another, attempting flight, collapsed in the air. The dog retrieved both and Stuart resumed his way.

He left the road where it dipped down to a small creek and a couple of hundred yards away at the mouth of a small coulee which was quite hidden from the view of chance wayfarers he kindled a fire of the driest wood he could find. While it was burning to coals he cleaned the birds, split them down the back and skewered them on two green, forked sticks. Holding a grid in each hand he began to broil above the cottonwood coals.

Immediately appetizing odors arose. The dog, sitting close watching the cookery, raised his muzzle, his nostrils twitching.

"Hungry, old scout?" his master addressed him gravely. He seemed to have acquired the habit, common to animal lovers, of holding one-sided converse. "One of these birds will hold you along till we get to Sitkum, and then I promise you a square. Not much longer to wait. Old Omar never stacked up against a deal like this, but:

"Some Dogs for Glories of Green Bones and Some

Whine for the Flapjacks and the Mush to come; One Grouse is not so much, but still a Grouse May stop the rumblings of an empty Tum.

"Not bad for us, Fitz. Better than usual. We're darn' poor poets, I fear. Well, here we are."

The dog took one of the grouse from his master's fingers carefully, gently. But once in possession, assured that it was his own,

2A—POP.

he tore at it savagely, grinding the bones to powder between his formidable teeth. In a few moments it was gone.

When Stuart had finished his own bird, picking the bones clean, he filled his pipe and lay smoking, regarding the fire. The dog lying beside him edged closer and laid its head upon his thigh. Stuart put his hand on the grizzled head and so in apparent understanding of silence they lay motionless for an hour.

Then Stuart shook off the lethargy of food and weariness and rose. Assuring himself that there was no danger of the fire spreading he adjusted his pack, picked up his rifle and returned doggedly to the long road.

Hour after hour he plodded steadily through the night. He met no one. The road wound across high, open bench lands, followed draws chilly with down drafts of mountain air, dipped steeply down abrupt slopes to creek beds and rose again in rough switchbacks. So far he had not passed a house, nor seen so much as a fence.

But now a pale light which had been growing in the east dispelled part of the darkness. A wan moon topped the peaks of the ranges. Fir and bull pine cast long columnar shadows across the trail.

The traveler, walking at a better pace, rounded a turn and saw to one side and below him a bright point of light. He stood overlooking an extensive flat, or broad gulch. The sound of running water struck his ears and he deduced the presence of a creek of some size. As he listened he heard faintly but unmistakably from the direction of the light the crowing of a rooster challenging the false dawn.

He had no intention of calling at the house which, as he progressed, seemed to be set well back from the road upon the creek flat. He came to a side road doubtless leading to it, and just then the dog, a few yards in advance, halted and growled.

Stuart stopped and listened. Distantly he could hear confused sounds which seemed to be approaching. He clicked his tongue sharply to the dog, which came to heel. Now he recognized the sound of numerous hoofs. It occurred to him that possibly somebody was moving a bunch of stock along the road, probably horses, though he could hear no bell. If they took fright at him and his dog they might quit the road and have to be rounded up again. So he

stepped a few yards aside into the shelter of bushes and put his hand on the dog's head.

"Steady, boy!" he commanded. "Quiet."

A dark, moving mass appeared, indeterminate in the pale light. Then Stuart saw that it was not loose stock, but a pack outfit. However, being off the road, he stayed where he was.

One man rode ahead. Then came half a dozen ponies, their loads bulking large in the gloom. Two men brought up the rear, slouching in their saddles, conversing. A snatch of their talk came to Stuart.

"We make it all right," one observed. "Haven't met anybody. That's pretty lucky."

"You bet," the other agreed. "I was afraid that old Walsh, blast his soul——"

The rest was lost to Stuart. The man in the lead turned up the trail toward the house and the outfit followed. They vanished in the night.

Stuart came back to the road and for some moments stood looking after them. But for the few words he had heard he would have gone on his way at once. Pack outfits were common enough, and the fact that apparently this one desired to avoid notice was none of his business. But the reference to "old Walsh" made a difference. Presumably that was Ed Walsh. The inference was that these men feared some interference on his part with their plans. Stuart knew nothing of Walsh's present affair, but if these fellows were putting something over on his old friend it seemed up to him to learn what he could about it. So he slipped off his pack, laid down his rifle and, calling Fitz to close heel, followed them.

In doing so he avoided the trail, keeping to the side where his footprints would not show above the hoofmarks. From the house several dogs barked at the approaching outfit and he paused for a moment to admonish his own animal.

He reached a point which commanded a view of the house. It was close to the brush. It was not a ranch, for the clearing that held it was small. He could see what seemed to be a stable and the outlines of a corral. A lantern winked in the darkness, bobbing in and out of view. The house door stood open, emitting a shaft of lamplight. Apparently the men were removing the packs.

Suddenly one of the dogs began to bark again, at first tentatively, a low "woof-

"woof" of inquiry, but changing to a hard note of suspicion. Then it made a short rush forward, uttering stern challenge.

Stuart's hand closed upon his own dog's muzzle. He patted his head, running his hand down the back, feeling the hair bristle to the challenge. "Steady, boy!" he whispered. "No, no, no!" And very quietly he began to withdraw.

But the dog's racket had attracted the attention of the men. One raised the lantern as if to illuminate the farther darkness. The dog began to make short rushes, barking furiously. Now it was joined by two others. A figure appeared in the doorway.

"What's the matter with those dogs?" an authoritative voice demanded.

"Smell something," one answered. "Coyote, maybe." He whistled. The dog redoubled his barking rushes.

"Coyote—nothing," said the first speaker. He left the doorway. Footsteps sounded. The lantern advanced. The men were coming to see about it.

Stuart retreated swiftly; but the dogs, suspicion now certainty, followed. He cursed beneath his breath. This was an unforeseen complication. A pretty figure he would cut if he were caught spying upon strangers in the night. The situation was becoming serious. The men of the pack outfit, realizing that no prowling coyote would cause their dogs to act as they did, were coming down the trail.

Stuart turned from it and headed for the shelter of a growth of jack pines. Among them he halted. The men had kept down the trail; but the dogs, momentarily thrown off, had again picked up his scent or that of the stranger dog and were following him hotly.

"Eliza on the floating ice," Stuart muttered. "How many of the infernal brutes are there?"

His query was answered immediately. Three running shapes emerged. The leader seemed to be a collie, the others nondescripts with a collie strain predominant. Their quarry, the stranger dog, was fleeing; therefore they came hot on his scent with the age-old impulse of man or beast to chase that which runs away. Bill Stuart, crouching in the shadows, patted his dog's shoulders.

"Fitz," he whispered, "shake those fellows up a little." The body stiffened beneath

his hand. The legs tensed, toes gripped, great muscular hind quarters quivered. "Easy, you savvy, old scout. Steady—steady a minute. Now! Go to it! Shake 'em!"

A bristling, grizzled thunderbolt bursting from the pines hurled itself upon the three pursuers. The night was rent with ferocious, fighting snarls. For a moment there was a locked, struggling mass. Then came a dismal howl. The mass disintegrated swiftly. One dog flew into the air and alighted running. Another fled on three legs. But the collie deserted by his companions fought gamely with wolfish slash and leap and snarl. Suddenly the snarls changed to choking noises.

Stuart leaped from the shadows. Fitz had the collie by the throat, had him down, was shaking him savagely. To a certain extent the collie's ruff protected him, but the great, punishing jaws were working in, boring for a hold in which they would meet and wrench outward, taking the throat with them. Stuart caught Fitz around the neck.

"No, no, no!" he commanded sharply. "Drop him, drop, drop!" With each command he brought his hand sharply against the dog's chops.

Reluctantly Fitz released his hold. The collie lay gasping for air. With his dog at his heels Stuart circled and came out upon the road. He looked up and down it cautiously. He saw nobody. He could hear voices back along the trail leading to the house. Securing his pack and rifle he slipped back into the shadows, made a detour and came back to the road. Keeping carefully to the side of it he reached a bridge above a rushing creek, ascended a hill and stood once more on open country.

He looked around, taking note of his surroundings. There was the creek, the extensive flat, the house back from the road. The creek issued from the hills which in the distance were deeply notched.

"Looks like a pass," Bill Stuart muttered. "All right, I'll know this layout again. Here, Fitz; come here and let's have a look at you."

He passed his hand over the dog's head, down his ears, along the shoulders and legs. Lighting a match he made an inspection by its brief flare, finding merely a superficial cut or two. Nodding satisfaction he patted the grim warrior, adjusted his pack comfortably, and hit the trail again.

CHAPTER V.

Ed Walsh, arising with the daylight as was his custom, built a fire in an ancient range, set the coffeepot aboard, and beat up a pan of flapjack batter. Then he thoughtfully surveyed the figure of Dan Gardner who, fully clad save as to his boots, slept the sound sleep of the erring brother who has made a night of it. Daylight, striking the old-timer's features, showed a general, dull gun-metal effect relieved by the red carriage paint adorning his nose which blushingly reflected the rising sun.

"Hey, Gardner!" said Walsh, and shook him, getting a response which though luckily partly unintelligible was wholly indignant. "Wake up!" Walsh insisted remorselessly, and yanked his feet to the floor.

Brought back to the stern realities of life by this tried and true method Mr. Gardner sat up, blinked his eyes open, and made labial motions of extreme dryness and dis-taste. He stared around the room.

"How'd I git here?" he asked.

"I freighted you."

Mr. Gardner digested this information for a moment. "By gosh," he said in the tone of one who makes an astonishing and almost incredible discovery, "by gosh, I b'lieve I must have been drunk! Well!"

"You was drunk plenty," Walsh told him. "Better get washed up now, and by that time breakfast'll be ready."

The prospect of food struck no note of enthusiasm in his guest.

"Breakfast?" he said meditatively. "Well, of course some folks *do* start the day like that. But I'd ruther have a drink if you've got one."

"Only coffee," Walsh told him. "Better for you."

Mr. Gardner sighed and creakily heaved up his long, sinewy body. In his time he had been a powerful man and still carried the frame of one though a trifle stooped and sadly stiffened. He moved over to an up-turned box which did duty as a washstand, made ready for ablution by the simple method of loosening the top button of his shirt, and as he did so caught sight of his face in a mirror suspended above the wash-bowl. He started and stiffened like a set-ter on a point. After a prolonged and silent inspection he turned to his host, a red spark glowing in his eye.

"Who done that?"

"Don't know."

"I do," said Mr. Gardner. "Them boys think they're funny, hey? Think it's safe to play horse with the old man." His feelings found vent in a blast of withering invective. "I'll show 'em. I'll learn 'em!"

"How?"

"How?" I'll take a gun and——"

"And have the judge wind up with 'And may God have mercy on your soul!'"

"I guess you're right," Mr. Gardner admitted after a moment's reflection. "Things ain't like they used to be. But I've seen the time there'd have been blood on the moon for a play like this."

"Times is changed," said Walsh. "Clean up the best you can and we'll eat. Then I want to talk to you."

The basis of stove blacking is plumbago, which resists water. When Mr. Gardner sat down to breakfast his countenance presented a distinctly barred-rock effect, to which the carriage paint on his nose lent a piquant touch of gayety. But circumstances considered he made a good meal, and at its conclusion produced a venerable pipe and a fragment of heavy plug.

"You was mentionin' wantin' to talk to me," he suggested.

"Yes. A young lady claimin' to be your niece come in on the boat last night."

Old Gardner's nerves found relief in a sudden twitching jump. "Gorrarnity!" he exclaimed, "I plumb forgot all about her. I got drunk, an'—where is she now?" Walsh told him. "What sort of a gal is she? I ain't never seen her. Gosh! it's lucky she didn't see me last night."

"She did see you."

"You're just foolin'!"

"Not any I ain't. I drove her up from the boat. We were just passin' the hotel when you come out in your war paint. Quite a reception committee, you looked like."

"You don't mean I spoke to her?" Mr. Gardner exclaimed in horror.

"You was too busy cussin' the crowd," Walsh reassured him.

"She might not know it was me," said Mr. Gardner hopefully, "not with my face all blacked up. You didn't tell her, Ed?"

"No, I didn't," said Walsh, "but it wasn't on your account by a darned sight. I said you was out in the hills and hadn't got your mail so likely you didn't know she was comin', but you was expected back in a day or two."

"Ed," said Mr. Gardner with feeling, "the good Lord'll bless you for lyin' for me. I wouldn't have that little gal see me the way I was for anything; nor have her know that I got drunk and forgot all about her."

"I judged you wouldn't," said Walsh. "You better lie up here for a day or two till you get that black off your hide and get sobered right up. Then you can come in out of the hills and be astonished to death. And while she's here don't you get drunk."

"I won't," Gardner promised. "I know I been a scandal all winter, but you don't savvy. I'm old and I'm lonelier'n hell. A few drinks cheers me up a lot. Then I take a few more, and I feel all warmed up, and young and soople like I used to be. By gum, I can just see the old boys and the old camps I knowed forty years ago. I ain't got much longer anyway. Things is about down to the turn with me, and I figger if I can shove back the clock with whisky, even if I know I'm only foolin' myself, it's worth it. But while that little girl's here you bet I'm plumb upright."

Breakfast dishes washed up and put away methodically, Walsh lit his pipe and seating himself at the open door began to read the newspapers brought by the boat which carried the mails.

His house was a couple of miles from town, beside a small creek. Back of it was a log barn and stable, a corral and out-houses. In the rear of these was a field already green with clover. Walsh, a confirmed bachelor, did not ranch, but he grew some feed for his horses, of which he possessed half a dozen. From where he sat he had a clear view of the road which connected Sitkum with down-river points.

"Hey, Ed," the old-timer addressed him from within, "got any turps?"

"What for?"

"To loosen up this durn paint on my nose. She sheds water."

"That's the varnish in it. Ain't got no turps. Got some lye, though."

"Lye!" Gardner snorted. "Think I want to take the skin off'n my beak like a durn scalded tomater?"

"Mix it weak."

"I don't fool with no lye. Might git in my eyes."

"Butter'll soften pitch. Try some."

Gardner accepted the suggestion. The only apparent result was to confer an added gloss, a brilliant, glistening, varnished ef-

fect. His curses rumbled abroad. Walsh hid a grin with the newspaper. Behind his taciturnity was a keen sense of humor. He dearly loved a joke, a "josh," and could put one over without the quiver of a facial muscle.

Presently he raised his eyes from the newspaper. A pedestrian with a dog at his heels, carrying a pack and a rifle came into view, heading for Sitkum. Walsh after a prolonged look waved an arm. The pedestrian after a moment's hesitation turned in at the gate.

As he approached a smile lit up Walsh's weatherbeaten features. Bill Stuart was grinning broadly. They had not seen each other since the latter was a growing youth. But Walsh jerked a warning thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the house and laid a finger on his lips. Bill Stuart nodded.

"Mornin'," he said. "How far is it to Sitkum?"

"Bout two miles."

"What's the chances for a job there?"

"What were you working at last?" Walsh asked, his eyes twinkling.

"I had a soft job, kneading dough; and I need the dough now."

"I did hear," said Walsh solemnly, "about a fresh young feller gettin' fired off the boat yesterday. I wondered how he'd make out for supper and breakfast—unless he had grub along."

"He didn't have any supper," Bill Stuart returned, "but next morning, when he could have eaten a porcupine without peeling him, he struck a shack owned by the homeliest-looking old-timer you ever saw; and this old-timer didn't stand 'round asking a lot of fool questions but got busy with grub right away. He was a fine cook, in spite of his looks, and he tossed up a mess of ham and eggs, and coffee, and—"

"Come in," said Walsh. "You look like a hobo, but I never let a man go hungry."

Immediately he began to rustle a meal. Bill Stuart sat down somewhat wearily. Evidently this pretense was on account of the old man with the facial decorations. Inadvertently his eyes kept straying to them. Encountering a baleful glare he shifted his gaze, but too late.

"Young feller," said Gardner, "if you want a good look at me, take it like a man."

Thus challenged Bill Stuart nodded ami-

ably. "Excuse me. I couldn't help looking."

"Well, I dunno's I blame you so much," the old-timer admitted candidly. "You don't happen to know what'll take off carriage paint, do you?"

"Sandpaper."

Mr. Gardner snorted.

"Of course a blow torch does a quicker job," Stuart suggested helpfully.

"Young feller," said Mr. Gardner earnestly, "you go plumb!"

"Well," said Stuart, "gasoline will loosen paint if it hasn't hardened."

"You got *some* sense, prospect you close enough," Mr. Gardner growled. "Got any of that there stuff, Ed?"

Walsh had a bottle of the useful fluid. "But I dunno's it's safe for you to use it," he said.

"Why ain't it?" Gardner demanded.

"Gasoline's mighty explosive," Walsh told him gravely, "and with a nose like that—" He chuckled at the crackling phrases which the old-timer hurled at him, and produced the explosive. Its fumes mingled with the odor of frying meat.

Bill Stuart consumed a panful of ham and eggs, huge slices of bread, and dipped deeply into a can of strawberry jam. Seated, he lit his pipe and prepared a meal for his dog. Its groundwork was mush. Walsh produced a pan of meat scraps and slashed the mixture liberally with canned milk.

"Come on, Fitz," said his master. "This is what the doctor ordered."

The dog rose, his eyes gleaming, saliva dripping from his jaws. Outside his master set down the plate. Fitz went for it ravenously, lapping up the milk, gulping down the mush and meat scrap. In no time the pan was polished clean.

"Hungry," Walsh commented. "Looks like a real dog."

"Fitz and I are tillikums," said Stuart. "By gosh, Ed, I'm glad to see you again."

"And I'm glad to see you," said Walsh, seating himself on a block on the sunny side of the woodpile. "You've filled out. You always was a wiry kid, but now you look like a pretty skookum man. Must be to do what you done yesterday. That O'Halloran is a pretty husky proposition."

"I guess so, if you let him get set," Stuart agreed. "I took him by surprise and he was about half shot besides. Still, I can handle myself when I have to."

"Can you shoot as well as when you was a kid?"

"Better. You taught me the trick of it."

"And you could outshoot me before I left. How's the old man?"

"Fine as silk. Sent his best to you. What were you getting at in your letter to him? And what's the idea of the mystery? Why do we meet as strangers? And who's the old sport you have in there?"

"What do you want to know first?" said Walsh. "I met the boat last night and the purser he told me about the fuss; so I been on the lookout for you, figgerin' you'd hoof it. As for meetin' as strangers it'll be better for you not to let on you know anybody here. Old Gardner there, he's been drinkin' too much, and I'm tryin' to get him in shape to meet his niece. I guess you saw her on the boat—a tall young lady with sorter red-brown hair."

"His niece!" Stuart ejaculated.

"You wouldn't think it, would you?"

"No. Well, never mind that. What were you getting at in your letter to the old man?" In the logging business, as on ship-board, the term is used irrespective of age to denote the head of the concern. So both men used it now. "You were so darn careful you didn't say anything."

"I don't like to put much in a letter. Besides, I ain't really got much beyond a sort of a notion there's some funny work goin' on."

"What kind of 'funny work?'"

"I'm guessin' at it, mostly. The old man's got Predie & Thompson's land holdin's, ain't he?"

"He and a couple more. But ostensibly Andrew McKellar has them. Outside the bank nobody knows otherwise."

"It's them land holdin's I meant in my letter. This feller, Wills, here, is handlin' them lands for McKellar or whoever it is, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"And he's sold some of 'em?"

"Yes."

"Did the old man and the others get their money out of them sales?"

"Yes."

Walsh appeared to be slightly taken aback. "Maybe I'm barkin' at a limb. Do you know who bought them lands and what they paid?"

"The lands so far have been sold at from

two to five dollars an acre. I have a list of the purchasers. Let's see?—Lawrence, Stubbs, Burns, McKenzie—those are some of the names of the purchasers."

"There ain't one of them men livin' on them lands now. And they never did live on them."

"That's up to them."

"I dunno about that," said Walsh. "I dunno's them fellers are alive."

"Well, we're not an insurance company. They lived long enough to pay for the land."

"I ain't so sure they ever lived at all."

"When did you notice these symptoms first?" Stuart inquired solicitously. "Do you have pains in the head, vertigo, hot flushes, cold chills, spots—?"

"I ain't crazy, Billy. What I'm gettin' at is that them folks ain't real people. They're just names."

"But they paid real money."

"Somebody did. There's other men livin' on the lands the men you named bought; and these other men paid from ten to twelve dollars an acre for what they're livin' on."

"You mean our purchasers sold out. That means we're holding the lands too low."

"Maybe. But what I'm tryin' to tell you is that you've been sellin' to dummies. Somebody slipped in between you and the real buyers and got five dollars or better an acre rake-off."

Stuart whistled softly. "How do you know?"

"Well, I don't exactly *know*. The way of it was I got talking to one of them settlers about land prices and he told me he'd paid ten dollars an acre. I said that was a good profit for somebody, for P. & T. had paid about fifty cents. Then he told me he had bought from a feller named Stubbs. He didn't see Stubbs, but when he picked out the land he was told Stubbs owned it and held it at ten. He liked the land and he bought it. Stubbs made the deed to him. He had a lawyer and it looked all regular. He owns the land now. But what I'm gettin' at is that nobody never saw this Stubbs. I didn't think much about it till I run into another rancher and got talkin' to him. And if you put the name of Burns—that's another you mentioned—in place of Stubbs it was the same identical thing over again. Course it wasn't none of my funeral, but account of me usin' to work for the old man, and knowin' P. & T. got

into him I was sorter interested. So I talked with some more settlers down there and I got the same story. Not a darn one of them had bought direct from the old man, and I knew he'd have his hooks into them assets unless he'd changed a lot. So then I wrote to him."

Bill Stuart's brow puckered thoughtfully as he considered the situation. If Walsh's suspicions were correct the syndicate was being defrauded very neatly.

"Who is getting this rake-off, do you think?"

"I dunno."

"What sort of a fellow is Wills?"

"Big, upstandin' man. Sorter hard, bulgy, blue eye. Looks you straight in the face."

"What's he like—apart from looks?"

Walsh hesitated for a moment. "I never like to say nothin' about a man I don't care for, Billy."

"Why don't you like him?"

"Maybe it's because he don't like me. We never had no trouble, not even a word. It's just sorter mutual, and we both know it."

"What does he do, beyond looking after these land sales?"

"He's into a lot of things—cattle, minin', insurance, contractin'—a little of everything. I guess he has some money."

"Stand pretty well locally?"

"Ace high. He comes pretty near bein' the tyee man around here."

"And yet you say he's crooked?"

"You don't catch me that way, Billy."

Stuart grinned. "If I told Wills he had been framing these sales he'd laugh at me. He'd say we got our price, which would be quite true, and that what transfers took place after that were none of our business. On the face of it he'd be right. He could say that he was our agent until the sale was made at our price, after which he became the agent of the purchaser to sell at an advanced price. And that would be pretty nearly air-tight."

"And yet you've been robbed on every sale."

"Pretty smooth, if we have," Stuart acknowledged. "We can always stop it by boosting our prices. The only way to get at Wills if he has been framing us is to frame him. I'll see how he stacks up. Do you know a fellow named Orme?"

"Yes."

"Is he a friend of Wills'?"

"Wills knows him, like everybody else. Far's I know they ain't tillikums—ain't even in the same crowd."

"Tell me about Orme."

"He's a big feller, that looks fat, but I got a notion he's pretty solid. Got a eye about the color of a fog. Plays consid'able poker and such. Drinks but don't get drunk."

"Mining man?"

"I guess he knows something about minin'. He ain't into it as a business, though. He buys some hides and cattle and turns 'em over. I wouldn't wonder if cards was his meal ticket, though."

"Could he put up, say, eight thousand if he wanted to buy a mining property?"

"He might. Why?"

Stuart told him of Orme's offer.

"Well, if he did that I guess he had the money or he could get it."

"What do you know about these claims?"

"Mighty little. If Orme made an offer I'd say he made it for somebody else, or else he got onto something."

"Who are his friends?"

"Well, he's around consid'able with Jerry McCool."

"And who's he?"

"I dunno—outside of bein' Jerry McCool. He's a little feller, slim and active like a weasel, with a bad eye. On looks I'd say he was hard people—but you can't tell by looks. You're askin' consid'able few questions, Billy."

"Here's another: Who lives in a creek bottom about twenty miles down the road? Looks as if there was a pass back of the place. The house is back from the road."

Walsh's blue eyes narrowed at the question. He shot a keen, inquiring glance at Stuart. "Feller named Sam Cole. Why?"

Stuart told him what he had seen and heard the night before. Walsh rubbed his chin.

"You heard my name mentioned—you're sure of that?"

"Dead sure. That was why I followed them."

"You didn't know them, of course. But could you tell what they looked like?"

"No. I was back in the brush a few yards and it was too dark. They were against other brush."

"Was them cayuses packed heavy or light?"

"I don't think they were heavily packed,

but that's a guess. Now suppose you come through."

"I dunno's I can," said Walsh. "I'm game warden in here, and that means I'm not popular with the Injuns nor with some whites. That Cole, he's an old hide hunter and construction-days meat killer, and he can't cr won't get it through his head that nowadays killin' game indiscrim'nat is livin' off your capital. I don't know what outfit that would be at his place."

Bill Stuart felt that Walsh was not telling all he knew or suspected. But just then Gardner's head showed at the nearest window. The old-timer beckoned energetically.

"Hurry up, Ed," he called urgently. "They's a female woman turned in off'n the road and headed this way. Hustle round front and stand her off."

CHAPTER VI.

When Graeme Campbell awoke in the early morning she felt a sense of unreality. From where she lay she could see majestic peaks against a blue sky. A fresh breeze, clean and pure, blew back the curtains of the open window and with it came the beautiful, liquid notes of a meadow lark. She was struck by the absence of noises familiar to her all her life. Save for the notes of the lark and the straining murmur of the breeze there was no sound. It was as though in her sleep she had been translated to a new, virgin world.

But these reflections were broken by the distant rattle of stove lids, the crackle of dry kindling. She arose and dressed. Her hostess, redder of face and clearer of eye than ever, in the morning light, greeted her heartily.

"What do you like for breakfast, my dear? How would mush and cream, and bacon and eggs, and toast and coffee, and some flapjacks with real maple sirup suit you?"

"They'd be wasted on me, Mrs. McIlree. A very little porridge, a piece of dry toast and one boiled egg, if I may choose."

"You won't never build up on pickups like them," her hostess told her seriously. "You want to eat. Look at me!"

Graeme looked and in spite of herself her eyes twinkled; but her hostess grinned broadly in answer.

"I know I ain't no pocket edition," she admitted with some pride. "I was always

big-boned and I ain't fat. Feel!" She extended a massive arm. It was hard as an athlete's. "All solid meat," its possessor went on. "I weigh two hundred, even, and I can heft as much as most men. More'n some. And I'm active. I can walk on my hands."

"Really!" Graeme exclaimed, awed.

"Learned to when I was a little girl. I guess I was sort of a tomboy. It's good for the figure. You'd think the strain would come on the arms, but it hits the stomach muscles and the back and legs. I'll teach you, if you like—when you get stronger, I mean."

During breakfast, her hostess doing ample justice to her own cooking, chatted cheerfully and biographically. Her husband, the boss of a river crew, had been drowned in an attempt to drive a wild mountain creek some years before. His likeness, a horror of an enlargement, hung on the wall.

"And Tom was a good deal of a man, if I do say it," was his widow's reminiscent tribute. "I outweighed him thirty pounds but he could handle me like a child. I dared him to try, once when we was both mad, and he took me at my word. Drowned he was, tryin' to drive Bush Creek in high water, which I told him not to try and he laughed at me, his hat on the back of his head and the cold, darin' devil that lived in him starin' at me out of his eyes. 'Phut! Bess, me girl,' he says, 'a little excitement is good for a man. Give me high water and I'd run hell on a powder keg.' And that was the last I saw of him till they brought his body in; swaggerin' out from the camp, callin' to his crew to get goin', his elbows bent out in a way he had and the thigh muscles of him bulgin' his stagged pants. Ah, well."

"I'm very sorry," Graeme sympathized.

"Oh, it was years ago and I got over it, though I took it hard then. I had Fay, but she don't take after Tom or me. Her picture was in your room."

Graeme remembered it. A fair, pretty girl, with soft, weak features, surely a strange flower from such a parent stem. She had no comment to offer. But Mrs. McIlree changed the subject, to her relief.

While she assisted her hostess to clear up, Graeme sought information as to her uncle's whereabouts. She asked where he lived, suggesting that in his absence she might be

getting settled. Mrs. McIlree discouraged her.

"His place'd be locked up. He'll be back most any time. He ain't gone into the hills yet. Too much snow."

"But where does he live?"

"Along the road about a mile this side of Ed Walsh's."

"Is Mr. Walsh a rancher?"

"No, he don't ranch much. He used to be a loggin' boss. In his young days he trapped and killed meat for railways, construction times. Last couple of years he's been a game warden. The Injuns—and the whites, too—was killin' game disgraceful. Ed ain't popular with the Injuns."

"There were two of them—a man and a woman—at the boat landing last night. When Mr. Walsh and I passed them they said something and laughed. Of course I couldn't understand, but I thought they were talking *at* him."

"Was the man a heavy, thickset buck and the klootch good lookin' but sorter snaky?"

"Why, yes, that's their description."

"Isadore, and his klootchman, Mathilde. Ed arrested him once for killin' elk. They've had it in for Ed ever since. If I was him I'd watch out for that pair, and I guess he does."

"But surely they wouldn't attempt any violence. That's a thing of the past, isn't it?"

"What you call 'violence' ain't a thing of the past no place, and never will be. Most of the Injuns are all right, but a few of them set up to be bad. This Mathilde is every bit as bad as her husband—maybe worse. And she has a brother, Jerome, that's a real bad buck if I ever saw one. If they got a good chance I wouldn't put anything past them. But Ed wasn't born yesterday. He's pretty cunnin' himself. He talks slow and looks easy, but he ain't neither one."

When she had finished helping with the housework—in spite of protests—Graeme set out alone on a voyage of discovery, her objective being her uncle's house. Sitkum City did not gain in beauty by daylight. Half abandoned camp and half new town, without the picturesqueness of the former or the promise of the latter, it straggled upon the bare flat sprawling and disorderly. Her mental picture of a hustling, growing town was hopelessly wrong.

A long, low building with a false front advertised itself as a trading company. Its windows exhibited a flock of trade decoys ranging from infants' bottles to rifle cartridges. A wagon full of squaws and papooses stood before it. Bucks stood on the store platform. Further on she passed the hotel which had been the scene of revelry the night before; but the few men who sunned themselves before it had no revel left. They were sodden, heavy with dead liquor. Their eyes turned with dull curiosity after the tall stranger girl as she passed. A log building evidently was a school. She looked in vain for a church.

Turning her back upon what seemed to be the exhausted possibilities of Sitkum she presently lost sight of the town. The road wound through colonnades of tall firs and little clumps of cottonwood. Underbrush was lacking. The country resembled a park rather than Eastern "woods." The road dipped down into brush and emerged again. Further on she came upon a small log house beside a trickle of a creek that crossed the road, and this she knew must be her uncle's. The house itself was partially concealed by cottonwoods just bursting into leaf. A couple of acres had been fenced in. There was no sign of life. The door was locked. When she peeped through the uncurtained windows into the darkened interior she could make out a stove, a plain, wood table, several chairs. It did not look inviting. At the rear of the house was a log stable, but this was empty. A short path led down to the creek where a trough carried water to a half-sunk barrel in a patch of clean sand.

Again the reality differed from her expectations and by no means came up to them. There was nothing homelike, not even a few square feet of garden plot. It was the habitation of the male of the old West, the nomad who, satisfied with the habitation itself, asked nothing and took nothing from the soil, getting his living otherwise, holding land and its tillers in tolerant contempt.

Frowning slightly she regained the road and for a few moments stood hesitant. A week before she would have been exhausted by even that short walk, but now she was not even tired. She felt a sense of returning strength. She decided to go on as far as Walsh's. He might perhaps have news of her uncle.

Once more she followed the winding road. Thus far she had met no one; but when it seemed to her that she must be nearing her destination she was overtaken by two riders in whom she recognized the two Indians of the night before. As they passed her at an easy trail jog, the dust puffing in little white balls from the falling hoofs, they glanced at her, their faces stolid, immobile, the eyeballs showing white against the high bronze of the skin. In the glance Graeme thought she detected curiosity.

She continued her way. Presently to her left she saw a house and outbuildings which must be Walsh's. She turned from the road and as she approached the house a dog came around the corner. She recognized it as the one she had seen on the boat the day before. At sight of her the animal halted, regarding her with coldly measuring eyes. There was nothing unfriendly in this regard, merely dignified appraisal. At the sound of a gentle whistle he wheeled and sprang out of sight just as Walsh himself appeared from the same direction.

He greeted her with what she thought was some embarrassment. "You won't mind my not askin' you in," he said. "I been doin' some housecleanin' and the place is all upset."

He brought two chairs and placed them in the shade just beneath an open window. Graeme sat down thankfully. Now she was tired. She realized that it would be an easy matter to overtax her strength. She asked for news of her uncle.

"He'll be back in a day or two, sure. Don't you worry."

"I'm not worrying. Mrs. McIlree is very kind. I told you I had never seen my uncle, didn't I?—only an old, old picture when he was a young man."

"He'd have changed since then," Walsh observed profoundly.

"What does he look like now?"

"Well," Walsh replied—his face was absolutely solemn though his eye held a faint twinkle and he raised his voice slightly—"well, I dunno's Dan Gardner's so much for looks right now. I wouldn't call him no beauty. He looks sorter rough and wild. You don't want to mind that, though. It's only now and then that he acts sorter peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

"Maybe I shouldn't mention it, but I guess you ought to know. You see, he's

lived alone a lot. I wouldn't say it was exactly softenin' of the brain. All prospectors is a mite crazy, anyway."

An inarticulate sound from the interior of the house came through the open window behind them. Graeme started and threw a hasty glance over her shoulder.

"Goodness! What was that?"

"That?" said Walsh innocently. "Oh, you mean *that*. That, that made that there noise."

"It sounded like a—a *snort*."

"Oh," said Walsh, "that's just a rooster—a mighty old rooster."

"In your *house*?"

"Well, he's a tough old bird," Walsh explained solemnly, "but the young ones run on him. Sorter play horse with him—tricks on him, you savvy. So I keep him inside. That was him cluckin' for the old hens he used to boss round. I guess he's a little crazy, too."

The mentally afflicted bird made a sound strongly suggestive of strangling indignation.

"But speakin' of your uncle," Walsh went on in his slightly raised voice, "he's lived a lot with Injuns. I've heard that now and then he likes to paint his face and dance." At which slander the rooster became articulate.

"You dam' old liar!" it said distinctly.

"Heavens!" the girl exclaimed.

"You heard it? I'm sorry."

"You needn't be." The girl's eyes laughed. "I'm beginning to believe the rooster, Mr. Walsh."

"Roosters know a lot more than they get credit for."

"But a rooster can't *talk*!"

"No, of course not. But a parrot can."

"A parrot?"

"No tellin' what this one will say when he gets started. He's a plumb wicked old bird. He's lived around minin' camps for years. We'll just move where you can't hear him."

She regarded Walsh doubtfully as he removed the chairs from the vicinity of the window. Walsh, who was enjoying himself hugely, kept a grave face.

"Have you any more pets, Mr. Walsh?"

"That's all—unless it's my horses."

"You haven't a dog?"

"No."

"Who owns the dog I saw here when I came?"

Walsh looked thoughtful. "You say you saw a dog?"

"Please, please, Mr. Walsh. I didn't see the parrot or the rooster. But I did see the dog."

"Oh, *that* dog," Walsh returned with engaging candor. "He's been hangin' around for a couple of days. Acts like he's lost."

"Mr. Walsh," she told him, "you have been very kind to me. I seem to ask questions I shouldn't, and you've been perfectly lovely about it. But I saw that dog on the boat yesterday."

Walsh was not at all discomposed. "I wouldn't wonder. Lost dogs are liable to show up anywhere."

She shook her head at him, laughed and rose. "I don't pretend to understand, but you are just as nice as you can be. And now I'll go back to Mrs. McIlree's."

"Come again," said Walsh.

"May I see the rooster and the parrot then?"

Walsh's eyes smiled. "I couldn't fool you," he confessed regretfully. "You caught on from the first. I may's well own up. There ain't no rooster nor no parrot."

"I knew it," she told him triumphantly.

"No," said Walsh humbly, "I was just tryin' to have some fun with you. Of course the rooster and the parrot was me."

"You?" Graeme explained with unfeigned astonishment.

"Uh-huh!" said Walsh solemnly. "I'm a ventriloquist."

"Mr. Walsh," she said, choosing her words carefully, "you are the most accomplished and—er—unexpected romanticist I have ever met or hope ever to meet. And yet I'd take your word for anything on earth."

"Now that's mighty good of you," said Walsh. "The trouble with me is that one way I never growed up. I'm gettin' old, but some ways I'm just a kid. I love to fool people—when it don't hurt. You've took my foolin'—which there was a reason for—mighty nice. And you're right. If I tell you anything's on the level you can gamble it is. I'm glad we're goin' to be neighbors for a while, and I'm tellin' you this: If things don't run just right and you want any help, or a pony to ride, or anything at all, just you come to me."

Graeme, somewhat surprised, thanked him. This broad spirit of helpfulness, bred

of mutual dependence in the days of the old West and still to some extent subsisting, was new to her. As she walked homeward she found herself puzzling over matters which were none of her business. Her natural conclusion was that the person in Walsh's house was the young man who owned the dog, but that for some reason Walsh wished to keep his presence there a secret. But the whistle which had called the dog had not come from the house. It was all a blur, and after all not her affair.

But by the time she had got as far as her uncle's house she found that she had exhausted her strength. She must rest before attempting the remaining distance. Accordingly she left the road, satisfied a sudden thirst with the cold water from the sunken barrel and, finding a comfortable place among the trees, stretched herself upon the ground with a weary sigh.

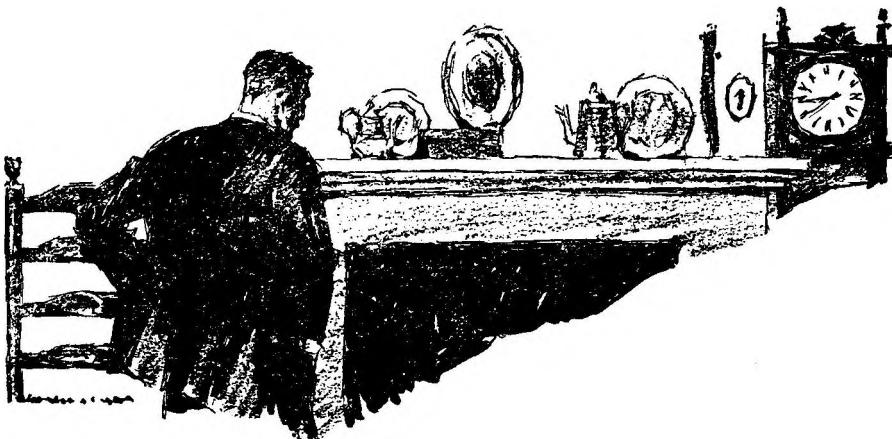
When she awoke she was bewildered for a moment. She sat up, instinctively straightening and arranging her hair. Being a city dweller she looked at her watch instead of the sun. The afternoon was far gone. She rose, shaking out and brushing her rumpled skirt, after which she bathed her face at the creek and, thus refreshed, set out briskly for Sitkum.

She was traversing the bush-bordered portion of the road when she heard behind her sounds strange to her experience—a low, muttering bellow, a long-drawn shout of "A-a-ah!" The makers of these noises were invisible, a turn of the road shutting them from sight. As she listened the sounds swung off to her right, accompanied by a smashing and cracking of brush, which drew nearer and then seemed to become louder. Uncertain, not knowing what if anything to do, she stood still.

And then from behind her she heard a shout and saw a man running on the road toward her.

"Get off the road!" he was yelling. "Get out of sight! Beat it! Oh, you dam'-fool girl, can't you understand? Get off the road!"

As she stood, much puzzled and somewhat indignant, the crashing to her right redoubled. From the brush there burst a huge red shape, with long, sharp, white horns, which with a low, muttering bellow charged directly at her. Thus enlightened, but entirely too late, she turned and ran.



The Symbol

By Percival Wilde

Author of "The Tale of the Three Kings," "The Haunted Ticker," Etc.

The unspared rod saves the spoiled card sharp a lot of trouble.

HE had begun the week with a typical gambler's roll; ninety one-dollar bills neatly wrapped into a stout cylinder, and the outside adorned with a single yellow-backed twenty-dollar bill. It was a roll which spelled prosperity, for the persons for whose benefit it was displayed could not request the privilege of examination, and were obliged to accept it on faith. It was a roll fit to choke a horse, for horses choke quite as easily on ones as on twenties. It was a roll which brought comfort to the soul of Bill Parmelee, its possessor, for its bulk was so great that whenever disposed he could not help feeling its welcome pressure. If he stowed it in a breast pocket it interfered magnificently with his breathing; if secreted in a trousers pocket it reminded him of its existence at every step; if cached—as it usually was—in a capacious hip pocket, it called itself to his attention every time he sat down.

Like its many predecessors the roll had grown from nothing. Bill Parmelee was in hopes that it would grow still farther. Down nearly to his last cent he had fallen in with a traveling salesman who felt the need of excitement. Bill Parmelee had supplied the excitement in a two-handed poker game in which Bill's artless manipulation of

the cards had converted the laws of chance into statutes which operated for his sole and exclusive benefit. The run of the cards had supplied him with a considerable number of satisfactory hands. The simple expedient of holding out an ace until it might be advantageously substituted for an indifferent card had helped to make bad hands less bad and had even made good hands better. Yet Bill knew enough to avoid resorting to his superior skill more often than was absolutely necessary. Three or four times in a session was sufficient—amply sufficient. Those times correctly chosen, there could be but one result. Hence the game had come to a grand climax in a deal in which Bill nursed two pairs against three of a kind; yet when Bill had been called and had unostentatiously laid down his hand the two pairs had miraculously become a full house.

That hand had seen the salesman's finish. "You're too many for me," he had admitted frankly. "I'll beat it while I've got my railroad ticket." He had done so and Bill had judiciously converted the miscellaneous notes which he had collected into ones, had decorated the outside with a lone twenty, and had begun to flash a roll.

There had followed a week which had been anything but satisfactory. The highly

transient guests of the commercial hotel at which Bill made his headquarters had exhibited a pathetic lack of sporting spirit, declined Bill's friendly invitations and confined their gambling to bets placed upon rival flies crawling across a windowpane. For a monotonous afternoon Bill had participated in this innocent form of amusement and in three hours of hard work had won the munificent sum of twenty-five cents. He had quit in disgust. His overhead demanded a larger return. Twenty-five cents for three hours; his hotel bill was larger than that. And the game, by its very nature, was sharp proof; one could not hope to make an accomplice of a fly.

He had debated the advisability of moving to a more progressive town; had debated for several anxious days while the roll gradually grew slimmer, and had just about made up his mind to shift his base of operations when opportunity, in the form of an unexpected invitation, knocked at his door. It was a rainy Sunday afternoon; would Bill take part in a little poker game? Would he!

He allowed his objections to playing on the day of rest to be overcome and he retreated to a quiet room in company with four other enterprising spirits. He scanned their faces with more than passing interest as the play commenced; another of the inevitable traveling salesmen; a prosperous farmer, well along in years; a lean and acid individual who announced himself as an insurance adjuster, and a fourth, a chubby little man, who promoted the sale of patent churning. He surveyed his companions again, and stifled a smile. It was too easy. Bill might be the youngest of the five; his innocent face; his frank, blue eyes; his unwrinkled forehead proclaimed the fact that he had not arrived at his twenty-fifth year; but in experience he had an advantage which might be measured only by centuries. From his eighteenth year, when he had run away from a respectable home, filled with a desire to see the world, every day had contributed to his education along the lines to which his talent naturally ran. He had learned to play the great American game well—more than well—and then, by chance acquaintances, he had been introduced to the various devices with which misapplied ingenuity has endeavored to hamstring the legs of chance. He had tried—and discarded—the many varieties of sleeve

and vest holdouts; he had experimented with the shading box; he had become an expert in the use of that little instrument known as the table reflector; but like all great artists he had succumbed to simplicity as embodied in the neat little device known as "the bug."

The bug, strangest of all insects, consists of three or four inches of watch spring, and a minute shoemaker's awl—nothing more. One end of the spring is sharpened to a fine point and is fitted into the head of the awl; and the remainder of the spring, flat against the under side of a table when the awl is pressed into the wood, is warranted to hold one or two cards in an inconspicuous manner.

Yet Bill was far too canny to make use of this apparatus until the arrival of the psychological instant. A profound knowledge of poker, supplemented upon certain occasions by a little sleight of hand, were sufficient to establish his superiority in nearly any game. The first half hour saw the prosperous farmer a loser to the extent of fifty dollars; the second saw his loss reach the limits of his available cash; the third saw him making hurried trips to the hotel clerk to cash a steady succession of checks. The joy of battle had seized upon the loser's soul—and Bill, quietly affixing his apparatus to the under side of the table, prepared for the killing. His capital had multiplied rapidly. Now—now or never—was the time to go over the top.

It was then that the catastrophe happened. Hardly had Bill finished dealing when the lean insurance adjuster laid a large-boned hand over what remained of the pack. "You've dealt out five hands, mister," he announced. "That's twenty-five cards. There should be twenty-seven left in the deck. That so?" Without waiting for an answer he spread the cards face down and proceeded calmly to count them. "There's twenty-six," he said quietly. "If you don't believe me, there they are; count 'em yourself."

Given the slightest of opportunities and Bill would have replaced the missing card as deftly as he had abstracted it. But the traveling salesman, the prosperous farmer, and the chubby vender of churning had risen, and watched his every move across the table.

He met the situation without embarrassment. "I dealt out the pack as it was given

to me. If there's one short maybe there's only fifty-one cards in the deck."

"Maybe and maybe not," said the insurance adjuster with a scowl. "At any rate, we'll see what is missing."

Bill watched with a forced smile as his enemy quietly sorted the cards into suits, and established that the ace of hearts was absent and not accounted for.

Bill nodded sagely. "Now that I come to think of it, the ace of hearts has been missing all afternoon."

The traveling salesman drew a sudden breath. "Missing nothing!" he ejaculated, and his forefinger singled out the unhappy gambler. "Didn't you hold two pairs a couple of minutes ago? And weren't they queens and aces? And wasn't one of the aces the ace of hearts?"

Bill Parmelee rose to his feet warily. "You're not accusing me of cheating, are you?"

"And if I am?"

Bill's hand dove in the direction of his hip pocket. "Why, then—" he began.

His memory of the events which took place immediately was a trifle confused. He recalled that the traveling salesman, plunging suddenly, had seized his knees in a perfect football tackle, while the three other players had flown at him as a single mass. He had tried to draw his gun and had had it knocked from his hand. The cards had gone flying about the room, and the table, with the damning evidence still affixed to its under side, had turned a sudden and a most unexpected somersault. Upon that had followed several minutes of utter oblivion for Bill, and at their conclusion, he found himself marching along the street, being clamorously wetted by a fine drizzle, with his right arm in the viselike clutch of the insurance adjuster.

For some minutes the men marched in silence. Bill inquired, "Where are you taking me?" and received no answer.

Then, as the arc lamps of the freight yards, lighted early in the afternoon, threw sickly beams through the mist, Bill's captor released him with a parting admonition. "Beat it," he advised.

Bill stood his ground. "Why aren't you taking me to the lockup?" he demanded.

The insurance adjuster smiled. "I will if I have to," he promised, "but I'd rather not. You see, brother, you and I are in the same line. You make a living out of the

pasteboards—so do I. Now everything would have been lovely if you hadn't started fishing in my little pond. The world's big enough for both of us. You don't have to do it." He lowered his voice confidentially. "That old farmer's my meat. See? Higbie—the fellow who passes for a traveling salesman—he's my partner, and we've been trailing the old man around for a week. He's our private property: roped, hog-tied, and branded; and we've just been letting him take care of his money till we were ready to take it away from him. And when it comes to the killing we don't divvy up with anybody else—not on your life!" He turned mild brown orbs on his amazed captive and lowered his voice still more. "It's all going to work out nicely now. We've shown you up and the old man thinks the world of us for it. So we're going to start the game over again where it was before you came in, and we're going to make a present of your roll to the old man to sort of soothe his feelings. But something tells me that by the time the dinner bell rings, your roll—and his roll, too—will have wandered where they really belong—to Higbie and me." From some safe place of concealment the late insurance adjuster extracted a yellow-backed bill and pressed it into his victim's hand. "Brother," he counseled, "if I was you, I'd travel—and I'd start traveling right away—*muy pronto*. This here town's liable to be a bit unhealthy for you."

Bill Parmelee coincided in that opinion too.

II.

With the twenty-dollar note—his own—which had just been handed him, and with the gold piece which—true gambler—he kept secreted in his shoe against a rainy day, he might have left the town in state, riding in a Pullman car. But upon his arrival he had made it his immediate business to familiarize himself with the timetable and his memory told him that no passenger train might be expected until six—more than two hours away. Debating the circumstances hurriedly Bill found many arguments in favor of a rapid departure, and none at all against. Were he to wait he might leave with dignity; but then again he might leave on a rail, warmly attired in tar and feathers.

The debate progressed no farther. From the distance came the roar of a laboring

engine pulling a long string of freight cars up the grade. Bill watched his opportunity and swung himself into an invitingly open empty with an expertness born of many years on the road. He did not know where the train was going; but he did know that it was putting miles between his late companions and himself. That was enough.

He made himself comfortable in the freight car, lighted a cigarette, and then, because he was young and hopeful, he burst into a peal of laughter. The joke was on him—very much on him—but he was sufficiently broad-minded to see its point. He pictured the scene after his departure; the gratitude of the prosperous farmer, saved from one sharper to fall a victim to two others; and his thoughts flew to the inevitable hour to come, when the grateful farmer, lighter in purse and richer in experience, would go on his way convinced that he had played and lost in an honest game.

Well, such was life. One could not always win, and he, Bill Parmelee, was decidedly lucky that his adventure had not cost him his freedom. He jerked himself into a sitting position and through the open door peered at the rapid procession of mist-infolded scenery. The up grade had become a down grade and the train was banging along at forty miles an hour. He wondered where he was and where the train might be taking him.

For six months, wandering about aimlessly, he had gradually been nearing his boyhood home. He had not the least desire to return to the little village which he had left so suddenly years ago, but he noted, with idle curiosity, how unconsciously he had been cutting down the distance which separated him from it. He had gone where money was to be had; where news of a game of satisfactory size had drawn him. He had traveled East and West; had set out, and had returned, and through it all, like some pawn being moved about on a gigantic chessboard, his progress had been slow, but in one direction. He noted it and wondered. Six months ago he had heard the beat of the surf on the Pacific coast. Now he was not very far from the thunder of the Atlantic. And the train, which clanked and lurched crazily around curves, might be carrying him to the seaboard itself.

The rain fell more heavily as he sat at the door, dreaming and gazing out into the

mist. At the most he could not be a hundred miles from home. He wondered if the passing of the years had changed it beyond recognition. Distinctly he remembered his stern old father, saying a grace before every meal; the clock which had never been the same since the day that Bill, aged fifteen, had removed an apparently superfluous part; the clean-swept hearth in the big living room; the hickory switch over it—ah! here his thoughts impinged and would not let go.

A switch it was—not a stick—cut in the woods down by the creek. It might be two feet long—though it had looked like six to him in the days which were past beyond recall. He smiled at the recollection. Often—very often—it had been applied to the tenderest parts of his anatomy; and to-day he could take it up in the fingers of one hand and break it in half—that is, if it still existed; if, for all the wintry nights that had howled down the chimney it had never been fed to the flames which crackled so near it.

Bill smiled in tender reminiscence as his thoughts seized upon that tyrant of his childhood days. Often, of an afternoon, he had stood guiltily before it, awaiting the instant when his father's hand would remove it from its pegs and employ it upon his small person. More than once he had plotted to hide it; to burn it; to destroy it utterly. More than once he had seized it—and had lacked the courage to carry out his resolution. He chuckled at the remembrance. For him it had been the outward and visible sign of an ancient uprightness; rectitude; integrity. Often he had dreaded the switch; but there had been days when he had stood before it proudly, boldly, unfearingly, and had murmured to it, "Well, old fellow, you can't do a thing to me now!" Upon such rare occasions the switch had seemed positively friendly; had glistened in the slanting light—and Bill's childish hand had dared to caress its sleek, barkless surface.

Ah, well, those days were gone! For a fleeting, painful instant Bill Parmelee, straining his eyes into the mist, wondered what the switch might say to him, card sharp and cheat and gambler. It would not approve: that was clear. Yet Bill had not drifted into his profession through deliberate choice of his own. He had always played cards. Even his father, Puritan

though he was, had relished a quiet game of cribbage or seven-up. Bill had been initiated into those mysteries at the early age of fourteen, and leaping recklessly into the turmoil of the world four years later had made the pleasant discovery that such abilities as he had cultivated brought their reward in the form of ready cash. Wandering from one poorly paid job to another Bill found this supplementary income useful—indispensable. He learned poker: learned to play it fairly and squarely, and then one day he made the amazing discovery that one of his boon companions did not hesitate to deal from a cold deck. Bill had protested, to be informed that wits, and not honesty, governed the game. Anything was fair if you got away with it.

To the young man fresh from the atmosphere of a puritanical home this was an eye opener; but he experienced little difficulty in adjusting himself to this new conception of morality. If cheating was the thing, he would cheat—and cheat more successfully than the next man. Within a month he had graduated from the ten-cent game in which he had learned to more expensive games where his undisputed talent was still better rewarded. From there to the game which invited the sucker to match his wits against those of men who made a living at it was but a short step. He made it grandly.

By this time he had subordinated all other occupations. Cards paid better: when they paid at all. But his life had never been one of easy luxury. Sometimes a roll grew—grew marvelously—but sooner or later it evaporated. Once or twice he had fallen in with sharpers cleverer than himself, to be relieved of his wealth in approved sucker style. On at least three occasions he had been separated from his capital at the point of a gun. Still oftener his love of gambling had led him to the roulette wheel, to lose in a night what had been months in the making.

Periods of high and low water had alternated. From the latter he had extricated himself by working for a stake. This achieved, a few cautious games had made more work unnecessary—until the next catastrophe. For nearly six years he had followed his profession, and had he taken an inventory he would have been forced to admit that he had little to show for it. A suit of clothes, expensive when new but now much the worse for wear; a pair of shoes

which looked well from the outside but which allowed water to seep through; a shirt and a collar which had seen better days; a tie which was comparatively new, but which had never been worth twenty-five cents; battered cuff links, of no ascertainable value at all—these, plus a hat and a suit case which the hotel had already seized and the few dollars in ready cash which he had secreted upon his person constituted the sum total of his wealth. Bill Parmelee hoped for a game in which his slender capital might multiply itself. Lacking that he would have no choice but to go to work for another stake.

He glanced idly at the country through which the train was passing, and gasped. The mist had risen. The valley, mellow in the failing light and dotted over with low, round grass-covered hills, looked curiously familiar. Those hills: amazingly numerous and amazingly round! Through the long vista of remembrance came the voice of a school-teacher who had explained to a wondering lad that others like them were not to be found in miles and miles. Over these hills a glacier had passed æons ago and had left its sign manual written upon their backs. Like a cloudburst came a rush, a torrent of memories.

The train clanked past a little station. It needed hardly a glance for Bill Parmelee to identify it: only one building in the world could be so sublimely, so familiarly ugly. Before Bill realized what he was doing he had swung himself to the ground and set foot again upon the soil of his home town.

III.

Leaving home, he had dreamed how he would one day return to these, the familiar haunts of his youth. He would go to the city, become rich, and come back to do honor to the village which had given him birth. Country boys who went to the city always returned rich: was it not thus written in the classics? "Mr. William Parmelee, our distinguished fellow citizen—" In anticipation he had murmured the mouth-filling phrase more than once. He would not be haughty; would carry his greatness as an unconsidered burden; would greet his old-time neighbors with a gentle democracy which would put them at their ease at once. In this modest program, visions of brass bands to welcome him, red fire and recep-

tion committees had played a prominent part.

Strangely, profoundly different was the reality; yet Bill Parmelee, squelching his way up the rain-sodden street, gave no time at all to vain regrets. His shoes leaked: but it was the water of home; his shapeless trousers clung clammily to his legs: but it was along the old familiar way that his legs were carrying him. With an odd thrill he recognized the homes of one-time playmates; wondered if after the lapse of years their inhabitants would recognize him. The scent of flowers lay heavy on the moisture-laden air; he inhaled it eagerly, gratefully.

He smiled as automatically he turned into the short cut across Riker's meadow. The lush grass clung to his ankles; wetted him to the skin; yet he squelched through happily. Thus, barefooted, had he done in the olden days; had thrilled at the cool ooze of the water between his toes. The man was but retracing the steps of his youth.

Abruptly—with dramatic suddenness, it seemed—the home of his childhood rose before him. It might have changed in its details—doubtless it had changed—but to the hungry eyes of the man who stood before it, drinking in its long-remembered outlines, it was what it always had been. There was the window of the room he had once occupied, the window at which he had sat and dreamed his dreams. There was the cellar door, with one broken hinge—curious how the sight stabbed him with poignant memories! There was the little porch, overgrown with woodbine; the familiar flower bed which he had so often weeded; the cherry tree which stood in the front yard and which he had so often climbed.

Over the freshly mowed grass he made his way to the door and stood hesitant with his hand upon it. His home-coming! A merciful chance kept his eyes from the glass panel in which the reflection of his features mocked him. Instead he gazed at the worn mat and at the century-old knocker.

At another moment Bill Parmelee's mind might have overflowed with thoughts. There were comparisons to be made between the lad who had quitted this place full of hope and courage and the man who returned to it sadly disillusioned upon life and upon life's rewards. Doubtless there were moral lessons to be drawn. But Bill Parmelee, cheat and sharper, was conscious most of all

of a mysterious something that had seized him by the throat, of a lump that had risen inside of it, of an all-pervading ache that might have been weariness and was something very much different.

Then, because it was the natural thing to do, he pushed open the door—it was never locked—and stepped across the threshold. The big living room had changed little. The hearth, as always, was clean swept. The familiar chromos smirked—the picture of his long-dead mother smiled from the wall. The clock, with the obstinacy that had characterized it since Bill's improvements upon its mechanism, pointed serenely—and motionlessly—to an hour which had flown away many years ago. The carpet, with its impossible roses in impossible urns, was the same. And at the fireplace the never-forgotten switch, older, but uncompromising as ever, rested menacingly upon its pegs.

In the corner a talking machine—a recent acquisition, this—testified mutely to the intrusion of a blatant civilization. But nothing else had altered.

These things Bill took in at a glance—the hospitality, the unpretentious comfort of the room, always the same ever since he could remember—and then his eyes met the gaze of a thin, bowed man who had risen to face him. To Bill it seemed unbelievable that the passing of a few years could have aged his father so much. The accustomed lines in his face had worn deeper—and there were lines that had not been there before. His hair was grayer and there was less of it. He stooped; he had not stooped before. Yet something about his figure was stamped with the hall mark of prosperity. Time might have dealt harshly with the man's body but it had accorded his persistent efforts the material reward which was their due.

For it all, John Parmelee's expression was what it had been before. Sprung from Puritan ancestors, habituated to taking life seriously, the flesh might be weak but the spirit was as uncompromising as ever. The steady eyes bored through the young man, searched out his soul, peered into his innermost secrets. Under their relentless gaze Bill squirmed, shifted uneasily from one foot to another.

A maid of all work appeared at the door to announce that dinner was ready.

"Let it wait," commanded John Parmelee. He closed the door and returned to

face his errant son. "Bill," he inquired mercilessly, "when will you be moving on?"

To the young man, thrilling at the sight of his familiar surroundings, suffused with a happy glow as each square inch of the commonplace room summoned up memories deep within him, the question came like a blow in the face. "Dad!" he gasped. "Oh, dad!"

The father repeated his inexorable demand. "When will you be going?"

"Dad! Dad! You haven't seen me in six years! Is that the only question you can ask me?"

John Parmelee gazed at his son. "It's the only question to which you can give a satisfactory answer. The others—you've answered already."

Bill refused to believe his ears. "I come here hungry, tired, soaked to the skin—"

The other would not let him finish. "Telling a story which I prayed never to hear from a son of mine! You don't have to say anything. I can see it all in your eyes. I don't want to know where you've been—what you've been. It would hurt me too much to know, and you've told me enough already."

"Dad! Dad!"

"I had no hard feelings against you when you ran away," pursued John Parmelee. "You were a boy and you didn't know any better. I wouldn't have cared if you'd come back to your home broke, starving, helpless. I could have fixed that and I would have fixed it because I'm your father. You wouldn't have been the first to find the world hard sledding. Bill, I wouldn't have cared about anything else if you'd come back clean; if you could have met my eyes and told me that my name had been safe in your keeping; but," and for the first time the older man's voice faltered, "Bill, that's just what you're not telling me."

A surge of indignation swept over the gambler. "How do you know I can't?" he challenged.

His father seized him pathetically by the shoulders. "Bill," he begged, "say I'm wrong! Say that when I looked into your eyes I saw things that weren't there! Say that you've been my son through thick and thin!"

"And if I say so?"

"Bill," faltered John Parmelee, "I'll believe you. God knows I want to believe you!"

For an instant the men faced each other. Then the gambler growled an unintelligible phrase and strode the length of the room.

"That's what I saw in your eyes—just that," said the father. He slumped suddenly into a chair at the fireplace. "I wonder," he soliloquized, "if you've thought much about me. Six years to you is nothing. It's a drop in the bucket—nothing more. You're still a boy. But to me six years is a slice out of a lifetime. Did you ever think of that? I've been growing older. I've been growing richer. I've been growing lonelier. Bill, in that next room there's been a place set for you at every meal since you ran away. I've never sat down to my food without seeing that place opposite mine. I've been waiting for you to come and fill it." He smiled sardonically. "Well, you've come."

"I've come."

"But you're not the same Bill Parmelee who went away." He paused. "The best thing you can do now is to go away again."

"So that's what you think about it?" The gambler gazed about the comfortable room, pulled up a chair, and plumped himself down into it. "I'm here," he announced. "I'm here to stay."

"Yes?"

He gazed contemptuously at his father's slack frame. "If you don't like it, throw me out. But it would take just six of you to do that."

"Quite so," assented John Parmelee.

The tempting odor of cooked meats assailed Bill's nostrils. "Me, with a rich father, bumming around the country!" he grunted. "Not on your life! I'm here and I'm here for keeps! See?"

His father smiled ominously. "If you want to take the chance, Bill, go right ahead."

"What do you mean?"

His father smiled up at him. "You can't stay in this house five minutes longer than I want you to. I've got a dozen men working for me, Bill, and all I've got to do is say one word."

"And you'd say it?"

"I'd say it."

"Let the town know that you've got a no-account, worthless son? That you had him thrown out of your house like a tramp?" The gambler rose from his chair.

"Why not?"

"What would people say?"

The corners of John Parmelee's mouth wrinkled into a wry smile. "Nothing they haven't said already."

The gambler gazed hard into his father's set countenance. Thus, many a time, he had appraised an opponent's hand across the poker table. "By George!" he ejaculated, "you mean it!"

"Of course I mean it!"

Something in Bill Parmelee's blood forced him to seat himself. "Dad," he announced, "I'll call your bluff!"

For a full minute the father stared into the clean-swept fireplace. "People have been talking," he ruminated aloud, "but they don't know. I think I'd rather not let them know." Suddenly he rose, crossed to a battered writing desk and extracted a dusty pack of cards. "Bill," he proposed, "let's settle this thing here and now. I'll leave it to chance. Will you?"

"Yes," assented Bill eagerly.

"We'll play cards. If you win you stay. If you lose you go. Agreed?"

"Yes."

John Parmelee made his way to the mantel and returned with a large box of matches. Gravely he divided a hundred between his son and himself. "These will have to do for chips," he announced. "I will cash each match for fifty dollars. You can quit when you like—now, if you want to."

Bill shook his head.

Parmelee, senior, took up the ancient pack of cards. "Bill," he inquired, "do you know how to play poker?"

IV.

Bill exulted as he shuffled the pack with elaborate clumsiness. The ace of spades, he noted methodically, lacked a corner; the king of clubs had been broken squarely across the back, and might be identified in an opponent's hand at a distance of ten feet; half a dozen cards—and he hoped that his poker face concealed his amusement—had evidently been lost and had been innocently replaced with cards of a different color. With such cards he ran no risk at all of losing. Yet he dared not win too soon nor too easily.

"Limit?" he inquired.

"No limit," said John Parmelee easily.

Bill nodded, gathered up his cards and dissembled a smile as his father commenced the game by pushing a match toward the center of the table.

On the first few hands he lost—lost honestly—but it was as he had intended. It would hardly do to make his opponent suspicious. It was not until the fifth hand that he dared to spring the first of a series of pleasant surprises. To his father, he would deal three aces; to himself, a lonely pair of queens. His father, hoping for a full, would draw two cards, and have his hopes realized. He would thereupon bet in proportion. Bill, in turn, would draw three cards—to arrange his hand differently, and draw less might discourage betting—but of the three, two would be queens and the result would be four of a kind. It was a simple maneuver with which he had succeeded often in the past.

It was no trick at all to stack fifteen cards. Indeed it was made pathetically easy by the fact that the third and fourth queens were among the half dozen cards with red backs, the rest of the deck being blue.

Bill offered the pack for the cut, and smiled as with a lightninglike pass his well-trained hands restored the cards to their original arrangement. Artistic, he reflected; yet a game with fifty-dollar chips was worthy of such skill. Cautiously he glanced at his cards; verified the fact that his queens had arrived as scheduled, and met his father's opener with a raise. It was not until thirty matches—fifteen hundred dollars—had gathered in the pot that Bill took up the deck and inquired gently, "How many?" He spread the cards slightly. Three blues; then two reds, and the reds the queens which would give him a winning hand. "How many?" he asked again.

His father studied his hand intently, folded his cards together, and placed them, face down, upon the table. "I'll stand pat," he announced.

Bill could not suppress his astonishment. "What?" he gasped.

John Parmelee smiled. "I don't want any," he said. "I've got a pretty good hand."

The gambler thought quickly. The queens he wanted were the fourth and fifth cards from the top. He could deal seconds without being detected; upon occasion he had even succeeded in dealing thirds. In such a game as this, surely, he could deal cards still lower down in the deck. But to attempt such a thing when the cards he wanted were red, and the rest of the deck was blue, would be simply suicidal.

His father had stood pat. Bill wondered if by some mischance he had given him better than three of a kind, if, by some incomprehensible error, the full house had arrived ahead of time.

"How many are you going to take?" inquired John Parmelee.

"Three," grunted Bill. To his pair of queens he added the pair of nines which had been intended for his opponent.

The older man pushed five matches into the pot. "That's two hundred and fifty dollars," he announced.

Bill threw his hand down in disgust. "The pot's yours," he conceded.

Regardless of rules, John Parmelee faced his son's hand. "Two pairs," he murmured. From his own hand he plucked three aces. "Not as good as three of a kind."

"What are the other two cards?" demanded Bill eagerly.

With a cryptic smile the father shuffled them into the deck. "You didn't call," he reminded. "I don't have to tell you."

Bill's stack of matches had dwindled appreciably but his fighting blood surged hot within him. It would be easy—ridiculously easy—to turn the tables. He waited impatiently until a pair of threes against nothing at all gave him the deal and one match—the smallest pot of the evening. He would take no chances this time. He would start with three aces against three kings. The remainder of the deck would be topped with two pairs. Whether his opponent drew or not, Bill would hold a full house after the draw. Once again he set about stacking the cards. Half a dozen ruffles and a pass—this combined with the proper placing of a neatly arranged discard—and he would be ready for battle.

It was then that Bill made the amazing discovery that his skill had deserted him. He shuffled and shuffled, to find the cards defying his uttermost will. He gazed about the room desperately for help. There was none forthcoming.

His father smiled gently. "If you shuffle much longer there'll be no spots left on the cards," he warned.

Bill offered the deck for the cut, noted that the cornerless ace of spades had been brought to the top, and made a pass to bring it back to the middle of the deck. Then—and to his overwhelming surprise—his hands refused to obey him and acted automatically. A second and a wholly in-

voluntary pass brought the ace back to the top again.

He dealt in bewildered silence, bet wildly on a four-flush, did not succeed in filling it, and lost half his remaining capital to the pair of jacks which his father displayed on the call. Bill had called. Insanity. Madness. He had nothing at all and knew that his opponent held at least an ace. Yet his hand, seemingly uncontrollable, had pushed the matches which constituted a call into the pot.

He counted what remained of his capital—less than fifteen matches.

"Perhaps you'd better stop," murmured his father. "You don't seem to know much about poker."

"I'll go on!" flared Bill.

"As you will."

Despite his conservative betting, half a dozen honestly played and honestly lost hands reduced his capital to three matches. He had attempted every trick in his repertory, to find some unknown factor, deep down in his subconscious mind, checkmating him at every move. He had held out not one card but a whole hand—and then, against his concentrated will power, something had forced him to drop all five cards to the floor, pick them up, and declare a misdeal. When, holding four of the six red-backed cards in his own hand, he had discerned the two others in his father's, and had inevitably known them for a pair of queens, some force, absolutely incomprehensible to him, had compelled him to bet his hand as if he were ignorant of his opponent's holding. The result had been an inexcusable loss.

The sweat stood out on his forehead as, hazarding his last three matches, he won, and took up the deck in trembling hands. Even now it was not too late. Even now, by any one of a dozen devices of which he was a past master, he might recoup his lost capital. But his efforts to make use of them were in vain. Slowly, with maddening clumsiness, he shuffled the cards. Slowly he dealt them out, peering at them from suddenly dimmed eyes and aware that he could read no card either in his own hand or in his opponent's.

His cards seemed to weigh ten pounds as he lifted them, separated them, and gazed at them. His heart leaped with a sudden joy. His hand, honestly dealt and honestly acquired, consisted of four aces and a

king. Perhaps luck had begun to turn; perhaps he would regain all that he had lost and more. With pounding pulse he pushed all of his remaining matches into the pot.

His father glanced at him keenly and met the raise. "All right, Bill," he said, "I'll take just one." He discarded one card, and laid the nine, ten, jack and queen of clubs face up on the table.

Bill Parmelee's thumb, resting lightly on the deck, felt the ridge which identified the broken-backed king of clubs. His father's eyes, he noticed, were gazing intently into his. It would be easy to deal a second—a third—or from the bottom; to deal any card but the one whose addition to those upon the table would mean a straight flush—the only hand which could beat the one he held.

His quivering fingers raised the deck; lost their hold upon it; allowed it to fall in utter confusion on the floor.

"Never mind, Bill," murmured his father, "give me one card at random."

Some suddenly resurrected thing in Bill made him shake his head resolutely as he pawed through the scattered cards. "No," he announced, "you get the card that was on top. I'll know it, because it has a broken back." He picked out the king of clubs and dropped it in its place on the table. "There you are," he said lightly, "you have a straight flush—and I'm broke."

Another story of this series by Mr. Wilde in the next issue.



TOO MUCH SUSPICION

ANDREW W. MELLON, secretary of the treasury and owner of more millions of dollars than any other man in the service of this government, was deplored the public's tendency to regard the Stock Exchange as nothing but a gambling device for shearing lambs. People, he said, forget that the Exchange is absolutely essential to the carrying on of the country's business and development; the trouble is that the public, being misinformed, is too suspicious of the brokers.

"It reminds me," he continued, "of a rich old fellow out in my part of the world. One day two persuasive promoters called on this man who was as influential as he was wealthy. They wanted both his money and the backing of his name in a scheme they were launching; and they talked to him about it for more than an hour.

"By George!" said the younger and more enthusiastic of the two after they had left him. "I believe we've got him hooked! He'll come in with us sure."

"I don't know about that," said the more cautious promoter. "He seemed infernally suspicious."

"Suspicious?" queried the younger. "What put that into your head?"

"Thunderation!" exploded the other. "Didn't you notice how carefully he counted his fingers after I'd shaken hands with him in saying good-by!?"

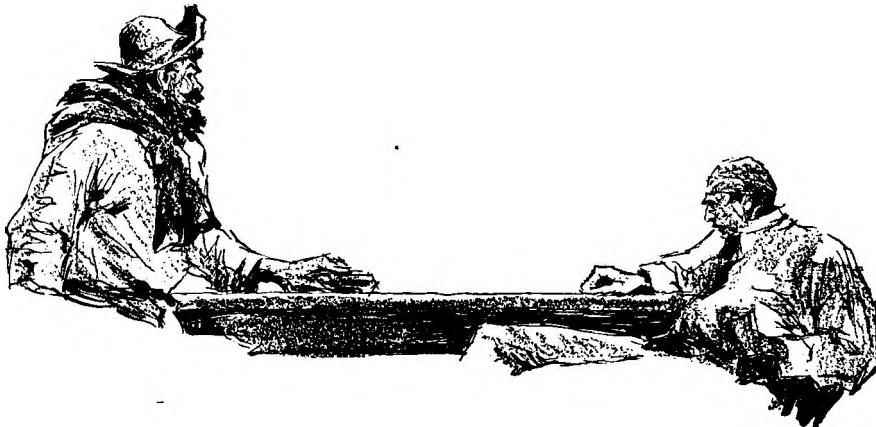
Curious, reflected Bill, amazing, marvelous, incomprehensible, with what sudden cheerfulness he took a last glance about the familiar room and prepared to sally forth into the night. It was raining again—raining hard—he could hear the steady patter as he tightened up his belt upon his empty stomach. It would be muddy and there would be fearful miles between him and wherever destiny chose to take him next. But there was a surprisingly happy note in his voice as he turned to his father and extended his hand. "Dad," he said, "I guess I'll be going."

But the older man's arm fell like an accolade across the younger man's shoulders. "Bill," he exulted, "when I looked into your eyes across the card table I saw what I wanted to see. Bill, my son, I guess you'll be staying."

V.

That night, stretched out luxuriously in a clean white bed, gazing through the familiar window at the darkness outside, Bill asked himself a question. "Why?" he demanded. "Why was it? I wanted to cheat—I wanted to cheat—and I couldn't! I just couldn't!"

Then, like a blinding flash of lightning, came the memory of how all through the game he had sat facing the fireplace—the vision of the switch, the hickory switch resting on its pegs—and Bill knew.



Don Q. and the Bolshevik

By Hesketh Prichard

Author of "The Twenty-first Prisoner of Dom Sebastian," "Don Q. and the British General," Etc.

Don Q. proves himself an excellent bandit and a loyal subject.

THE mistake first began when Sanski pushed on into the mountains without having the courtesy to apprise Don Q. of his coming. Had he sent a letter explaining his wishes Don Q. might, or might not, have seen him. In any case his person would have been sacred under the laws of hospitality and this story would never have been written. But as I say, Sanski having done his work in Barcelona where he scattered bolshevik money very freely, heard as he traveled to the west of the powerful brigand Don Q. who ruled in the mountains of Andalusia. Here, thought Sanski, was good ground to sow his seed. So he put a large wad of notes in his greasy pocketbook which he always used to boast was stained with the blood of various aristocrats, bought a mule and went about hiring two guides.

At length he came across a man named Robledo, who was at that time spending a week in the outskirts of Malaga on quite other business. He introduced himself bolshevik fashion by slipping a note worth ten pesetas into Robledo's hand.

"Comrade, I wish to hire somebody who will guide me into the mountains and I pay well."

"Yes?" said Robledo noncommittally.

He had never seen a man like this before. First, he was dirty, abnormally bearded, yet he dressed in good clothes. His Spanish too had a foreign accent.

"Comrade," continued Sanski, "can you tell of a man who could guide me into the mountains?"

"It may be," said Robledo.

"Perhaps you yourself?"

But Robledo had been a spy of Don Q.'s for twenty years and he was nothing if not cautious.

"The señor will pardon me," he said, "but for what reason does he wish to visit the mountains?"

"I wish to have speech with one who dwells there."

Now this was a euphemism totally unmeant by Sanski but which Robledo took as referring to his master. He had of course from the first intended to decoy Sanski into the hands of Don Q., so now he said:

"I myself would guide you, for my name is Robledo, the *cazador*, and I lead parties of English gentlemen to hunt ibex in the high sierra, but I have business here in the city which I am not sure that I can leave."

"Will this help you to make up your mind?" and Sanski handed him one hundred pesetas. Robledo looked at them in

surprise. Sanski saw the look and drove home his advantage, as he thought.

"If we return, I will give you two hundred more. You will find how well it pays to serve the 'International.'

Robledo had never heard of the "International," indeed, he was a convinced upholder of the aristocracy as personified by Don Q.

"Now, comrade, when can we make a start? I have bought two mules and I am ready at any time."

"Where are the mules?"

"They are in the stable of Ignacio."

"And from whom did you buy them?"

"I bought them from Ignacio."

Robledo sighed and shook his head. He knew those mules. They were not good ones, but by brigand law they were to be part of his share of the booty and even in Spain where any mule is valuable those two would not be worth much. However, luck had come his way that morning and he thought of the man's fat roll of bills, and so it was with rejoicing heart that he led him up into the gorges.

As they traveled Robledo had to listen to Sanski's propaganda. At first he put in one or two objections but before night fell he had come to the conclusion the man was mad and he argued no more, while Sanski in the intervals between his battles with his mule spoke in a manner which more than ever confirmed Robledo in his assumption.

That night they slept in the lee of a boulder, or rather Robledo did, while Sanski turned and twisted in the cold of the mountains. He had a fine headache on awaking and as he had forgotten to bring provisions and Robledo did not see fit to share his little store with him, he was an extremely weary man by the time Robledo lit the signal smoke and they came on the outposts of the bandits.

Sanski was glad to see that here Robledo left him, for he desired above all things a more communicative companion. He got two, Gaspar and Antonio.

"You know these mountains well?" began Sanski.

"Yes," said Gaspar.

"You are a brigand?"

"I have been one for thirty years," said Gaspar.

"Bravo! comrade, you are the sort I like to meet. You would not knuckle under to others."

Gaspar shrugged his shoulders.

"As to that," he said, "years ago I loved a woman. So did another man. I have forgotten his name but I always make the sign of the cross when I pass the place where he is buried. The Civil Guard were after me; I took to the mountains; I have been here ever since."

"And what is your name, my fine fellow?"

Gaspar looked at him as full of suspicion as an egg with meat.

"Are you a government spy," said he, "that you come asking men's names in the mountains, where they have no names?"

"No, no, but I want you to tell me something of this leader of yours, this Don Q. Have you never desired to lead yourself? You are a strong man—have you never envied his authority?"

It was now that Sanski got the shock of his life, for Gaspar lifted the staff he was carrying and struck him full across the face.

"Comrade!" cried Sanski. But Gaspar signed to Antonio and it was a gagged man whose mule was led into the Boca de Lobo some six hours later.

Don Q. was sitting in his cave when Gaspar came to make report. For five minutes he stood in silence and then Don Q. said:

"Well, Gaspar, what is it?"

"I have brought up the man of whom Robledo sent word."

"And what is he like, this man?" asked Don Q.

Gaspar gave a disparaging gesture.

"Robledo said that he had a great roll of money," he replied. Gaspar was not a communicative man.

"Bring him here," ordered Don Q., after a moment of consideration.

So Sanski entered the presence of the brigand and at once, as was his manner, burst into a flood of speech.

"Comrade, I give you greetings on behalf of the oppressed!" Don Q. looked up.

"The oppressed?" said he.

"The toiling millions! The proletariat!"

"Whom you represent?"

"Whom I and my comrades represent over there in Russia as presently we shall represent them all over the world."

"Indeed," said Don Q. "But are you not wandering from the point? Why have you come into our mountains?"

"To see you."

"That is delightful," said Don Q. "But why should you wish to see me?"

"To further the great cause of the revolution in Spain."

Sanski did not notice that Don Q.'s brow darkened.

"Ah. The revolution in Spain," repeated Don Q. "And what have I to do with the revolution in Spain?"

"I trust, comrade, you will be one of its leaders."

"We have a king in Spain," said Don Q. "What of him?"

Sanski made a gesture.

"The revolution knows how to deal with kings," said he. "We have proved it."

"But," said Don Q., "there will be many people who will be against the revolution."

"Bourgeois and aristocrats!" said Sanski with a snarl. "Spain will run red with blood."

There was a sharp sound as Don Q. drew in his breath, but Sanski was not a very observant man.

"And what do you wish me to do in this matter?"

"When the signal comes, you will gather your men—let me see, how many have you?"

"There are sixty at present in this glen."

"Well, with these sixty men you will march down and burn the houses of the landowners. Assistance will come to you from the towns of the seaboard."

"And what shall I gain for myself by doing this?" asked Don Q. in his softest voice. Sanski drew out once again his historic pocketbook. It chanced that Don Q. looked at it and perhaps with a slight expression of disgust. Sanski pointed to the stains upon it and said:

"The stains are from the blood of the enemies of the proletariat."

"Ah!" said Don Q.

Then Sanski counted out twenty-five thousand pesetas and laid them on the table.

"That will be what you will gain from it now," he said. "Later you will form a Soviet and enrich yourself at your will."

Sanski was silent for a moment.

"Me—a Soviet——" said Don Q. in a strangled voice. "And that is the message you came here to give me? Take back your money!" Then without pausing for a reply, he continued, "I would have you understand that Alphonse XIII. has no more loyal subject than myself."

"But," gasped Sanski, "you are a brigand!"

"Exactly," said Don Q. "I trust I am a good brigand but I am also, I hope, a better royalist."

"It is impossible!" cried Sanski.

"And further," said Don Q., "every word you have said to me since you came here has insulted me and when I am insulted I repay. You have come into our mountains by your own will, you will never leave them except by mine."

"But I came of my own accord!"

Don Q. looked at him coldly.

"You asked a man, Robledo, to guide you into the mountains. That man has been my follower for twenty years. It is by decoying such as you that he does his work. But we will not talk of that. Now to business. How much credit have you got in this country?"

"I have fifty thousand pesetas at the bank at Granada."

"And that is all?"

"That is all."

"And you have here twenty-five thousand pesetas? In all seventy-five thousand? Your ransom will be one hundred thousand pesetas."

"I have told you I have only fifty thousand pesetas besides what I have here."

"Exactly," said Don Q., "but strangely enough you do not fill me with confidence. I believe that your credit at Granada may be larger than you think fit to tell me. But the way out is easy. Write a letter to the bank at Granada and tell them to send up to a place I will name all the money to which you are entitled."

The shot went home. Sanski's jaw fell and he saw the craft of the trap in which he had been caught.

"And if I refuse?" said he. Don Q. smiled.

"Do so, and I will call my men. You will pass into the hands of your guide, Gaspar, that charming fellow——."

"No, no! I will write the letter."

"Now one word more. As a rule I find it possible to invite my prisoners to be my guests here in my poor cave, but I am of noble blood and I have no doubt that it would be against your principles to eat at the same board with me. However, there is on the other side of the valley a *choza*, a hut of straw, that will be your abode until the coming of this ransom of yours. My

men will guard you. For the rest, swear to me that you will indulge in no propaganda, you will not attempt to seduce my men. You understand?"

"Yes, I will not speak with them on these subjects."

"Swear it?"

Sanski shrugged his shoulders.

"I swear it," said he.

Don Q. clapped his hands. Gaspar came up the path.

"This man," said Don Q. pointing to Sanski, "is to be lodged in the *choza* under the pine tree. Grulla the Crane and Drumion will have charge of him. They will watch him night and day." Then turning to the prisoner:

"I have the honor to wish you a happy stay in our mountains," he said.

So Sanski was marched away across the other side of the glen where he found the bottle-shaped *choza* of which Don Q. had spoken. Into this he was thrust and Grulla the Crane and Drumion took up their places just outside it.

Now Grulla the Crane was a strange man. It was he whom Don Q. rescued from prison and then punished for being so stupid as to allow himself to be caught, a lesson that had evidently sunk into Grulla's heart for he had become much more efficient since, in fact he had in him the making of an excellent bandit and certainly none of the band knew the mountains better, for he had spent his life in them as a poacher.

Drumion was young and good looking in his dark way, his hair shaven very close to his head. He had been three years in the mountains and was one of Don Q.'s best men. These were the two, then, that were set to guard Sanski.

The days passed, one succeeding another in hours of brilliant sunshine and one after another sinking into the colder nights. Sanski was fed from the brigand's camp fires, and at first, however much he chose to talk, his guards would not exchange a word with him.

But Sanski, as he waited and watched the suns go down and saw, as he could not help seeing, that what Don Q. said, he meant, decided that there was only one way for him and that was to escape. From the moment he came to this conclusion he began, quite regardless of his oath, to work upon his two guards.

It was quite by chance that he learned

that Grulla had been punished by Don Q. and it was this chance that made him throw out his first hints to the long, lean bandit. At first these hints were utterly ignored and then one day, when Grulla had gone inside the *choza* with his food, Sanski offered him ten thousand pesetas if he would help him to escape. Grulla shook his head. Sanski waited in bitterest trepidation lest Grulla should report his offer to Don Q. But nothing happened, so when next he was alone with Grulla he offered him fifteen thousand pesetas. On this occasion Grulla answered, "It is impossible." But Sanski, who in his time had tempted many men, knew from the fact that the bandit had at last spoken that temptation had got a hold upon him and when a little later he offered twenty thousand pesetas, Grulla fell.

Sanski asked, "What about Drumion?" And Grulla replied that that was his affair, but he begged Sanski to say, should Drumion ever refer to the subject, that the price to be paid was five thousand pesetas. This development delighted Sanski since it gave him power over Grulla, for Drumion would bitterly resent being cheated by his companion.

The preparations for the escape were not many. Twice Grulla brought up more food than Sanski could possibly eat and Sanski laid aside a portion of it for provisions by the way.

"It is a long journey that we shall have to take," said Grulla, "but if we go fast all the hours of darkness and hide during the hours of light it may be that we shall win through." But he shook his head. He was a pessimistic man.

As darkness fell on the night appointed Sanski's heart beat faster and faster still until at last all the camp had fallen into silence and the bandits were sleeping round their fires. The light in Don Q.'s cave was the last to go out and half an hour later the three men picked their way out of the *choza* and crept through the glen. Now, Sanski's life, the latter part of it, had not been spent in any very active exercise, and before an hour had passed he began almost to wish that he was not escaping. Grulla it seemed, leaped up the mountain paths like a goat and with him went Drumion and behind them both, unbearably out of breath and sore with the blows of a thousand natural obstacles, labored the apostle of revolution.

At length he was obliged to cry out.

"What is it?" said the voice of Grulla.

"I cannot go so fast."

"Do you know what they will do to you if they catch you?"

"I do not care."

"Listen," said Grulla. Now Grulla was not a man of strong imagination but he painted such a picture to Sanski that his tiredness wore off and he started again on that mad flight. Hour after hour he did his best to keep up, but once nature forced him to hurl himself to the ground. In a moment Grulla was at his side.

"You must get up and continue," he said.

"I cannot."

"Yet you must," said Grulla. "For see, it is not only your life that is in question now, it is mine and my comrade's also. You have set your feet on this path, *señor*, and now you must continue on it."

"I cannot move."

"Drumion," said Grulla, "have you your knife?"

"Yes," said Drumion.

"Then we had better put an end to him. You see, *señor*," continued Grulla, "that will be safe for us for we need only say that you escaped and that we followed you, and that you fought and we had perforce to kill you—and you will not be there to deny it."

So it was that Sanski blundered once more to his feet and walked like a man in a dream. All his life he had had an agitator's hatred of effort and he had grown flabby in the long months of high feeding and drinking while he was spreading propaganda. And now all these things rose against him. He wept as he walked and his heart was full of loathing of all created things, of Don Q., of the world, of the mountains and most of all of the inexorable men who were his companions.

At last the faint light of dawn began to show on the mountaintops and before it grew strong, Grulla stopped.

"We have done the first stage of our journey, *señor*," he said. "See there is a hole in the rock so we can lie during the day-time."

Sanski sobbed in relief.

"Drumion and I will watch," said Grulla, "though I do not think they can follow our tracks for we walked half a mile through the water."

Sanski without a word crept into the cave. He thought that he would fall asleep

at once, but this was not so. The man was so tired out that sleep passed from him and all that day he lay and ached and cursed and swore as evening drew ever nearer and he knew that once again he would have to take up the burden of his terrible flight.

But as it happened fortune came to him, for when the sun was setting Grulla came in and whispered that a party of Don Q.'s men were camped not far off. He had seen the smoke of their fire and he had crawled out to their camp. The fugitives therefore would have to wait until it was full dark. In the late evening Sanski crept out of the cave and looked about him. Everywhere were peaks. Far below him he could see the dark cork woods and ilex trees through which he had come and farther still away, the twilit plains which he was trying to reach.

He turned to Grulla.

"How does our road lie from here?" said Sanski.

Grulla pointed upward.

"Between those two peaks," he replied, "there is a path and from that path one can reach the plains. But it is a rough road, *señor*."

Sanski shuddered.

"Have the peaks any names?" he asked listlessly.

"The one on the right is called 'The Peak of the Weasel.' Why, I do not know. Now rest, for you will need your strength."

An hour later they once again took the road and once again Sanski's weary limbs knew aches and pains of which he had not dreamed in all his soft and easy life. The evening had turned cold. A deep mist shrouded everything and through the mist Sanski staggered ever after the figures of the two brigands, which loomed larger than human in the whiteness. It was, perhaps, twelve o'clock at night when Grulla halted for the first time. "We are between the two peaks," said he. "There is a cave on our right. Let us enter."

Sanski was aware of a great opaque darkness into which he walked.

"Wait till I strike a light," said Grulla; but there was no need. At that moment on all sides torches and lamps were kindled and in front of Sanski's horrified eyes appeared the small and wizened figure which he had not seen since their only interview.

"Well, my children?" said Don Q.

"We have carried out our orders, master," said Grulla. "Here is the man," and he indicated Sanski.

Then Sanski, in his weariness, broke down utterly. He realized the trick that had been played upon him; the terrible journey, wild hopes of escape, all were useless.

"Mercy!" he cried. "Mercy!"

"And why should I show you any mercy?" returned Don Q. "You have broken your promises. You have indulged in propaganda; you have tried to suborn my men. More than all, you have insulted me. You came to me asking me to join the Spanish revolution, to rebel against my king, and you offered me your bloodstained money. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Surely I have suffered enough! That man," and he pointed to Grulla, "threatened to kill me if I did not keep up with them."

Don Q. smiled. "I have no doubt he would have done so," said he. "Our good Grulla was always a man of action. But to return to your case. I do not think that the world is the better for a man like you, but that is not my affair. Do you know where we are? We are on the very top of the highest mountain range in Spain. Sometimes the mist lies there for many days. To-day at dawn Grulla and Drumion shall lead you and put your feet on the path to the plains. If you can reach them you are free. If you cannot, it is the judgment of a Higher Power."

"And my money?" screamed Sanski. "That letter I wrote. What have you done with it?"

"I sent it to the bank and they obeyed your orders. You told me that you had but fifty thousand pesetas. I find that the bank had half a million in your name. Why did you lie to me?"

"Because I knew you would take it away from me."

"As you and your comrade took it away from others?"

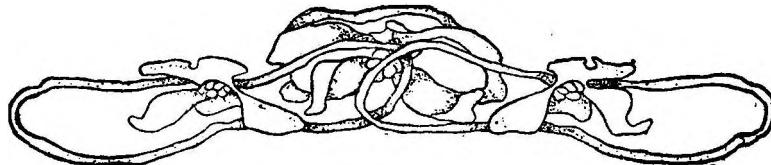
"They were aristocrats—bourgeois—devils!"

"And as I," said Don Q., as if Sanski had not spoken, "have in my turn taken it away from you. Our Church has many excellent missions and for the past week they have been rejoicing in an anonymous gift."

"But," cried Sanski, "this is monstrous. If I do reach the plains I am ruined! I must work! I——"

"Be silent," said Don Q. "There is no more to be said. There is a priest here if you wish for his services, for in a few hours you will be alone in the white mist."

Dawn was barely perceptible when Grulla and Drumion led Sanski into the mist. There, without words, they left him, and in a moment were lost to view. Sanski shouted their names many times but no answer came and it seemed to him that the mist grew ever thicker. What happened to him, who knows? Or whether he regained the plains. But never again did he sit in the bolshevik councils. Perhaps he had learned his lesson up there among the mountains, or perhaps, somewhere at the bottom of a precipice, lie the bones of the pioneer of the Spanish revolution.



IN MILLIONAIRES' LAND

CHARLES M. WILLOUGHBY, who served with the Creel committee during the war, is now with the American Relief Commission in Russia. Writing from Moscow on a picture post card, he recently informed one of his Washington friends:

"It has just cost me 200,000 rubles to get a hair cut. I paid 50,000 rubles for a shine and tipped the boy 10,000 rubles. He was peeved at the small tip. I priced a box at the opera and they told me it was 3,600,000 rubles. When my wife joins me here I am told that I should allow her 'pin money' of at least two or three million rubles per day. I am spending money just like 'Brewster's Millions.'"



Work for a Real Man

By Alan Sullivan

Author of "He Walked Like a Sailor," "Brains," Etc.

The oil business is justly reputed one of the three or four most unscrupulous fields of contemporaneous human endeavor. This is the story of a man who entered the oil business with a clean conscience and a sore heart—and came out of it with his conscience still immaculate and his heart recovered of its bruises. John Shanklin was no superman. His chief asset was a belief that honest effort deserves, and in the end will win, a fair reward. Because he was neither ashamed nor afraid to tackle a man's work like a real man his faith was justified.

—THE EDITOR.

(A Complete Novel)

CHAPTER I.

FROM the office windows of Burley & Betts, in a tall building in Los Angeles, one could see the far crests of the Sierra Madre range filling the eastern sky, massive and imposing, lifting serenely above the haunts and doings of men. Of those whose eyes wandered frequently to this majestic spectacle none surveyed it with more thankfulness than John Shanklin, senior clerk. He began to stare at it when first Burley & Betts made room for him in their expanding business, and continued to be conscious of it all through the four years that preceded his appointment as senior clerk. And on the day when Burley intimated in his deep, rumbling voice that by the end of the year, if things continued to be satisfactory, there might be room for a junior partner in the firm, it seemed that the Sierra Madre was dipped in golden light.

He was coming into his own by hard plugging, backed by a fixed belief that there was as much romance to be found in business as anywhere else, and that fundamentally it was important to be two things: straight and constructive. He took pride in doing his work, so that when he had finished it needed no further touches. Sometimes it seemed that in law one lived by disentangling the knots that other people unconsciously tied. At this Shanklin always smiled. He was fond of undoing knots, and on one particular morning when the Sierra Madre looked more inviting than ever, he leaned back in his chair, pursed his firm young lips, and wondered what Courtney Brooks wanted to talk about at the appointment Burley had made for his client at eleven o'clock. Brooks was not the man to get himself entangled.

From Brooks to his daughter Claudia was

a quick transition. Shanklin's engagement to Claudia had seemed to him the most wonderful thing in the world. He lived in the thought of it. Only that morning, soon after the sun had topped the Sierra Madre, they had explored Pasadena in search of a bungalow, and found what they sought, white-walled and red-roofed, with an inner patio where spread a silky pepper tree over a tiny marble pool.

Presently the door opened and Brooks came in, accompanied by Sitwell, his partner. It had been suggested by a cynic that Brooks did the things which Sitwell couldn't do—and the latter did the things which Brooks wouldn't, and that therein lay the secret of their success. Brooks was loud and hearty, his partner was suave and ingratiating. Brooks boomed things out, Sitwell suggested them. Brooks bluffed, Sitwell finessed.

"Morning, John," sounded the big voice, and a large soft palm engulfed his fingers. "You know Sitwell—so we'll get to business."

"Sitwell, a tall, lean man of about thirty-five, dressed with the utmost care, nodded affably and sank into a leather-covered chair.

"Won't keep you long this morning, John," began Brooks comfortably. "In fact we could have fixed the thing up last night if you had come round. Where were you?"

"Working—looking up matters for a case that's on this afternoon."

Brooks grinned. "Well, Claudia was disappointed—but I guess she won't criticize under the circumstances. Look over these, will you?"

He laid some papers on the flat-topped desk, and the young lawyer, glancing through them rapidly, noted that they were deeds for some fifty acres of land not far from Los Angeles. His brows went up a little.

"Going farming, Mr. Brooks?"

The big man chuckled. "Not on your life. Those are oil lands—or they're going to be before long. I want a charter to operate and sell stock—the usual thing, you know—nonpersonal-liability stock."

"You propose to incorporate on these holdings?"

Something in the steady tones drew a quick glance.

"Sure—why not?" The big man wheeled on his chair. "By George! That's a great

view you've got from here—can see the observatory—eh?"

"Yes, we can see the observatory." Shanklin's voice was colorless. "What capital had you thought of?"

Brooks turned suddenly to his partner. "We agreed on two million—to sell at ten cents. But I've an idea now that we might cut that down by a quarter."

Sitwell leaned slightly forward, pressed together the tips of his manicured fingers and regarded them intently. Presently he looked up.

"We propose to retain one third of the total shares for property and promotion—and I'm of the opinion that we can raise one hundred and thirty-three thousand dollars just as easily as a hundred thousand."

"Well, you ought to know," grunted the other; then, glancing at Shanklin: "Sitwell is the financial end of our team."

Shanklin did not answer. Ever since he had joined Burley & Betts an important part of the business had been corporation work. It had given him an insight into matters sealed to the everyday man. At times it was difficult to control his impulses when things were egregiously undesirable—but, he always reflected, he was a lawyer and not a judge. As to oil and oil lands, he had acquired valuable experience—but of all the incorporations which had come into the hands of Burley & Betts this was the wildest.

The oil lands of the Los Angeles district had to all present knowledge been accurately determined. These strata lay in recognized areas and at approximately well-known depths. Along their strike and up to a certain distance on either side of it there was the chance—the fair chance—of finding oil. But outside of this the chance was, to say the least, remote. And here on his table lay deeds for lands far removed from any oil strata—for which Brooks had paid some five thousand dollars, and which he proposed—as part, and only part, of the game—to resell to the public at a thousand-per-cent profit.

The big man lit a fat black cigar. "It may interest you to know, John, that my bunch of stock goes straight to Claudia just as soon as it's issued. She'll have to keep it off the market for six months, but after that I don't care."

Shanklin drew a long breath. "Will you be passing again this morning?" he asked

quietly. "I'd like to look into this before I say anything."

Sitwell's lean face assumed the slightest tinge of surprise. The thing was so simple—it had been done so often before—that his instincts were at once aroused. The way Sitwell worked was to try and make himself feel as he reasoned the other man felt, and proceed from that.

"You don't anticipate any difficulty in getting a charter, do you?" He gathered himself and stood by the door, tall and graceful.

Shanklin shook his head. "You'll have no difficulty in getting a charter," he answered diplomatically.

CHAPTER II.

The door closed behind them and Shanklin perceived that the thing that again and again he had prayed might not come had indeed come, and brought with it an intensified moment he was loath to face. In the previous year—he had read a day or so ago—countless thousands had been ruined throughout the country by speculation in fraudulent oil companies. Now the hour had come for him to announce where he stood.

His mind turned instinctively to Claudia. She knew nothing of it all, but if she did know, where would she stand? Claudia would be intimately affected by his decision. Her mother had died when she was still a child, and for years she had been to her father so much more than only a daughter that the two were wrapped up in each other. Shanklin might be her fiancé, but Brooks was her father, her king—and the king could do no wrong.

Then there was Burley & Betts. The latter was the San Francisco partner, and but rarely came to Los Angeles. It was to Burley that Shanklin looked, a little man with bushy brows, a deep, volcanic voice and a bulldog face. Burley was accustomed to having his own way, and this was no doubt largely due to the degree in which the formidableness of his manner had surmounted the insignificance of his person. There was something electric in his attitude. When his mood was one of approbation the entire office staff was conscious of a pleasant tingling in the air. When he disapproved he radiated something that spread like an approaching thunderstorm and was just as

discomfiting. What would Burley say to all this?

By the time Shanklin's hour of grace was nearly up the matter had come to an irreducible minimum. He must contrive that, without antagonizing Brooks, the proposed charter be looked after either by Burley himself or in some other office. To manage this he must trust to his own wits. It was quite clear that he could not undertake the work himself, no matter whether Brooks' bunch of shares was destined to go. He was drawing a fine distinction between his duty and what he conceived to be his integrity. But a life without such distinctions was, he quite deliberately decided, not the life he wanted. As for Claudia, his fate lay on the knees of the gods. When the clock pointed to the hour he directed that Brooks and Sitwell be shown in as soon as they arrived. Presently the two entered and he drew a long breath.

Ten minutes later Brooks heaved his big body out of his chair. He looked puzzled but there was an understanding twinkle in his eye.

"Then I take it, John, that for some reason, which you haven't made very plain, you don't want to act for us?" He said this in a voice which was in no way offended, but held a note of surprise.

Shanklin nodded, conscious of a vast relief. He felt that never before had he crossed such thin ice, and with such success. Sitwell's expression had roused his apprehension once or twice, but now the younger man's face was blank.

"If it's all the same to you."

"Sure; but I had an idea I'd like to keep the business—well—sort of in the family," said Brooks reflectively. "However, you will speak to Burley, so he can't misunderstand?"

"Yes." Shanklin had an immediate conviction that with Burley the ice would be thinner than ever, for it was not the custom of the firm to decline business on any pretext.

Brooks moved toward the door, glancing once or twice at the young lawyer as though it were in his mind to speak, and it struck Shanklin that in his manner there was something more than regret. It was as though he interpreted the real motive for this unsuspected decision and silently sympathized with it so far as his position permitted. In that instant Shanklin got a sud-

den insight into the character of the father of the girl he loved, and perceived in him a man who had been primarily honest, but whose natural instincts had been suffocated by the desire for easy money.

"Come on, Sitwell; there's another lawyer in this building."

But Sitwell, who had also risen, stood motionless, apparently examining the lining of his hat. His lips, slightly compressed, gave Shanklin a swift sense of discomfort. "Just one thing, Brooks, before we go. Mr. Shanklin hasn't taken us very much into his confidence as to his real reasons. Why not see Burley yourself?"

"What for?"

"To get at the bottom of this. Ah! Here he is now."

The door was flung open and a little man swept into the room like a sirocco. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I left a brief here this morning." He began to ferret about on Shanklin's desk like a terrier. "We seem to have what you'd call the loose-leaf system in this office."

Sitwell smiled slightly. "Glad you came in. I was just going to tell you that we're both sorry your office can't do our work."

"Isn't our office as good as any other?" snapped Burley, continuing to search. Then, as though realizing fully what had been said, he straightened up. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"Come on, Sit; it doesn't matter," put in Brooks hastily.

But Sitwell held his ground. "It's only that Mr. Shanklin is too—too occupied with other matters to attend to us," he said coolly.

Burley dropped a handful of papers and stared, his eyes contracting to pin points. "What are you talking about?"

Sitwell put on his hat, pushed his arm into that of his partner, and moved toward the door. "Ask him," he said, jerking his chin toward Shanklin.

The sound of steps died out, and Burley, clearing his throat, spoke with difficulty. "What is all this tomfoolery? Aren't you preparing that charter?"

Shanklin shook his head. He was trying desperately to pull himself together.

"And may I take the liberty of asking why?" The senior partner's voice took on a certain icy significance.

The chief clerk stared first at the Sierra Madre as though in a swift appeal for help,

then at the angered face. "It's rotten business—rotten all through," he said slowly.

Burley's thick eyebrows arched into a black curve. "Since when have you been on the bench?"

Shanklin's nerves steadied a little. "You know what I mean, sir. Brooks is incorporating and is going to sell worthless stock to ignorant people. I don't want to help him do it."

Burley leaned forward a little. "And you undertake to pass judgment on the motives of my clients who come to my office for legal assistance?"

"There's lots of clean business to be had, sir. This isn't clean."

"A Daniel come to judgment—and in Los Angeles. Mr. Shanklin, listen to me for a minute. Every individual has certain rights as a citizen: some of them are most easily secured by the aid of a lawyer. You undertake to criticize what he is going to do with those rights after he gets them. I didn't know you were such a fool. I'm sorry, because things looked well for you here—now they don't—and you'd better get out. Do you think," he added with rising anger, "that I'm going to have my business spoiled by a crazy altruist?"

"I can't help what you think, sir. I only know what I feel. I'm sorry, but I can't put a stroke of a pen to that charter." He looked up suddenly. "You know it's a rotten thing yourself—you saw the deeds. I may be an altruist, but I'm not a fool."

"When I want you to decipher my mind for me, young man, I'll send for you. Meantime you're too expensive for this firm. Come in when you are ready and get your check."

He stumped out and Shanklin stared after him. Then, quite methodically, he put his papers in order, realizing dully that never had his work looked so inviting as at this moment. From a top drawer he took out a photograph of Claudia Brooks, regarded it hungrily, and put it in his pocket. In an hour the desk was covered with neatly folded packets, each dated and labeled. From the bookcases he took a few volumes—his own—wondering where he would use them next. With a sigh that was undisguised he went into Burley's office.

The little man was sitting chin in hand. The anger had died in his face. As Shanklin came in he motioned to a chair.

"Look here, let's talk this thing over. I'm

not as hot now as I was a while ago and you kept so infernally cool that it made me hotter. You're not in earnest, are you?"

Shanklin took a long breath. "Why not?"

"Damn it, you're engaged to the daughter of the man you've insulted without seeming to know it. Does that strike you as being a somewhat false position for a prospective son-in-law?"

"Brooks and I differed—that's all. I can't see that it will affect my engagement."

Burley grunted incredulously. "From what I know of the lady I've an idea it will. High-spirited young women don't like that kind of thing."

Shanklin felt a swift discomfort but thrust it out of his mind. "I can bank on her."

"Then you've got more assurance than I ever had. I don't bank on things till I've got 'em—and not always then."

"What do you think of Brooks' little game yourself, Mr. Burley?" Shanklin was desperately anxious to move the talk away from Claudia.

"I don't think at all—but do what my clients ask me, if it is within the law. More or less than that no lawyer is required to do. Incidentally I don't judge 'em."

There was a little pause. Shanklin got a glimpse of how easy it was to succeed—if one were not too bothered with scruples.

"Brooks may be as crooked as a ram's horn," went on Burley thoughtfully, "but it's not exactly your place to suggest it, neither is it the attitude I propose my assistants shall take. Come on—forget it and look after that charter. You've probably done much worse things without knowing it. I've got a check here, but I'll tear it up. Didn't want to hand it to you anyway."

Shanklin made a little gesture, eloquent of things he could not put into words. This office and this atmosphere were his intellectual home and Burley his professional guide-post. He had accepted it all without question as being the fruit of his own effort, assuming that it would go on till he shared the burden equally with his chief. But now it seemed that there was bound up with this a distasteful sort of surrender of the things most worth having. But he could bank on Claudia. This reflection stiffened his courage and he shook his head.

"Perhaps I am a fool, and I don't mean to be critical, but I'm willing to take a chance on being what you call an altruist.

I don't attempt to justify myself but that's the way I feel about it. We both know that this country is rotten with the sort of company that Brooks proposes to form, and I don't see that my engagement has anything to do with it. Brooks is only trying to add to the rottenness instigated largely by Sittwell, and—"

He broke off. Burley's face had taken on a sudden expression of resentment, and his short, thick fingers were drumming restlessly on his desk. He looked now more like a bulldog than ever.

"I've gone about as far as I care to go in this matter," he said. "In fact, a damned sight farther than I would have gone for any one else." He paused. "Look here, will you stop being an idiot and make out that charter, trusting to a man who is slightly wiser in the ways of the world than yourself?"

Shanklin flushed. "I'm sorry."

Burley, in a fraction of time, became again the head of the firm. The warmth in his voice dried up.

"Then there's no alternative. I'm sorry to part with you—as I would be with any man who has worked as hard as you have. But what happened this morning convinces me—quite unexpectedly—that you're not built on the lines of a successful lawyer. You're cursed with too many self-searchings, and I advise you to get into something else. Here's your check."

Shanklin took it without a word, and glancing at it, saw that it included a bonus of six months' salary. His face reddened. "What's this for, sir?"

"None of your business. Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet." Shanklin's voice was shaky. An extra two thousand dollars! He had not dreamed of it.

"Well, if you get stuck and need any sound legal assistance come in and see me—it won't cost you anything."

Shanklin nodded. He found it curiously hard to speak.

Burley got out of his chair and put a hand on the young man's shoulder. "When I was your age I remember feeling pretty much about things as you do now. I got over it—whether for better or worse I don't know—but I reckon you won't—and that may be a handicap. But I guess the world needs fellows like you just as much as men like me. I can't keep you here—but"—he

hesitated a moment, while his face softened perceptibly—"good luck to you, and if I can help let me know."

Long after Shanklin left him the senior partner stood at the window, his head pushed forward, his hands deep in his pockets. Presently he turned to his desk.

"Gad," he said to himself, "if I had a son I'd want him to be just like that!"

CHAPTER III.

Two or three hours later Brooks hooked his arm into that of his partner and turned homeward. He said little and walked with a step that was for him unusually deliberate. Sitwell, too, was rather silent. It was in his mind that a spoke had been put in Shanklin's wheel, and the idea pleased him. Presently he stopped at a florist's, selected a large cluster of early roses, and slipped his card in among them. Brooks looked on quizzically.

"Coming up for dinner, aren't you, Sit?"

"Not to-night, thanks." Sitwell had his own way of doing things, and his plan of campaign required careful thought.

"Meet you at the office to-morrow. Remember me to Claudia."

Brooks watched the tall slim figure till it turned the corner, and wished that Sitwell had accompanied him a little farther. He was experiencing a queer breathlessness that sometimes came over him of late. He was thankful when he reached his apartment and sank into a big chair by an open window. The breeze came down from the Sierra Madre like a cool, invisible caress. Presently he felt better, and, lighting a big cigar, let his eyes wander round the room.

On the mantelpiece was a photograph of Shanklin, signed in his even script. Scrutinizing it, Brooks became conscious of more anger than he had yet felt. The face was smiling, and here in his own establishment it began to look curiously overconfident and even arrogant. So this was the youth who sat at a desk and criticized a man old enough to be his father. What, he now wondered, might not be Shanklin's attitude after he married Claudia. The thing began to work venomously in his brain, till, without realizing it, he strode over and stood staring down at the straight mouth and steady eyes. Just then a door opened and he heard a laugh.

"That's an excellent omen, father. I've never seen you do it before." An arm

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slipped into his own, and he looked at the girl with a glance in which affection struggled with discomfort. It came to him that since the thing had to be done, it were best done quickly.

"Jack and I had a wonderful time early this morning. We found the bungalow—a darling of a house. We can get it by paying half down. There's a room for you whenever you want it—often, I hope."

"Oh," he said uncomfortably—still staring.

She glanced at him puzzled. "Why do you look at Jack like that?"

"Perhaps you'll never see me doing it again," he said gravely.

"What do you mean?" Her brows were suddenly wrinkled.

Brooks examined the top of his cigar. "Sit down and I'll tell you."

He regained his chair and she perched on the arm of it, close to him, yet at the same time remote. He did not look at her as he began to speak and recounted what had happened that morning in Burley's office.

"At first I didn't realize just what he meant by saying we'd better take the work somewhere else. I reckoned he was full up. Then, just as we were leaving, Sit got at the truth of it. John thinks we're crooks," he concluded sharply. "He didn't put it that way—but he intimated it."

"Ridiculous—you're my father," she expostulated swiftly. "I'll see him at once. There's some dreadful mistake."

Brooks shook his big head. "No, you won't see him at once—or at all. I understand English as well as any one—and so does Sit and so does Burley. He knows about it."

The girl was on her feet in an instant. "Father, it's impossible. What did Mr. Burley say?"

"We didn't wait for that. He was just beginning it when we left. But I can imagine it."

"Dad," she answered, her whole soul in her eyes, "let me straighten this out. Jack is coming in this evening; he said so this morning. There's something we don't understand."

"What he says now may differ a little." Then, catching the pain in her dark eyes, "If he likes to clear himself to you and then to Sit and me, I'll forget it, not for his sake, but yours."

She kissed him joyfully. "You're the

dearest and best father there ever was. Of course he'll do it. Don't forget that I know him better than either of you."

"You know Sit pretty well too, daughter, but you wouldn't have him."

Her eyes became thoughtful. "Yes; but I never felt about him the way I do about Jack. There's something in me that answers now. It didn't before. I've a funny idea that you were something like John—at his age."

There followed a little silence, in which the past years rolled away and Brooks saw himself as he was at the time of his marriage. Yes—perhaps he was something like Shanklin—thirty-five years ago.

She kissed him again, and disappeared into her room, and Brooks' mind turned automatically to business matters. There were no lines of care in his face, and not for worlds would he have let the girl perceive that for months past the partners' resources had been steadily shrinking, till now, as a desperate resort, they had come to the step taken that day. The thing was, as Shanklin at once perceived, quite deliberate; but the attitude of the partners varied considerably. Brooks regarded it as something which under more promising circumstances he would not have done, while Sitwell for years past had regarded the great army of the ignorant as his legitimate spoil. What rankled in Brooks' mind most of all was that the scheme should have been deciphered by his daughter's fiancé. He blamed himself for ever entering Burley's office.

At eight o'clock that evening Shanklin picked up the telephone in his room and held it for a moment uncertainly. He had considered writing to Claudia for an appointment in town next day, but finally decided to go to Brooks' apartment—even if it were for the last time. On the way he wondered how much she had heard, and how the thing had been put to her. He was overjoyed when she received him with her wonted pleasure and affection. Brooks was not visible.

"I've been telling dad all about the bungalow," she said, "and there's good news for us. He says very soon he'll find the other half of what it is going to cost—then we'll have it clear. He expects to make a good deal of money in the next few months."

"That's kind of him."

She laughed. "You ought to know he's never been anything else. Really he doesn't

want much for himself. He's like you in that way."

Her arms went round his neck. Presently she looked up, a shadow in her dark eyes.

"I'm worried a bit to-night."

"Tell me." It was Claudia's habit to get straight to the heart of things.

"About father—he's worried too. Should a girl ever attempt to adjust a business misunderstanding?"

"There's nothing I don't want you to know about," he said slowly.

Her face brightened. "I hoped you would say that—so tell me what happened to-day."

"That was a matter in which Sitwell took the principal part. I had no desire to involve Mr. Brooks."

"But father feels now that he is involved. He talked to me about it, and if you hadn't come to-night I should have asked you to. I'm not thinking about Mr. Sitwell, but about him."

"What did he say?"

"That he hoped that you'd straighten it out to-morrow—then we'd all forget it. He thinks it quite natural that you should do his legal work, and is hurt and surprised that you won't—for he says you have declined it."

Shanklin hesitated with an overwhelming conviction that, such was the girl's transparent honesty, he would never be able to make this thing clear. Had she been wordly or calculating it would have been otherwise.

"It was Sitwell who really brought about this difference. Mr. Brooks was content to let the thing be as I asked. And," he added significantly, "I know why Sitwell did it."

She flushed a little but stuck to her point.

"Dad and Mr. Sitwell had agreed in something connected with this new company and you refused to have anything to do with it. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Then tell me why, Jack. Was it the real reason that you had too much work?"

He looked her straight in the face. "No; and, extraordinary though it may seem for me to say so, your father wasn't keen on it at all. Sitwell insisted and Mr. Brooks yielded. I think he's tired—anxious and overworked. Anything I've got is at his service—you know that—but not for this particular purpose. What would you think of me if, in the way of business, I raised no questions but did what I was asked without a word?"

"Will you tell me, then, just what you were asked to do?"

"I can't," he said gently. All he held dear in life was at stake.

She drew away as though he had hurt her. "Not even for me?"

He did not answer.

"Don't I come first any more, Jack?"

He caught at her hand. "I love you with all my soul, but——"

"I didn't think there were any 'buts' in love."

"And I'm thinking of the thing love is based on."

She glanced at him curiously. "What is that?"

"Self-respect. If I throw that overboard I've got nothing left fit to love you with."

"And you were asked to sacrifice that?" Her lips parted. "And by my father?"

"Don't," he protested. "Won't you——"

"My father!" she whispered; then, swiftly, her whole consciousness revolting, it seemed that he was associating her father with tricksters. Sitwell at that moment held no place in her mind—her loyalty, her natural affection, every legacy of childish memory rose in violent protest.

"I'm not judging your father," he said shakily, "but myself."

"But you prefer not to do business with him." She had turned very pale and was staring at a small engagement ring that Shanklin had slipped on her finger a month previously.

"I'd sooner not be responsible in this matter. I can't say what it is, but it's nothing unusual. Burley has probably looked after it already."

He jerked this out while she regarded him incredulously, feeling in her heart a protective surge that enveloped her father—the one who wanted so little for himself. She had a vision, now that her own happiness was being shattered, of his big figure, his generosity, his invariable good nature. He became doubly dear. He needed her. Her father had never asked that her marriage be delayed, never hinted what the separation would cost him. Suddenly she recognized in him one who was above all things lonely. The conviction filled her with a swift reproach. She used it to assuage the ache in her own heart and regarded her lover with the eyes of one who has made a devastating discovery.

"Claudia," he begged, "don't!"

She drew off the ring, feeling all the while a desperate tugging at her heartstrings. She had not dreamed that love could hurt so much.

"I'm sorry, Jack. I told father I could straighten this all out, but you won't let me. You see I thought I knew you better than I do."

Shanklin's pulse stood still. It swept over him in a flood that here and now, if he could only take her in his arms and explain that it was all the mistake of a moment of thoughtlessness, and that he would tell her father so next morning, he could yet save his happiness from shipwreck. But in the middle of all this came the whisper he had heard first as he scanned Brooks' title deeds spread out on his desk, and the whisper demanded to know how he really proposed to interpret life. It was just the plain, quiet question, "Where do you stand?" All afternoon and evening it had persisted. Now the time had come to make answer. He made it in his own peculiar way. "Claudia, I'll love you all my life, wherever you are."

They stared at each other, these two between whom had dropped a curtain of division. Claudia was deadly white. Her lips moved, but no words came. Shanklin stood, his shoulders set, his lips compressed, every fiber of his body yearning for the girl of his choice. The ring dropped with a little tinkle on the polished table. He looked first at the trinket, then at her.

"All my life," he whispered.

When she raised her head he had gone. The apartment was very still. The last half hour might have been a dream, till her glance fell on the ring close beside her. She picked it up mutely, reviewing the day when it had arrived. It was insignificant beside the jewel which had before been offered by Sitwell and refused, and she had treasured this one for its very simplicity. Now the touch of it brought everything to life again.

Came a knock at the door and a maid entered with a long box.

"Flowers, miss; shall I undo them for you?"

"No—thank you—leave them." It was in Claudia's mind that if these were Shanklin's she would make still one more effort. Soon her lap was piled with perfect buds, whose fragrance filled the room. She picked up a card, her fingers trembling, and stared at it incredulously. Then she bent her head

slowly over the blossoms, her tears coming like rain.

CHAPTER IV.

The Enterprise Oil Company came before the public a month later. Brooks heaved a sigh of relief and exhaustion when the Eastern papers arrived, containing a flamboyant advertisement that stock could be purchased at ten cents. These advertisements seriously depleted the partners' cash reserve. Brooks, consulting his bank balance, estimated that he had not more than six weeks' expenses actually in hand. Sitwell was better off.

The matter imposed on the older man a greater strain than he realized. The thing had been done, and done successfully, before, but this time it seemed that a new factor was introduced—one in which Claudia, Shanklin, and Sitwell were all involved. He tried to put Shanklin out of his mind, especially now that Sitwell, the coast being clear, had renewed his advances; and Brooks chuckled, observing how well his partner played his game. He respected Sitwell's shrewdness, and there would be a distinct advantage in having him look after the girl's interests later on; but beyond that it seemed that, after all, there had been something about the lawyer one missed in his rival—something youthful, promising, and, in a way, steadfast. How curious it would have been to have a partner who did not allow one to stray from the narrow path.

A week after the first advertisement appeared inquiries for Enterprise stock began to dribble in from the East. The company had sought no publicity in California. Brooks was too wise for that. But for some reason Enterprise stock hung fire. Applications were for one hundred shares upward to a thousand, and Sitwell's desk was littered with checks which were disappointingly small. It was one afternoon when he was adding up those insignificant amounts that he glanced disgustedly at Brooks, who was, as usual, occupied with a large cigar.

"What do you suppose is the matter?"

"Matter with what?"

Sitwell, who was signing a small stock certificate, held it out contemptuously. "This is for fifty shares and will bring in five dollars, or not enough to pay what it cost to get it. It looks as though we've missed our guess."

"It's in my mind," said Brooks calmly,

"that there are some eighty million folks in this country east of California. Give 'em time, Sit, give 'em time. Advertisements like ours take time to percolate."

"That may be true, but we haven't sold enough stock yet to repay what we've personally put into the property, and it stretched us a good deal to find that. Do you remember that we took in thirty thousand on the Black Master proposition in three weeks?"

"Money was easy then—it's tight now. Also it seems to me that the Black Master was floated the year wheat went to a dollar and a half a bushel, and Silas didn't know what to do with his money. There's a good lot of that stock lying round in Ohio to-day."

"I know it, but we're not advertising in Ohio this time."

The big man roused himself with something of his old fire, and wheeled ponderously in his chair. "Don't you suppose I've been long enough in this game to remember the moves? Didn't I teach you what you know? You're smart, Sit, darned smart, but sometimes I wonder if there isn't something left out of your reckoning. You have it in your head that most every one is a crook—like us, if you want me to talk plainly. Well, they're not. Most every one is straight, and credulous. That's what we live on, and bank on. Hanged if I know what keeps 'em straight either, unless, maybe, it's more comfortable and you sleep better. I'd give something, if I had it to give, to be able to say that I hadn't lied on or off paper to a living soul and that no man had lost money through believing me. It's too late for that now, and I'm not worrying, but when you start being anxious because honest folk don't come your way as quick as you like, it starts me thinking in a way I don't want to think—if I can help it. What will happen with the Enterprise is just what has always happened before. The thing will look as though it were bust, then some honest fool will come along with a bunch of money, and beg you to take it. And you will."

Sitwell played with his pen. "You're not looking like your old self," he said thoughtfully. "Not sick, are you?"

"Sick—no. I get short of breath, so I suppose I'm smoking too much. I always did since I quit the corncob pipe. Like to have one now."

The other man pondered a moment. He knew that those with big frames like Brooks often abused their strength, then dropped out, quietly but suddenly. He was, too, aware of needing Brooks in the business now, almost more than ever before. His assurance, his equability, his massive belief that there were successive generations of honest fools who could be profitably exploited, all these were of distinct value in the business of promoting oil companies without prospect of oil. Brooks was, in short, a kind of sheet anchor, firmly embedded in tenacious if speculative mud.

"Look here, Sit, how do things stand between you and Claudia?"

Followed a pause, while Sitwell wished that his partner were less abrupt. Claudia was constantly in the back of his head. He wanted her because she was beautiful—and decorative. Such wives were an asset to any business, especially one like his own. He would have pride in exhibiting her.

"I think they stand all right. Sometimes it's hard to tell with girls like her."

"Has she forgotten that fellow?"

"She never mentions him. I don't worry about that, anyway. Where do you suppose he is?"

"Never heard of him since. Neither has Burley. He told me so. You know, Sit, there's something I couldn't help liking about him."

"Because he did his best to put a spoke in our wheel?"

Brooks grinned amiably. "No. Because he was the first lawyer who had the nerve to tell me that I was a crook—and you too. Hanged if I don't like him for that."

Sitwell left his desk and put a hand on the big shoulder. "What's the matter, old man?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess. Maybe too much tobacco. But I've got a sort of picture in my head of about ten million straight Americans, mostly farmers, sitting in judgment on me and you and the Enterprise and other little companies I needn't mention, and that the verdict will be along presently and not a favorable one, either. I guess I'd be happier if my girl were safely married." His face took on the dull flush it sometimes showed of late, then he got up and shook himself like a dog. "Look here, Sit, if you marry my girl and the Enterprise pulls through, there are two things I want you to promise here and now."

"That's all right. What are they?"

"I'd a sight sooner you didn't promise so quick. One is that you'll not take money from a woman."

Sitwell stared. "But that's the easiest of all."

"Who knows it if I don't? But that's the very reason. It isn't clever, Sit, it's only mean, and I'm sorry I ever touched it."

"All right. What's the other?"

"That when the Enterprise goes through you will quit the promotion game and get into something else. I don't want my girl to have anything to do with it. One in the family is enough. You needn't ask any reasons. I've given quite a few since I started talking."

Sitwell nodded. "I'm willing, if Claudia is."

"All right, I'll bank on that, and I don't know but what it makes me feel better." He moved heavily toward the door, then stopped with a whimsical smile. "This last year or so I've sort of felt like unburdening myself a little, but couldn't be sure just how you would take it. That's all I want to say. As to Claudia, why, if she's willing—and you'll keep your promise——"

"I'll see her this evening."

Brooks turned, his hand on the door. "By Heaven, Sit, I wish my wife were alive."

He went out. He wanted to be alone for a while. He was curiously but quite definitely conscious that there was one thing in the world at the present time that really counted—his girl Claudia. His mind turned to the Enterprise business, in respect to which Sitwell's anxiety rather amused him. They were playing a game—and there was only one way to play it. That was apart from whether the game was worth the candle or not. This one, he resolved, was the last he would ever play. And just then he felt that queer tightening in his chest and dryness in his mouth—and smiled grimly. Finally he went home and found Claudia.

She made him comfortable, and hovered over him like a protecting mother bird. Presently she looked hard into his eyes, and settled down on a rug at his knee. His big hand wandered to the thick dark hair coiled in slow waves, and rested there caressingly.

"Talk to me, Claudia."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to me?" She smiled up to him.

"Perhaps I do. We haven't seen much of each other lately."

"What's in your mind, father?"

"You principally. I've been thinking a lot."

"It would be easier for both of us if mother were alive," she said with swift intuition.

He nodded. "How are things between you and Herbert?" She did not answer at once, and he went on thoughtfully. "If your mind is clear—why wait? I want to see you happy."

"That's just it—should I be happy—quite happy?" She leaned forward, clasping her hands about her knees. "You see, I haven't forgotten Jack. He's not easy to forget. Bertie's very different. He makes me feel like an ornament, and with Jack I felt like a companion. But I couldn't forgive Jack for what he did, however much I might have cared."

Her father nodded again. The girl was so transparently honest that he shrank from any attempt at influencing her. He wondered how her mother would have put it if she had known what he knew. Then he remembered that while his wife was alive he had never been reduced to his present straits and stratagems.

"Is business worrying you, dad?" put in the girl, with that sudden interpretation of his thoughts she so often achieved.

"Not more than usual. I'm getting a bit tired of business. I'd like to get away and loaf for a while."

"Is the new company not going well?"

"As well as most things do at the beginning," he countered.

She glanced at her father, and meeting his eyes, discerned in them the shadow of care. His face, too, seemed drawn and weary. At that she had a flood of feeling. "Would it make you more contented, dad, if Bertie and I were married soon?"

"Yes," he said slowly; "if I knew that you weren't doing it just to please me."

"Do you think I'd marry one man to please another?" she laughed; "or throw one over, either?" she added soberly. "No—I think we should be very happy. Bertie is a highly finished product, much more so than I am. I'm sure we'd see lots of interesting things and people, and he mustn't insist on my being a potted plant, sheltered from every wind that blows—you understand. If there are going to be hard knocks I want to take my share of them."

The big man stroked her cheek tenderly.

Hard knocks! That was inevitable. He could only trust to Sitwell's astuteness in years to come.

Brooks found his thoughts drifting, drifting. He seemed so often now to be floating on a lake of thought, silent and unrippled, where there reached him an infinite number of whispers he had never perceived before, and it came to him in a breathless fashion that perhaps this was only the forerunner of the ultimate calm that was not far away. All the more reason to think clearly now, when the horizon was filled with Claudia. What could he do to help? He had suspected for some time that she was lonely. His own associates were not those he wished for her. As for the best people in Los Angeles, she did not, could not know them, the people to whom he secretly looked up. This was part of the cost of easy money, but he was not paying it. Claudia would continue to pay unless Sitwell took her away and started over again with a clean reputation, or at least one that was not known as besmirched. Brooks winced mentally, realizing that he would not have had to think of this if it were Shanklin and not Sitwell. But what else could he do now?

"By and by," he began slowly, "you must try and steer Bertie out of this promotion business. It's too—too uncertain. When this new company is on its feet would be a good time—you'll know when the opportunity comes; so don't hesitate. Persuade him to buy a ranch or go into business. It isn't so exciting, but it's healthier—a lot healthier. There's something in the smell of the earth that's good."

The girl looked at him strangely, but did not speak. His eyes half closed and he rambled on, sometimes to her, sometimes apparently to an invisible person who stood near by. Through it all she read a certain dissatisfaction, as if he had worked hard and got but little for it.

CHAPTER V.

During the week which followed his dismissal from Burley's office Shanklin made a complete analysis of himself and his affairs. The manner of his discharge had softened the blow and he deposited two thousand dollars to his savings account with a grim satisfaction that the total was now seven thousand. He knew Burley too well to misunderstand the expression in the lit-

the lawyer's eyes when they parted, and he was glad of that. But now everything was pulled up by the roots, except his love for Claudia, a touch of sympathy with Claudia's father, and a cold hatred for Herbert Sitwell. It was Sitwell who had displaced him—a thing to be remembered. At the end of the week he packed his trunk, gave up his room, and went into the country to work matters out. It was typical of him that he took a job on a small ranch. He could think while he worked.

In the days that ensued the thing became fairly clear. There were two activities open—law and oil—and of the two he believed that oil searched for and developed legitimately offered the greatest inducement. But to his present knowledge of the subject he must add a practical training, and, furthermore, get his further instruction at some one else's expense. This decision made, he laid down his tools, drew his pay and started on foot for the oil fields south of Los Angeles.

They stretch for miles on the long bare ridges that parallel the coast; an army of derricks—a hive of activity—and on the breeze is borne the acrid odor of this great treasure house. There is a wilderness of bare, angular towers, a medley of sheds, piles of lumber and steel casings. All day and all night the beams of the pumping engines balance and tilt, tilt and balance, and at every stroke the earth is bereft of some of the black, thick liquor in which is concentrated the light and heat of forgotten ages. The pipe lines squirm across the country like great snakes, charged with a precious burden, to deliver it in gigantic tanks whence fortunes are sent to the ends of the world. There is the reiterant throb of machinery, the whine of cables, the ring of steel and the crunch of the bit as the metallic teeth gnaw remorselessly at buried strata. Down below, two thousand feet, lie the hidden sands where the treasure rests, sands that have been heaved, folded, broken and distorted by successive convulsions of the earth's crust.

To this amazing territory come engineers, prospectors, adventurers, men of money, and men of imagination from all corners of the globe. The air is electric with possibilities. Fortunes change hands overnight. The rancher sees to his cattle, goes to bed, and wakes to find himself a millionaire, burdened with wealth he knows not how to em-

ploy. The long slopes of the ridges bask in the sun and down far under the short grass is that which is the parent of joy, exultation, crime, and deceit. It is hard for man's better impulse to run straight amidst the prodigal inducements of nature. Good men go under and bad men rise often to the top. Farm and factory, business and profession, property and inheritance are all risked in this frenzied game, while ever the warm earth yields new rewards or reveals empty shelves when at last the plunging bit ceases to burrow and dynamite rends her secret caverns.

Shanklin's heart beat quicker as it came in sight. He had walked slowly, noting the run of the hills and the lie of the land, pitching his mind forward with cool deliberation. But he was only half human had he felt no thrill when the vast army of derricks lay before him. He wandered about for an hour, sniffing the sharp odor, noting the mechanical art that was everywhere employed. At the end of the hour he nodded to himself contentedly. This was work for a real man.

A few moments later he addressed a short, sturdy, blue-eyed man who stood regarding intently a rising framework of timber. At a little distance a handful of men were unloading long steel-casing pipes from a motor truck.

"Can I get a job here?"

The man glanced at him sharply. "What kind of a job? What can you do?"

Shanklin motioned to the casing. "I can carry the end of one of those things."

"Then carry it—at forty cents an hour."

So began the term of dog work that tried his back, but strengthened his courage. He said little and saw everything, feeding his soul on thoughts of Claudia and his mind on a well-thumbed book of geology. Poring over the latter whenever he got off shift, the thing began to reveal itself with a certain majestic simplicity, till the prodigious drama of it all gripped him. At the end of the first month Harrison, the foreman, offered a better job at better pay. It was put in the curt manner that marked all he did, but a glint came into the blue eyes when it was gratefully accepted.

"Didn't know just what to make of it at first. I reckoned in spite of your overalls that you were a swell down on his luck. The way you took hold of those casings put me wise. This job is not for long. I

can't promise anything more unless I get another myself. How are you standing it?"

Shanklin grinned cheerfully. "Never felt so well in my life."

"You look it." Harrison paused, then with a swift glance, "What's your real business?"

"To learn this one."

The glint in the blue eyes deepened. "I had a squint at your hands before I hired you. Come along."

"Well, I thought I was a lawyer up to a short time ago, then decided I wasn't."

"It would be a darn good thing for the country if more fellows decided that way." Came another appraising look. "Game was maybe a little sharp for your taste?"

Shanklin nodded. "Maybe it was."

"Well, I sort of saw you coming before you saw me, and helped you ask for a job. We get all kinds here but not many of the kind we want. But you might as well know right now that if there's one business more crooked than the law it's oil. I'm in it—and I'm telling you."

"It's possible I'm aware of that already."

"Did they skin you badly, son?"

"No, they only wanted me to help in the skinning in a legal way—and I backed out."

"First time I ever heard of any of your tribe doing that. Reckon you're willing to stay here till we shoot this well?"

"There's nothing I'd like better. I've seen this game from one side only; now I want to see it from the other."

Harrison extended a sinewy hand. "Shake, son. I'll put you through."

Thus began the intimacy which was destined to involve so much. Harrison had followed the oil business since he was a boy. Always in the field, he drilled away steadily, immune to the fever dominating the hectic life around him. He had seen fortunes made and lost, but never had he speculated. He had put down wells in South America, in the Great Coalings pools, in Texas, and even in the Caspian, where the sands of Baku vomited their riches. Now he had come back to California, where he was born, wise in his art, a quiet man with a mine of experience. Some of this Shanklin gathered in their first long talk.

"It gets you after a while, and holds you," Harrison was saying. "I don't reckon it's altogether the money, either, though the man who thinks he's struck oil thinks he's been handed the key of the mint. It's some-

thing like I used to feel when I was a kid and robbed the jam cupboard. Well, down here," he twisted his heel into the soil, "there's God's jam cupboard. Some of the shelves are loaded but some of 'em aren't, and that's where our guess comes in. I suppose as often as not we pass within a few feet of the edge of fortune, or, if we get a curve in the well, swing fair into it." He paused, then continued as though turning the pages of his own experience. "There's one thing you need to find oil, and that's money. Going into the game yourself?"

"I hope so."

"How much have you got?"

"Something over seven thousand dollars."

"It's enough to lose. Know what this well is going to cost?"

"No."

"About forty thousand—that's all. What you want is an oil spring that don't need drilling. Suppose a little fellow like you does strike it, will the pipe lines owned by the trust carry your stuff? Not much. Can you get tank cars? Nary a car—all in use. Result is you sell out for what you can get. That's the reason you need money."

Shanklin stared at him soberly. "Cheerful sort of game, isn't it?"

"You've said it, son. I've been more or less black with oil since I left the cradle, and while I've seen it make many a straight man crooked I've never yet noticed it making a crooked man straight. When oil gets into the blood you can't tell what won't happen, and what the business needs is more honest folk in it and less wildcatting. On top of that, you reckon what a thing will cost, then multiply by two, and you're somewhere near it. You've got to live with it, and by and by you dream of it like you dream of a woman, and it can turn a corner quicker than any woman I ever saw." He gave a short laugh that had no mirth in it. "Married, maybe?"

"No."

"That's wise, son, darned wise. You wait till you strike oil, but if you don't, you might just as well get married. It won't cost any more. I hooked up too early and was away most of the time. Then my wife died while I was in Russia. Got one daughter—she's in Los. Don't see much of her either."

"Take this well I'm on now. It's contract, and a lump sum for so many feet. I

reckon on a certain amount of trouble. If we strike more, I'm done. I may make three thousand and perhaps not a cent. You said just now that you wanted to get into the game. Well, the best way is to start with the right crowd, and always at their expense. You're too small a fish to operate on your own account. I've been on the job for the last twenty-five years and all I've got out of it so far is a five-thousand-dollar ranch that goes to my girl if she is not too high-toned to live on it, and my drilling rig which is worth about thirty thousand. It's my capital. That works out at a little more than a thousand dollars saved a year, and I've made millions shoot into the air for the men who hired me. That's the oil business. But there isn't any fortune coming from this well. The field is too drained already."

"These sands we're on top of now—how far do they go?"

Harrison pointed south along the rounded shoulder of the ridge that formed the great anticline. The ridge itself was perhaps a quarter of a mile wide and crowded with derricks where the pumps worked ceaselessly. The array stretched northward for another two miles. But across its southern end cut a wide valley, dry, brown and bare save where artesian wells had tapped the life-giving waters and scattered orange groves spread like patches of green velvet.

"That's the end of the anticline, half a mile south. No use going after oil down in that low land. It isn't there. But the ridge is all underlaid by oil-bearing sands—no pools, mind you, but the sands are fairly thick. They were good till about a thousand pumps began sucking at them. If this well gives seventy barrels a day it's all she'll do. Then on at the other side of the valley there's another small anticline. Heaven only knows how it got there. Guess it was sort of left over, but anyway it's good for a few fifty-barrel wells. And that's all there is to this field. Production is now about half a million barrels a day for the whole shooting match. There's been a good deal of wildcatting down in the valley on account of its nearness to this anticline, but you might as well expect oil under Fifth Avenue, New York. The oil sand is overlaid with about three thousand feet of shale, and there's no shale there. Say, son, got any one depending on you? Free man yet, aren't you?"

Shanklin smiled grimly. "Yes, I'm free." "That's all to the good, specially in the oil business. You keep clear for a while, and if you ever get to promoting a company—"

"I think you can leave that out."

Harrison shook his head. "You can't ever tell. That's the oil business again. If you do ever promote a company don't sell any stock to women if you can help it. Supposing you don't strike oil, and I reckon you may not, they'll be madder than wet hens and will never forget it—or you either. If you do strike it they'll be mad anyway because the well isn't eight times the size, and if it's a gusher they will take all the credit for it and say they felt it in their bones. You can tell a man to go to hell, but what are you going to say to a woman? Just the same, there's one woman I'd like to see round here, only she don't seem to want to come. That's my girl."

"She's in Los Angeles?"

Harrison nodded. "Yes, and from what little I've seen of her crowd I don't like them much. A lot of them drove out to the anticline a while ago and she sort of exhibited me as her hard-working old father. Matter of fact, she didn't know I was here till she found me. But when any one has your own blood you sort of yearn for them. Seems to me it's going to be mighty hard for a girl in that lot to get the right sort of husband. It's most as bad as marrying the promoter of a wildcat well."

CHAPTER VI.

Harrison disappeared into the sleeping camp. Shanklin moved a little farther from the incessant cough of the engine, lay on his back on the long grass, and peered up at the stars. He was nearly happy. But so often as the buoyancy of youth tingled in his veins, just so often was he conscious of an intolerable longing for the girl he loved. He had reckoned that work, ambition, and fatigue would go far to heal his spirit; but Claudia, he discovered, had wound herself too closely about his heart for any such substitution. Now he was in pursuit of the treasure of the earth, having forfeited the treasure of his soul.

He passed from this into a grim reflection of what Sitwell might be doing now. A companion in Brooks' trickery, he would wield a definite power over the older man,

and, with Claudia at stake, would not hesitate to use it.

He lay for an hour thus. A mile away, in the valley, a single light blinked from a small farmhouse, and it came to him suddenly that there or thereabouts was the property the title deeds of which Brooks had put before him only a few weeks previously. Oil! He smiled at the thought of it. All his assumptions had been verified by his talk with Harrison. What if this were the property, and he could from his vantage point watch the operations of Sitwell day by day. The idea piqued and in a curious way comforted him.

He came off the night shift one morning a week later, and struck across country. Between the great anticline, where was Harrison's contract and the farmhouse, ran the highway that led from Los Angeles to San Juan Capistrano and San Diego, along which a succession of motors flashed like shining beetles. In half an hour he was staring at a newly painted sign just outside a wire fence. "The Enterprise Oil Company—Nonpersonal Liability."

So that was it! A few sheep nibbled at the scanty grass, for the land was poor, and not irrigated. Behind the white adobe farmhouse spread the remnants of what had once been a garden. Beside the door were two cabbage palms. A little way off was the well, which, judging by the vegetation, Shanklin surmised as alkaline. Two miles eastward commenced the foothills. In the middle of the tract lay a pile of timber, and two men with saw and hammer worked leisurely over the erection of a small shanty. And that was all. He smiled grimly, and struck up the hard earth path that led to the front door. At his knock a man appeared, tall, lean, and unshaven, fit occupant of this unkempt domain.

"Can you give me a drink?" queried Shanklin.

The man pointed to the well. "Help yourself; it isn't very good, but I'm used to it."

The water was alkaline and Shanklin only moistened his lips.

"Been here long?" asked the visitor, putting down the tin dipper.

"Too long for me; the land is salt, and I'm getting out."

"Sold the place?" Shanklin glanced at the wooden sign.

The other man nodded. "About six weeks

ago." He paused, and a grin slowly spread over his long face. "Some fellows in the city bought it. I've an option on it at the end of the year for half of what they paid. I can't lose, and that's about what it's worth."

It all seemed like Sitwell's work. At the end of the year they would sell the place back, and pocket the proceeds.

"In oil yourself, aren't you?" asked the rancher.

Shanklin nodded. "Working with Harrison on that anticline."

"Those fellows let on they thought there was oil here! But—well—I've been in the business myself."

"You get a royalty if they strike any?"

"Fire and brimstone is all they'll strike if they go far enough. However, that's their end of it."

"Did they offer you any stock?"

"Sure—a wagon load—but I wouldn't touch it. The kitchen's papered with stock that's no good."

He rambled on, and when he had finished the tale one phase of the Enterprise Oil Company was complete. Shanklin hazarded something about the fate of those who put money in schemes, but Trent, the rancher, regarded such individuals as being expressly created for the relief of men like himself. He called it the doctrine of compensation. Shanklin left him on his doorstep, and tramped back to the sleeping camp filled with silent and utter revolt. It was on the future of this sort of thing that Claudia's fortunes depended.

That afternoon, when the hunger for her was sharper than ever, he caught her name mentioned in the personal column of a Los Angeles paper. It was the notice of her marriage to Sitwell two days previously.

Claudia had not taken the marriage under any illusionment. Her love was in fierce conflict with her pride. She was aware that the intensity of her feelings was moving her nearer to Sitwell, and her father's anxiety to see her finally settled had not only touched her, but given her as well definite feelings of apprehension. It was in secret moments that she confessed to herself how much it all had hurt. The dream and vision of youth in the arms of youth had vanished.

Courtney Brooks, as though he had held on to life for this particular purpose, died suddenly and quietly two weeks after the wedding.

CHAPTER VII.

Sitwell was in his office, sorting the morning's mail. He went over the small pile of envelopes, putting aside now and then one that looked promising. Experience had made him deft in separating the chaff from the wheat at sight, and one could tell a good deal by the feel.

Deliveries had been dwindling of late, till now twenty letters a day was a good take. One third of these had, on the average, enclosures, but the amounts were so insignificant that he had begun to doubt whether the Enterprise well would ever be put down. In this case, he reflected cynically, there should be more left over for himself. Finally there remained only the least important-looking envelope. Opening that, he suddenly straightened up, his expression brightened and his face grew tense with excitement.

He sat thus for a moment till his glance wandered to the chair that so recently had held the big figure of Brooks. It seemed that in a queer way the chair was again occupied, while the broad, good-natured face of his late partner regarded him with misty and reminiscent eyes. Brooks knew evidently what was in that letter, and had returned to remind him of something, but Sitwell, still elated, spoke out just as he had used to speak, and felt grotesquely fortified by the sound of his own voice.

"When I gave that promise neither of us guessed how soon I was going to be up against it, so for Claudia's sake, your girl's sake, I'm not going to keep it."

Did Brooks look disappointed or not? Sitwell could never tell. All he knew was that the big outline faded away and the office was unusually quiet. He sat staring at the letter. Always when things were at their blackest they got brighter again. But for this he would shortly have had to confess to Claudia that he was a defeated man. Now, again, out of those eighty million honest Americans east of California salvation had come. He was not going to let the manner of its coming worry him in the slightest. Putting the letter in his pocket, he left the office, and shortly afterward entered his apartment with a step even lighter and quicker than usual.

Claudia greeted him with surprise. She was all in black, and her dress seemed to impose a pallor on cheeks that were usually full of color.

"What is it, Bertie; anything wrong?"

He laughed. "It's just the other way. This is the sort of thing I've been waiting for. Read it." He handed her the letter.

She noted that the postmark was from a small town in Illinois, and the writing that of a woman. Then she read:

MR. H. SITWELL,
THE ENTERPRISE OIL COMPANY,
LOS ANGELES,

DEAR SIR: I have seen your advertisement, and if it is not too late I would like to invest in your stock about twenty thousand dollars. This is my daughter's inheritance and I must not lose it. So before buying the stock my daughter and I think of coming out to Los Angeles at once, and you will be able to show us the company's property and answer more questions than I can put in a letter. Will you, please, telegraph me whether you will be there and meet us on our arrival and show us the property? Then we can decide at once.

MARGARET WINTER.

Claudia stared at her husband. Something in his manner—even in the way he stood—had given her a subtle sense of alarm and discomfort. Only the night before they had had a talk, the result of which was to keep her awake for hours, putting to herself questions that she could not answer. "This isn't my affair, Bertie," she said slowly.

He smiled. "This is a case for a little teamwork. If we can pull this thing off it means enough money for the first well. If we don't, that well won't be put down. Money has about stopped coming in—whether on account of something in the advertisement or not I don't know. Apart from Enterprise money my own account is down to about two thousand dollars."

"What!" she stammered.

He nodded. "We've been under heavy expense lately that couldn't be avoided—your father's funeral, your clothes, and certain liabilities of his that"—he hesitated a little—"you didn't know anything about. Financially, we're on the ragged edge of nothing. It isn't a pleasant thing to say, but it's true. I've been putting it off from day to day, waiting for something like this to turn up."

"But this would be the company's money, wouldn't it? I don't understand."

"Certainly; but with this, plus the rest, we could start work and I could charge a comfortable salary for looking after it—something sufficient to keep us going."

Claudia's face was grave. "I didn't know

things were so bad, but"—she faltered, glancing at the letter—"this frightens me."

"Is it the amount?" he asked, smiling again.

"Partly—and the circumstances. This woman is a widow and the money goes to her daughter."

Sitwell's mood changed suddenly. "What a beautiful doubter you are," he laughed, slipping his arm round her. "You've been congratulating me when subscriptions were five hundred dollars a day—and now you're rattled when one comes along for forty times as much. Tell you what we'll do; make Mrs. Winter a director, and she can look after her own money."

"But she doesn't know anything about the business?"

"I'll be there to help her," said Sitwell evenly. "Leave it at that. Now we come to your part of it."

She stared at him wonderingly, still breathless at the sudden revelation of his financial insecurity. "My part of it?" she questioned.

He nodded. "There are about one hundred oil companies within twenty miles from here that would give Mrs. Winter a hearty welcome if they knew anything about this"—he tapped the letter. "That's what we've got to avoid. I'm going to telegraph her to come along. Then when they arrive we both meet them, and you will insist that they stay with us till the matter is settled. That's the sort of thing that goes a long way."

"Bertie, I can't do it!" she expostulated.

"Why?" he demanded shortly. "Because you're in mourning?"

"Only partly. I don't know those people, and—and it's unnatural."

Her husband surveyed her with amused tolerance.

"Look here, Claudia, I'll tell you something. You don't raise any objection to my way of doing things till there comes along something so big that it startles you. There's a chance like this about once in a lifetime. Now I'll tell you something more. I know that your father wanted me to get out of this business, on your account. He said so six weeks before he died. He never was really fond of it himself, but got anchored in it and found he couldn't move. I'm a good deal younger than he was, and I'm not anchored—and I am willing to get out if the chance comes; and this is the

best that's ever likely to come. Is this news to you?"

She glanced at him as though appraising his sincerity, and almost his loyalty.

"If we don't get this money," he said, without a shadow of expression on his face, "it probably means that we have to return all the other subscriptions. And that"—he made a significant gesture—"you ought to know what that means. The first well will cost about fifty thousand. Now, how about a little teamwork on your part? A pretty and attractive woman can help her husband a lot."

Teamwork, the expense of her father's funeral, her own clothing, the chance of something better and happier in the future! She balanced them up against the unknown widow in Illinois. It flashed upon her that Shanklin had condemned her father, and lost both herself and his position because he undertook to pass judgment. Now the situation cropped up again, and her own attitude seemed fantastically unreasonable. "I'll do all I can, Bertie," she said gently. "When do you expect them?"

The decision once made she felt somehow happier and more confident. It would give her an opportunity in her own domain. Planning entertainment for her unknown visitors, she took a sharp pleasure in the fact that the country round about was beautiful and full of interest, and she was proud of California in a new and exciting way.

A week later the Winters descended from the California Limited, and Claudia, waiting at the barrier, breathed a sigh of relief. Mrs. Winter was tall, good-natured looking, with high color and a large mouth. Her daughter struck Claudia at once as being a most attractive girl, with a tan dress, neat tan shoes, a workmanlike hat, a small well-shaped face, and eyes of the clearest gray. Her mouth was firm and delicate. Even Sitwell seemed pleased as he slipped forward and introduced himself, then Claudia. Mrs. Winter regarded them both with a frank and interested stare.

"I'm sure it's very good of you to meet us. This is my daughter Edith. We've been three days in that train, and I think we'll go right to the hotel, if you got those rooms."

Claudia captured the gray eyes. "My husband and I hope you will come to us first—for a while. The good hotels have been full all winter and you wouldn't like the

others. We're all ready for you, so do come."

Mrs. Winter shook her head a little incredulously. "We can't impose on you—we'll find something."

Sitwell laughed. "It's more than we can do, and we live here. Most of the East seems to have moved West for the winter months this year. You might get a suite at the Leamington at fifty dollars a day."

Mrs. Winter gasped, and from Claudia to the girl sped a swift signal, unseen by the others, but very potent. Edith laid a gloved hand on her mother's arm.

"It isn't fair to Mr. Sitwell, but I think we're very fortunate to have found friends so soon." She glanced at Claudia's mourning. "Should we really come? Is it quite convenient to you?"

"My wife's father died five weeks ago and she's lonely," put in Sitwell quickly. "We live very quietly, and, of course, don't entertain, but I know she'd be grateful if you came."

"Truly?" asked Edith Winter with a quick, searching glance.

"Yes, truly." Claudia made a little gesture of confirmation. This was the kind of girl she wanted to know, and make a friend of.

Mrs. Winter breathed a sigh of relief. "Then thanks ever so much, just for a day or two, till we get settled down. How do we reach your place?"

Sitwell smiled and led the way to his car. He had hung on to it in spite of pressing need. The man without a car in Los Angeles was a curiosity. As he drove he talked, and Mrs. Winter listened with a touch of excitement.

"Better have a good rest first. After that we'll run out and see a lot of producing wells near our property, then the property itself. There is plenty of time and I advise you to do the thing carefully. I'm quite at your service, and I think it will interest you."

"Any oil near here?" she asked.

He changed his route and drove past bungalows and cottages, in whose back yards were pumping wells.

"There's nothing quite like it in the world," he said.

She nodded, impressed with the sight of those private treasure houses, operating day and night just outside the kitchen window. She was taken, as well, with Sitwell's per-

sonality. He was not the type she had expected to meet, but rather a person of the world with admirable manners and address.

"We thought it best to come and have a look at the property ourselves," she said thoughtfully. "It was my daughter's idea, and it's all a secret. I wouldn't let her tell any one—even her fiancé."

"Good idea. I've been thinking over the matter of your investment, and how it could be made as satisfactory to you as possible."

"I haven't invested yet," she said cheerfully.

Sitwell colored a little. "Certainly not; but in case you did it has been suggested that you take a seat on the board of the company."

"What! Me a director!" Mrs. Winter was suddenly breathless.

"Why not?"

"I hadn't thought of that. I'll put it to Edith."

That afternoon when Mrs. Winter had retired to rest the two girls talked long and happily. Edith's eyes were full of sympathy when Claudia told of her father's death.

"My own life isn't half as interesting as yours," she said presently. "I was born on the farm—no brothers or sisters—my father died six years ago. I went to a high school, and then took a correspondence course in stenography. I could have got a job in Chicago, but mother wanted me to stay with her. Father left her the farm and twenty thousand dollars in government bonds. Mother thinks she can double this, and that's why she's here. By and by, when I'm married, she wants me to live more—well—like you do."

"Why does she want you to do that?"

"I don't really know. She's tired of quiet, and cows coming home to be milked, and danger of late and early frosts. I suppose when you've lived fifty years on a farm you want to get away from it. She's coming to me after I've been married a year."

Claudia smiled her congratulations. "When will that be?"

"Perhaps next year—yes, I think so. Jim—Jim Hunt has a job in New York with a very big firm. It isn't much to begin with, but there's something better ahead."

"Jim tells me that I may have to live in awful places—log cabins and all sorts of things. Would you like to see his photograph?"

"Very much."

Edith blushed a little and opened her bag. "Here it is. Isn't it nice? He's twenty-five—two years older than me."

Claudia looked. The face seemed strangely familiar, with eyes set far apart, a steady mouth and a look of quiet determination. Presently the resemblance came to her, and the blood crept to her temples. The picture was like Shanklin cast in another physical mold, but endowed with the same qualities, the same manner of confidence, the same fearless frankness. Even the eyes were Shanklin's, and she felt a strange thrill at meeting them.

"What do you think of him?" asked the girl.

"He looks good enough—even for you," said Claudia a little unsteadily.

"Thank you, for both of us." The gray eyes grew very soft. "We won't be married till he has the position he wants. He says that there are lots of hard knocks anyway in his profession, and we'll have to take them together, the bitter with the sweet. Don't you find it wonderful," she went on wistfully, "how much two people who really understand can be to each other?"

Claudia nodded. Those unsought confidences were becoming more than she could bear. Edith Winter was engaged to a man amazingly like John Shanklin. She almost certainly would marry him and share his hard knocks, but what a joy to meet the brunt of blows struck in the open, rather than the stabs she was now receiving in secret.

That evening Sitwell spread maps and plans on the table, and with the Winters on either side of him talked Enterprise for an hour. It was the first time his wife had seen him, so to speak, in action; and she was struck with his versatility and memory. The plans were, without question, compiled with the object of showing the Enterprise ground as close as possible to its plutocratic neighbors, and the impression gained at a first glance was that the locality was highly favorable.

Mrs. Winter's eyes rounded as she heard of the value of producing wells hard by; but Edith laughingly confessed that plans always puzzled her, and that she would rather wait till she saw the actual thing itself.

"Even then," she went on, "I won't know anything, or mother either." She paused,

then added with a touch of daring, "Have you much invested in it yourself, Mr. Sitwell?"

"Nearly everything I have has gone into the Enterprise," he replied promptly.

Edith nodded, but seemed unimpressed, and Sitwell, noting the regular contour of her young face and the decision in the curve of her sweet lips, had a fleeting anxiety that here he might strike something to disturb his program. But, he reflected, it was the mother, and not the daughter, who held the financial reins. And he was glad of that.

"Then we'll drive out and see it to-morrow; is that the plan?"

"Yes, if it suits you."

"It will be delightful, and," she laughed, "you won't forget that we're two women, and want a bargain, and even then we'll take a long time to make up our minds?"

"Just as long as you please," replied Sitwell with all the gallantry he could muster.

"We've come to a rather diverting place, so you must make allowances," she hazarded, and, turning, examined with interest the books that lined one end of the room.

She took down several volumes, one after the other, turning the leaves with a lingering touch.

"Oh, what a nice-looking man." A photograph had slipped out of "Marcus Aurelius," and she regarded it with instant attention. Something in the level eyes, the contour of the mouth, the set of the figure with its atmosphere of confidence and sincerity captured her imagination. This might have been Jim Hunt's brother.

Sitwell glanced across the table and saw Shanklin's features smiling at him.

"That," he said coolly, "is a very deceptive face—a man we used to know well until he turned out disloyal and tried to play a nasty trick, which didn't work. I didn't know there was a picture of him in the place."

"How queer," Edith said, with the faintest color in her cheeks. "I would never have guessed that. He's too like my Jim."

CHAPTER VIII.

If Shanklin had not raised a point of honor—if he had not stuck to it—and if he had not happened upon Harrison punching holes in the great anticline south of Los Angeles, he would not have been strolling along the highroad a mile or so from his

work and wondering just where he would turn when that work was done. He was divided between the consciousness that he was a more capable man than two months previously and a great hunger for Claudia. That she was Sitwell's wife made no difference. He had written on hearing of the death of Courtney Brooks, and received in reply a polite impersonal acknowledgment. But he could not know that Claudia had sat long in a maze of doubt and regret before she forced herself to write it. And it was as well for them both that he did not know.

There had been grim fights with himself in lonely hours. Work was not the panacea he had expected, but it was the only one he knew. He longed for his woman with all the ardor of his soul, but there only came to him visions against which he was unable to seal his eyes. He knew enough of men like Sitwell to anticipate that the girl, his girl, would be regarded as a valuable business asset. People might have doubts of Sitwell, but they would accept his wife without question. Shanklin could never get even now. The other man was intrenched behind too exquisite a rampart.

It was with such thoughts as these that he walked broodingly one evening through the flatland that just here cut off the great anticline as though with a sickle, and, a mile or so west of the ridge, sat down and lighted his pipe. In a field, two hundred yards away, a man was digging in an irrigation ditch. Presently an oath drifted through the quiet air.

"Rock—by the great horned spoon, rock!"

The man stopped digging, and, leaning on his spade, was frowning down with disgust on his tanned face. Presently he started off toward a small house a quarter of a mile distant.

Shanklin looked after him with a smile. Hard luck, he thought, to find rock where, judging by the slope of the distant anticline, there should be hundreds of feet of earth. For a moment he puzzled lazily over this, till, quite unconsciously, he heard a tiny voice that asked what kind of rock it was. From that he seemed to move into a hush, as though there was something in his mind that wanted to get out and express itself. Suddenly he drew a long breath, and, climbing the fence and endeavoring not to appear to hurry, tramped across the springy soil and peered into the ditch. In

the bottom he saw a foot square of reddish-yellow shale from which the earth had been scraped away.

Two hours later Harrison was wakened by a hand on his shoulder. "Get up, I want to talk to you."

He was tired after a hard day. "What's the matter? Keep it till to-morrow." He listened a moment to the rhythmical beat of the engine and closed his eyes. Nothing was wrong there.

"It won't keep," said Shanklin softly. "Honest—get up."

The other man pushed his feet into his slippers and stood for a moment blinking. "What the devil is the matter with you?" he yawned, good-natured in spite of it all.

Shanklin pushed a fragment of rock into his hand. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

The contractor held it against a lantern, then his brows drew together in sudden anger. "Do you wake me up to show me this?"

"Where did it come from?" persisted Shanklin evenly.

"Off this lot. It's surface rock. Are you crazy?"

"It came from the valley, about a mile west of here. Am I crazy?"

Harrison rubbed his eyes and gave vent to a low whistle, instantly cut off. "It's shale," he said with a touch of awe. "In the valley—a mile from here!" Then, as though the thing were too incongruous for words, "You've been walking in your sleep, Jack."

Shanklin grinned. "Put on your boots, bring a short piece of steel, and come and see."

There was little sleep for either of them that night. They were back in camp in another two hours. Harrison, as was his wont, had said but little even when he stood on solid shale at the bottom of the ditch, and stared first at the rock under his feet, then round at the sleeping country. The lights along the great anticline formed a row of yellow points that stretched southward, broken only by the flats where the valley cut through. They were in the middle of this flat, but beneath him was the formation which his plunging bit had reached hundreds of feet from the surface and a mile east. The thing was incredible but it was true. He chipped off a pocketful of samples, climbed out, and the two started back almost si-

lently. The occasion seemed too big for talk.

Once in the little office Harrison lighted the lamp, pulled down the blinds, motioned Shanklin into the chair at the rough wooden desk and pushed a pencil into his hand. "Get it down on paper and see if it looks the same to both of us."

The younger man blessed the midnight hours spent over geological textbooks, and set to work. He plotted the anticline like a long, narrow French loaf, then chopped a small section out of its middle. This section he indicated as having been moved to the westward, still maintaining its general direction. Next he outlined the flow of waters which had worn down its crest, and the alluvial deposit which now covered to an unknown depth its entire surface, with the exception of that one square foot which had interrupted the progress of an irrigation ditch. At last he looked up. "Is that what you make of it?"

Harrison glanced at him with new respect. He had a certain amount of geological knowledge but could never have assembled and presented the thing like this.

"How much is left of that anticline in that valley we shan't know till we go after it."

Silence fell, and each man knew that the other was exploring his own resources. The younger noted his companion's strong features, and thanked the guardian angel who had led him hither. Presently they found themselves staring at each other.

"I've got seven thousand dollars," said Shanklin thoughtfully.

"I've got the rig—that's worth thirty thousand. I can raise some money on it."

"Then you take the big end of it."

Harrison shook his head. "I don't do business like that. You found the property, so get hold of it and put it in. I'll find the rig, and work for nothing myself. Then we both get after the rest of the money."

"How much?" The younger man's heart was beating irregularly.

"As we'll go about it we should do it for forty thousand, allowing for some bad luck. I've learned to allow for that." He paused for a moment. "Before we decide on this thing we should look it in the face. If we don't get oil, we're broke—badly broke. You know how it is."

"But you believe that this anticline has been faulted, and we've established the fault?"

"Sure, you've established it."

"And the average flow of wells on the shale used to be somewhere about three thousand barrels a day?"

"More than that on the crest of the anticline."

"Then what it amounts to is that our bit of shale carries all its original oil, and that if we get anything it ought to be big."

"That sounds right enough; it should be."

"And we've got the rig and enough cash to get an option and have something over to stand with?"

"That's so." Harrison began to grin.

Shanklin paused for a moment. It struck him suddenly that his operations were going to be remarkably like those of the Enterprise Company—at least superficially. He proposed to drill on a spot which engineers and prospectors had not even thought it worth their while to consider. What if this patch of shale were only a large and isolated fragment, carried there by some geological convulsion and lost in the brown earth? He put this latter to Harrison.

"No; that's not float rock; it's in place. I can tell by the sound of it under the steel."

"Well, then, are you game? If so, I'll draw up an agreement."

A large, hard palm was extended. "Forget the agreement, and shake on it. We're on together—even partners."

There was more talk, and it was settled that Shanklin should go in pursuit of his option.

CHAPTER IX.

It was in the middle of the morning that Harrison, busy splicing a steel rope, looked up and grunted. "Visitors—darn them!"

As he spoke a car climbed up over the shoulder of the ridge, lurching unsteadily toward them. It came nearer and Shanklin discerned a man and three women.

"That's the worst of this anticline. Every tourist that rolls along the road wants to come up and poke around," grumbled Harrison. "We're too near the highway. Every now and then some crank comes along with a lot of Easterners to show 'em what their well is going to be like—when it's finished. Reckon here's one of them now."

Shanklin's eyes rounded. The car was near enough to reveal Sitwell at the wheel, beside him a girl. Behind was Claudia with an older woman. They were all talking

gayly as they stopped for a moment, then came on. Shanklin pulled his hat down over his eyes, glanced at his stained overalls, and sauntered round to the far side of the camp. The car came closer. Shanklin edged behind a corner of the house, and stared hungrily at Claudia. She seemed animated and very beautiful. It was the first time he had ever seen her in black. Then he remembered and his eyes hardened as they turned to Sitwell.

Just then Sitwell stepped forward.

"Good morning," he said to Harrison. "May we wait a moment and see how a well ought to be driven?"

The contractor glanced at the three ladies. "Sure, you can; but there isn't much to see."

Claudia smiled, but did not speak, and Sitwell, with a word of thanks, began to talk. Shanklin, listening, admitted that he talked well. Harrison moved off. Sitwell's voice lifted a little and grew even more confident. He got the ladies out of the car, and they inspected the mouth of the well and the dipping cable that reached into the depths where the sullen bit was at work.

"We'll be doing this very soon ourselves." His eye caught that of Edith Winter. "There's our property close by." He pointed eastward, where, a mile away, glinted the Enterprise sign. "You can see what a good locality this is—these wells are the best-known and most reliable in this field."

Miss Winter looked a little puzzled but her mother stared up and down the great anticline with rising excitement. "I think it's just wonderful, Edith, that we were lucky enough to come and see for ourselves. What did Mr. Sitwell tell us this field was yielding?"

"About one hundred thousand barrels a day; that's nearly two hundred thousand dollars," said the latter.

"Don't you think the Enterprise property looks—well—a little lonely from here?" put in the girl quietly.

His eyes took on a shade of humor. "I'm glad you asked that. It does on the face of it, but our engineer tells us that the same formation is there, just beneath the surface. It goes to the far edge of our ground—but no farther."

Had Sitwell added that he was his own engineer the statement would not have sounded so plausible, and, even as it was,

Shanklin, listening from his corner, noted that the girl looked only half convinced. Then her mother came in again.

"It's all perfectly clear to me, Edith. There's a lake of oil under here, and Mr. Sitwell's—I mean the Enterprise—property is just on the edge of the lake." She spoke in a sharpened voice. The smell of oil and the thump of machinery were getting into her blood. "I'm quite satisfied," she went on, "with all we've seen to-day, and I think we're very lucky. This is going to be a surprise to some one we both know."

Sitwell's lips had a pleased smile. Claudia was looking at Mrs. Winter with an expression of mingled relief and apprehension. Shanklin, watching her with all his eyes, wondered if by chance she had been forced into Sitwell's campaign. There had ensued a little pause, when Mrs. Winter went on again with every sign of rising fever.

"I'm telling you now, Edith, that, as your guardian, I feel this oil business is good enough for you to put your money into. You'll thank me some day. You're getting five per cent and these wells are paying—how much did you say they were paying, Mr. Sitwell?"

"Anything from twenty-five to two hundred and fifty."

"There you are, Edith, and from a man who knows, and here are we simply wasting our money in government bonds and getting five per cent, that the government hates to dole out, when we ought to be getting a hundred at the very least. Why we could take just half those earnings and put them into another well, if Mr. Sitwell has any more, and be rich in no time. When I think of our vegetable garden now it simply makes me tired. I'll never touch a spade again as long as I live. No wonder a lot of people stay poor when they never leave the farm. Why can't you be guided by me—and Mr. Sitwell of course?"

The girl did not answer, but sent instead a queer little glance at Claudia, as though asking what Claudia, from her superior knowledge, thought about it all. Shanklin caught that glance and held his breath. He would know now where Claudia stood. The latter did not move, but sent back a wistful look which said nothing, revealed nothing. It was a strange instant of silence during which hidden factors were at work. Something of it seemed to reach Sitwell, whose

hand was in his pocket fingering an application form.

"Suppose we go and see some more wells."

Mrs. Winter revolted and plumped down on a balk of timber. "Edith, why are you so difficult? I've seen enough wells and I'm satisfied. I don't want to go any farther."

"Then what about home and something cool to drink?" put in Claudia, seeing that the older woman had gone to the limit of her power.

"That's right; come along, Edith." Mrs. Winter climbed into the car and fanned herself. "Just to think that we're right on top of a lake of oil," she murmured, leaning back and regarding almost with affection the dwindling line of derricks.

"Just a minute, I want to look at this engine." The girl stepped forward and stood within a few feet of Shanklin.

The latter felt a slight drumming in his ears. Here was another opportunity for altruism. It wasn't his affair, but this girl's fortunes hung in the balance. Her mother, the pendulum, had swayed unmistakably toward Sitwell. He was conscious of a clamor assuring him that it was no business of his, but through this he heard that same small voice which had first stirred when he scanned the title deeds of Courtney Brooks, the deeds for the land he could see a mile away.

The small voice spoke again, and he leaned forward. "Keep out of it," he whispered. "Don't touch it!"

The girl turned quickly and got a glimpse of a face that seemed in a queer way familiar. Her lips parted, and, even as she stared, he vanished.

She hesitated a moment ere rejoining the others, then climbed into the car with a questioning glance at Claudia and the other. They had seen nothing, and she felt vastly relieved. All the way home she puzzled. The tones had been strange, but there was that in the man's eyes and mouth that reminded her irresistibly of some one she had seen but recently—and in California. Suddenly she remembered the photograph between the pages of "Marcus Aurelius."

The car moved forward, disappeared in the valley, halted a moment at the Enterprise property, and slid back toward Los Angeles. Shanklin was looking after it when Harrison's voice sounded at his shoulder.

"The women looked good to me, but what did you make of that fellow?"

"I'd hate to say."

"That's the way I feel. You noticed they stopped down at the ranch?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll bet he's the chief push in the game and never did a stroke of work in his life. Sort of chap who lives on folks like you and me."

Shanklin shook his head. "Not that one," he said with conviction. His thoughts turned to Claudia, and he got a glimmering of how things stood between her and these strangers. How much or how little, he wondered, did Claudia know.

This was the question that sharpened itself in Edith Winter's brain on the way home. The two had been instinctively drawn to each other at first sight. But she had begun to make a differentiation, however slight, between Claudia and her husband. Her mother's impulsiveness caused the girl to think in a new way about her inheritance, and Sitwell had been a little too ready to fan the flame of enthusiasm. Then the man in "Marcus Aurelius"—whom Sitwell had described as disloyal. The face was not disloyal; in fact, it was the kind of face one might suitably find in "Marcus Aurelius"—honest, open, and fearless. She was caught up in all this, and it imposed on her a silence that Sitwell, noting uncomfortably, tried once or twice to break but with small success.

She took a furtive glance at Claudia, caught a strange expression in the dark eyes. She had a vague feeling that the girl was thoroughbred, while the husband was not. There was no explaining this, but the feeling persisted. If, for instance, there should be a difference between him and a man like the one in "Marcus Aurelius" she would certainly back the latter. But that man had just spoken to her with startling and unexpected warning. She was to "keep out of it." That could only mean the Enterprise. Slowly the thing began to unreel itself, or at least what seemed the only possible explanation of there being a photograph in Sitwell's apartment of a man who was one day in business attire and on another in workman's clothing.

That night she sat on her mother's bed and said what was in her mind.

"It's my turn now, mother," she began, "and I'm going to take it!"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing yet that can't be put right; but

I feel that this thing has gone far enough. It's all very well to keep some things from Jim, and make up your mind to surprise him; but suppose it's we who are surprised and disappointed, and perhaps worse. We shouldn't have come out here at all; but now we are here let's make the best of it."

"You'll settle my chance to make a fortune for you both if you're not careful."

"I've settled on several things," was the quiet answer. "And, mother, it's no use protesting. They are going to be done. You've got oil on the brain and I haven't. First of all, we're not going to buy any stock yet."

"Then we'll be too late—it will all be gone," broke in her mother. "Mr. Sitwell was speaking of that on the way in."

"I don't believe there'll be any difficulty at all; and," the girl added shrewdly, "there are probably lots of other things just as good. The second point is that I'm going to telegraph Jim to try to get two weeks off and come out here."

"And take the chance of losing his new position!" Mrs. Winter was startled.

"He won't lose it if he goes about it the right way, and I might lose everything if he doesn't. The third thing is that we mustn't stay here a day longer than we can help."

The older woman looked up helplessly. She liked Claudia, and was impressed by Claudia's husband and their joint kindness. She had made up her mind about investing in the lake of oil, whose black depths were almost visible to her trusting eye. And now Edith proposed to upset the program. There was a curve on the girl's lips she did not fancy. The girl noticed her expression, smiled cheerfully, and went on.

"The Sitwells are awfully kind but it's queer, our being here. We accepted because we thought there was nowhere else—but there was. I've been looking in the papers."

Mrs. Winter began to feel disturbed, and made a little gesture. "It's on your account we came out here," she said pointlessly.

"And it's on both our accounts that we must be very careful. Don't you feel it yourself? Just assume that Mr. Sitwell was not a bit interested in us—only in our money. Do you think," she added with sudden insight, "we'd have been asked here if we had only five hundred instead of twenty thousand dollars to invest?"

"Edith," exploded her mother, "you make

me feel as though I'd no right to be in this bed."

"That's just what I wanted—you haven't; but you'll have to stay in it to-night. Then we can move. I'm going to write to Jim, and to-morrow I'll wire and tell him I've written."

She sat up late, finding it a difficult letter to write. It seemed at once that the Winter family had acted too precipitously, so she gave neither names nor details, merely stating that she and her mother needed advice about an investment. She added:

I won't let mother do anything till you get here. We'll make a trip to Catalina, and perhaps to Santa Barbara. Address me at General Delivery and come just as soon as you can to advise a girl who needs you very much.

She told Claudia next morning after Sitwell had gone off to his office. He had hung about for a while, hoping that the previous day was about to bear fruit, but nothing in his manner betrayed the tenseness of his mind, for he was by now perfectly aware that Mrs. Winter's enthusiasm had received a chilling baptism at the hands of her daughter. He had spoken of this to Claudia and tried to impress her with the importance of her own attitude, urging that on this might turn success or failure. But Claudia had said not a word. Now, when her husband had left the apartment and Edith Winter came to her with something of a strained look on her bright face Claudia instantly understood the situation.

It was an odd conversation in which each girl found it impossible to speak all that was in her heart. They were mutually attracted. With nothing but an inexplicable discomfort to guide her, Edith felt strangely sorry for Claudia. She had seldom seen so beautiful a woman, and they were both about the same age. And now she was about to hurt one for whom she had conceived a sincere affection. She put it with the sweet frankness that characterized all she did.

"Mother and I have been talking things over and feel that we have imposed on you far too long already. She won't decide about buying Enterprise shares till Jim can come out here and give us his opinion. And we don't yet know when that can be, perhaps not for some weeks. So I'm finding rooms to-day, not so very far from here, and—and I don't know how to thank you for all your kindness—and—and I'd love to

have some of those shares if it meant that I was going to see something of you—and anyway after this may I please call you Claudia and will you do the same?"

Claudia saw the transparent honesty in the gray eyes and was deeply touched. Whatever might have led to this decision, and she did not trust herself to think of that, the girl's affection was obvious and sincere. It was unlikely now that the Winters would ever invest in the Enterprise. She seemed to read that in what had not been said. Also there was an odd certainty that she and this girl had been brought and not thrown together, and that, whether or not through the Enterprise, they were destined to move still closer toward each other.

"I think," she said slowly, "I know just how you feel. I would probably feel the same, at least I hope I would. It's been a joy to have you—the first girl who has ever stayed with me, though my father often used to have his friends. Before you came of course I wondered just what you would be like, but was happy the minute I saw you. It was the Enterprise that brought us together, but I have a queer feeling that it won't need the Enterprise to keep us fond of each other."

They spoke no word of either Sitwell or Mrs. Winter. Nor was there any further reference to the Enterprise. Edith was guarding her mother, and Claudia surrounded her husband with impalpable fences. Then Hunt's name came in and Edith spoke of him with a certain quiet confidence reminiscent of what Claudia had felt not long before for the lover she had dismissed.

"How soon do you think you'll be married?" she asked.

Edith smiled wistfully. "I don't know yet, but probably Jim will be able to say when he comes out here. I can't even tell when that will be, but perhaps within a fortnight."

"Is he an engineer?"

"Yes, one of the juniors for a man called Spencer Martin in New York, who is in a great many things, especially oil. I tell Jim that he will never make our fortune as long as he works for some one else, and he'd better make a strike on his own account. He laughs at that and tells me he's getting valuable experience at some one else's expense. Also he says we'll have plenty of hard knocks later on."

Claudia made a little gesture. Hard knocks! She would not mind them in the open—with the right kind of man beside her. But how would her husband stand them in a fair fight? Doubt, vague but enveloping, began to creep over her.

She sat silent for some time after Edith left her, harassed with doubt as to how her husband would take this interruption to his campaign. Then, afraid to leave the news till his return, she went straight to his office. She found him moody and anxious, and, since it was the first time she had been there, obviously puzzled. This made it difficult to speak. After a little self-searching struggle, she told him. His eyes narrowed and his lips compressed into a thin line. He got up and stared out of the window.

"Why do you think she made the decision so suddenly?"

"I don't think it really was sudden, Bertric, but she felt they were both in an awkward position, especially if they do not invest."

"Have you any reason for thinking they won't?" The voice was a shade ragged.

"No, she only said that they would wait till they could get Mr. Hunt's opinion, and she does not know how soon that will be."

"Anything more about Hunt?"

"Just that he was in the office of some man in New York." She paused, then went on with a touch of timidity, "Don't you think it would be more—well—comfortable to get what you need from some other source?"

"Why?"

"I know you want to make a success in this and then go into some other business, as you promised, but the idea of persuading a woman to invest makes me unhappy. I dare say it's foolish, but women don't know anything about investments, and the sum Mrs. Winter speaks of is Edith's inheritance. Do you really feel that you need it?"

Sitwell looked at her with a peculiar coldness then without speaking took out his bank book and made some neat figures on the margin. This done, he emptied his pocket of a few bills and some silver, counted them as though performing a rite and presently drummed on the desk with long, thin fingers. Claudia sat wordless.

"Your young friend's action probably means that we are down and out. We have five hundred and twenty-seven dollars in

the world, some of which we owe. Were that investment made we would pull through. Subscriptions for Enterprise stock to-day are less than one hundred dollars."

"Bertie!"

"I don't say it's your fault, but those are the facts. I asked you to have them as our guests, and you did, which was the right move to start with. Then I was able to influence Mrs. Winter favorably, but felt at once that you were the one to deal with the daughter. The daughter has not been dealt with, and now you know the result—in which you will have to share."

"Bertie," she broke in indignantly, "how horribly unfair!"

He went on unmoved. "The only explanation I can see is that you do not trust your husband. It's a cheerful reflection for a bridegroom, and likely to be disconcerting, but perhaps it's as well to find out at once."

"It's not a matter of my trusting any one," she protested, "and I did do all you asked. Edith came to her decision without saying a word to me."

"Since when has she been Edith?"

Claudia disregarded the thrust. "Will you tell me," she asked shakily, "why you cannot wait just till the Enterprise has been inspected by Mr. Hunt?"

"Yes—if you will tell me how we are to live for an indefinite period till it pleases Mr. Hunt to come to California." He drummed again on the desk. "Meantime it would be wise to get your things together. We will probably be moving next week."

CHAPTER X.

A fortnight later Shanklin went into Los Angeles for the first time in months. Life in the open had hardened him. There was a new depth in his voice, and his muscles felt like mild steel. Harrison's contract was finished and the well shot. To-morrow they would move to their own ground. He held a lease till the first day of September.

In Los Angeles he turned unconsciously in the direction of Sitwell's apartment house. It gave him an odd sensation to pass Burley's office on the way, and he paused, glancing up at the lofty window from which he used to survey the Sierra Madre. He wondered who was sitting at his desk now, what Burley might be busy at and how the choleric little man fared. His face softened

as he remembered the lawyer's last words offering sound advice when needed. At the present moment he did not want advice—but money. He had put five thousand dollars into his option. That left him two thousand. Harrison had found twenty thousand. And they could not reckon on pulling through on less than another twenty-five.

While he walked, he thought. He might promote a company, as others did, like Brooks and Sitwell. There was justification for it, while for promotions such as the Enterprise there was none. It would involve making the secret public, and, considering the vast possibilities ahead, inviting rivalry and opposition and underhand tactics on the part of envious speculators. He had not dared to use any of Harrison's money and purchase the property outright. That would cut their working capital too low. The thing was to find another twenty thousand before the first was used up, work as hard as men may work, and, by the first of September, make or break. Yet, reflected the young man cynically, he had got into the habit of looking down on Sitwell because the latter was a gambler. Presently he found himself opposite the apartment house. There were no curtains in the sitting room of the late Courtney Brooks. At the main entrance from the street he saw a notice—"Desirable apartment to let."

The porter told him. The Sitwells, or, as he put it, Miss Claudia and her husband, had left a few days previously. Some of the furniture remained, since there was a balance still owing on the rent. The new address was that of a side street two miles away. Letters were being sent to Mr. Sitwell's office. Miss Claudia didn't look very well. That was all the man knew.

Shanklin nodded, scribbled the address and went out to the blazing street. What kind of a thing would life be with a man like Sitwell, when Sitwell was in difficulties? It seemed that Courtney Brooks had died just in time.

Reaching the new address, he discovered it to be a cheap boarding house. He hung about uncertainly, half hoping, half fearing to see her, and conscious that she was in need. His brain was throbbing with the renewed conviction that love was the one thing that mattered. Success, wealth, even triumph over one's enemies, were not comparable in value to the purity and power of

its eternal flame. He was in desperate need of larger resources, but he was a free man, unshackled to any one who could burden or injure him. The reflection that he should have in any degree what this girl had not began to gnaw viciously into his brain. He was not forgetful of Harrison and all that hung in the balance, but here was something supremely instant and imperative. After a long scrutiny he walked quickly away.

An hour later he returned and rang the bell. "Is Mr. Sitwell in?" he asked.

The woman who opened the door shook her head. "He's never in at this time."

"Then Mrs. Sitwell?"

"Yes; want to see her?"

"No." Shanklin's face was half turned and the brim of his hat pulled far down. "But I've a letter here—if you could give it to her."

"Sure; but won't you come in and give it yourself?"

"If you'd be so kind, it will be all right." He handed a long envelope, addressed in typewriting, to her.

The woman glanced at him sharply, for the feel of the thing was unmistakable. "I can't very well see who you are," she said, her voice softening, "but I guess—well—I'll give it to her right away. Sure you won't wait?"

Shanklin only murmured a word of thanks and hurried off. The woman watched him till he turned a corner, then knocked at Claudia's door.

"A man just brought this for you, personally," she said with evident interest. "Wouldn't wait or give any name."

As the door closed the girl stared at the envelope and slowly opening it found ten notes of a hundred dollars each. She fingered them for a moment, her breath coming fast, with a queer feeling of unreality. Presently her eyes rounded. Whence had this money arrived, meant so obviously for herself? Her thoughts flashed to Shanklin. It would have moved her very soul could she make herself believe that this was his gift—but she could not. She did not doubt that he still cared, but his resources were limited and he would need them all, whatever pursuit he might be following. She ran over names of friends of her father's, and could think of none who might have done this. Edith Winter occurred to her, for, in spite of the Enterprise affair, she felt

that with Edith there was a sympathetic bond of understanding, and even now it was still unsettled whether the Winters would invest or not. But the possibility that this was Edith's gift was too remote. Going over it all again and again, it seemed suddenly as though this might after all be Shanklin's way of showing his regret for what had happened between her father and himself.

She thrilled at the possibility, for it was all there was left. In the past few weeks she had been initiated to a new worldly knowledge, and faced realities as never before. The biggest of them was her husband, who was being gradually revealed to her by the stark pressure of events. There were no dreams left. She began to see him as he was. Presently the door opened and he came in, with an expression she had learned to dread. She thrust the notes hastily into her pocket.

If Shanklin was in her mind, no less was she in his on the way back to the valley next morning. He had had enough of the city for the time being. When he reached the property he found Harrison divided between unloading a wagon load of derrick frames and conversation with a stranger at whom he jerked his chin as Shanklin strode up.

"Meet Mr. Woolley, State geologist. Mr. Woolley, this is my partner Shanklin."

Woolley held out his hand. "You've tumbled on a very interesting thing, Mr. Shanklin. Was it as much luck as Harrison tells me?"

Shanklin laughed and took a swift glance. Woolley had a straightforward look that pleased him.

"It was pure luck—nothing else. I was loafing along the road and heard Pettigrew, who owns this place, strike rock in an irrigation ditch, where I thought there was hundreds of feet of soil."

"But it might have been a boulder."

"It didn't ring like a boulder would," said Shanklin thoughtfully, "and that started me thinking."

Woolley looked at him with sudden respect. "And then what?"

"Then I reckoned the anticline might have been faulted, if this rock was shale—and it was."

Woolley nodded, took out a notebook and sketched an imaginary geological fault. It was neat and workable and did not much resemble the laborious product of a notable

night weeks past, but its purport was the same.

"That's what I make of it."

Harrison laughed, felt in his pocket and drew out Shanklin's sketch. "This isn't so pretty, but it's our picture."

"It's the same thing, and just as good."

"Then how far do you reckon we have to go?"

Woolley dug his heel into the ground. "Roughly about five hundred feet has been eroded here; that would leave you about two thousand."

"Just what we calculated."

"You say you have an option on the ground?"

"Yes, till September the first. That's all we could afford and keep any money for drilling."

Woolley looked about him thoughtfully. "It's not my affair, but I assume you realize you've either got a big thing or nothing at all?"

"That's what we reckon," said Harrison calmly. "Also you may notice we're doing no advertising."

Woolley smiled but his eyes surveyed the two with a queer gravity. "I think that's wise, under the circumstances. In fact I rather feel that you've got the most promising proposition in southern California today."

"It interests us more than any other," chuckled Shanklin, "and we're particularly anxious that it shan't interest any one else just yet."

"You needn't be anxious about my end of it. I only wish that half the money I see spent were half as well spent. If you fellows pull this off the Chamber of Commerce will want to give you a dinner."

Harrison grunted. "If we do, we'll give the dinner."

It was Woolley's turn to chuckle. "Well, good luck to you, and if I can be of any use let me know. That's what the State pays me for." He glanced along the valley to a spot where there was a yellow gleam of new planking. "Not rivals of yours, are they?"

Shanklin shook his head. "Not that we know of, but," he added cynically, "they call it the Enterprise. Gentleman by the name of Sitwell."

"I'll drop in and see him. But it seems to me that that would have been a more suitable name for this venture."

He waved his hand and struck off up the highway. In his pocket was a fragment of shale and in his mind was the knowledge that heretofore that shale had lain five hundred feet from the surface. It was palpable that the partners had hit fair on a clean-cut fault, which so far had escaped his own trained observation.

He drove thoughtfully, stopping a mile and a half up the road, and made his way to the center of the Enterprise property, where Sitwell was deep in conversation with a carpenter. Woolley had known Courtney Brooks in years past, before he had formed partnership with his future son-in-law. The latter he knew only slightly, but Sitwell now welcomed him with what seemed an excess of heartiness.

"I was just hoping some one like you would come along, Mr. Woolley. I want advice as to the best place to put down our first well—Enterprise No. 1."

Woolley shook hands. "Glad to help you—if I can. Show me what you've got."

Sitwell waved his hand. "Help yourself."

The geologist's eyes made a swift survey. "You're a bit off the anticline, aren't you?"

"Yes—but this is the only thing Brooks and I could get—about here."

"Was Brooks with you in this? I heard of his death a few weeks ago. He had one daughter, hadn't he?"

Sitwell nodded. "My wife." Then after a little pause. "As a matter of fact we're both interested in this property, and I'd be very glad of any suggestions you'd care to make."

This was more than Woolley bargained for. Courtney Brooks' daughter, as he remembered her years ago, had left a definite impression of childish charm and beauty. He wondered first if she had fulfilled her early promise, and then if her fortunes were really linked up with this patch of ground. Finally he experienced a genuine impulse to help—if he could—and hazarded to himself whether Sitwell really wanted help as much as he said.

"You're going to drill here?" he asked.

"Certainly." There was a note of surprise in the word.

"Did you see a geological section of this territory, showing the anticline?"

"Yes; but not lately."

"Then let me make you a rough one."

He pulled out his notebook and sketched a diagram indicating the anticline with its

folded oil sands and overlying strata, just as though a fist had been thrust up under a bed, distorting mattress, sheets, blankets, and coverlet into a long hump. On either side the strata dipped sharply. Near the edge of the page he made a cross.

"That cross roughly is your property. I don't know how far you are above the sands, if they reach here at all, which is doubtful. If you did strike them it would be a pumping proposition, no pressure."

Sitwell made a little sound in his throat. He knew all this already but it was no part of his game to say so.

"Of course you're aware that in this district the oil underlies the shale. There's not much of the latter, but if you get it you're pretty sure of oil." One hand closed round the fragments of rock in his pocket, and, intent on his argument, he held it out. "That's the shale. The sandstone is above it here; and sandstone is what I'd like to see, but I don't."

Sitwell's eyes narrowed. He had observed Woolley's car stop farther down the valley, for all day the road had been unusually clear, and from the Enterprise ground one could follow its slow curves stretching to the southwest. He recognized the character of the shale in an instant. It was freshly broken, and even geologists were not apt to carry samples in their pockets overnight. And yet Woolley had just said that in this district there was five hundred feet of sandstone on top of the shale. His mind grew suddenly tense. In that case where did this sample come from?

"Do you want an honest opinion on your property?" asked Woolley slowly. He was thinking of Courtney Brooks' daughter.

"Of course I do."

"Then save your money. Don't spend it here. I'm not speaking now as the State geologist, but just man to man. You understand this isn't for publication? As a matter of fact it's immaterial to me whether you put down a well here or not. One place is the same as another."

Sitwell flushed a little in spite of himself. He had asked for candor—and here it was.

"I'm only saying this privately—because well, because I remember your wife as a girl. You're not offended, are you?"

Sitwell recovered himself. "Not at all. Why should I be?" He hesitated an instant. "Any suggestions of good prospecting ground?" he asked casually.

Woolley's mind turned to Harrison, who had the real thing and knew what he was doing, and to Shanklin, whose sharp brain had solved the geological puzzle of what had become of the missing section of the great anticline. That was good, even brilliant, business. But this!

"We'd both appreciate anything you'd care to say, and I'm not speaking to the State geologist either," repeated Sitwell.

"I'm not justified in saying much, but I don't mind telling you that there is promising prospecting ground near here, and that's about as far as I can go. The rest is up to you." He slipped the fragment of shale back into his pocket. "Get after it, for, if you don't, I've an idea that others will."

The promoter laughed. "The State of California is nearly a thousand miles long. Which way do I move?"

Woolley climbed into his car. "Don't follow me," he laughed, and sped northward toward the city. He wondered a little whether he had said too much, but was honestly anxious to assist, if he could, a long-legged girl whose face and eyes had lingered for years in his memory. He thought nothing of the shale sample, being too accustomed to having such things in his fist, and, anyway, Sitwell was apparently too untechnical to draw any conclusions from its exhibition.

CHAPTER XI.

Something less than forty-eight hours later, Harrison, who was sweating in the sun with a monkey wrench, threw the tool down and swore viciously. "The trouble with this country is that labor is up in the air. You can't depend on it. These fellows think it's a favor to work for you at their own figure. Where's that carpenter we hired yesterday?"

Shanklin, levering a gas engine on to its wooden bed, looked round and nodded. "He must have lit out last night, and without pay, too."

"That's the part of it I don't like. Seems to me that a man don't leave money behind unless there's a good deal more in front. I noticed that he was hanging about while Woolley was talking. Suppose he heard anything?"

"He couldn't hear anything that would harm us."

"No, but it might help some one else. Didn't take anything, did he?"

"No; there's nothing missing." Shanklin straightened himself up; an uncomfortable thought flashed into his brain. He paused a moment before speaking. "Has it ever occurred to you that we're going about our job a bit carelessly?"

Harrison regarded his work. "No, it hasn't; there's nothing the matter with this?"

"Come over here. I want to talk to you."

The contractor recovered his wrench and followed, wondering. A little way off Shanklin squatted under an orange tree. His face was unusually serious.

"The rule of the road in this country," he began, "is that any one can go and look at any one else's work—especially so when it comes to putting down a well. Now we happen to have tumbled on to the only new thing in this part of the country."

Harrison sucked at his pipe. "Perhaps you're right."

"I know I'm right. That carpenter, for instance, he didn't want a job; he wanted information, and he got it."

The elder man whistled. "Who for?"

"That's what we don't know, but it's out. As to your own crowd, I reckon they're safe?"

"They ought to be. I've had 'em six years—the three who know anything. I suppose we ought to let 'em into this?"

"Presently—yes; but not yet. In the meantime we run a closed shop; no one admitted to the ground, if we can work it. And, Harrison, I've got a confession to make about money."

"Not broke again?"

"No; but I'm a thousand dollars short of what I figured."

"Well, that's a thousand more to find."

Shanklin grinned. "I thought I ought to let you know; that thousand may mean a good deal."

"If we have any luck we'll start punching a hole in this shale in about three days," murmured Harrison reflectively. "Then you can get out and make up your shortage. But," he added, "I wonder who that darned carpenter was really working for?"

The carpenter's employer was at that moment approaching his boarding house in a side street in Los Angeles. He walked quickly and his step was light. Once inside he raced upstairs and found his wife seated by the open window. The day was warm. As Sitwell entered she glanced at

him curiously. She had seldom seen him so animated, not, in fact, since the first day of the Winters' visit. He kissed her and began to stride up and down the room. Presently he pulled up a chair and sat close beside her.

"Claudia, I want to tell you something. It's important for both of us; and I want your help."

She shrank instinctively. Was this another twenty-thousand-dollar inquiry? He seemed to interpret her thoughts, for he went on at once.

"Before asking you to help, let me go back a little. You thought I treated you badly over that Winter affair. Perhaps I did; but I felt you might have done more to keep them at the apartment. You knew how tight things were."

"I did not," she protested; "and I couldn't abuse their confidence. I leave that to you. I don't know anything about the Enterprise business—except," she added cynically, "what you've told me."

He flushed at that, but retained his poise.

"I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, if you are. I'm sorry if I was unkind. I didn't mean to be. I was wrought up with anxiety. And the Enterprise—"

"Well?" she put in.

"Isn't what we thought it was. I got that yesterday on the highest authority. At the same time I got a hint of something infinitely better and bigger."

She stared at him intently. If he had only thought the Enterprise was good, how could he have spoken to the Winters as he did? Had her father only thought so too? With this came the blinding conviction that Shanklin had been right. She felt a little sick, and leaned back in her chair.

"I've a chance now to catch up and get out for good, if I can work it," he went on. "A discovery has been made about a mile from the Enterprise of great importance—oil shale on the surface. It's part of the big ridge on which you saw the producing wells. You couldn't understand it technically, but it really means that what has been found on that ridge will be found on that patch of shale."

"Who told you all this?" she asked. It sounded more real than anything he had ever told her about his business.

"Woolley, the State geologist, suggested that I might find something better, and"—he hesitated—"I did. I can't use his name.

He only gave the hint because he knew your father, and you, too, years ago."

Claudia puzzled, then dimly recalled him, but it was only a childish memory.

"And you got it?" she asked, with a lift in her voice.

"No, not yet; but I'm the only man who knows about it, except Woolley and the present lessees. Now, listen! They are two prospectors who have very little money, most of which has gone into purchasing an option, which runs out in about three months. They've got to get this well down by then, because their option won't be renewed. I've bought the renewal with all I could lay my hands on, because it's an impossibility for them to win out. With that property I can get any sum I ask; and even with the prospect of it I can get all the backing I want. It's literally a slice cut clear out of the richest oil sands in California."

"But what about the Enterprise? Have you abandoned it, then? And what about the people who have bought stock? I'm a large stockholder myself."

"I was coming to that. I used some of the Enterprise money to get that option. It was in the interest of the stockholders and will be officially confirmed."

She stared at him amazed. "Can you do that without asking them?"

"It isn't regular, but I've done it."

Her hands moved helplessly. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes; and the most important part of it. I've got to go to New York to see Spencer Martin."

She puzzled for a moment till the name flashed back. James Hunt, Edith's fiancé, was in Martin's employ, and it was to Martin that her husband now intended to make his proposition, having first and unsuccessfully tried to inveigle the girl into the Enterprise. But Sitwell knew nothing of the existence of James Hunt. The complexity of the thing baffled her. Then she experienced a wave of weariness, followed by a staggering sense of fatality. What was meant to be would be and the only hope for the future was that her husband be diverted from devious paths.

"Spencer Martin?" she asked uncertainly.

He's one of the biggest and pluckiest oil operators in the States. He has wells in Central America, Pennsylvania and Texas. He's tried California several times, but didn't get in soon enough. I know he wants

to get in, because there's war on between him and Western operators. That's why he'd go a long way to find something. I can't write him all this, so I've got to see him, and I can't see him till I get some money."

She did not answer, for her mind was pitched on the packet of notes hidden away in her room. Had Sitwell mysteriously divined their presence? He had not seen them? Something in her responded, in spite of all that had passed, to his earnestness, and she admitted with shame that now he talked like an honest man. Then doubt assailed her anew.

"My idea is," her husband was speaking slowly, "that if possible we both go to New York. If nothing comes of this I'm ready to turn over the Enterprise affair to the other directors, and get a job in the East and settle down. If something does come of it, then we are justified in going."

The smooth face betrayed only a sincere desire for her company and encouragement and a readiness, should this venture fail, to take up a less risky method of life. And this last possibility gave her a vivid gleam of hope.

"How much would it cost?"

"Including expenses in New York, say for three or four days, about six hundred dollars. Then you'd need some things. I wish I hadn't sacrificed that car," he added reflectively.

Six hundred dollars for the chance of getting rid of the nightmare life she was leading! She searched his face again.

"Of course the Enterprise Company won't make any trouble if this thing goes through," he said, as though speaking of the action of some outsider; "but if it doesn't, they possibly may." His eyes caught hers and held them. "I have to remember that."

She stood up and put her hand on his shoulder. "Bertie, will you give me your word of honor about something?"

"What is it?"

"That whether this thing goes through or not you'll get out of promoting companies. You know what father felt and said. We all considered that Mr. Shanklin was disloyal—to say nothing of making himself ridiculous—and he paid for it—but Mr. Shanklin was right. If he was here I'd tell him so. Do you know where he is?"

Sitwell's pulse fluttered a little. If Claudia only knew! "No," he lied.

"I want to be honest with you, as I think this afternoon you've tried to be with me. You don't know how it has all hurt. I didn't marry you, Bertie, because I loved you—for I didn't love you—but because father wanted it. Did you ever guess that?"

He had known it all along, but his ambition dulled his sensibility. He stared in her eyes. "No," he said again.

"Well—it's true—and because, perhaps, I owe you something for that, I'll help now—if you give me your promise. If there was any love between us I couldn't talk like this, but you've killed whatever there might have been."

She went into the next room and returned with six notes of a hundred dollars each. "You must not ask any questions about this money. It's mine."

He stiffened with surprise, but she went on quietly. "I give it to you to save us both—and find a way out. When do you want to go to New York? I'll come."

Sitwell, with the money in his fingers, could find not a word in answer. His brain was racking itself with questions. Swiftly he ran over the names of their acquaintances, then pitched on one that seemed to stand out in flaming letters. What if it was Shanklin! The irony in the idea was so sharp and pointed that it made him a little breathless.

"We'll go as soon as you are ready. Will to-morrow do?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll see about berths now." He went out, closing the door with unusual deliberation.

A little later that day came a letter from Edith Winter, in Catalina. She opened it with pleasure. They were hoping for the arrival of Hunt from the East. She concluded with an affectionate personal message that came straight from her heart.

Claudia sat for some moments deep in thought. She had assumed that the Winters had decided not to pursue the Enterprise matter any farther, and in spite of the situation thus created, the reflection relieved her. But now she knew that the Enterprise was not worth considering—and Edith didn't.

Gradually it became quite clear that this was an obvious opportunity to do the right thing, the thing worth while. The letter she wrote depicted nothing of the stress under which she labored. She expressed the

hope of seeing the Winters when they came back from Catalina, and suggested other interesting places to visit. As to the Enterprise, she said, "Will you think it very strange if I tell you that I'm disappointed so far? I have a large number of shares left me by my father, and I'm afraid it's not going to turn out what we hoped."

CHAPTER XII.

Spencer Martin's private office, on the twenty-second story of a lower Broadway building, was big, like himself. For a desk he used a large mahogany glass-covered table, out of which a segment had been carved to accommodate what he called his bow window. He stood something under six feet, with a vast paunch, huge shoulders rounded with fat, a reddish face, a ponderous lower jaw, pendulous cheeks, and small blue gimlet eyes.

He was looking over his Texas production report when Sitwell's card was brought in. Glancing at it indifferently he went on with his figures. They were very satisfactory. Presently he grunted and picked up the card. "Who is he?"

The secretary shook his head. "I don't know him, sir."

"What does he want?"

"I don't know that, sir, except that it's personal."

"It's always personal. Find out."

The door closed, and Martin turned to the news from Mexico, where he had large interests. He began to frown and pushed a button at the edge of his desk. The secretary reappeared.

"Mr. Sitwell says that——"

"Forget it. How much are we paying that alcalde down in Tampella?"

"Five hundred dollars, sir."

Martin tossed over a report. "Jenkins says he's having difficulty in getting labor. Wire him to double that payment and demand results."

"Yes, sir—and Mr. Sitwell?"

"Sitwell be darned. I'm busy."

The door closed again and Martin's mind pitched back to Mexico. He was almost sorry he had ever committed himself there. What with labor trouble, insecurity of title and government extortion it took a big production to make money. But he was accustomed to having his own way and carrying things through, and hated to withdraw. If

Mexico had decent administration it would have been all right. He wondered over this for a while, then absently picked up Sitwell's card. In one corner he saw 'California oil properties.' He pushed the button again.

"Show him in."

If the truth were told, Sitwell entered with his heart in his mouth. To seek an interview with Spencer Martin was like fingering the door of a lion's cage. But for once in his life the promoter was fortified: what he had to say was the unadulterated fact and he could prove it. So when Martin glowered at him from under thick bristling eyebrows and motioned to a chair, he sat down quite coolly, collected and ready for the ordeal.

"Good day. What do you want?"

Sitwell nodded and began. Knowing what manner of man this was he had very carefully rehearsed what he would say, and determined to be as brief and to the point—if he could—as Martin himself.

"Forty miles south of Los Angeles there's a big anticline. It's broken by a fault; and—"

Martin pressed the bell automatically. "Bring me the maps of the Richfield anticline, southern California." He leaned back, surveying Sitwell in total silence. The latter knew better than to speak before his turn. Presently the map was unrolled on the big desk.

"Go on," snapped Martin.

"This anticline is broken by a fault and continues half a mile farther south. It's all productive ground, and yields about a hundred thousand barrels a day."

Spencer Martin cleared his throat. "Well, what about it? Tell me something I don't know."

Sitwell leaned forward with his most courteous air. "The throw of the fault has never been established till"—he paused for an impressive moment—"till last week."

The big man laid a podgy finger on the map. "Go on."

"Where it has been discovered there's shale on the surface. On the anticline the shale is down five hundred feet. That takes that amount off the necessary depth of the well."

"What well?"

"The one I hope you will decide to sink," said Sitwell coolly.

Martin snorted. "Do you own this property, and if not whom are you barking for?"

"I don't own it but I have an option dating from—from September the first."

"That's nearly nine months ago. Been sleeping on it?"

"I refer to next and not last September."

The big man's cheeks grew purple. "And you take up my time talking about property you haven't got. I'm not interested."

Sitwell took a long breath and half rose from his chair. "Sorry to have disturbed you, but I thought I'd see you first. I have letters to Mr. Pember in the same matter and I'll go there. Naturally I would not have mentioned the thing at all if the holders of the present option were going to be able to exercise it. But they're not. Good morning. I don't anticipate any difficulty."

"Sit down a minute and don't be in such a damned hurry." Martin wanted time to think. He paid no attention to the reference to Pember, an active and successful rival operator with whom he constantly was at war. Also he was entirely used to people playing Pember as a trump card. He had in fact been measuring Sitwell, just as he measured all who came into that office, before he went farther. He had an idea that he had room for a man like this, could he survive the next half hour.

"Go on."

"I was saying that the present holders will not be able to exercise their rights. They do not know that, but I do."

The small eyes grew even smaller and sharper. "How much shale is there, and how far from the anticline?"

"Fifty acres, about, and half a mile away; that's the throw of the fault."

"Go on."

"This ground is underlaid by oil sands of the anticline. I have it on high authority."

"Whose?"

"I can't very well tell you. I'm not supposed to use his name."

Martin made a sound like a mastiff's bark. "Good morning." Then he got out of his wide-armed chair, stumped to the window, and stood staring at the slim hulls of the ships furrowing the Hudson River. "Good morning," he repeated over his shoulder.

"His name is Woolley, the State geologist." Sitwell's voice sounded jerky and unnatural. His face looked a sickly yellow.

The big man wheeled suddenly. "Why couldn't you tell me that before? Don't you think I'm a safe one? Think I'd be

where I am if I couldn't keep my mouth shut? Now go on."

"This fifty acres is virgin ground, with deep sands. The present option will expire in about three months and a half, and," he added, "I've got the next one."

"But if the other fellows win out?"

"They can't—they haven't money enough."

"Who are they?" demanded Martin with sudden interest.

"One is Harrison, a drilling contractor, the other a young fellow called Shanklin, who was recently fired from a law office in Los Angeles."

"How far have they got?"

"The well's just started, with Harrison's rig."

The big man pushed out his lips. "You said just now that they would not be able to exercise their option. How can you be sure of this?"

"If they do, it's because I've gone to sleep."

Martin settled down in his chair again and bent his small eyes on the map. It struck the visitor he looked like an overfed pig, dressed in fine clothes. A great solitaire diamond glittered on a fat finger. He was not pretty but he looked amazingly capable.

The finger moved along the diagram of the anticline to where the fault sheered it off, then westward a little.

"That's the place?"

"Yes."

There was a little pause and Sitwell held his breath.

The finger moved to the bell, and, simultaneously, it seemed, the door opened.

"Is Mr. Hunt in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Send him here."

A young man came in, of middle height, with a firm mouth and quiet brown eyes.

"Look up what information we've got on those sands, and let me know in ten minutes."

The young man disappeared. Spencer Martin pushed away the map and surveyed his visitor with the least suspicion of a twinkle. "Mr. Sitwell, I suppose you came here because you've heard I want to operate in California?"

"That's quite true."

"About ten men come in every day for the same reason, but they don't usually get

as far as you have. It's a fact that I do want to operate there. Now, in case your statements are verified, what's your proposition?"

Sitwell did not stir a muscle. He was playing the biggest game in his life—and almost enjoying it. Spencer Martin was not the kind cut of whom money could be made quickly. But he was the kind who would stake a fortune when he thought a fortune was in prospect.

"If you think I've come here to try and make money out of you, you're mistaken, Mr. Martin. I don't need your money—at least, not yet."

"That's the talk. Go on!"

"I've got an option which promises to turn out the biggest thing in southern California. What I am looking for is a partner who will help me make sure that my option is good, and will develop the property later on. I don't want you to take my word for anything. Come and see for yourself."

"I don't know a darn thing about it myself," said Martin suavely. "I hire men who do. There's that fellow Hunt—knows more already than I ever did—and I pay him what?—two thousand a year—and he's tickled to get it."

Sitwell smiled. "I've said all I've come to say."

The big man sent him a grudging glance of admiration. "Well, then, how much?"

"Five thousand and a half interest. You pay expenses meantime, and the cost of development."

"What expenses?"

"The outlay in seeing that work does not progress too rapidly for the next three months," said Sitwell coolly.

Martin's left hand stole up to his heavy chin and caressed it slowly. "Any suggestions?"

"Do you need any? You're longer in the game than I am."

"Perhaps not. Should I leave that to you?" The broad face wore a grim smile. "Here's Hunt. Well, what about it?"

The young man laid a rough hastily sketched diagram on the desk. "Last report of Woolley, State geologist, gives no estimate of the throw of the fault of the Richfield anticline. There has been much erosion in the valley to the west, and this is supposed to have destroyed whatever portion of the ridge was shifted. Shale is reported five hundred feet down, oil sands

about twenty-five hundred. Present production about one hundred thousand barrels high-grade oil. Union, Western, Richfield, Pacific coast are principal companies operating."

Martin grunted. "And suppose one did find that bit of lost anticline—what then?"

"It should mean a big production. It's virgin ground."

"Come back in another ten minutes."

Hunt closed the door gently and Martin turned to his visitor. "When do you go West again?"

Sitwell smiled. "When I've made satisfactory arrangements."

"Look here, you said I've been in the business longer than you have. That's right. You reckon that I'm a bit of a plunger; that's right too. So far, I'm with you. Now as to your proposition—I'll take it up—with one alteration, which is that you get your five thousand the day that option comes into my hands. I won't pay an advance profit on a speculation you thought good enough before my name ever came into your head. But I will refund what you paid for your option and what this trip costs you."

"As to expenses—I understand—and will meet them up to a certain amount, but you will personally report by letter just what you spend and how you spend it. When the property comes into my hands you can make out partnership papers. I'll sign 'em and pay cost of development. And it will be the first time I've entered into partnership with any one. You know what that means to you, or you ought to. All this is on the understanding that Hunt confirms what you've told me. You've put up a good story, and I'm inclined to believe you, but, on principle, I don't believe anything till it's confirmed."

"There's just one thing. If through any oversight of yours that first option is exercised you'll be sorry you ever saw me. That's my offer—take it or leave it."

"Will you put that on paper?"

"I'll put nothing on paper till I get a report. You've got my proposition."

The door opened softly and the secretary said something in an undertone. It was only a whisper but Sitwell caught the name of a man preëminent in oil circles.

"Ask him to wait." Martin turned with the movement of an impatient elephant. "Take it or leave it—quick"—and, at the

latter's involuntary nod, "Send Hunt here." He drummed thoughtfully on the polished glass of the big table. "What are you doing to-night?"

Sitwell had a flash of inspiration. "I'm having you to dinner at Romano's. I want you to meet my wife."

Spencer Martin grinned. He liked the daring of the thing and began to wonder whether this were not the kind of associate he had always been looking for but never so far found. Just then Hunt came in and stood waiting.

"You go West with Mr. Sitwell to-morrow. Get to Los Angeles nine o'clock Friday morning. The property he will show you is fifty miles out. That's an hour. Look it over and leave Los Angeles that afternoon by the Sunset Limited. Get back here on Tuesday with your report. You've got to leave Tuesday night for Pennsylvania. Burbridge is in some kind of trouble. Tell the office to get transportation; draw what money you want; and wire to have a car meet you. That's all."

Hunt nodded and went out. The latter examined his cigar and scrutinized Sitwell's face, which, though his heart was beating rapidly, had remained impassive. Again the big man felt a throb of approval. This, he then and there decided, was the kind of man he could use.

"Steer Hunt out to your option and let him alone. He doesn't need any help. If this thing goes right it may lead to others. I make no promises—but you can draw your own conclusions. My name doesn't appear in this matter till you turn over the property. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly."

"Then when do you dine?"

Sitwell got up and stretched himself. To all appearances this might have been the end of a conversation in which he had long lost interest. "Eight o'clock suit you?"

"Yes; meet you then." If it had been half past seven Martin would have changed it to eight. He liked to approach the table feeling like a hungry wolf.

CHAPTER XIII.

Spencer Martin arrived at Romano's at a quarter before the hour. He would watch the Sitwells and come to a final conclusion before they saw him and assumed the guise of hosts; from which it will be observed that

he was a man of considerable perception. They had been waiting for him in the lounge for perhaps ten minutes when he emerged from an adjoining room. Claudia, looking up, saw the ponderous figure—the dusky red face, the small gimlet eyes, the enormous paunch, the immaculate clothes and a shirt on which gleamed pearls as large as marbles, and put him down as one of those products of the metropolis which one had read of but never seen. What a dreadful man!

"Claudia, let me introduce Mr. Martin."

She got up as though in a dream, felt the blood climbing to her cheeks, murmured something unintelligible, and presently found herself at a small candle-shaded, flower-decked table between the two men. The flowers, the lights, the silver, the women's dresses, the music that drifted from among a cluster of palms, were all that she had hoped and anticipated. But this man!

Spencer Martin settled himself comfortably. Romano's was his favorite restaurant. He often entertained here, and they all knew him, from the maître d'hôtel down.

"Fond of New York, Mrs. Sitwell?"

"Yes; but I know very little of it."

"And you won't see much this time," said her husband apologetically.

"You shouldn't let him make such flying trips," chuckled the big man. "Here today—gone to-morrow."

"You must be a very busy man, Mr. Martin," she ventured.

"I suppose I am—it's my form of amusement—and it agrees with me." Even as he spoke his red flesh exhaled, as it were, a suggestion of coarse, primal vigor. "Your husband couldn't stand what I do—but then he takes it more seriously than I do. I can see that."

"Some men have to work harder than others—to live," put in Sitwell deferentially.

"And a lot of them ask too much to live on to begin with. It's dog work that counts. I wore overalls when I was ten, and paid to find out. Result is that my men know I know. I'm not a geologist. One can hire them cheap. As for the rest of it when I see the man I want I buy him. Know much about the oil business, Mrs. Sitwell?"

"I'm afraid I know nothing," she said nervously.

"Born in California?"

She nodded.

"Great little State you have there, bu: I

never got anything out of it so far, unless your husband and I make a couple of million out of this fool thing he's bluffed me into." He applied himself noisily to his soup, then looked up with a twinkle. "What would you do if some one handed you a million?"

Claudia laughed in spite of herself. "I can't imagine. It's too far beyond my dreams." Then with a touch of daring at which Sitwell's eyes sparkled, "I think I'd give it to you and ask you to make another with it."

"I'd do it. Darned if I wouldn't."

"I'm sure you would." She was aware of a sort of breathless admiration on her husband's face.

"I've done crazier things in my time than make a million for a friend. Trouble is that when there is a million around it's hard to tell which is your friend. What do you think of little old New York? Suppose you've been here before?"

"No, never. And I know only what I've seen this afternoon, and it's very wonderful."

"Never been here before!" Martin stared at her. "That beats me. Why didn't you say so before?"

"I hadn't come to that yet," she parried.

Then she caught the eyes of Spencer Martin. They were fastened on her boldly. Claudia trembled. The eyes shifted and bent on Sitwell.

"It's a darn shame shooting you across to California when you're just off the train. Why not let Hunt go alone, and stay here and see a bit of life? I'll show you New York as it ought to be shown."

Sitwell felt a surge of triumph. "That sounds good to me."

"You can stay at my place out in Westchester, and spend every day in town. We can do the theaters and motor home afterward. I'm busy most of the days, but my playtime is at night."

Martin jerked this out as though he wanted to get rid of it, but all the time his small eyes were glancing first at Claudia, then at her husband, in what would have seemed a jocular, careless way had it not been for the little points of light that had suddenly kindled in their gray-green depths. The girl saw them and was smitten with fear.

"That's a pretty good offer, Claudia—let's take it—eh? It won't make any busi-

ness difference?" Sitwell turned to his guest.

"I've known such visits mean a considerable aid to business," came the significant answer. "Better stay and have a good time, Mrs. Sitwell."

"May I talk it over with my husband?" Her voice sounded small and thin. She was in terror of what might happen whether she agreed or not.

Martin nodded. "We can fix it up to-morrow." He ate for a while without speaking, then: "I'm going down to Pennsylvania in my private car in a few days. You'd better both come along and have a squint at some of my wells. I can put you on to something good in the way of stock before it reaches the market."

"I'm afraid my money's all locked up in option," said Sitwell regretfully.

"I'll carry it for you—don't worry. You see, Mrs. Sitwell, it's more than probable that your husband and I will be pretty closely connected before long. We sort of tried each other out to-day," he added with a laugh.

His mood changed, and he talked for a while with Sitwell, flinging out curt sentences that seemed to lag behind his active brain, revealing a mind ruthless, courageous, and fortified by success.

And while he talked, Claudia explored every avenue of escape. Whatever happened she must leave New York to-morrow. The spider's web was gleaming, and Sitwell was ready to take her by the hand and walk into it.

At ten o'clock Martin proposed going to a cabaret, but she pleaded fatigue after her long journey.

"Never mind, we can do something to-morrow. Get in my car and I'll take you both home." He seemed too assured of to-morrow to raise any protest.

As the big motor moved off she looked pale but very beautiful. Martin, glancing at her sidewise, thought her the most desirable woman he had ever seen. When they got out he held the girl's hand in his big, hot palm for a more than unreasonable time.

The big car moved off with a soft mechanical pur. Sitwell stood for a moment looking after it. He sighed and pitched his mind forward to days that would obliterate all the petty anxieties of the past. Those days were at hand now. Then he realized

that he was standing alone, and went quickly up to their room.

She was at the window, staring at the great glowing vista beneath. Her body seemed rigid, and she did not turn as he entered.

"What's the matter?"

She turned swiftly and faced him, her cheeks pale, her eyes large and cold with contempt.

"I loathe him!"

He stared in sincere amazement. "What's the matter with you?"

"Everything, and nothing. I'm going back to-morrow."

He shook his head. "We're staying here for a week, Claudia; you're not a fool!"

"I'm a woman with a little self-respect left. You can enjoy Mr. Martin's society without me."

But Sitwell was vividly aware that it was not his own society which prompted Martin's hospitality.

"You misunderstand him altogether. He's rough, and, perhaps, a bit vulgar, and—"

"I'm glad you are aware of that."

"He's good-hearted, and intends well for us. Have you the faintest idea what all this means?"

She surveyed him with eyes of utter scorn. "I know what he means—for me. And you, my husband, stand by and smile. You can stay with him if you like. I go back to-morrow."

Sitwell shook his head. "You propose to upset a fortune by a bit of foolishness! You'll do nothing of the kind."

"And my first duty will be, as a shareholder of the Enterprise Company, to ask an inquiry into their affairs," she went on, there being nothing left in her heart now except shame and hot resentment.

He began to think furiously, for this was the one thing he could not afford—yet. Claudia faced him, her whole soul in her indignant eyes. Then something like fear took hold of him. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable. You misinterpret Martin altogether. If you insist on going back to-morrow, we'll go. I'll see him in the morning."

She looked at Sitwell strangely, as though suddenly she saw him for the first time in natural colors—false, calculating, without pride in that which demands pride, ready to barter the shreds of his reputation for the prospects of wealth, a stranger to honest ef-

fort, a semblance of manhood in well-cut clothes—this was her husband.

They left next day. Just what Sitwell said to Martin he did not reveal, but Claudia suspected that on her shoulders had been put the responsibility. She was secretly glad of this.

At the station the engineer met them, and was introduced. As Sitwell spoke his name she looked at him with a swift sense of remembrance. "Is this the Mr. Hunt who is engaged to Miss Winter?"

He smiled broadly. "How on earth do you know?"

"I met your fiancée in the West. She spoke——"

Sitwell pressed her arm warningly. He was a little breathless. He did not understand anything, except that in the next moment the Enterprise matter would come to the surface.

"We met Miss Winter and her mother in Los Angeles a few weeks ago," he broke in. "Now let us find our seats; there'll be lots of time to talk."

Hunt nodded and picked up his bag.

"Not a word of the Enterprise," Claudia heard the sharp whisper close to her ear.

CHAPTER XIV.

At last the heavy train roared down the long grade from San Bernardino, then into the great white station of Los Angeles. Hunt leaped out, dodged a pile of baggage and in another second had Edith in his arms.

"You blessed girl, I've only ten minutes to talk to you. There's a car waiting to take me and Mr. Sitwell out to his property, and we have to race for it."

She nodded. "All right, Jim, I'll go with you."

"But you can't, most desirable one. This is strictly business."

"Jimmy, don't treat me as though I were a child. Then we'll dine together. I've come all the way from Santa Catalina to have dinner with you."

He shook his head despairingly. "Edith, I was afraid to tell you in my wire, but I have to go back to-night. It will be all I can do to catch the train. I'll meet you here ten minutes before it leaves at four o'clock. It's the best I can do."

She looked at him, amazed. "I don't understand a bit. I didn't know Mr. Sitwell

was with you. I didn't know you had to go back so soon. Oh, Jimmy, tell me you're joking. I've so much to ask you—and tell you too, if you will only take the time to listen."

Her lover began to waver, for all his ideas about business. There was no sound reason after all that she should not at least drive with them. He glanced at Sitwell. Claudia came forward and greeted Edith with evident affection. Hunt turned to Sitwell.

"Miss Winter suggests that she would like to drive out with us to the property. What do you think? I know it's not customary to take ladies on business inspections, but this time——"

He was stopped by the strange expression on the narrow face. Sitwell had instantly perceived that any such procedure meant disaster. They were not to inspect the Enterprise, in fact so far as concerned Hunt there must be no Enterprise, but a property of which Edith Winter knew nothing. She would come to her own conclusions, which on no account must be upset. Anything she might glean from Hunt she would apply to the Enterprise, and that would suit admirably. He saw too that if Edith came she might persuade Claudia to join her, in which case Claudia would be brought face to face with Shanklin. And that would be the end of many things. Then he became aware that Edith was holding out her hand.

"How do you do? I'm afraid I'm rather excited with so many things happening at once. Won't you take me? I'll be very good."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said smoothly, "but it's impossible. Mr. Hunt and I will have many things to discuss that in justice to his principals he could not discuss before any one else. But we'll be back as soon as possible. Then I'll turn him over to you entirely." He spoke rapidly, afraid that the girl might assert herself as a prospective investor in the Enterprise, and turned quickly to Hunt. "I hope you won't think me cold-blooded, but I'm sure that's right."

Hunt nodded grimly. "Whatever you decide. It's your option. How far do we go?"

"About fifty miles out on the San Diego highway. That's straight south. We ought to do it inside the hour by getting away at once."

Hunt hooked his arm into Edith's and they moved a little distance away. "Look here, darling, it's rotten luck, but the man is at perfect liberty to take that attitude if he sees fit. I don't know anything about him except the few ideas one forms in a four-day journey. His wife seems one of the best. You can tell me all about them later on. We'll make up for this some day. Tell me about yourself—and where's your mother?"

Her eyes were misty with disappointment. "Mother is in Catalina and I rushed over here to meet you. I thought you were coming for a few days at least. Oh, Jimmy, this is too tantalizing. I had no idea it was Mr. Sitwell's property you were coming to inspect."

"One doesn't put that sort of information in a telegram if one is employed by a man like Martin, who happens to be my boss. Martin's name attracts a good deal of attention in the oil game—and there are too many leaks in transit."

"It's very odd," she said reflectively.

"What is odd, Gray Eyes?"

"That you of all men should have come out here with Mr. Sitwell."

Hunt had a flash of inspiration. "He doesn't happen to be the man with whom you were thinking of investing?"

"But he is."

"Good Lord, and I'm going to inspect his property and can't say a word to you about it."

"You don't mean to say that you can't tell me whether to invest or not. Jimmy, how perfectly ridiculous! Then I will come with you whatever Mr. Sitwell may say, and follow you like a dog and watch every move you make. I'm yours and you're mine and a perfect ocean of oil won't keep us apart even if it doesn't exist," she concluded incoherently.

"But, darling, the information won't be mine to give. It's Martin's."

A twinkle dawned behind the mistiness of the gray eyes. "I'll compromise, Jimmy, and won't go if you'll do something for me," she bargained.

"You won't ask for my opinion?"

"I won't expect you to say one word about the property. You can just either frown or smile. That'll do."

"But I always smile when I see you."

"Yes, in a different way. You know what I mean perfectly well, and I'm going to act

on it, so be awfully careful what you do with your features."

"I'll do my best," he chuckled. "What a temptress you are, and there's Sitwell looking horribly impatient. We'll have to rush for that car, so try and forgive me before the four-o'clock train."

"I'll forgive you anything but I think Mr. Sitwell is horrid."

"Perhaps you'll think better of him if he makes your fortune. See you at exactly ten minutes to four." He beckoned to Sitwell and the two sped off. Edith heard Claudia's voice at her elbow.

"Will you have lunch with me? Do, and I'll meet you anywhere you like."

The gray eyes were fixed on the dwindling car, following till it vanished round a corner. The girl felt thwarted and helpless. Ten minutes with the man she loved instead of days. Sitwell's attitude was not only mean, but also puzzling in one who had so wanted her money. Suddenly she determined that if she could not see her lover's face she would at least see as much of his back as possible. Anything might happen then.

"Thanks tremendously, but my day is full of jobs for mother and myself. The shops at Catalina are rather limited. You must be tired too so I'll meet you here after the train goes, or, better, I'll lunch with you to-morrow."

Claudia nodded and went off a little hurt.

Edith stood irresolute for a moment and ran to a big car that waited for hire across the street.

"The San Diego highway, as fast as you can." Then she huddled into a corner of the front seat.

The San Diego highway is something more than an ordinary road, being a two-hundred-mile ribbon of amazing smoothness. It sweeps up mountain flanks and slides with the curve of a gull's wing into lazy valleys. Always it is glossy and perfect, traversed by innumerable cars that dot its surface like swiftly moving beetles. It is a road of roads, an invitation to speed and a joy to the motorist.

Edith's car, clearing the city, quickened its pace, the engine note rising to a rhythmic drone. She nodded contentedly, her eyes fixed on the speedometer. Two miles out she saw, another mile ahead, the gray body of a car moving very fast. She leaned toward the driver.

"Do you know who that is?"

"Was he waiting for the Sunset Limited?"

"Yes."

"It's my brother. The garage got a wire to have their best machine at the station. That's the one they think is the best, but it isn't. Want to pass him?"

"No," she smiled, "but I want to keep about half a mile behind, wherever they go, and," she stammered a little, "I don't want them to see me. Understand?"

The man winked knowingly. "You bet I do—just a little shadowing. How far do we go? He's letting her out a bit now."

"About fifty miles."

The only answer was an additional burst of speed.

Halt an hour later the Enterprise sign fled by, and, looking westward, she saw the line of derricks crowning the great anticline. So it wasn't the Enterprise, after all. Remembering Claudia's letter, she wasn't surprised, but her imagination was sharply piqued. A moment later the brakes were rammed on and the big car pulled up close to the ditch. A little farther on Sitwell and Hunt climbed over a fence.

"Go on now," she commanded, "and drive very slowly." She huddled down, the brim of her hat tilted over her face. It was prudent—but unnecessary. She saw Hunt at a little distance in conversation with two men, near by a cluster of shanties around a derrick. Sitwell she did not see at all. Presently the three sat down, after which Hunt got up and seemed busy with something in his hand. Edith stopped the car and watched intently. Came another long conversation, and Hunt walked slowly over the width of the ranch north and south, then east and west, and with a word of farewell came back to his car. Sitwell got up from where he had been lying in the shade and joined him. Then the car moved up a side road and climbed the slope of the anticline.

She saw all this, glancing constantly at her watch, for the shadows were beginning to lengthen. At a quarter to three they were still on the anticline, and she grew desperate. At five minutes to three the car nosed downhill, heading for the highway.

"Now," she panted, "back to the station—get there before them, whatever you do."

The driver grunted, "Our turn come—eh?" and opened his throttle.

At ten minutes to four she dashed into the dressing room at the Southern Pacific sta-

tion. Emerging a few seconds later, with hastily tidied hair and a dab of powder on a small nose which felt uncomfortably hot, she placed herself at the barrier. The last hour had been a whirl in which there had been little opportunity to think, but one thing was clear. It was not the Enterprise, after all. She had no guide as to what lay behind this sudden development, but, remembering Claudia's letter, concluded that the Enterprise was to be left to take care of itself, Sitwell having transferred his energies to something more promising. Then she realized that Hunt knew nothing of the Enterprise. But they were both Sitwell's undertakings. Finally the way seemed clear. It was now lacking only three minutes to four o'clock.

In another sixty seconds Hunt raced up, and slipped his arm round her. "Engine trouble—lost eight minutes! What rotten luck, girlie. I'm so disappointed."

She clung to him. "Jimmy, don't worry. It can't be helped. When will you be out again?"

"I don't know—it depends on this thing. Edith, you look adorable."

"Never mind me. I'm dreadfully in earnest; and in a minute and a half you'll be gone. You saw Mr. Sitwell's property?"

He looked hard into the gray eyes.

"Are you smiling or frowning?" she demanded.

He did not speak, but slowly a wide grin wreathed his face, revealing the strong white teeth, puckering in little wrinkles, a grin that was whole-hearted, spontaneous, and eloquent.

"Oh, Jimmy, I'm so glad."

The girl felt herself enveloped in a pair of muscular young arms, and the next moment Hunt sped up the platform. From the car step he waved his hand. The grin was still on his face when it lessened in the distance. She stood for a moment deep in thought. Then, walking slowly to the street, signaled her driver, paid him, and waited irresolute.

"Anything else I can do, miss?" He had enjoyed that trip.

"I want to go out there to-morrow morning, but it's rather expensive."

"It don't cost so much when I'm not chasing my brother," he laughed, naming a moderate price, and attracted to her dainty personality.

She smiled back, and gave the name of

her hotel. "Pick me up there at nine o'clock."

He touched his hat, and she walked off, tense with a situation on which, she was assured, hung so much of the future. It was now a case of her wits against those of Sittwell, who had at last got hold of something good. She was proud that her fiancé should be sent on an important mission by a man like Spencer Martin, and thrilled with the fragmentary knowledge she had herself acquired. It was a matter of forcing Sittwell to take her money and put it into this new property, instead of the Enterprise. Then she would have the support of Hunt and Spencer Martin. But before she did that she would have a look at the property herself. She smiled at the idea. What did she know about it? And were visitors welcome?

CHAPTER XV.

As a matter of fact, visitors were not particularly welcome. Shanklin decided, after a few days of attempted exclusion, that to keep people out only attracted attention. Their venture had received no publicity. It was regarded by competent oil men as a wildcat well, and as such excited no particular interest.

The thing that taxed them both was money—or the lack of it. Ten thousand dollars had not gone far. Applying to sources which he thought promising, Shanklin found that it was impossible for a discharged clerk to borrow. They had their secret, but felt it was too precious to reveal, and disclosing it would only prejudice their chances of retaining control. There was the ultimate resort of selling Harrison's tiny ranch.

"We go on as we are till the last tick of the clock, then we'll have to let the thing out. You can imagine what will happen. We'll have to play one of the big fellows against another, and take what he's willing to give us."

"Our option runs to September first—three months from to-day. We've got eighteen hundred feet to go," mused Harrison. "I've done a bigger footage in less time, and I wasn't working for myself either. That end of it's all right. As to the money, perhaps we've bitten off more than we can chew."

"We're not beaten yet by a long way. I'm wondering who was the chap who came

here yesterday. You didn't see him. It was before you got back."

"What sort of chap?"

"I took him for an engineer by the way he talked, though he didn't ask any questions. He went away with a piece of shale in his pocket just the same. I saw him pick it up."

"Some friend of Woolley's."

"I don't think so. New Yorker, I took him for." Shanklin broke off with an oath. "Harrison, the thing is out."

Harrison looked up, his eyes hard. "That carpenter?"

"Probably, but one can't tell."

"Is there any one you know who would try that game on you?" said Harrison slowly.

"One man, if he could, but he doesn't know where I am. It's the way he lives, or tries to live. I thought I'd put a spoke in his wheel once, but that didn't work. Put the spoke in my own instead. However, I think we can forget him. Speaking of money, if this were the ordinary wildcat and you and I were standard promoters, I'd say that was a prospective investor." He pointed to a figure stepping briskly toward him.

Harrison swore softly. "You're the ladies' man. I'll leave it to you."

The figure drew nearer, and Shanklin recognized it as that of the girl with the gray eyes. There was something mysterious in her appearance.

"Good morning," she said brightly; then, with another glance, "Oh—it's you!"

"It unquestionably is." He was prompted suddenly to mirth. "I hope you've made your fortune."

The gray eyes met his own in utter frankness. "How did you know?"

Shanklin chuckled. "Oh, a little bird." He noted her changing expression. "I hadn't been introduced—but I hope you're not angry with me."

"No, not exactly angry: but—I know now."

He laughed outright. "I can only compliment you on I know not what."

"Your photograph," she said quite seriously.

"Now you're complimenting me."

"Please, don't; I found it in 'Marcus Aurelius.'"

He pulled down his brows at that. "Will you please tell me who you are?"

"But you're not what I was told you were." She shook her head decisively. "I'm sure of that."

"I don't know whether to be glad or sorry." Shanklin was utterly at sea.

"My name is Edith Winter."

"Mine is John Shanklin." He lifted his hat. "Now, will you tell me about my photograph?"

"Only that I saw it in the house of some people, where I was staying, and I remembered, because it was so very like a man I know—very well indeed."

"Thank you, for both of us."

It was her turn to laugh. "Do you know why I'm out here?"

"No, but I'm glad you are."

She surveyed him quite gravely. "I want to see Mr. Sitwell about this property."

He lit a cigarette with the utmost deliberation. "Would you mind telling me why you want to see him, because I'm—well—interested myself?"

"Oh!" The idea obviously pleased her. "I want Mr. Sitwell to let me in on it. He controls it, doesn't he?"

"Well, not yet; in fact, I wasn't aware that he had any interest whatever. Indeed, for your personal information, I may say he hasn't."

"You're making fun of me. He must have, because he's offered it for sale in New York."

Shanklin forgot about the cigarette. "Really? To whom?"

"I can't tell you. Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything about it. Don't look at me like that." She stamped a small foot.

"Quite so; but now that you have said it, you mustn't mind if I'm interested to hear that Mr. Sitwell has offered my property for sale."

"Then he hasn't anything to do with it?"

"If I may put it that way—not a darn thing."

"But he must have something to do with it, or he wouldn't have dared. Do you own this property?"

"My partner and I have an option—and ____" He broke off with a low whistle. "Will you wait till I walk down to the ranch house and back? It will take ten minutes. That's my partner on the other side of the derrick, pretending not to see you. He doesn't like ladies."

Shanklin strode off, his brain working like a dynamo. Ten minutes later he returned,

his lips pressed tight. "I'm very much obliged to you—very much indeed. That explains everything about the carpenter."

"This isn't 'Alice in Wonderland.' What do you mean?"

"If I were in a jocular mood, I'd say it was Edith in Blunderland—but I'm not. The carpenter—well, he doesn't really matter. What does matter is that Mr. Sitwell expects to secure this property on September first."

"But your option?"

"Sitwell expects that it will not be exercised."

"Why?"

"Because he'll do all he can to prevent it." He looked at her sharply. "Since you know so much, perhaps you can tell me if he sent an engineer here yesterday?"

"Yes, he did."

"Can you tell me who it was?"

"Yes—the man I'm going to marry."

Shanklin gulped. "Thank you—it's a little sudden—but thank you all the same. I'm sure you'll both be very happy."

"Didn't you like him?" she queried.

"I must confess that I took to him at once—even without knowing what you've just told me."

"Mr. Shanklin," she said, with a long, straight look, "may I tell you something?"

"Yes, if you think I can stand any more. You've told me a good deal already."

"Do you know Mr. Sitwell well?"

"I'd hate to tell you how well I know him. But that's not telling you anything."

"And do you like him?"

"Do you like snakes?" he parried.

"When they're in cages I don't mind them," she said significantly. "When I came out here I honestly thought he owned this property."

"Who—the snake?"

She nodded. "Now I begin to see things."

"What do you see? I've been seeing things ever since you arrived."

"Why Mr. Sitwell is forgetting the Enterprise; why I got a letter about it from—well—a friend; why you whispered to me a month ago; why Jim smiled so when he went off yesterday."

"I saw Jim smile myself, and it was a rip-snorter. Please go on."

"Mr. Shanklin, is there any chance of my investing in this property—now—with you?"

His jaw dropped. "Invest! Good Lord!"

he breathed. "Could you finish the sentence?"

"Just how much money do you mean?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

He winced a little. "That's all you have?"

She nodded. "Yes, and I have the farm. It's my inheritance from my father."

"And you want to slam the whole twenty thousand in here?" His voice had a touch of awe.

"I certainly do. To-morrow, if you like."

"I can't take it."

Her eyes clouded. "You mean you won't—won't let me in?"

"If I said to you that I objected to your gambling your inheritance on a well that might strike no oil, would you believe me?"

"This isn't that kind of a well."

"I'm mighty glad to hear it. Where did you get the information?"

"From Jim."

"Oh! And what did Jim say?"

"He didn't say anything, he just smiled. I knew what that meant."

"You evidently understand each other remarkably well—but—I'm sorry. How would you feel if this turned out a dry well? I don't think it will myself—but it may."

"If it weren't a big thing, Spencer Martin wouldn't be interested," she answered quickly. "Oh, what have I said?" She seemed suddenly overwhelmed, then with an assumption of calmness, "Do you see what I'm banking on?"

"Jim is my first guess. So he's for Spencer Martin?"

"Yes. Now will you take that money?"

Shanklin felt a little weak. "I've got a partner. I've told you how I feel, let's hear what he says."

"The one who doesn't like ladies?"

"He may have got over that by now." Shanklin strode round the derrick. "Harrison, come here!"

"Can't. I'm busy."

"He hasn't got over it, but I'll fetch him." Presently he reappeared, with Harrison at his heels like a sulky pup. "This is Miss Winter. She has been telling me a few things you'll find interesting." He glanced at the girl. "Shall I repeat them?"

She nodded, and he went over the story point by point. Harrison listened, his head a little on one side. When it came to Sitwell, his face turned a dusky purple. The shade remained while he heard about Hunt

and Spencer Martin. Then Shanklin outlined the girl's proposal, omitting nothing about the farm and her inheritance.

"It sounds almost as though I had advised her to leave the Enterprise alone, hoping she'd drift along to us later," he concluded gravely.

Harrison sat for several minutes quite motionless. His partner knew what thoughts were moving within him. This was manna from the skies, and even less expected, the solution of all their trials. Presently Harrison looked up. "You'd better keep your money. We'd sooner have it from them that might miss it less. It would come mighty handy; but I reckon you're wiser to stay out."

"I told you," said Shanklin softly.

"What did you tell her?" demanded his partner.

"Just what you have."

The girl sprang to her feet. "If I needed anything more, I've got it. You splendid men!"

Shanklin stared at her. "The lady's talking to you, Harrison."

"I'm talking to both of you," she flashed. "You've got to take this money, every cent of it. Jim must not know anything about it. And as to Mr. Sitwell, he won't know either, you may be sure. Is it enough to finish the well?"

"It would be, if we took it." Harrison spoke gravely.

"And I'd be a partner?"

"If you were anything at all." Shanklin shook his head. "Don't you see how we both feel about this thing?"

The girl stood very straight. "If you don't take it," she said with absolute sincerity, "I'll give it to Mr. Sitwell to invest for me. I know the risk, and I know what it would mean to have partners like you. I won't worry you by hanging about, and I won't ask silly questions. If you think I can help in any other way, you'll let me know. I'm not a fool or a sluggard. Now, is it going to be you, or Mr. Sitwell? I told you I don't like snakes but sometimes even they win out."

Shanklin drew a long breath and glanced at his partner. There was a moment's silence.

"I'd hate to see Sitwell with the lady's money," rumbled Harrison gruffly. "Perhaps we need another partner."

Shanklin chuckled. "I thought he was

getting over his dislike for your sex. Shake hands, partner."

"What strong fingers you have!" she said. "Gracious, I forgot all about that car. I'll be back in a day or two with the money."

"Going into the city now?" Shanklin asked with a grin. "Take me with you?"

"Nothing could be more appropriate. Come along."

Ten minutes later she looked at him seriously.

"Do you realize there are two people who must on no account know that I am getting an interest in your property?"

"Who are they?"

"One is Jim."

He nodded. "I think you're right there. Supposing we win out we take the wind from the sails of Spencer Martin, and since you have a passing interest in Martin's engineer, it might possibly occur to—"

"Exactly. I thought you'd see it. The other is more difficult."

"Who is the other?"

"When I found your photograph in 'Marcus Aurelius,'" she began a little uncertainly, "I felt that what Mr. Sitwell said was very strange because you were so like my Jim, and—" She broke off with a laugh. "Do you think my mind is wandering?"

"I'm charmed to be considered like Jim, but what has that to do with the other person?"

"Well, when Mr. Sitwell said that you were not the sort of man they believed you were, Mrs. Sitwell said nothing at all. That made me wonder."

"Please go on. I'll take care of Sitwell by and by," said Shanklin evenly.

"Then can't you see that since Mrs. Sitwell and I are very fond of each other I would not like her to know that I was interested with you in defeating her husband's plans to get control of your property. It's all terribly mixed up and I can't very well explain, but there are other reasons as well." She looked at him wistfully, as though imploring him to understand what she could not well put into words. She wanted to talk about Claudia, and dared not, being now secretly convinced that this was forbidden ground. She hazarded just one thing more.

"I'm afraid things have not been going very well with them, and a good deal turns on her husband's getting this lease."

"Exactly. And as the matter stands I

don't mind saying he's going to have the time of his life getting it. If we strike oil before the first of September, Claud—I mean Mrs. Sitwell, won't be the loser. If we don't, and Spencer Martin strikes it later on, she comes out ahead." He broke off, a flush on his tanned cheeks, for in Edith's eyes was a gleam of complete understanding.

"Look here," he went on, "I'm shockingly lonely in spite of your very kind offer of that twenty thousand, so won't you dine with me to-night? I haven't had a decent dinner for months. My partner shuts his eyes when he eats, and doesn't know the difference."

She shook her head, feeling that there was something whimsical about this following on the invitation to lunch the day before. "It's awfully nice of you, but I can't. There are a heap of things to do to get that money."

Talk turned to the work ahead. Edith would efface herself. She promised that. It would take a few days to get the money. When Shanklin spoke of an agreement she waved it aside, but he insisted and it was settled that her share be one fifth. At that she nodded contentedly.

"Of course, if it's anything it will be a gusher. How much is one fifth of a gusher worth?"

"Depends on the strength of its gush. If it's, say, twenty thousand barrels a day, you would get about five thousand dollars."

"That's twenty-five per cent on twenty thousand," she said reflectively, "and the government pays only five."

"I mean a day—not a year."

"Five thousand dollars a day!" she gasped. "Stop the car. I want to breathe."

"On the other hand we may get nothing," he said cheerfully.

"Which means that I go back to the farm."

"For such time as Jim stands for it. From what I saw of him I don't think that would be long."

When he got out of the car she gave his hand a quick, vigorous pressure. "I'm so glad I'm your partner, and so will Jim be when it's time for him to know about it. You two are so like each other that I'll think you are Jim—and forget myself. You won't worry now, will you?"

"I won't worry now," he said.

She drove off with a wave of the hand.

He went out to dine alone feeling confidently reckless.

CHAPTER XVI.

Sitwell sat in the Enterprise office and stared thoughtfully at the chair recently occupied by his late partner. There had been no attempt to find another partner. Business was in too delicate a condition, and there was a further difficulty in discovering exactly the man for the job.

But at the moment Sitwell was well content. Only twenty-four hours had elapsed since his return from New York and already he had composed a circular letter to Enterprise shareholders. The draft was in front of him now. It stated that while subscriptions were coming in steadily, the directors thought it wise to delay actual drilling till the whole required amount was in hand. Furthermore, recent developments in the vicinity of the lease made Enterprise stock even more promising than before. Work would commence in a few weeks.

From this Sitwell reverted to comfortable reflections of Hunt's visit. The thing had worked as smoothly as grease—or oil. He had not thought it good policy actually to inspect Shanklin's ground himself, suggesting that it would be more prudent if Hunt went over the lease without mentioning any other name than Spencer Martin's and to this Hunt unsuspiciously agreed. So Sitwell lay under a tree, smoking endless cigarettes and watching the game proceed. On the drive back Hunt had been rather silent till suddenly he turned to his companion and blurted that the property was either immensely valuable—or nothing at all. He had been instructed by Martin that there were to be no secrets from his new associate. Furthermore he would advise Martin to take up the option should the present owners not complete their well by September the first. Next he handed Sitwell two checks. One for six hundred dollars, to cover the expense of the New York trip, the other for a thousand to meet necessary disbursements. Vouchers would be required for the latter. That thought had been a little disconcerting, but Sitwell only laughed as he thrust it in his pocket. He saw himself now the colleague of one of the biggest men in the business.

Deliberating on this, it did not seem that there was any need for further concealment.

As Martin's partner he would have a new reputation to maintain, for which he might as well prepare at once. That brought in Edith Winter. He could afford to go to her now, tell a straight story, which would be backed up by Hunt's opinion, give her a small interest in his share of the new option and secure the twenty thousand dollars. The more he thought of this the more he fancied it. One result would be that it would put him right with Cláudia. As to the effect on Shanklin, it ought by all odds of the game to be demoralizing. He had already got Shanklin's girl, and expected to get his property. Shanklin might squirm, but he could do nothing else. The idea of this squirming grew more and more inviting, till Sitwell rose and began to pace the office, smiling as he walked. It was as well, after all, that Brooks was not here. He fancied that Brooks had rather liked Shanklin. At that he laughed softly, put on his hat and started for his boarding house. They were leaving it in a few days for better quarters.

Claudia was sitting by the window when he arrived, and looked at him listlessly. She knew that Hunt's visit had been satisfactory, and that important things were on the horizon. But her mind was full of New York and ineffaceable visions of Spencer Martin. She wondered to what extent her husband had played into Martin's hands. Just then she felt his long fingers on her shoulder. They brought with them a kind of chill.

"Not worrying, are you?"

"No—not that. I'm wondering. I've been wondering all day."

He patted her arm. "You needn't wonder any more; matters were never brighter."

"You stick to what you said, Bertie?"

"Just what do you mean?"

"That whether this last project goes badly or well, you will get out of the oil business."

He pushed out his lips. "I hadn't met Spencer Martin then. Look at this." He took out the smaller check.

She hardly glanced at it. "What difference does this make to your promise?"

"Great Scott! It's quite certain you don't realize at all. Don't you want me to be Martin's partner?"

She glanced at him strangely, and he went on. "There's too much on the program just now to settle anything. Let it

stand a while. In the meantime you needn't worry about money."

"It wasn't money."

He felt suddenly angered. "Is it because you married the wrong man?"

"That's part of it," she said simply.

For a moment he did not answer and the gulf stretched wide and impassable. At the present stage of affairs it was really unimportant, but his mind turned to Shanklin. There was one thing that puzzled Sitwell, though he had not for various reasons pressed the point. Now, it seemed, was the time.

"You never told me where you got the six hundred dollars you gave me."

She paled a little at that. "Does it matter?"

"It seems curious, since I had practically nothing myself, nor did I know you had anything."

"Perhaps," she said carelessly, "I'm a more saving housekeeper than you imagined."

Their eyes met and measured. "Have you seen Shanklin since we were married?"

"No."

"Or heard from him?"

"Once, to express his regret at father's death."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No." Then bitterly, "I'm glad I don't."

"Did it never occur to you that he sent that money?"

"To the wife of Herbert Sitwell?"

The lean cheeks reddened at this thrust, but he was satisfied now. The money could have been from none other. Then came the picture of Shanklin, sweating on his short-lived lease. It was enough to make the gods laugh. There was an answer to all this and he would give it when the time arrived. That would be very soon.

"Thanks for the compliment." It had been in his mind to give her the check, but now he put it slowly back in his pocket. Why part with it at all? It might be returned to Shanklin. In the same moment something flickered across his mind, a dramatic scene that he could stand aside and watch and revel in. The more he thought of it the more he liked the idea. It restored him almost to good humor.

"I don't seem very popular this evening, but since we are in funds again I'd like to make a suggestion."

Claudia was too depressed to care what

he said. To-morrow, and the next day, and the next year were all weighing on her spirit.

"Well?"

"You'd better pretend that I'm some one else's husband, and come and have a good dinner. Thank Heaven we're moving to better quarters soon."

She nodded listlessly, and going into the other room, took out the frock she had bought in New York. It reminded her of Spencer Martin.

CHAPTER XVII.

Shanklin ordered his dinner with more than usual care, thankful to be rid of the thump of machinery and the grind of work if only for an evening, then wondered why he had come here where in times past he had often brought Claudia.

He began to smoke thoughtfully and looked about. It was the best restaurant in Los Angeles. Groups of tired business men with wives into whose laps they poured their winnings with sacrificial ardor; parties of tourists who were motoring up the coast from San Diego to San Francisco; film stars of both sexes whose salaries surpassed that of the president of the country, attended by satellites from the studios of Hollywood; young men of the type of the matinée idol; young women exhibiting large eyes, red lips and that sort of clear-cut physiognomy which makes what is called a picture face. Shanklin noted that there was no change here. In one corner was a group of four, and among them a girl whose features attracted him no less than her manner. What was she doing here? he wondered. It was a noisy group, save for herself.

A little later his eyes were drawn back to the group in the corner. Their voices were higher, except that of the attractive girl with the fair hair. Next her was a man whose face he seemed to remember, but could not place. He was holding his glass to the girl's lips, and whispered something that brought the blood leaping to her temples. She looked frightened and pushed the glass away. The other man joined in. Then Shanklin heard her voice.

"Let me alone. I know when I've had enough, and you don't."

Followed laughter from the three. Shanklin's gaze narrowed but he did not move. Came the other woman's voice.

"Lap it up, child, it's good for you. Give her some, Bob."

The second man got up and came round the table. Between the two they refilled the glass, pushing it against the full red mouth. Shanklin felt cold, and waited. He saw a thick hand grasp the smooth white of the girl's shoulder.

"Drink, you little fool! Drink!"

For answer there was a swift motion that flung the wine into his face, and the girl jumped up, only to be pulled back into her seat. Her eyes seemed full of terror. One of the men shouted with laughter. For a fraction of a second her eyes met those of Shanklin and sent him a quick petition.

It came in a moment when he was in the mood for something like this. He stepped across, choosing as he went which man he would hit, then hit hard with some of the driving force of Harrison's plunging bit. The man collapsed, blood streaming from his mouth. A knot of nervous waiters gathered like flies. Shanklin stood in the middle of them, staring at the thing on the floor till he felt the girl's weight on his arm.

"Quick," she whispered. "We've got to get out—both of us, before they have the police here. For God's sake get me out of this."

Followed a burst of excited voices. The affair was over so rapidly that no one understood what it was about. Shanklin was evidently sober. That helped him with the crowd. The girl steadied herself and spoke out.

"I was being insulted and this gentleman interfered. Please let us pass." Then she added defiantly, "Unless you approve of a girl being insulted."

Two or three men laughed and the circle parted. One clapped Shanklin on the shoulder, pushed a visiting card into his hand and offered to appear in court if called on. The latter grinned and shook his head.

"All right," he said to the girl, "there's nothing to be frightened at now." Then he glanced up, and looked straight into Claudia's face.

He never knew how he reached the revolving doors. Claudia stood still, her eyes wide, her cheeks pale as death. She saw the girl clinging to his arm, the bleeding figure on the floor, the spilled wine. The thing was too evident, and there could be only one explanation—the end of a drunken

brawl. She stepped aside to let him pass with his burden, making as she did so an involuntary gesture. Shanklin saw it and his heart contracted.

Sitwell saw it too, and drew his wife to him as though to protect her from contamination, being instantly aware that this time luck was definitely with him. He darted at Shanklin one cynical glance and waited impassively till the two had traversed the revolving doors. Then he led Claudia to a reserved side table.

"It's a pity you married the wrong man," he said smoothly, "but will you have thick soup or clear?"

She got through the evening somehow, and Sitwell, watching her, had sufficient tactical sense to make no further reference to the affair.

He was too wise to attempt to improve on the situation, and for the next day or two made no reference to it whatever, being actively engaged in thinking out the matter for himself. There was one thing he might yet do to clinch it, a thing he pondered over with a queer light in his shifty eyes. He had set his gaze toward success and thrust aside the possibility of failure, but of late that possibility had moved formlessly in his imagination. It would not keep quite thrust aside and came at him like an irritant pin prick in unexpected moments.

"How would you like to run out with me and see that property? I'm under promise to Martin to keep an eye on it," Sitwell said to Claudia one morning at the breakfast table.

"Isn't it rather expensive without our own car?"

"I mean in our own car," he said contentedly. "Our luck has turned and I bought it back yesterday. Paid only what I got for it too. We can start any time you like."

She felt almost happy. The car meant much to her, and she drove well. Also she wanted to see something backed and believed in by others than her husband.

"I think I'd like to."

He nodded. "I hoped you would, and when I explain this thing you'll appreciate for yourself just how big it is."

"But it isn't yours yet. Are you sure you're going to get it, and even if you do, how can you be sure that it is any better than the Enterprise?"

Sitwell laughed. He was not in a posi-

tion to explain why he was sure, and she did not press the point. There was that in her mind which she was anxious to forget if she could. Anything that could divert her was welcome, if it offered only a semblance of interest.

Threading State Street, she caught sight of Edith, and waved a hand. "Bertie, there's Miss Winter. Wouldn't it be nice to take her out? It strikes me somehow as the right thing to do."

He edged the car into the curb, mindful that this girl was Hunt's fiancée. "If you like—yes—perhaps it would."

Claudia signaled and Edith came up.

"I was hoping that I'd see you to-day. Come and have lunch with me."

"And I you. We're going into the country to see"—Claudia hesitated a moment—"to see some property—and want you to come."

The gray eyes narrowed a little. Sitwell was leaning forward over the wheel. "Do come," he put in. "Get you back here about four—only fifty miles out. We'll have a bite on the way." He spoke with a certain sincerity, suggesting that though the girl had kept her twenty thousand dollars, this was nothing between friends.

She experienced a throb of admiration for his nerve. "Thank you—it sounds delightful."

Claudia moved to the back seat beside her. There was talk of Catalina, then Edith smiled into her friend's eyes.

"That letter of yours—I never thanked you for it, but I acted on it."

"I know you did, and I'm glad. Bertie doesn't—well—spend much time on the Enterprise now. He's got hold of something much better. We're going to see it to-day. I've never seen it."

A faint color climbed into Miss Winter's smooth cheeks. It was difficult to know just what to say, or whether to say nothing. She decided on the latter, with a feeling that shortly she would participate in something vivid enough for one day. Also, she was conscious of an accepted check for twenty thousand dollars, pinned inside the breast of her bodice. It was strange that she should be aiding the fortunes of the man who, she was assured, was the real love of the girl beside her.

Later they sped past the Enterprise property. Edith glanced at the big sign with a queer little smile, and stole a look at

Claudia. Sitwell apparently had not seen it, or, if he had, experienced not a single qualm. Claudia thought of the stock she held, and remained silent. Presently the cough of an engine grew louder, and they saw the gaunt spars of a derrick over the orange trees.

"This is the place," said Sitwell, and stopped the motor.

"Who found it?" put in Claudia suddenly.

"Come along and see." He turned through a small gate and strode ahead. "I expect to control this property on the first of September."

Claudia was close beside him, but Edith dropped a few steps behind. There was a lump in her throat. The check pinned to her bodice seemed to burn like fire. A short, thickset man beside the derrick straightened up and looked round. He saw Sitwell. His face grew suddenly dark. He stared for a moment as though not believing his eyes.

"Jack, come here."

Another man appeared, and Claudia glanced at him. Then their eyes met, and something caught at her heart.

"You!" she stammered. "You!"

Shanklin, oblivious to all else, held her with his eyes. The sight of Sitwell standing beside her filled him with cold hatred, but for the moment it was overwhelmed in his swift hunger for the woman he loved. The woman herself was robbed of speech. He pulled himself together and lifted his hat.

"Good morning." He did not trust himself to look at Sitwell.

Her lips moved, and Sitwell's voice came in, but a little unsteady. "I wanted my wife to see the property, since I've got the second option on it."

Harrison heard him and fingered a wrench, wondering how far it would sink into the smooth face. Shanklin only smiled grimly. He would see this thing through, cost what it might.

"I'll be very glad to show her. Though," he added, "there isn't much to see."

Claudia listened to him as though in a dream. A little way behind her stood Edith, who had caught Harrison's eye, and laid a finger to her lip. The same warning reached Shanklin. The girl was thrilling with the fact that now she knew how it stood with him and Claudia and Sitwell.

"You don't know Miss Winter," said Sit-

well. "We—we brought her out for the trip."

Shanklin advanced and shook hands politely.

"So glad to meet you," said Miss Winter sweetly. "Do tell us all about it. Mr. Sitwell thinks you have unearthed something wonderful."

He choked a little at that, being startled by the daring of the thing, then caught a look, charged with warning. It stiffened him. He would do his part, cost what it might. What she wanted him to do was plain enough.

"I hope it's wonderful," he said. "Are you interested in oil?"

"Enormously—that is I expect to put some money into it almost at once." Her voice lifted slightly so that it might reach Sitwell.

The latter came nearer. "Mr. Hunt, the engineer who came out here a few days ago, is a great friend of Miss Winter's." He paused, then added, "In case the property comes to me I hope that she will acquire an interest. She came out West to invest in oil."

Shanklin bit his lip. "I'm glad you think so." His jaw clenched, and he looked hard in the other man's face. For a moment Sitwell seemed about to speak, then moved closer to the derrick, where he stood gazing at the dipping cable. Shanklin was conscious of Claudia near by, her whole soul in her dark eyes. His heart felt numb, but he forced himself to turn toward her.

"Apparently it's neck or nothing between your husband and myself," he said stiffly. "Do you mind if I say that he's not going to win out?"

She could not answer. Voices were shouting at her that here was the man who had aided her distress, and the return she made was to imperil his future. The irony of it was like a knife in her breast. She knew now more than ever that she loved him with all her strength. She had not known what love was till its object became unattainable. He was a workman, and it endeared him the more, because it was honest work. Presently she became aware of his voice.

"It was pure luck our finding this. It will make us or break us—Harrison and me. Don't mind his looking so surly; he doesn't like women. We hope to shoot this well about the twenty-eighth of August—that is, barring accidents which one can't foresee.

Yes, I like the work; it's open air, and all that. Mr. Sitwell's going to have a run for his money."

Edith sent him a quick glance of approval, and wondered whether her adored Jimmy could have comported himself so well. Sitwell's face was blank. He put in an impersonal word or two as Shanklin talked. He scrutinized the rig, deliberating how and when he would begin his special and private duties, but it seemed that these men were particularly able to take care of themselves. He examined the face of the drill runner. Labor troubles, he reflected, were matters of everyday occurrence. They might be expected here. Presently he found himself alone with Miss Winter, his wife and Shanklin a little way off. The latter was pointing to the anticline, half a mile away.

Claudia glanced hastily over her shoulder. "Jack—that girl in the restaurant."

"Oh," he said distantly. "I never saw her before. There was a row and I helped her out."

"Forgive me!"

"For what?" He felt suddenly hopeless and weary.

"For everything. Oh, Jack, I didn't know."

"Is it any use now?" he said under his breath.

"I let you go—and I shouldn't—and I used your money—it was your money—for Bertie's trip to New York—the trip that put him in a position to do this. I did not know it was your property."

"It doesn't matter—now."

She caught his arm, and he trembled at the touch.

"But it does! What can I do?"

"Nothing—you married him." The thing was torture, and he wanted to get it over.

"Would it help to know that you were right? I mean when we said good-by?"

She made a despairing little gesture. Sitwell's voice sounded behind them.

"If you're ready, Claudia, we'd better be moving."

She sent an imploring look. Shanklin caught it, and came to the limit of his endurance.

"Good-by, Jack," she whispered.

"I'm sorry our interests clash, Mr. Shanklin," said Sitwell; "but in this game it's every man for himself."

"And the devil will take the hindmost. Good morning."

Sitwell turned abruptly, a flush on his sallow cheek. "All's fair in love and oil. Come along, dear."

He strolled off, his head in the air, but inwardly convinced that it was time to depart. Claudia, after one lingering glance, followed a little behind. Her steps dragged. She wanted to stay there forever. Shanklin did not move till, a moment later, something was pressed into his hand.

"That's one fifth interest as we agreed," said Edith shakily, "and if I don't go too I think I'll burst. I'll be back soon and I think you're splendid, partner."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Sitwell was very quiet during the drive home. Claudia was in the rear seat with Edith and he was conscious that her eyes were fixed on him. She had not spoken when the journey was halfway done. He stared ahead along the winding road, wondering what it was that had missed fire, and feeling out of his depth. He could not pitch his mind high enough to realize that machinations, however astute, not only bring inevitably their own retribution, but must also fail to warp in others those emotions which are both sincere and profound. He was attempting to model things to his own desire, ignorant of the reactions he probed and of contrary forces that he only stimulated. He tried to be amused at the sight of Claudia and Shanklin face to face, but it was not amusing, for he had credited neither of them with the composure they displayed. It aggravated and in a peculiar way baffled him. But Claudia was already his and the property soon would be. He gripped the wheel tighter and quickened his speed.

They left Edith Winter at her hotel, where the girl seemed for a moment about to refer to what had happened, then only murmured a word of thanks for the drive. This was accompanied by an inscrutable glance from the gray eyes to which he found no answer. She made a little gesture, and he drove home. Pulling up in front of the dingy house he hazarded something about its being their last day there, but Claudia did not answer. He chuckled, and, reaching their room, flung himself into a chair and held out his arms.

"Come and tell me your impressions. I never saw you looking better than you did to-day."

She did not answer, but moved a little nearer the open window.

"Do you still think you married the wrong man? You won't after September the first."

"I want to tell you something, Bertie."

The voice was strange, but he nodded quickly. Queerer things had happened than that she should be merciful when most he needed mercy. His heart was beating violently, but he tried to smile.

"Then come and tell me here. You'll never have a better chance."

"But what I'm going to say will make a difference all your life."

"I'm consumed with curiosity. Please go on." He had not meant to say this, but it was no more unreal than the whole situation.

"It's just that I despise you more than I thought it possible to despise any man. You're not a man. You have no honor, no pride."

"A pretty stiff sentence. Please proceed."

"There's more to tell you than I can put into words," she went on haltingly, "because you've killed whatever I might have felt for you except contempt. When a woman says that to a man she has said it all."

"That will do," he answered, still impulsive. "Shanklin asked for it—and he's got it. He asked both your father and myself."

Claudia caught her breath, and the truth that had stirred so restlessly in her soul burst forth at last. There was a wild relief in blurting the truth.

"Jack was right, and you know it."

Sitwell stroked his chin and sent her a sidelong glance. "So it's Jack now. Perhaps that's my fault for renewing an old acquaintance unexpectedly. But surely you don't put your father in the same class as your husband?"

"Listen," she said hotly. "Father never blamed Jack as you did. That's done with and you can't change it. I never knew till to-day that a man could be so dastardly. Is there any one you have not deceived?"

"Don't be silly, Claudia, and lose your temper. Shanklin happened to hold the first option and I was lucky enough to get the second. It would have been the same no matter who held the first. That's business, and you know nothing of business. Do you think I would miss such a chance

simply because he once expected to marry you? If he fails, as he most surely will, I take up the property and become Martin's partner. Then you can have what you like, even to seeing very little of me," he concluded sarcastically. "Also I'd take care that you weren't bothered with Martin."

"Would it surprise you if I said that I could prefer a man like Martin to one like yourself?" Her very voice was remote, and a strange light had dawned in her eyes.

He quivered at that, being smitten with a swift, unnameable fear. A door opened in his brain, through which trooped vision after vision all devilish and torturing.

"So your New York visit was not such a failure as you led me to think?" he said bitterly.

Claudia shook her head. "It's no use trying to explain. You're not the sort who could understand. I shall never attempt to explain anything again, nor need you. But what I do want you to know is that from now on you have three people to conquer—Jack and his partner and myself. If I can defeat you, or help to, I will, and while you plot I will be doing the same thing."

She broke off suddenly and their eyes met and grappled till Sitwell shrank at the scorn he discovered. Then she went out, blindly, as though he were not there, and he sat for a long time, chin in hand, endeavoring to fit things together. The pin prick was at work once more, biting with a tireless tooth. It reminded him that Spencer Martin had cast a spell, the glamour of which had blinded many a man.

What if Shanklin won out?

The grind of work continued on the lease and the partners felt a new courage. As Harrison put it, twenty thousand dollars had been pushed down their throats and all they had to do was to swallow it. But it worried him nevertheless that it had come from a woman. He did not believe in women as shareholders in what was so far a wildcat well.

He believed, too, in what he called greenhorn's luck. It had often been the door to fortune. So why should not this youth, so late from an office desk, and a child in the oil business, uncover what the rest of the seeking world had missed? The thought fortified him and kept a light glinting in his eyes.

As to Shanklin, it was difficult to tell whether the knowledge that Claudia still loved him was a help or not. His own worship had remained unshaken, but he experienced a dull sense of bewilderment that his own success would spell disaster for her. If that happened he would go and take her, and he counted on her coming. Money would take care of Sitwell. The man who had sold his honor would sell his wife—at a price. There would be no haggling. Then he would show Claudia what love really meant. He fastened on this with the rapture of youth, building it up into dreams from which he woke, breathless, to hear again the reiterant *chug-chug* of Harrison's tireless bit.

On the tenth of July the hole was down a thousand feet, still in shale. On the night of the eleventh, Burbeck reported to Harrison, who was on duty, that he had lost the bit. Harrison cursed and ran to the derrick.

To those who follow the oil game no explanation is necessary, but let those who know it not consider a ring of gigantic steel teeth at the bottom of a thousand-foot hole, ten inches in diameter, blind, black, and unapproachable. The losing of a bit has wrecked fortunes, broken hearts, and dissipated courage. It has snatched success from waiting hands and robbed the world of riches. It is as though the metallic finger of science were chopped off at the joint, leaving a helpless stump.

Harrison and the rest of them sweated for a week. The danger—and he knew it well—was that in rescuing the bit they might lose the hole. Steel casing will stand so much handling, and no more. Time and again Denison's tongs grappled with the thing, and lifted, only to have it break away and plunge downward with a shattering force. On the seventh day the tongs took hold, kept hold, and the thing was drawn up gingerly, foot by foot, till its gray length swung clear. The hole, at least, was saved. Came then the necessity of punching through a piece of the old bit, where it lay embedded, with the new one. For this Harrison used special cutters, costly things of great hardness and high temper. It took three precious days. Drilling recommended on the twenty-first of July. There were forty days to go, and still a thousand feet to sink.

It was no surprise to them that Burbeck

had disappeared after reporting trouble. They only wondered how much he had been paid. But the problem was to get a substitute for Burbeck. Harrison solved it.

"You take it, Jack," he commanded. "You know enough already, and you can call me any time. I'm wanted for too many things. Keep plugging till you hear something that sounds wrong; then quit, and shout for me or Denison. That's all there is to drilling."

Shanklin took it and liked it. He did not spare himself, for the time was getting appallingly short.

In the middle of the month a letter came from Edith Winter.

You'll be wondering, perhaps—or I hope you will—what has happened to me. Nothing; but I've made up my mind not to bother you by being in the way. I think the best thing for me to do is to stay here in Catalina, and wish you—and all of us—luck. Of course, if there is the least thing I can do, you will let me know. I hope everything is going all right. Tell me if I can help—but I feel that a woman hanging about is apt to be a nuisance. Best wishes to Mr. Harrison. Yours, E. W.

P. S.—My love to Mr. Sitwell.

Harrison grinned when he read it. "Good stuff—only there's something we've got to tell her."

"What?"

"Her twenty thousand isn't going to be enough to see us through. It might, but for Burbeck. He cost us about four thousand. I've just been figuring. If nothing else happens—and it will—we'll need another four thousand. Can you get it?"

Shanklin wiped his stained fingers on a piece of waste, and put the waste in his pocket.

Harrison nodded approvingly. "You wouldn't have done that three months ago. How about it?"

"I'll go into the city."

Things began to happen on the lease. There were no strikes, but men came for a day or two, then dropped out with pointless excuses, or none at all. Tools were lost or stolen and the daily footage dwindled. Apparently no one was to blame, and there was but one obvious reason. The partners were under no misapprehension with regard to this.

The secret of the well was as yet their own, so far as they knew, excepting only Sitwell. To the rest of the world it was a wildcat, another grave for the hopes of

the deceived and ignorant. California was dotted with deserted derricks, gaunt pyramidal skeletons not worth taking down, all begun with the aid of flamboyant advertisements like those of the Enterprise, and ending as Courtney Brooks' last venture was bound to end. Brooks had seen it coming, and that had killed him.

On Shanklin's lease, Denison, the drill runner, came next in importance to Harrison and himself. He had followed Harrison round the world and back again, chasing oil and generally finding it—for others. He was tall, sinewy and silent, with a kind of doglike affection for the contractor. Years ago he had pinned all on marrying Gertie, and lost. He knew she was in Los Angeles and had a dumb conviction that by now she was too much of a lady for a man who worked in overalls. Harrison spoke of her but seldom, because it hurt too much, and when he did speak the other man said nothing and only worshiped the more blindly in silence. As to the outcome of the present venture, he kept his thoughts to himself. He knew that beneath this shale there should be oil in quantities, that Harrison had mortgaged the rig to put down the well, and he shrewdly suspected that Shanklin was risking all he possessed. But not a word of it passed his lips. Then one day Denison got a letter from Texas that kept him awake all night.

He was offered not a job, but a position, such a position as he had often dreamed of. It was not to go drilling in the South, but to travel about in comfort in his own car and see that others did their work. The offer came from the Fort Worth Contract Company, a large concern of wealth and standing. It was generally understood that it screened the identity of a group of important operators who had wide interests in Texas, and was accepted as a name to conjure with. The opening now offered made him a little breathless. Gertie would not turn up her nose at that.

He crumpled the letter in his pocket, and, working methodically, thought over it for hours, his mind full of visions of authority and big business. He would be on the inside too. Certain knowledge would be his, with opportunities to make money by merely following the big men unnoticed and at a little distance. He knew the drilling game inside out, and the company evidently knew that he knew. He would be on friendly

terms with the great ones in the business. It meant security—and no more overalls. What was more, he would be able to help Harrison to a job when the latter went broke on this wildcat, which was quite likely. It was after this had occurred to him that he went to Harrison and handed him the letter without a word.

The latter looked at the heading, whistled softly and sat down. His face was impulsive, but his eyes narrowed as he read.

"Mind if I show this to Jack?"

Denison did not mind. It was a matter for both partners. When Shanklin came to the end of it, he sent Harrison a swift glance.

"Sitwell—plus Spencer Martin."

Harrison nodded.

Denison was puzzled. "What's up?"

"Ever hear of Spencer Martin?"

"New York and Oklahoma?"

"Yes."

"What's he got to do with it?"

Harrison handed back the letter. "Tell him, Jack."

For a quarter of an hour Shanklin's voice sounded impassively across the creak of machinery.

Denison's spirit boiled over. He spoke briefly but with a certain picturesque freedom that pertains to those who habitually work in overalls. There were little gaps in his remarks, interlarded with carefully selected and blasphemous descriptions of the breed of men like Sitwell and Spencer Martin. The gist of his pronouncement was that he would be damned if he left the lease till the well was shot. More than this, he defied the partners to drive him off. He had no money to put in, but he would work the skin from his hands without money to help beat a pair of crooks who—then, his descriptive power failing altogether, he breathed one final coruscating oath.

"Say, supposing I fix that fellow Sitwell so that he don't give us any further trouble?"

On the hasty assurance that this was not the kind of help required he went back to his work, muttering nameless threats, and for the rest of the day pondered what answer he would make. He posted this the next morning. It was brief and definite. It simply told the Fort Worth Contract Company that they might go to hell. He never knew that, being read by an astonished manager, it was forthwith sent on to

Spencer Martin with a request for further instructions in the matter.

The partners worked on, and under no delusions. Sitwell moved in the background, searching earnestly for weak joints in their armor.

They spent hours figuring depths and costs. Shanklin explored the great anticline anew, calculating the thickness of the shale, and how much of it might have been worn away when there took place the erosion that in ages past had formed the valley in which they drilled. Those at work on the recognized field learned to know him as the "Wildcatter," and talked to him with good-humored tolerance. Sitwell had begun to be known also, and the two were classed together. The only difference was that Shanklin was drilling, while the other held up, obviously waiting developments on his rival's ground. But any fool could guess the result. Then Woolley came by again and stayed for an hour. He rubbed in his palm the muddy sludge that flowed up from the well, and examined it under a magnifying glass while the partners stood by and tried not to appear too interested. After which Woolley nodded slowly several times and fixed on them a curious stare. He glanced about to make sure that no one else was in earshot.

"Do you know," he said quietly, "I won't be surprised if you get it."

Harrison made a little noise in his throat. "I'm glad to hear that, but there's one man who's going to be heartbroken if we do."

"Who do you mean?"

"The other wildcatter." This with a jerk of the thumb at the not-distant Enterprise ground.

"But his property will be worth a good deal more if you do get oil."

Shanklin coughed warningly. "If nothing happens to upset plans we'll be shooting on the thirtieth of August. You had better come."

Woolley nodded and rubbed his palms dry. He was puzzled and a little anxious. The reference to Sitwell was obvious and he tried to remember whether he had dropped any hint on his last visit. If the partners did strike oil there would be a frenzied rush to secure the surrounding ground. He remembered when it had first been struck on the great anticline, and what had happened then. And this was just next door.

CHAPTER XIX.

The partners had been counting the weeks. Now they ticked off the days and even the hours, reckoning that Sitwell was doing the same, which was actually the case. Doubts, vague and disconcerting, were moving in the restless brain of the latter. Martin, on receipt of his manager's letter from Fort Worth, had stared incredulously at the inclosure, sworn a great oath, then burst into a roar of laughter. He was furious and delighted all at once. "By gum," he rumbled, "I'll get that fellow yet. Can use that sort in my business." To be told that he might go to hell was a totally new sensation. It tickled him, and he decided to retain Denison at any price when the lease changed ownership, and put him in charge of the work. That set him thinking in a new fashion. It was just possible he might not get the lease after all. It would make no material difference, for he had all the oil he really wanted, but he objected strenuously to acknowledging defeat, as conceivably he might be forced to do on September the first. That would be thanks to Sitwell.

Martin did not analyze the matter any further, but sent a letter to Sitwell in which there were pointed suggestions that now the latter had better get really busy if he desired to avoid an uncomfortable result later on. He grinned as he signed it, thinking of that dinner at Romano's. If he didn't get the lease he could see his way to getting something even more attractive. Sitwell would be down and out.

Shanklin went, first to the firm from which he had bought two thousand dollars of casings, and paid cash. He dared not say too much and was afraid to say too little. The manager listened attentively, though he had heard such tales before.

"I'm sorry, I can't. The firm wouldn't stand for it. If you had a good lease on good ground we'd furnish you with supplies on slow payment, but we can't do that with wildcatters."

So that was it. The partners had been content to be called wildcatters. It minimized publicity and diverted eyes both curious and intelligent. But Shanklin wondered whether the hand of Sitwell were not visible here.

By midafternoon he wondered no more. Apparently there were not four thousand

dollars available in Los Angeles. He had never tried to borrow money before and went about it awkwardly, but the men he knew remembered him as the man who had been discharged by Burley. That was enough. It seemed also that a lawyer, down on his luck and trying to borrow money on a wildcat well was an object of universal suspicion, more than any other kind of man would have been. Everywhere it was the same. A more or less impatient hearing, regrets, then a half-meant, "Good luck to you."

He began to feel desperate and thought of Burley. But he would have to commence by confessing that he was doing exactly the thing he had objected to in Sitwell. Burley would shake his bulldog head at that. One could picture his cynical and regretful expression. Besides, it was like crawling back to a kennel out of which one has been kicked.

In sudden revolt he gave up the thought of Burley and walked, he knew not why, up the long grade to Pasadena. That miraculous suburb looked more opulent than ever, the villas and bungalows more expensive, the palms and oleanders more insultingly gorgeous. He went slowly along the vista of Orange Avenue. Its perfection reeked of wealth, and, he reflected, much of this came from oil, not wildcats, but big wells on established fields. Presently, with the heavy scent of flowers making him feel oddly dizzy, he turned into a side street toward a small bungalow that he knew of, and lounging past on the far side of the road saw a girl in a white dress. She was tall and dark and looked something like Claudia. The top of the pepper tree in the patio was now visible above the low red roof. How it had grown. At that he retreated, caught a car to Los Angeles, and found a motor bus starting for San Juan Capistrano. It would pass close to the lease.

At Harrison's interrogative nod he shook his head, and noticed that drilling had stopped.

"Engine trouble—started as soon as you left. Tinkered over it for a while, then sent in for a duplicate. Five hundred dollars."

It developed that the piston rings, cylinders and valves had been heavily cut and scored. They puzzled over this till Harrison swore viciously. "I've got it—emery sand in the oil. Try that drum."

A minute later he rubbed the gritty stuff

into his hard palm. The muscles of his face were standing out in ridges. "Sitwell again!"

Shanklin nodded. "You'll never prove it. Filter the oil."

Another week dragged out. The ground was a little softer and this helped to make up lost time. Came the fifth of August. Money was low, and five hundred feet remained to be drilled.

During this period both partners seemed to acquire the ability to live without sleep, save an hour or two snatched when opportunity served. They were bleary-eyed and dirty, but tireless, being driven by the sting of acute necessity. The irony of it was that every foot driven brought them nearer the point when funds would disappear altogether. Harrison began to talk about his farm. "I'll sell it; then if I'm broke—I'm broke."

But Shanklin would have none of this, being definitely opposed to gambling other people's property without their approval. He ransacked his own brain to no purpose.

They had posed as wildcat speculators and were accepted as such. The clank of machinery began to reverberate in his very soul—its reiterant note suggesting that he was forging his own destruction. He stared at the peaks of the Sierra Madre as he used to stare months before; but now they seemed colder, more distant and forbidding.

Harrison had no inkling of how matters stood between Claudia and his partner—only that the well must be shot before the first of September. Around that day the planets circled.

CHAPTER XX.

Early in August a big touring car pulled up by the roadside, and Shanklin saw a laughing group loiter under the orange trees and move slowly toward him. It was Sunday, and since morning the highway had been populous, but now he rarely looked in that direction. In the middle of the group was a girl, tall and very fair. He puzzled over this for a moment, then remembered. It was the girl of the restaurant.

She glanced at him with dawning recognition. He was dirty, unshaven, and his eyes had the glassy suggestion of sleepless nights. There was little about him to recall the immaculately dressed man who, having hit once, and hit hard, had tucked her arm

protectingly into his own, put her in a taxicab, and walked off without a word. She had wondered who was the girl who stared at them so strangely in the doorway, and concluded regretfully that it spelled trouble for some one. That was all weeks ago, and nearly forgotten.

He touched the brim of a disreputable hat. "Good morning."

The girl colored a little. "I didn't know it was you at first."

"I'm not surprised. Interested in oil?"

"No, but my father is."

The others had glanced at the derrick, wandered aimlessly about and already turned toward the grove. There was nothing exciting about this well. Their laughing voices grew fainter. The girl looked at Shanklin earnestly.

"You never let me thank you for that night; you never even asked my name."

"There was nothing to say 'Thank you for.'"

She shook her head with decision. "You wouldn't say that if you knew what happened afterward. I only heard it two days later. I've finished for good with that crowd."

He nodded and she went on earnestly. "It woke me up." Then after a straight glance: "I needed waking up. Have you been here ever since?"

"Ever since."

"And when do you finish? This isn't your real work, is it?"

"The well finishes—or we all do—by September first. Yes—this is my real work."

"You don't look it. Why do you say that?"

"Because it happens to be the case."

A shout reached her from the roadside and she waved her hand. "Well I'm awfully glad to have seen you, and to be able to say thank you, at last. And good luck by the first of September—all kinds of luck. I know you deserve it."

She extended a long white hand. Shanklin touched it with stained fingers. Then she turned, and ran straight into Denison, who had emerged, rubbing his eyes, to take over the shift. "Bill!" she stammered. "Where did you come from?"

Denison pulled himself together with amazing swiftness for a man stupefied with sleep. "Hullo!" he answered unsteadily. "I can say the same for you."

"I—I haven't seen you for a year."

"That's not my fault. I—I didn't reckon you wanted to see me."

She glanced at him uncertainly. "Don't go back over it, Bill. Have you seen father lately?"

His mouth opened a little. He looked at the camp and crooked his finger. "Come here."

She followed, and he pointed through an open window. Peering in, she saw Harrison stretched in his bunk, regardless of the sunlight that streamed over his face. He was dirty and exhausted. One hand hung limp, and she discerned the hard, smooth palm, the knotted fingers, the wrist with its tiny, dark, ingrained lines. His shirt was wide at the neck, revealing massive muscles and the strong column of his throat.

Tears started into the girl's eyes as she looked.

"What's the matter, Bill? Have things gone wrong? Every one looks—well—desperate."

"If we get oil by the first of September, it's all right. If we don't, we're broke. Matter of fact, we're broke now."

"I don't understand?"

Denison told her as much as he knew, told her jerkily, with pauses and breaks that made the story utterly convincing—a plain, unvarnished thing that carried pathos and pride in every word. She listened, her eyes wide, her breath coming faster. Once or twice she started up to run to Harrison, but her one-time lover put out a retaining hand.

"Don't wake him just to tell him—well—that you're fond of him. He needs sleep, more than anything else—except money. He won't sell that ranch he's holding for you—he won't mortgage it—he won't touch it. Says you may need it some day—though you don't seem to realize that. I'm not saying anything about myself, Gertie, for I've only put in some work. The others have put in all they've got."

"Money?" she said quickly. "How much?"

"Shanklin reckons three thousand dollars would do it. We've had bad luck—but it wasn't that either. We're fighting the men who want this lease, and there's nothing they haven't tried to knock us out. That's why we look desperate."

She sprang to her feet. "Bill, forget everything I ever said to you before, and stay where you are till I come back."

She raced to the impatient group by the

big car, which shortly moved off with a wondering cargo, then back to the camp. On the threshold of the bunk room she paused for an instant and tiptoed in.

Harrison stirred in his slumbers. His brain had set a watch for the quick steps that came so often. They meant trouble. But this time while he struggled with lethargy there was no deep voice with its depressing message, but a touch of something against his palm, and a whisper, soft and caressing, that reached him like balm and sent him back to dreams of long ago.

"Dad—dad—speak to me."

He sighed, and lifting himself on one elbow opened his heavy eyes. Gertie was leaning over him—a flower in all her dainty beauty, a strange visitor in this atmosphere of sweat and work. He stared at her, unbelieving at first, then with a sudden light in his eyes.

"Girlie—girlie—what brings you here? Be careful, you'll dirty your dress."

"Dad, why didn't you write to me?"

He patted her hand. "What about?"

"This—and all your anxiety."

He looked slowly round the disordered cabin. It recalled him back to actualities.

"Oh—this—why worry you with it? I've worked hard all my life."

"Dad, you should have let me know."

He glanced at her with dumb affection. What had she to do with grime and stress and effort?

"It's a man's job, girlie, not yours."

She shook her head. "I've seen Bill, and I know all about it. Now what can I do to help?"

He smiled a little at that. She was so dainty and delicate. But she went on persistently, with a deepening conviction that destiny had asserted itself in bringing her here. There must be something she could do to compensate for the things she had left undone.

"Just how much did Bill tell you?"

"Enough to make me feel I'm the poorest excuse for a daughter in California."

He chuckled at that, stroking her arm almost timorously, as though he might hurt it. But the caress reached her very spirit.

"There's nothing needed—but money. You can't help, daughter."

"How much?" she asked quickly.

"Three or four thousand." He spoke dully, as though he might as well tell her, however futile it was.

The white brow wrinkled a little, and he watched her hungrily, realizing each successive moment how desperately he had missed her, and how strange she looked in this drab setting. The yellow hair seemed to absorb the sunlight and radiate it again like a golden lamp.

"How is it with you, daughter? Things going well?"

"Don't!" she expostulated. "Nothing counts but you now. Yes, I'm all right. Isn't it queer that I know all three of you?"

"Do you?"

"That other man—his name is Shanklin, Bill told me. I owe him something, too." She told him the story, sparing herself not at all.

"I was a fool," she concluded, "but I'm out of that for good, thanks to him. Now let me think." Presently she jumped up. "I'm going into the city right away, and will be out again first thing in the morning. Till then don't worry, dad, more than you can help. I want to pay back a little—just a little—and there isn't a minute to spare, is there?"

"Not many," he admitted; "but—"

"There are no buts! Can I get a lift in from here?"

"A motor bus passes every hour—about due now."

"Can Bill walk down with me?"

Harrison grinned. "Ask him."

She went off a minute later, a dark stain on her white blouse, but eagerness in her spirit. Her arm was linked with Denison's. Shanklin looked after them and, smiling, saw Harrison at his elbow.

"You never told me about that row at the restaurant. Queer it was Gertie—isn't it?"

But Shanklin somehow did not think it was queer. He was beginning to be aware of influences, faint and elusive, that shaped the affairs of men with invisible touches. Harrison's reunion with his daughter would do more to fortify him than anything else. There was something in the thought that brought with it a shadow of dejection. What would he himself not give for reunion with the girl he loved. And how remote it was!

Gertie reappeared at noon next day, racing up from the highway, dressed in plain, workmanlike clothes, her cheeks pink, a small bag in her hand. Harrison went to meet her, feeling unaccountably younger.

She flung her arms impetuously round his neck.

"I've had a tremendous rush, dad, and got rid of a lot of silly things I didn't need for two thousand dollars. Here it is—and I'm sure we'll find the other two. And, oh, I've come to stay—so you can fire the cook."

CHAPTER XXI.

On the eighth of August Sitwell, in the Enterprise office, received a wire from New York.

Arriving twenty-ninth. Your later reports unsatisfactory. Hunt leaves to-morrow.

The message was unsigned, it being considered by the sender that signatures were in such cases unnecessary and might lead to complications.

As he laid the telegram down it quivered with the little vibration he had detected for weeks in his own body, as of a violin string tuned to a given pitch. He attributed it to lack of exercise and too much tobacco; but, nevertheless it kept time to a small reiterant throb in his brain that now hardly ever ceased. He stared at the street, admitting silently that from Martin's point of view his reports had been disappointing. It was not for lack of money, but it seemed of late it was increasingly difficult to get things done. Men took his money—did nothing—and he was in no position to expostulate. Bürbeck was under pay till the first of September, and the dealer who mixed emery sand with his oil was looking for more business—but that game was played out.

Behind all this were his own reports, forwarded weekly to New York—incriminating documents that staggered him even as he sent them in. He thought of them now, neatly filed, a record of dishonor. And it came to him that on the strength of a gruff promise he had transferred his very soul to the keeping of Spencer Martin.

Then there was Claudia. Though of a caliber that smiles at the protest of the deluded, he found himself strangely humiliated by a woman's contempt. It was a new sensation. She was his—yet not his. It baffled him that she could maintain her distance at a time when her allure was never so strong. She had her own room, where he was a stranger, and after she retired he used to sit for hours, gnawing his thin lip, calling himself a weak fool and listening—listening. It was at such times that he

remembered what she had said about possibly preferring Spencer Martin to himself, and pictures of that would flicker jerkily through his brain and leave him cold and gasping. Dreams came to him of Shanklin striking oil in the nick of time, of Martin's fury, of his own impotence and Martin leading Claudia away.

One trouble with Sitwell was that he had no comprehension of real love. His every emotion was expressed in terms of self. He had never used the word sacrifice—except in business. Now he was giving way to fear and felt horribly lonely. If only Brooks were alive. But Brooks would never have allowed him to get himself into this hole. Also he would certainly have sided with Claudia.

He jerked himself together. The overwhelming fact was that Shanklin had four hundred feet to drill—and twenty days to do it in—good average work in fair ground. Hunt was already on his way West, oblivious to all that was going on beneath the surface. Therefore, argued Sitwell, whatever remained for him to do must be done forthwith. He ran over possibilities, feeling unusually dull and impotent. Burbeck, it seemed, was the only man available for what moved in his mind.

During the night of the thirteenth a westerly gale came in from the Pacific and harried the length of California. It struck the great anticline, whistled through battalions of derricks and swooped into the valley where it made havoc among the orange groves. The flimsy buildings on Shanklin's lease quivered to its pressure, but the work did not falter. Shanklin was asleep after a hard day, Denison was drilling and Harrison patrolled the darkness with an uneasy feeling that this was a good night for trickery. He paid special attention to the long line of pipe that brought water from a neighboring irrigation ditch.

At midnight he was pottering over the pump when suddenly it began to race. Simultaneously the pressure decreased, a serious thing as it might result in the well becoming choked with thickening sludge and stop drilling till the bore had been arduously cleared. He was running along the pipe, searching for the break that must exist somewhere, when a faint shout from Denison brought him racing back to camp. He tripped, fell and plunged ahead. A hundred yards away he caught a yellow line

of flame at the base of the most westerly building.

The moments that followed seared into his brain. The thing was hopeless from the start. The wooden structures were dry as tinder, and the gale converted them instantly to a row of blazing torches. To wake Gertie and the sleeping crew and drag them dazed to safety was the first duty. Then all fought fire with clothing, towels, sand and even their bare hands. In a quarter of an hour the camp, excepting only the derrick and running gear, was a heap of smoking ash. Once the flame licked round the derrick leg and Shanklin beat it out with a shovel. Gertie had made desperate entries to her kitchen, hurling through the window food and dishes till Denison dragged her away by force. Harrison, leaving the job of salvage to others, stuck to the engine, till at the bottom of the well the sludge thickened for lack of water and the plunging bit seized and stalled. Then, because there was no light to see by and no material to work with, they all lay down beside the ruins of their camp till sunrise.

In the gray of dawn Harrison sat up. Gertie's head was on his knees. Her eyes were shut and she breathed like an exhausted child. The flaxen hair streamed disheveled and her face and arms were streaked with black. He stared at the wreck of his hopes, then down at the gently heaving shoulders, and of a sudden there came to him an extraordinary wave of feeling. It didn't matter now. Nothing mattered. He knew that never again would he be lonely. If it took disaster to bring them together, he welcomed it. He dared not stir lest he waken her.

A little way off sat Denison, just as he had sat for the last four hours. His face was as though carved from granite and his eyes burned, except when he looked at Gertie. What moved in his tumultuous soul was that the account must now be squared, and he proposed to do the squaring. He was only waiting for the time when Sitwell would spin past on the highway to see whether the thing had been pulled off. Denison proposed to be there when he passed. The other men lay in the grass or dispersed through the orange grove, wondering which way to go for the next job. To them it was the unexpected end of another wildcat. Nothing more. The tops of the Sierra Madre were pink when Shanklin

turned up. He had been walking about all night. He passed Denison with a grim nod, then came over and looked down at the other two. Harrison had a wisp of flaxen hair in his battered fingers.

"By God," said Shanklin thickly, "I wish my girl were as close as that." He moved on, stood for a moment frowning at the distant peaks, and threw his head back with a jerk. The game was up—he was knocked out—but he had done his best. He regretted nothing. He would make this introduction to the inner workings of the oil business serve him well in the future. No more altruism for him. Burley was right. There was no doubt as to the author of this ruin, but so far as he was concerned Sitwell was safe, screened by Claudia. That thought was too bitter to endure. He went back to Harrison. The latter took off his coat very gently, rolled it in a bundle for Gertie's head, and got stiffly to his feet.

"Well," he said evenly, "that's our finish. Sorry, partner."

They eyed each other with the wordless and strange approval that straight men exchange in the hour of defeat. There had been nothing wanting on either side. It was worth a good deal to know that. They sat down beside the derrick and talked, with little word of the past. One does not like to dwell on fruitless effort. The future was the question now. Harrison's mind was on the farm he had saved over for Gertie. He thought he would like a bit of farming for a change. Presently a shadow fell between them and they heard Gertie's voice, utterly weary, but charged with a passionate resolution.

"What's that ranch worth, dad? Gee, but that was some night!"

Harrison shook his head. "Worth too much to risk on a wildcat well. It's home for you and me now as long as Bill will stand for it. Why do you want to know what the ranch is worth?"

"How much money would it take to run this party till the end of the option?" she went on stubbornly.

Harrison knew what was in her heart and that he would never consent, but she was too earnest to be put aside. To humor her he surveyed the wreck with a critical eye. The derrick was scorched but practically unhurt. The engine, the great tilting beam and the running gear had escaped damage. So far as actual work was concerned they

might begin that day, but there were no supplies, no camp, no money.

"Another two thousand, girlie. But what's the use of talking?"

For answer she dropped beside him and flung her arms round his neck. "If you don't mortgage that ranch I'll never forgive you. I don't want it. I hate anything that looks like a ranch. I never said that before, but I do now. Bill would be a perfect fool on a ranch." She raised her voice imperiously and waved a grimy hand. "Come here, Bill."

Denison came over, his brows still thunderous, to be assailed with protest and argument. Two thousand dollars! Why hesitate to put that in after risking thirty thousand. He glanced dubiously at Harrison, who made a definite gesture.

"It isn't my ranch. I won't say a word," he announced brusquely.

Gertie sprang to her feet, her eyes full of angry tears that made dirty little water courses down her grimy cheeks.

"If you won't agree with me before we're married you're not likely to afterward. What's the matter with you men? If I had anything more I'd sell it—but I haven't."

Harrison began to explain, then gave it up. He was at the end of his tether. The camp was not insured, insurance being impossible on such a risk. He felt the impalpable weight of the hand of Spencer Martin, and had a new perception of its power. Then he perceived that with Gertie he might carry his point in another way.

"Matter of fact," he said slowly, "I've had about enough. There was the long chance of a clean-up here, and we took it. We've lost. That's all. Now I'm tired and ready to quit. I feel like taking one end of a hoe for a while, and eating oranges between times. Jack's young. He can go on chasing oil if he has a mind to, and what he has learned here won't hurt him. He didn't have enough to lose much over this gamble of ours, and maybe he had to begin like this anyway. Understand, girlie?"

"You darling old liar," she said shakily, then put her head on Denison's shoulder.

In mid-forenoon a motor bus roared by on its way to Capistrano. Sitwell was on the front seat, something having warned him not to travel alone. He stared keenly at the lease, saw the bare ground and blackened derrick and nodded with the manner of one who is well content. Burbeck had

earned his money. He left the bus a mile or so farther on, and caught the next one back. Once in his office, he dictated a telegram to Spencer Martin, stating that the latter might definitely expect to acquire the option on September first. Details were following by post.

Leaning back in his chair he demanded of the shade of Courtney Brooks what it thought now. It was easy to visualize the old man with his broad, good-natured face, his rather weak mouth and general air of benignancy. Brooks would never have pulled off a thing like this, therefore he had never made a real stake. There was something heroic about ruthlessness. Martin would appreciate that. Martin's future partner felt suddenly masterful. The pin prick in his brain had stopped for the first time in weeks. It occurred to him that now would be a good time to show Claudia who was the head of the family. He closed his desk and went out, smiling. She would be at home now. Walking quickly, he continued to smile.

But Claudia was not in, being called to lunch with Edith Winter who had arrived that morning from Catalina. It was while Edith was waiting for her guest that she glanced at a noon paper and saw the news of a fire that had wiped out the buildings of the latest wildcat lease in the Richfield valley. Shanklin's name was mentioned. She was still staring at this when Claudia arrived. She advanced to meet her, extending her hands. She gave Claudia a wan little smile.

"I'm so glad you were able to come, for I'm quite alone. Mother loves Catalina too much to leave it."

"It's good of you to ask me. Have you heard anything of Mr. Hunt lately?"

Edith nodded. "He ought to be here soon, and I may get a wire any day. But he can't stay long—that's the worst of an engineer's life."

Her voice trailed out and Claudia looked at her, puzzled. The usual cheeriness was missing. She seemed distract and singularly ill at ease.

"Is anything the matter, dear?"

"Did—did you see this? I don't know what to make of it."

Claudia read—and her heart contracted. "How dreadful," she said unsteadily.

"It isn't so much the loss of the camp, but what it may mean by the first of next

month. Does Mr. Sitwell know about it?" There was a lift in the voice.

"He hasn't mentioned it. I haven't seen him since morning."

Edith glanced at her and pondered. "I'm going to tell you something," she said gravely, "that will be a surprise."

The other girl pulled herself together. "Yes?"

"I'm a partner in that well. I put all my money into it. I'm fighting your husband and Spencer Martin—just like the others. Jim doesn't know anything about it—and he mustn't—till the thing is finished, one way or the other. This fire means that I may lose everything except the farm. I can stand that, but it will break my heart if my partners don't win out. When I asked you to lunch I didn't know anything about this—but I've got to tell you—because"—she hesitated a little—"because I believe in you—no matter what happens, or has happened."

Claudia fingered her bread and probed for an answer, but the only thing she could see was the vision of Shanklin's face as it must have looked when he surveyed the ruin of his hopes. She wondered how it came that Edith was his partner, but something deterred her from asking. "Then Spencer Martin will get possession of the property?" she ventured.

"I suppose so. They wrote to tell me that more money was necessary—and they were afraid I'd lose what I'd put in. They said at the start that that might happen, and only took the money when I made them. Now I can't find any more, and I don't know any one who would be ready to lend it, considering all the circumstances. So I suppose I'm broke; but I've met two of the finest men in the world, and that's something, even if I am engaged," she concluded doggedly.

"And they need some thousands of dollars?" said Claudia slowly.

"They did"—the other girl sent her a curious glance—"but that was before the fire. Now, I suppose, it's more. All I can do is to go out there and say, 'Don't mind about me!' But they will—more than about themselves. That sort of man always does."

Claudia's breath came a little faster. "When are you going out?"

"On the first motor bus for Capistrano. I'd have hired a car last week—I shan't now."

"If our car is in the garage may I take you out?"

"I'd like it awfully. I hate going alone—but—with a wondering little glance—"are you sure you want to go? I thought —" she broke off in confusion.

"Don't think—let me take you. I'll send for it."

Claudia went off to telephone, with a queer thankfulness that Spencer Martin's work had made the car essential—and had saved it. In twenty minutes the machine was at the hotel. She wondered, as they got in, where her husband was. A moment later she stopped in front of a large jewelry shop. "I won't be a minute, but there's just one thing I've got to do."

Edith Winter's face acquired a cynical little smile. It seemed queer that any woman of heart could, if she really felt as the girl was assured she felt, buy jewelry at such an hour. But, she reflected, Claudia's husband would do well out of this, and one man's meat was often another man's poison. She waited for ten minutes, then fifteen, with increasing vexation. Presently Claudia appeared, putting on her glove as she came. Her eyes and cheeks were bright.

"Get what you wanted?" said Miss Winter indifferently.

"Yes; but it took longer than I thought. I'm so sorry to keep you."

As they passed the Enterprise ground, Edith looked up with a queer little laugh. "Suppose it turned out all right, after all."

Five minutes later they got out. Halfway through the orange grove, a tall girl with fair, disordered hair and a torn dress planted herself in front of them. "If you don't mind, visitors aren't wanted to-day."

Edith nodded. "I quite understand. I'm Miss Winter."

The girl stared at her, the color flaming in her cheeks. She looked tired, dirty and disheveled. The hard light in her blue eyes softened at once. "Oh, Lord! I've never seen you before. I didn't know. Have you heard?"

"Yes; that's one reason I came."

"Well, there's not much left to come to. I'm Gertie Harrison—cook. Been here for a week—then this happened." Her glance wandered to Claudia, at whom she looked with slow recognition. "I've seen you before, though—one night in the city. Remember the row?"

Claudia nodded. She could never forget that incident.

"Well, I wondered after that if Mr. Shanklin needed putting right with any one. Never saw him again till I happened along here and took hold to help out." She turned to Edith. "I'm sort of putting in time to help them along up at the rig. They're trying to get the bit free now, and if any one talked there'd be trouble. Sort of dismal anyway. It won't come to anything, but dad swears he'll drill while the money lasts, and then wreck the well. It won't be long."

"When did the fire happen?"

"Happen? It didn't happen; it was laid by a sort of human snake that's been trying to bust the thing for months. It beats me," went on the girl wrathfully, "why such men live. Of course they don't live long. Some one kills them, or they go mad, or something like that."

Claudia looked away and Edith's voice came in quickly. "I think we'll go up now."

"Then I'll wait here," said Claudia. "Will—will you ask Mr. Shanklin if he can spare a minute, when it's quite convenient?"

An engine began to cough at a little distance.

"That means that the bit is free and they're going to start drilling," said the girl grimly. "But what's the use? There wasn't eighteen hours to spare." She led the way, breathing resentment against life in general and one human snake in particular.

Their voices died away. Claudia sat quite motionless. Presently she heard a step and looked up.

Shanklin was close beside her, his sleeves rolled up, a stained and weary man. His eyes had the hard luster of intense fatigue and in them glinted an indomitable resolution. His face was that of a man who fights for the sake of the fight, knowing well that the issue will be against him. He stared down at her without speaking, then made a sudden gesture as though to ask what part she had in these tense hours. "Well, Claudia, the game is nearly over. Martin has had excellent assistance. I'm sorry—especially for Miss Winter. She tells me you know about that."

She nodded, and he went on. "Last night put the finishing touch, though I doubt if we could have hung on anyway."

"Money?"

"Yes—and not much at that. A hole has been punched in our credit. We should have been down and out now but for Mr. Harrison's daughter. She's the second woman to the rescue."

"And now?"

"If we got running we might pull through with help. Of course there's no camp left. Tents would serve but we can't buy them. The grub is about finished, so," he smiled gravely, "we can't offer you anything in the way of dinner."

Her lips began to quiver. "Do you remember what I told you when—when I saw you last—that it was your money I used—not knowing?"

"You must not worry about it."

"But don't you see, Jack—it isn't only that—it's everything. It's the things that count. I haven't had them since I married."

"Steady, Claudia," he whispered. "You have to see it through, too. That's a bigger job than mine."

She pressed a folded slip into his hand. "Jack, it's all I can do. Let me be the third woman to the rescue. I took something from you—not thinking what it might cost you—but this is something that will help me to feel I've undone a little of the harm. And I'm terrified lest I'm too late."

He glanced at it wonderingly, and saw a check for eighteen hundred dollars.

"Is it any use?" she pleaded. "Tell me—quickly."

He stared at it again, then at her and felt the blood surging to his temples. "You bring me this—you?"

"Jack," she whispered. "there was a time when I was very unfair, and—" She broke off, her lips quivering.

He made one step toward her and stood rigid. There came a whisper—tiny, distant, but strangely potent. It said that she was not his woman, but sworn to another, and though the oath was given in ignorance, that made no difference. He heard this quite distinctly. What the future had in store was for the future to tell, but meantime he could serve her best by guarding her spirit with his own, no matter at what cost to his heart and body. It was part of the price of destiny. Also he had work to do. It was real man's work. Then the whisper died away, and he heard her voice, pleading and very tender.

"It would help me so much, Jack, if you

took this. Perhaps it might mean success; and that would make me much happier—just to think that I had aided a little. You see I never have helped, but always seem to have done the other thing, when I really least meant to. Oh, my dear, can't you guess what it would mean to feel that I was just a little part of it all? Nobody knows, Jack, not even Edith."

The pathos in her tones subdued his emotion and he pulled himself together. Man's work—that was the thing now, and, craving her with all his soul, he would wait a little longer for the rest.

"Do you think this is enough to be of any use, Jack?"

"Use!" he said triumphantly. "Every use. It ought to see the thing through. I'd like to shout. Wait till I tell the others. Won't you come up?"

She shook her head, her cheeks suddenly scarlet. "I'd rather not. Won't you come back here?" She felt inexpressibly happy.

"Yes, in a minute." He raced off and returned almost at once. "My job is to get into Los Angeles and spend some of that money as fast as I can. Miss Winter will stay and sleep at the ranch house, if she is not too excited. Who's car is that? Will you drive me in?"

She was at the wheel in a moment. "Oh, Jack, Jack, won't I drive you in!"

CHAPTER XXII.

At noon on the sixteenth Hunt arrived in Los Angeles. He had wired Sitwell that it would be unnecessary to meet him and was rejoiced to find Edith at the barrier. They had a delightful hour before he said that Spencer Martin was waiting his report and it would be necessary that he proceed to the property at once.

"You are so mysterious about that lease," she said, making a little face. "Could I come this time?"

He pondered. The day was fine and the thought of her in the car beside him was alluring. "We might compromise. That is, I'd rather you didn't actually visit the property with me, but you might wait close by until I'm through."

"And that wouldn't be unprofessional?" she said demurely.

He laughed. "I won't be professional till I get there. Watch me. Have you seen anything of the Sitwells?"

"Not much, but I've heard of him once or twice. Do you like him?"

"There are all sorts of folks in my business. I like her."

Edith nodded. The ice was getting thin. "Is Mr. Martin coming out?"

"I expect so—later." He wanted to forget Spencer Martin and all connected with him. For the next hour they sped happily through an earthly paradise.

Shanklin, sweating over a very temporary forge, saw the engineer approaching. He laid down the hammer, and extended a grimy hand. Hunt took it in his firm grip.

There was something heroic in that salute, carrying with it much of the essence of manhood. It expressed the mutual recognition which honest men have for each other in times of stress. Hunt, glancing about, saw what a change was here. The blistered derrick legs told their own story, and irregular outlines of black cinders, among which were pitched a cluster of tents, said the rest. But the rig was working as smoothly as ever. A chalk mark put the present depth at seventeen hundred and twenty feet.

"Trouble?" said Hunt inquiringly.

"Yes—three nights ago. We've fixed it up. Lost eighteen hours."

"How did it happen?"

Shanklin's face did not alter a muscle. "Just how it happened we don't exactly know."

"Where's Harrison?"

"Asleep. We've been—well—rather busy here, and he takes it when he can get it. Have some coffee?"

Hunt laughed. "How did you guess?"

Shanklin whistled and a mass of yellow hair protruded itself from one of the tents. He asked for coffee. Presently a tall, blue-eyed girl waved a dainty arm and Hunt looked in, wondering. When he came out he looked at his host gravely.

"Putting on a good deal of dog out here, aren't you? That's the best coffee I've had in months."

Shanklin squirted oil on a bearing that began to complain. "Under the circumstances we think we're entitled to the best that's going. That isn't the only woman who has helped us along."

"When are you going to shoot?"

"Harrison says the twenty-ninth. That leaves us a day to get to the bank and back."

The thump of the engine continued, and Hunt, dipping his hand in the sludge, examined it critically. Presently he looked up.

"It seems good to me—straight sedimentary. You reckon on two thousand feet, don't you?"

"Yes—barring accidents."

"You ought to make it—and, by George! I hope you do."

"Thank you," said Shanklin quietly. "I believe that."

"My boss wants to be here on the twenty-ninth. He'd like to see this well shot."

What was in Shanklin's heart about Spencer Martin did not bear repetition but he only smiled at the intensity of his own feelings.

"I've no objection."

"Some men wouldn't stand for it."

"We've stood for a good deal here, Mr. Hunt." The tone underwent a subtle change.

Hunt sent him a comprehending glance, as though to suggest that he understood and sympathized.

"I'm in a queer box—with you," he said slowly. "I've the feeling that I would do just what you're doing, were positions reversed. But outside of that I'm backing you. I wish I had an interest."

"If you were a free man I'd make you an offer. Want to see Harrison? I'll wake him."

"No; as a matter of fact, Miss Winter, my fiancée—you don't know her—is waiting in the car. I'll get back now, and see you in a few days."

"Why don't you bring her up?" said Shanklin soberly. "It isn't pretty—but—perhaps it would interest her."

"I will—on the twenty-ninth. Is that all right?" He laughed a little. "I'm just trying to imagine the scene if your well comes in strong. You embracing the cook—hats in the air—the reward of honest toil—the kind of face my boss will have—my own envy—my girl's questions as to why I don't go and do likewise. I hope to God it does work out just that way!"

Hunt waved a hand, and went off to find Edith. They walked arm in arm toward the car, which, diplomatically, she had sent half a mile up the highway. His brows were pulled down and he seemed hardly the happy lover. She sent him a curious glance.

"Would it be unprofessional to tell me

something about this property? You're very mysterious."

"It's one of those cases where my heart is not in my work."

"But why?"

"Imagine two good fellows—little men in the business—men who have only just started fighting with their shirts off against money, and influence, and—well—other things that shouldn't come into the game at all. If they win out, the industry gains by having them. If they're beaten, the industry loses what it needs—more decency. I wonder sometimes," he went on a little bitterly, "whether the decent man has a fair show in this life."

The girl pressed his arm. "I love you for that; but don't you feel inside that in the long run the decent man has the best of it?"

"Not in the oil game." Something moved him to unburden himself still farther. "I'm going now to see another fellow," he continued. "My private opinion is that he's not fit to clean these men's boots, but the odds are he'll win out on this property, and make his fortune."

"You're going to see Mr. Sitwell?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I have to. Then for Catalina with you."

"Couldn't you stay here for the next few days? There's so much to do and see."

"All right." He was a little puzzled, and having read of the golden sands of that fairy isle, wanted to see them—and with her.

"And if you happen to meet Mrs. Sitwell, give her my love—remember—not my best wishes."

He nodded, but when, two hours later, he sat talking to Sitwell, all thought of the man's wife left his brain. Sitwell was jerky and nervous, continually leaving his chair and conversing in high-pitched, ragged tones that Hunt found increasingly suggestive. His eyes were very bright. Their color seemed to change constantly, while his tall figure, as though inoculated with some fiery virus, was in increasing movement. He looked at his visitor almost furtively, his long hands clasping and unclasping. "You expect Mr. Martin on the twenty-ninth?"

"Yes. Harrison will shoot then."

"How far are they down now?"

"Something over seventeen hundred. I've an idea they may make it."

Sitwell leaped from his chair. "After that fire? Impossible!"

Hunt looked at him. "The fire didn't hold them up long. They're drilling now."

The younger man revolted suddenly and savagely. Then, as he scrutinized the face in front of him, it seemed that Sitwell was on the edge of some great disaster, whose proportions already began to swell before his distorted eyes.

"Had—had Mr. Martin any messages?"

"No. I've wired him to-day, giving the depth of the hole."

"Did you mention the fire?"

"That's not my end of it." Hunt's voice was cold. "By God! Sitwell, these fellows deserve to win out, and I hope they do. When you see Martin you can tell him that if you like."

He stormed out, slamming the door behind him with a crash that lifted the other man from his chair. The air seemed foul in that immaculate office. He was seized with a great desire to do something for Shanklin and the others, a desire intensified by what he felt was a slimy contact with Sitwell. But there was not one thing he could do, being in Martin's employ. Presently he turned into a tobacconist's, and, selecting a box of the best cigars, scribbled Shanklin's name and the nearest post office, which was on one slope of the Richfield anticline. A little later he rejoined Edith, his eyes still cloudy with thought. "Let's have a good dinner. I want to get a certain taste out of my mouth."

She smiled with a divine understanding, and he felt as though all the winds of the world had blown through and cleansed him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

With the arrival of that anonymous box, brought to camp by Denison two nights afterward, a touch of solace settled on three weary men. They smoked wordlessly, blessing the unknown giver, though Shanklin made a shrewd guess. It was the sort of thing he would like to have done himself. Presently he looked up with a grin.

"There's something I haven't told you yet. Spencer Martin will be here on the twenty-ninth."

"Like hell he will."

"He's coming out to the lease and wants to see the well shot."

"Where did you get all this?"

"Hunt told me. He didn't half like to do it, either, but had Martin's orders. I take

it that his local representative may be here too. Any objections?"

Harrison bent on his cigar a distant gaze. "These coyotes who have been trying to get us propose to come out here and see our well shot?"

"That's about it. Is there any law against it?"

"Girlie," called Harrison suddenly, "come here."

A mop of flaxen hair emerged from an adjoining tent, followed by a figure that bore little resemblance to the recent stenographer of a well-known film company. A pair of smooth arms were put round Harrison's shoulders where they left patches of flour.

"What is it, dad?"

He told her in a curious tone, half anger, half astonishment. The idea was too grotesque to be swallowed at once. Gertie's face was a picture. Then she burst into a peal of laughter.

"Fine, just fine! We'll have a bang-up party with all the trimmings and I'll do my darndest if you'll keep Bill out of the cookery. Sort of send-off to our big well. Can't you imagine Mr. Martin with his face in one of my pies the very minute the oil comes? Can't you—"

Something in Harrison's expression brought her to an abrupt silence. She leaned over him, and stared straight in the tired face. Her mirth vanished. All in a moment she seemed sobered and strangely wise. Their eyes met and searched each other.

"Go on, girlie."

"Doesn't it strike you men," she said slowly, "that it is just the very thing to do? They've been snapping at your backs all the time, but you played straight and said nothing. Seems to me that if they can make themselves come it means they have no pride or shame, and that you can afford to be more than just straight at the very end. Whether she gushes or whether she don't, I kind of think you'll be glad afterward that you did it—and they'll be sorry. You've taken a pile of risk and a pie or two isn't going to make any difference now. It won't cost any more, for I'll save it one way or another between now and then, and if we don't get drowned in oil we'll go down in a blaze of glory. The newspapers will eat it up, if Mr. Martin don't stop 'em."

Harrison half nodded. "I reckon you're right. How about it, Jack?"

"I'm with the cook," chuckled Shanklin, "and it will be some party."

Work progressed steadily with no further interruption from hidden agents, and Shanklin wondered if Sitwell had shot his last bolt. It was now make or break in two weeks. He pored over geological diagrams, checking figures and depths. One of the crew patrolled the surrounding area all night, a rifle under his arm.

Shanklin's mind moved on to what would follow if he did win out. There would be freedom, reputation and independence. The world would lie before him, opening inviting arms to his youth, and health and riches. He could gratify every longing—except one. At that thought the vision faded. He saw Sitwell sinking lower and even lower. He saw Claudia—but at this he shut the eyes of his soul, and tried not to see anything more.

Harrison, emerging from the cook tent, thrust his hands in his pockets and stood looking at the dipping cable. He stooped, swooped up a handful of sludge, rubbed it between his fingers and snuffed it, his eyes half closed. Then he grunted contentedly. He was like the rest of them, walking in his sleep; but sleep, of late, was out of the question. "I smell oil, Jack. That is, I don't actually smell it, but the something one smells first."

"What you smell is hope. I've noticed it for months. It's the effect of a good cigar."

Harrison shook his head. "It's what I've taken twenty-five years to learn. Suppose we do strike it?"

"Pay up, sit tight, and watch our money come back. Then cut this fifty acres up into small leases and sell out."

"It's likely we'll want twenty thousand on the thirtieth. But where's it coming from?"

"On the least show of oil, we can get all the money we want."

"Maybe. I reckon we can. But I'd like to see that fixed. Who are you going to?" The older man spoke as though fortune were assured.

"I hadn't got that far," said Shanklin slowly, and relapsed into thought. "There's Burley," he murmured, half aloud. "I used to work for him. He's the most likely. I've an idea he likes me."

Harrison regarded him shrewdly. "Then for God's sake wash, shave, get into decent clothes, and go and see him. On your looks

now, I wouldn't lend you thirty cents myself."

"He fired me six months ago."

The other man stared. "Why go to him now?"

"Because I think he's sorry he fired me."

"Then hustle, or he may get over it."

Shanklin hustled, and waited two hours for a lift into the city. He went straight to Burley's office and was recognized at once by the elderly stenographer, who had missed his youth and buoyancy more than she cared to confess. She greeted him with undisguised pleasure.

He chatted for a moment, then she tapped at the senior partner's door and put her head in. There issued Burley's big voice. It held a note of surprise, but he would see Mr. Shanklin at once.

"Come for that advice, et cetera, young man? Well, what is it? Don't mind saying I've missed you every day. Got a sort of plaster-face idiot at your desk who doesn't know his own mind. Ever think of taking up legal work again?"

"No, Mr. Burley."

"H'm—pity. Think you should do well in spite of your darned altruism. Hear that Mr. Brooks died some months ago?"

"Yes, I heard it."

"You married, didn't you?"

"No, sir."

"What have you been doing?"

"Practical work—drilling wells. Can you give me ten minutes, sir?"

The last words sounded like old times, and Burley smiled. He confessed to wanting his senior clerk back again. There was room for a junior partner now. "Yes, as long as you like, but first let me get a word in. That talk we had was—well—a little hot. I've thought of it since, and I'm inclined to believe now that you were right—only you were so damned lofty about it. It may interest you to know that I'm not doing any work for—well—your particular friend. I've good reasons too. Now as to yourself, if you're just a little tired of drilling wells, come straight back here: we can fix up that partnership business right away. That's all."

He finished with a snort. He had done the decent thing, and was rather red in the face.

Shanklin stared out of the window at the Sierra Madre. For a minute he could not quite trust himself to answer, and scanned

the distant crests, now tender in the rays of the declining sun. When he did speak, it was with an unmistakable jerkiness. "Thank you for that, sir. It means a lot. May I decide on the first of September?"

"Why not now?"

Shanklin told him, beginning at the beginning. The little man sat quite still as the tale unfolded, and only a little twitching of the bulldog features revealed his changing mood. It was a plain tale and dispassionate, but every word a stinging truth. Sitwell's name was not mentioned, but there was no chance of misapprehension. The losing of the bit, the emery sand in the oil, the fire—all these were detailed in words that lost nothing through their direct simplicity. Shanklin might have been relating the tribulations of a friend.

"So the way the thing stands is that I may want twenty thousand dollars on the first of September. If I do, it will be because I have made my fortune. If I don't make it, we drop the lease, which automatically passes into other hands—and get a job. Will you finance me to that extent? I'll give you my note for the amount and my interest in the property as security. If the well doesn't come in, you can destroy the check. If it does, you're safe."

Burley grunted vigorously. "Of course you can have it. Why the devil didn't you let me know before how things were going?"

"I didn't feel it was the sort of proposition I could fairly put up to any one. Harrison and I were satisfied, and we pyramided on it."

"How much ground does that lease of yours cover?"

"Fifty acres—all we could afford to option and have anything left for drilling."

"Do you reckon there's any shale outside that area?"

"There may be, but one can't tell. As I said, we're called wildcatters."

"What occurs to me," went on Burley slowly, "is that if you do get oil the land round yours for some distance away is going to be worth a good deal."

"It should."

"And to option it beforehand is the sort of thing that, say, Spencer Martin would do."

"Exactly."

"Has he?"

Shanklin shook his head. "Under the circumstances he only gambled on Sit-

well's proposal. It was Sitwell who put him on to it. I might as well tell you that right now."

"You needn't have told me, I knew it—but don't ask me how. What amount do you suggest is necessary to get further options right now?"

"On our reputation as wildcatters another twenty thousand would cover all the ground worth while."

Burley nodded. "Then get them." He took out a check book and wrote rapidly. "Here's forty thousand—more if you want it. I feel like a gamble for the first time in my life." He paused, and continued with a quizzical glance: "I don't ask any interest in your well, but I'll share equally with you on any profits from the sale of the options. But, mind you, I'm not banking on a darned cent."

Shanklin's lips were dry as he took the check. "I'd better give you that note now."

"Forget the note. Your word's good enough. And that," he added with a grin, "is because you're an altruist."

Shanklin found it hard to speak. This was the fourth time that aid had appeared out of the skies—and in the oil game too. It gave him a baffling conception of forces that worked silently and steadily on his behalf, deeper and stronger than all fraud and trickery. He murmured something indistinctly.

Burley leaned forward. "What's that you said?"

"I only half know myself. It only struck me that there's more than chance about all this. Perhaps it's the thing some people call destiny."

The little man nodded. "Maybe. That's more in your line than mine. Know what I call it?"

"What?"

"Bread upon the waters. I guess I owed you something. Mind you this doesn't exactly pay it, for I'm only having a bit of a gamble, but it will serve to show you how I feel. Stay and have dinner. I'm all alone."

Shanklin fingered the check as in a dream, then made his thanks with stumbling sincerity. "May we leave it that I'll dine with you in any case on the second of September?"

Burley nodded. "Meaning that either you'll be a rich man or——"

"Or perhaps your junior partner."

CHAPTER XXIV.

At five o'clock on the morning of the twenty-ninth Harrison swung his feet to the floor and stood stiffly erect. He listened a moment to the thump of the engine, then went into the cook tent, where Gertie stooped over the stove.

"Coffee, dad? It's waiting for you. Jack has just had his."

He sipped it, regarding her thoughtfully over the rim of his cup. Her eyes were shrunken, and smarted like his own, but her youth had come triumphantly through the last three weeks. Suddenly he wondered what would have happened if she had not come. He put down his cup, and his arm went round her shoulders. "You remind me of your mother, Gertie."

Her face grew very tender. "Do I? Why?"

"Always at something for some one else."

"I began too late, dad," she whispered. "Mother began right away. There's a big difference."

"But you've pulled us through here. Then there's Bill."

"What about Bill?" she asked teasingly.

"I was going to ask you."

"He's the finest man, bar two, that ever stepped in shoe leather."

"That does me good."

"I didn't say anything about it because—well—this isn't exactly the time for announcements of that sort—but he'll do for me, whether this is make or break. Does that help you any?"

He nodded. "A lot."

"You see, if you strike it to-day we can afford to keep house—and, if you don't, Bill is good for three hundred a month anywhere—and that's enough."

"Ever hanker for the city now, Gertie?"

"Do I look it?"

"No, you don't; but one can't tell."

"What I had in the city will do me the rest of my life," she said almost vindictively. "I told that to Bill, and he's satisfied. Dad, did you ever think of what Jack stands for in this outfit?"

"I haven't had much time to think."

"Well, turn it over in your mind. First, he finds this shale; then, because she believes in him, Miss Winter pushes twenty thousand dollars down his throat; then, because he'd done me a good turn, I'm glad to help, for one reason; then Mrs. Sitwell comes along with more boodle; then the

man that fired him puts up twenty thousand dollars without a quiver. Now, why do you reckon all that happens?"

"You'd better ask him."

"It's because there's some influence—I don't know what—that when things happen to decent men gets up after a while on its hind legs and says, 'This thing has gone far enough.' That's what's struck us here on this lease. Say, are you sure those folks will be here to-day?"

Harrison nodded, smiling. "Yes. Got anything to eat?"

"I've made two pans of cookies and six pies—and this stove is burned out. But I guess it will do."

"I guess it will," he said slowly, and their eyes met in perfect understanding.

At ten o'clock Edith Winter turned up, sampled the cookies and glanced interrogatively at the rig. Harrison was still drilling.

"When do you shoot?"

"Three o'clock maybe—not before; plenty of time."

"Does your heart go pit-a-pat?" she asked gravely.

"It does," he admitted. "How about yours?"

"I'd hate to tell you. Are you having a party to-day? Gertie's made all kinds of things."

"Folks get hungry round noon," he said stolidly.

"And you propose to feed a man like Mr. Sitwell on cookies?"

"There's Spencer Martin, too," he chuckled. "City men can put away quite a pile in the country."

"Don't! Don't!" she stormed suddenly. "You make me feel like a brute."

"What's the matter, partner?"

"Everything with me—nothing, with you and Jack and Bill and Gertie. It's worth anything to have known you—if we never strike oil."

He flushed under his tan. "You'd feel the same way if you'd had to work—any one would."

But Edith was not so sure. She watched Gertie laying a table for her enemies with a care she had never taken for her own. Beneath it were trodden the black cinders of the former camp. There was no question of war or rivalry, but just the unwritten law that those who passed high noon here must eat, be they friend or foe. Gertie examined her work, her head on one side.

"I could do better with a few flowers and some more fixings, but if this place is going to be swimming in oil in a few hours what's the odds?"

Spencer Martin arrived in Los Angeles on time, having crossed the continent in his private car. There were two reasons for this method of travel. One was that he luxuriated in it himself. The other reason was that he expected Sitwell and his wife to take the trip back to New York on the second of September. This would happen whether he got the lease or not. He wanted it, and reckoned it would mean oil before long, but there was something else he wanted more. The thing about Martin, the thing that made him most dangerous, was that he knew how to wait. He smiled now because Sitwell thought he was coming out on account of the lease.

He wanted Claudia all the more because she spurned him, wanted her in a new way. He was ready to make her his wife, once Sitwell had been attended to. He did not think this latter process would take long, and to hasten it had been putting the screws on from New York. He didn't think of this first. Sitwell had put it into his head, where it stuck and assumed an odd significance when the former suggested that he would see that the lease came into the big man's hands in due time. Martin remembered that when Sitwell came back next morning and explained awkwardly that he and his wife must leave for California that evening. Sitwell was in the hollow of his hand now. And when Sitwell met him in Los Angeles, and he noted the nervous tension in the lean, twitching face he thought of it all the more. Damn the lease! He would be married soon, and have something to show his friends that would open their eyes.

It was at Martin's suggestion that they picked up Claudia. He had planned this too. His course of action was carefully thought out and there was nothing offensive in his manner. He was as jovial as ever, but quieter. The green eyes hardly glanced at the girl, and when she met them she found only a good-natured friendliness. He joked about the lease, wondered carelessly who would win out, remarked that he had more oil already than he knew what to do with and then said that he had brought the car over to take them both back to New York, where he needed Sitwell for big

ger things than a wildcat option. Sitwell held his breath as he listened.

They were twenty miles on the way. Hunt was in the front seat, Claudia between the other two men. Her heart was in her mouth at the thought of the next few hours, but somehow she felt less afraid. Martin seemed to have forgotten her.

The big car pulled up at half past eleven and Spencer Martin descended ponderously. Behind him came the others. They stopped and talked for a moment till they formed a little procession that moved slowly through the orange grove. Edith Winter watched them coming and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Hunt was last. Her heart was unruly. The engine coughed steadily and Shanklin and Harrison apparently took no notice. Denison was at the door of the cook tent with Gertie. His eyes were on Martin.

"Morning," said Martin.

Harrison and Shanklin nodded simultaneously. There was no handshake—nor did it seem to be expected.

"I'm trespassing."

"That's all right; make yourself comfortable."

The big man glanced at the derrick. "When do you shoot?"

"About three o'clock," said Harrison coolly, then stared at Sitwell. The latter was biting his lip. "There's nothing special to interest you yet a while, so I reckon we'll go about our business."

He turned away, and the green eyes followed him curiously. Shanklin was staring at Claudia, who looked back, her whole soul in her gaze. It was as though she were trying to explain why she had come. Presently Sitwell began to talk to Martin in undertones. Edith Winter and Hunt had disappeared. A moment later Claudia was beside the man she loved.

"I couldn't help being here to-day—they both insisted. Do you mind?"

"In a few hours one of us will be rich," he said shakily. "I hope it will be you—who need it more than I do. But whichever it is, I can't stay here, Claudia. It hurts too much."

"Don't go, Jack. It was all my fault—mine from the start—but don't go."

"It was no one's fault," he answered slowly; "it was all meant to be. You and I hadn't much to do with it. Burley wants me back, but behind Burley I'd see you.

We're within a few feet of either fortune or ruin; but, whichever it is, I don't complain of the last few months."

"It was always you, Jack," she whispered, "but I didn't know, till it was too late."

He bent his head as though to some invisible caress. It was the world of men for him now.

They turned and went slowly back, each dumb with a consciousness that needed no speech. Beside the derrick Sitwell was standing with Martin, his face drawn and haggard, but a brilliant, restless light in his eyes. He stared at the two, and his lips curved into a strange smile.

CHAPTER XXV.

Beyond the camp Edith Winter and Hunt sat beneath the orange trees. Presently Gertie's voice sounded within the cook tent. There followed a man's laugh. Denison came out and struck at a steel triangle hanging from a post. It gave out a ringing musical note.

"Dinner," he called. "Come and get it."

Spencer Martin roused himself. "Eh—what's that?"

Harrison wiped a pair of greasy hands. "We haven't got but ordinary stuff; but such as it is, you're welcome."

The red face turned a darker red, and the big man hesitated for one of the few times in his life. The smell of freshly roasted coffee drifted out of the cook tent, and something querulous stirred in his great stomach. He glanced at Harrison almost with respect. "Don't mind if I do," he said shortly.

Harrison, left to do the honors—Shanklin having evaded the duty—made a gesture to Sitwell. "Might as well come in—it don't make any difference now," he suggested with a certain grave simplicity.

Sitwell's face began to work convulsively. His eyes turned to Martin's broad back, then, meeting Claudia's profound gaze, he seemed to be struggling with conflicting inward forces. Harrison's voice sounded again, deep and dominant, like the beat of his own machinery. And at that Sitwell followed his master.

The contractor did not sit down, but drilling his last few feet, watched his guests with imperturbable interest. Martin, at the

end of the table, ate steadily, with an appetite that seemed sharpened by the manner of his entertainment. The small eyes missed nothing, and from the big body spread the suggestion that already he controlled not only the ground beneath but the fortunes of those around him.

Edith maneuvered Claudia into a seat between Hunt and herself, with a feeling that the girl needed protection. Opposite her was Denison, who ate with little side glances at his companions and an occasional squint at Spencer Martin. This was a meal he would remember all his life. Suddenly Martin looked along the table at Shanklin and stared fixedly. He said nothing, being occupied with a sudden reflection that perhaps here, too, was the kind of man for whom he could make a good opening in the oil business. That was one of Martin's strong points—he could appreciate ability in an opponent.

Something in the air got into Gertie's blood, and she surveyed her guests with a quizzical, whimsical consciousness that this was better than a motion picture. She stepped behind Sitwell. "Have some more. I hadn't much time to get this party ready, but I'll guarantee the coffee."

He gulped, and burned his throat, whereat Martin chuckled.

"Matter of fact, you're too kind." He tried to catch Claudia's eye, and failed. "I half expected to be chased off this lease."

Shanklin smiled grimly. "Some one is going to be chased off. I wonder which it will be."

Sitwell experienced a cold chill but Martin laughed outright. He loved a fight, however unscrupulous might be his own weapons, and for Sitwell he held his usual contempt toward those whom he had mastered. As to Claudia—whose husband was in the hollow of his hand—there was no hurry. He tilted his cup toward Shanklin as though in a toast to the victor.

"My compliments to the cook. You must have lived well out here."

"We've lived hard," was the significant reply.

Sitwell's voice came in shakily. "I see you've got two charges of dynamite ready—why two?"

"The second will wreck the well—if necessary. Have some more pie."

"What's the object in that?" asked Martin carelessly.

8A—POP.

"No particular object. My partner and I feel that way—that's all."

"Strike you as throwing good money after bad?"

Shanklin smiled. "In a sort of a way we've saved up for a bit of a fling at the finish."

"Any idea of what you're going to do if it's a dry well?"

"We'll meet that point when we have to."

"Supposing you have to, do you want a job—all of you?"

"Harrison and I don't." Shanklin paused, and added with a grin, "Denison might."

Martin looked across the table. Denison was sitting rigid, not missing a word. He perceived the underlying bitterness of it, and was aching to take a share, but knew that the art of it was beyond his powers. He could smash in Martin's face, but he could not talk like that. Then Martin stared straight at him. Yes, he remembered that letter and had wanted to see the man who wrote it ever since.

"Like a job—in case?"

Denison tried to answer, but felt as though his head were too full of blood. He gulped down what was in his mouth, and, licking his lips, pushed them out in trumpet form. The lips moved, though not a sound came, and Martin understood perfectly. They had repeated what he read in the letter. At that he wanted Denison the more.

There was a little silence, and Edith had a weak desire to scream. Harrison, who was standing near the door of the tent, had heard it all, and gave no sign. It seemed that those who had the most to lose were the least disturbed. Then something drew her eyes to Sitwell and she was amazed to see him staring at Martin with an expression of fiendish hatred that flicked swiftly over his face and left it drawn and sallow. She remembered, once, an animal in a trap, and it had suggested the same extraordinary mixture of venom and fear. Martin grunted, and went on eating. There was nothing the matter with his nerves. Presently he pushed away his plate.

"I'll give you five thousand dollars to leave that well as it stands, if it is dry," he said evenly.

Shanklin grinned. "Ask Harrison."

The big man got up, and walked slowly toward the rig, where he stood halfway between Harrison and the dipping cable. The business of the hour was oil and he thought

of nothing else. He had a feeling that there was oil here and that he would get it—in his own time. He was, too, a practical man and hated to see work destroyed and then done over again. There might be only another hundred feet to go.

"How about it?"

The contractor sent a contemplative glance to the top of the derrick, then stared at the twin dynamite torpedoes that lay gray and menacing, their blunt noses needing only the detonators to transform them into engines terrific and irresistible. He fingered the detonators, rolled in a twist of waste in his pocket, and his mind traveled down—down—nearly two thousand feet, to where the remorseless bit still gnawed at the bowels of the earth.

"I'll make it ten thousand," said Martin.

Through Harrison's veins leaped a sudden fiery flood. The labor, the stress, the sleepless nights, the struggle against unknown enemies who did their work and disappeared in the dark, the sight of this man who was at the bottom of it all and yet immune to anxiety and loss, all combined to infuse him with a spirit of utter defiance. No money could compensate for the dull roar and the spurt of flame that would wipe out this arduously performed labor, and leave Martin to do it all over again. He admired the man for his nerve, envied him for his power, and loathed him for his methods.

"What would you do in my place?"

"I'd take the money. I never refuse it."

Harrison recognized the truth. It was Martin's way.

"This time your money isn't any good. Better stand back a—"

CHAPTER XXVI.

That sentence was never finished. From the well's mouth came a dull sound, as though far below some surviving titan of the past were coughing as he slept. The dipping cable quivered. The sound grew sharper—hoarser—and from the smooth steel casing came the vicious hiss of air spewed forth at increasing velocity. The solid earth gave a slight tremor. Came a roar, and the bit sailed up, a tangle of cable and scored metal. With it was a column, black, shining, straight, like the trunk of a lofty tree. Column, bit, and cable hit the top of the derrick and tore through it. There was a crashing of timber, a rain of

fragments and shattered mechanism, and high into the stainless air climbed that black trunk, till, a hundred feet up, it feathered out like a gigantic plume, and caught the prismatic rays of the sun, absorbing them in great waving streamers. From the very skies pelted oil, fed constantly by the great column, whose bulk seemed every moment to increase. It rained, profuse and prodigal, as though rejoicing that again, after cycles of time, it had found the light. The wind caught it, brooming it out like dark and driven spray. And ever the hidden caverns of the earth yielded their store. There was nothing left of the derrick; the white tents had turned a rusty brown; rivulets of oil were trickling in little newly formed channels toward the ordered lines of orange trees; and the air was saturated with a strong, sharp color.

Harrison picked himself up. Martin had staggered back, and was wiping oil and blood from his cheek. The tent emptied itself with a crash of dishes, and Shanklin raced out, his mouth open but destitute of speech. Claudia's eyes followed him. Edith flung herself into Hunt's arms and shouted things that he only half heard through the steady roar of the gusher. Gertie had Denison by both hands and danced hysterically with a wild chant of joy and triumph. The place was transformed from a tense arena of rivalry and effort into a paradise that dripped riches on worthy and unworthy alike.

And Sitwell! Sitwell stood, his face transformed, his muscles twitching, his fingers curved like talons. He stared at the gusher with eyes that gleamed with fear and sheer amazement. Thus for a moment till he caught sight through the black rain of the bulky figure of Martin. In letters of fire there marched through his brain, warped with fraud and futile crime, the warning winds of three months ago. At that he put a hand to his head, which was burning, and with a scream sprang forward. Through the oil he came, loping like a beast, inarticulate with convulsive lips. Like a beast he sprang and fastened upon the bull neck of the man he now hated and feared. Terror and revenge were in that desperate grip, for he saw himself from now on under Martin's heel.

Under the driving impact Martin went down. The long fingers tightened and sank, while Sitwell, worrying him like a dog, made strange noises in his lean throat. Thus,

with the oil they had stooped so far to capture inclosing them like a pall, till the wind shifted and Harrison came racing up, Shanklin close behind. Five minutes later Martin drew a long breath; the blood began slowly to leave his puffed face; and his swollen eyes lost some of their glassy stare. He groaned, and lifting himself on one arm, saw Sitwell, bound but writhing, a thin fringe of bubbles on his purple lips.

After that it seemed that the lease became suddenly populous with strangers, who tore up from the highway, scrutinized the wreckage around the gusher, and, perceiving that somehow they were in the presence of tragedy as well as drama, maintained a bombardment of questions. Sitwell was moved into a tent, where Denison sat on him, regarding his unseeing eyes with mute satisfaction. The unknown God had spoken—that influence about which Gertie had come so near the truth—and in no uncertain sound.

It was to Claudia that Edith, cutting short her transports, turned with blessed understanding. She monopolized the girl, warning away even Shanklin, till the madman disappeared in a closed car, commandeered from an astonished tourist and guarded by Denison. Gertie, who refused to be separated, sat on the front seat. Then Edith and Hunt carried off Claudia. Shanklin watched silently, still held off by Edith's imperative signals. So the group dwindled till, except the knot of visitors that constantly passed up from the highway and back again there remained only Spencer Martin.

Shanklin stared for a moment at the two torpedoes. His brain was numb, but the sight of the big man standing so motionless set up a triumphant vibration that ran tingling through his body. What had Sepnser Martin to say now?

The broad, uncouth figure came slowly toward him, a travesty of itself, blood streaked, spattered with oil, torn by Sitwell's maniac fingers, but for all that a man vested with brutal courage and a stranger to fear.

"Well, you've won out." He extended a wide, fat palm. "That well is making twenty thousand barrels."

Shanklin looked at the hand, and suddenly it became a loathsome thing, emblematic of fraud and crooked practice—the pudgy fingers vested with dangerous pow-

ers—the hand that had led Sitwell to lunacy, and would not hesitate to repeat the gesture when again the occasion arose.

"By God—you swine!"

The bloated face quivered for a moment and the small green eyes receded. Harrison overheard and came up, standing without a word beside his partner. Martin took a long breath and seemed about to speak, but a glance at the two men held him silent. Then with head bent forward, and massive jowl set tight, he walked slowly away through the mist of oil, that last word ringing in his ears.

The gaze of the two followed him till he disappeared behind a cluster of tourists grouped just clear of the black spray. Harrison took a long, deep gulp of pure air.

"Jack," he said whimsically, "did Spencer Martin eat all of that second pie?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

So, among hidden depths of the earth, the honor and toil of men, the fortitude and love of women, found their great reward. Harrison's bit, eating through the hard crust that overlaid a great pool, had tapped the compressed accumulation of ages. It was a matter now of capping the flow. Not only was this well a gusher of fortunes, but the land around had acquired a value beyond all dreams of the past.

It was days before they achieved any real conception of the truth. The rush of oil men, the publicity, the growing general belief that behind it all lay that more thrilling than any gusher—the invasion of lessees who met the partners' terms with uncomplaining alacrity—the drone of work, as derrick after derrick sprang up around them—all this induced a sense of unreality that was but slowly dissipated.

The personnel, too, had changed. Edith and the half-stupefied Hunt departed for Catalina, after the latter, during a curt talk with Martin, handed in his resignation. He had a feeling, as Edith's story unfolded, that he wanted to bathe in the sea and free himself from an uncleanly contact.

Martin was rolling back to New York. He sucked at his black cigars, staring silently out of the window.

He did not think much of Claudia, except as one of the few women he had wanted and missed, but he was keenly mindful how he felt when, in the course of a stinging con-

versation with Hunt, he learned that she was now independent. The fact that did stick was that he had been beaten by three women. He had never heard of anything like it before, and it added a definite touch of humiliation. Women in the oil game! He made no attempt to see Claudia, not that it would have been useless, but because she was the wife of a madman and surrounded by something new and strange that he could not understand. It made him a little anxious. He had ruined many a man, but not one of them had gone mad before. The destruction of reason seemed more formidable than that of fortunes. He contemplated this for hours, little dreaming that he himself was but a power of destiny—a necessary factor in the complex development of his country, by whom and through whom the spirit of progress was mysteriously evidenced. Had he been told that it was his chicanery, through the agency of Sitwell, that had called forth every opposed strength of courage, determination, and loyalty, he would only have shrugged his massive shoulders and grunted contemptuously.

Harrison was divided between new duties, a sense of embarrassment over his wealth, and a profound joy in that his girl had come back to him. He did not think much of the money that poured in, knowing how little he asked for himself, but was grateful for what it meant to Gertie and Denison. Since it was not money that united them, it would not be money that held them together. He bought a few clothes, hung about Los Angeles for an empty day or two, then took up his abode in the little ranch house and pursued the steady custom of his life—which was work.

Claudia stayed in her boarding house under the care of a warm-hearted landlady. There was no need for it, because Shanklin sent her a check on account, one-twentieth interest in the property. She had examined it with incredulous eyes. It was, he explained in writing, only an estimate, but conservative, and she might expect further remittances month by month. She lingered over his signature with a sensation of having been thrust into a backwater of life where she could revolve aimlessly year by year while the main river swept indifferently by. Sitwell, in his padded room, had a stronger hold on her now than when his calculating brain was at its sharpest. He was only the wreck of a man, beating out a blind life

against the bars; but so long as he lived she must wait, however empty her soul of joy and peace. She saw Shanklin but seldom, not trusting herself to come so near the gates of her desire. These sequestered weeks gave her beauty a new and wistful touch.

Shanklin, for his part, did not question her decision. He saw Burley as often as he could, and found in Harrison a temporary anchorage for his restless spirit. He dared to long that Sitwell would die, and wondered for what baffling purpose life should be fostered in the insensate shell. He saw to it that the patient had every care, but did not go near the asylum, being told that Sitwell shouted constantly, cursing Claudia, Martin, and himself. His own future was so simple as to be almost uninviting. The promised thrill of freedom and power passed like a dream. He realized that this was a phase that must shortly end, and he would soon face existence again, equipped as never before. But in the meantime he had a queer liking to chat with Harrison and spend long solitary hours watching the new pipe line curve into the distance, and listening to the hum of work on new leases around his gusher. Where was he going to fit in without love?

One evening when the declining sun painted the Sierra Madre in fairy tints, he lay, face to the skies, listening to a far, clear call that reached him from the world of men. The time for rest was over. He recognized this quite definitely, and even wondered why it had not sounded before. Then he sat up with a swift consciousness of human presence. Claudia was standing at a little distance. As he stared she moved uncertainly toward him.

He went to meet her with a sudden breathlessness and at the sight of her face all speech left him. Her eyes were wide and glorious but in them were shadows of mystery, and her face was touched with awe. Tall and graceful she stood, lovely with every allurement of the body, but expressing as well the white purity of her soul, a guardian spirit, an altar for worship, a flame for man's inspiration, a harbor at his journey's end.

"Claudia!" he whispered. "Claudia!"
"Jack!"

She swayed a little, but something sent him a swift warning. He did not move.

"I want to tell you that—that Bertie died three days ago. I tried to find you, but you—"

"I've been away," he said shakily.

"He was conscious just for a little while. He sent you a message—you and Harrison—then he wanted to die. His mind began to go back over everything, and he got frightened." She shuddered.

Shanklin put his hand on her shoulder. "What was the message?"

She trembled at his touch. "The best man wins," she breathed faintly. "It was the last thing he ever said."

"Claudia!" His own voice sounded as coming from a long way off.

In the next issue, "Anybody's Money," a complete novel by Thomas McMorrow.



TAKING IT OFF THE DOUGHBOY

OME one connected with the war department has been struck by a bright idea—a revolutionary idea. Efforts are being made to lighten the load carried by the infantryman—inch for inch and pound for pound the most heavily laden army animal. An 800-pound pack mule carries a burden of 250 pounds; an automatic rifleman in the infantry, who probably doesn't weigh more than 180 pounds, is expected to make it snappy with 133 pounds of arms and equipment on his back. Machine gunners carry from 115 to 125 pounds, and the plain buck private who doesn't have to carry anything except what he needs to fight with, wear, eat for a couple of days and sleep under, prances along with a light load that doesn't weigh a great deal more than half as much as himself.

The war department experts are having trouble deciding what to leave out. They say that the average infantry pack shouldn't weigh more than sixty-one pounds, but so far they have been able to reduce its weight only a few ounces. Various suggestions have been made, among them that extra shoes be carried in the wagons, that shelter tents be abandoned or reduced in weight and that new methods of waterproofing be developed that would make raincoats and perhaps overcoats unnecessary. Efforts are being made through the American Legion to get the expert opinions of the men who served in the infantry during the war. If you've ever had your shoulders galled by pack straps and have any ideas on what a doughboy can get along without, send them to the war department.



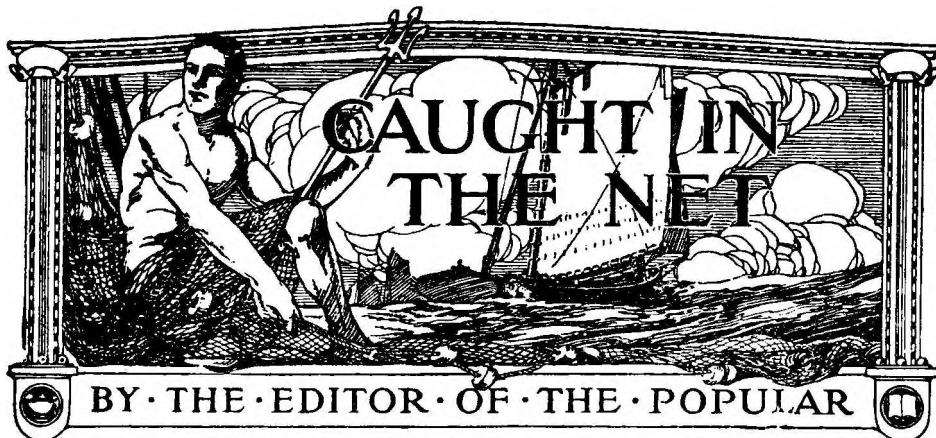
A BATTLEFIELD THAT HAS GONE OUT OF FASHION

HE guns of Waterloo had hardly died away when guides and innkeepers began to grow rich by catering to visitors who came to stand on the ground where Napoleon's power was broken forever. Later monuments were erected on the field and visitors flocked there until it became the most frequented spot in Belgium. The innkeepers grew richer. Then a little more than a hundred years after the battle had been fought came another war—then peace again. But the visitors didn't return. The guides wait in vain for tourists; the inns are closing theirs doors. Newer and greater battlefields are near by—Nieuport, Dixmude, Ypres—and attract the visitor to Belgium. Waterloo is deserted.

Through the gathering dusk drifted the perfume of jasmine. At arm's length these two, on whom destiny was now smiling, gazed at each other till he drew her suddenly close. Gone were all memories of toil and stress, forgotten was every moment when fate hung in the balance.

She gazed up at him with eyes in which moved unfathomable things. In them he discerned that which painted life in noble colors, making it a thing of pride and companionship, throbbing with joys and sanctified with tears. Here was his harbor, the home of his spirit.

Their lips met and he compassed his heart's desire.



BY · THE · EDITOR · OF · THE · POPULAR

ABOUT RESOLUTIONS

MOST men and women have contracted the habit of resolving away all their weaknesses on New Year's Day. It is a good habit. But it is impractical. There is so much bad in the best of us that we can scarcely expect to get rid of it all at once. Theoretically each of us is "captain of his fate" but practically it takes longer to get a master's certificate in self-command than to win to the command of a seagoing vessel. The sailor with an ambition to walk his own bridge does not learn seamanship by the bare resolution to become a master seaman. He takes up his profession point by point. He learns one thing at a time. If he is fortunate he may learn enough to become a master at the end of ten years.

The road to ship mastery and the road to self-mastery run parallel. If you would learn to be captain of your own fate you must, like the sailor, take up the profession point by point, one thing at a time. Trying to wipe out your weaknesses and develop your talents all at once will advance you little. If you are wise you will, for the present, concentrate your attention and what strength you already have on being strong in some one particular thing. You will even pick on some trivial failing, perhaps, rather than on a major fault, for experimentation. A sailor does not start his career by mastering navigation. He begins by swabbing decks.

It is surprising how much vital ground can be covered in the trivial process of swabbing decks. Swabbing decks, to begin with, strengthens the back and the arms. It improves the wind. It teaches the moral knack of doing something distasteful without distaste. Not difficult in itself, it fortifies the swabber and prepares him to tackle the more difficult tasks that lie ahead. It is only a short first step on the road to command, but it is a step that has to be taken before the next longer pace can be started.

For New Year's, therefore, it is a good plan to resolve to do just one thing. Not necessarily a big or difficult thing. Out of all your flaws select one—a minor one. If you succeed in mending it you will gain confidence to proceed to more serious failings. In the process of achieving self-mastery one small success is worth a dozen disastrous attempts, however whole-hearted. The reason most New Year resolutions fail is that the folk who make the resolutions bite off a great deal more than they can chew.

HAPPY GERM!

IT may not be flattering to us to learn that we are extremely similar in temperament to the diphtheria germ, but it is none the less true. Doctor Arthur I. Kendall, dean of the medical college of Northwestern University, has discovered that the diphtheria germ is extremely sensitive to his environment and that his whole character is dependent upon the nature of his surroundings. Which seems to establish pretty clearly a bond of moral brotherhood between man and the Klebs-Löffler bacillus.

The whole trouble with the bacillus in question is one of faulty environment. Raised in an atmosphere of beef tea he develops a murderous disposition, exudes hatred in the form of deadly toxins, and kills on sight. But carefully nurtured on good home cooking of the kind he likes, with plenty of sugar in it, and he is the embodiment of peace and good will. He devotes his life to the beneficent task of manufacturing lactic acid—the component which makes buttermilk a hygienic blessing—and would scorn to raise his hand against any man.

It is the usual thing to consider all disease germs as inherently dangerous. Here is a surprising contradiction of the popular idea. The diphtheria microbe, apparently, is rather to be pitied than despised. Sugar is his natural element. Place him in it and he is as harmless as any lamb. Force him to live out of it and he becomes an unnatural and vicious microcosm.

Just as we habitually regard noxious germs as fundamentally venomous, so we commonly view noxious men. But the truth is that most disagreeable men, most sour men, most weak, tyrannical, and criminal men, once had potentialities for good. Like the deadly germ of diphtheria, they have been brought up on the wrong fare and are rather to be pitied than anathematized. Unfortunately, a man is considerably more complex than a germ. The same fare that makes one man good makes another bad. If it were possible to determine just what kind of environment suited each individual we might attain the moral millenium. But so far we are too ignorant of our own natures to make that determination possible. The diphtheria bacillus knows what he likes best and what is good for him. Man, for all his vaunted superiority, has yet to attain that knowledge.

AUTHENTIC MAGIC

IT is a small, quiet, dignified audience. The men nod and whisper as they take their seats. There is nothing obviously extraordinary about them and one would hardly suppose that these gentlemen had a string of learned degrees tagged after their names.

Darkness, after the speaker has been introduced. It is to be an address with moving pictures. On the screen is flashed the behavior of a bullet as it shatters a plate of glass. Then the curves and shapes of a solid rubber ball as it is impelled from a gun are shown. The various actions of different explosives and projectiles are given minutely on the screen and their characteristics studied. Gunpowder, dynamite, nitroglycerin, TNT have revealed their terrible energies without a sound. And the speaker, who has penetrated to the heart of a thunderbolt, casually tells us that his pictures were taken at the rate of five thousand a second!

Mild applause, a low buzz of conversation, and another man stands before the gathering. What he is demonstrating looks like the trick of a slick magician but he assures his listeners that it is pure nature without the adulteration of human guile. He calls his subject "a hesitating magnet." In his experiment he causes a bar magnet of cobalt steel to float in the air, to approach or recede from a certain object. This object, it is explained, is an ordinary magnet, and through repulsion exercised between it and the magnetic bar of cobalt steel the latter acts in apparent defiance of gravitation, suspended in mid-air like the celebrated coffin of Mohammed. The speaker says that the peculiar nature of the cobalt-steel specimen is entirely responsible for the unbelievable exhibition.

Polite applause, a little laughter, and the next act is introduced. It is a biological marvel. The audience is invited to examine the specimens, after a brief talk. Three beetles are shown that had been operated on by one of the pupils of the famous Przibram. The original heads of these beetles had been cut off and others substituted in their places, without killing the creatures! And to prove the claim absolutely, one of the beetles was dissected to show how the original and introduced gullets in the specimen had grafted together! Among other remarks, the speaker said that the new heads had produced changes in the beetles, especially in sex characteristics and color variations.

But where is this scientific vaudeville taking place? you ask. Well, it was at a recent meeting of the Royal Society, London.

DO WE TRY TOO HARD TO WIN?

SPORT history is going to record 1924 as a banner year for international competition. During the next twelve months our champions will meet the best that the rest of the world can send against them in almost every branch of sport, and before long we are likely to hear from across the Atlantic the anguished wail that Americans take sport too seriously; that they train too diligently and try too hard to win.

The Olympic Games will arouse the most widespread and among the general public the most intense interest of any of the international competitions of the year. On the basis of points scored in the track and field events the United States team should win, as our teams have won each Olympic since the revival of the ancient games in Athens in 1896. But we will not win because other nations take the games less seriously than do we. As a matter of fact, some of the European nations are making far more systematic efforts to produce winning teams than ever have been made in America.

Most of the charges that Americans take sport too seriously come from England. We admire the British as a nation of sportsmen; we admire their high ideals of amateur sport—and we doubt if they really are any less anxious to win than are Americans. Much has been made of the fact that English college oarsmen in training are allowed to drink beer and wine and to smoke cigarettes. This, it seems to us, shows more clearly that English ideas of proper training differ from ours than that Americans are more anxious to win than are Englishmen. We have a conviction that if English coaches thought that their men would be better without beer and cigarettes, beer and cigarettes would be banned. Probably the difference of attitude toward sport of the English and the American athlete is more apparent than real. The American admits that he wants to win; the Englishman likes to adopt a nonchalant pose toward even his most serious enterprises—a pose that doesn't keep him from being a brave and stubborn fighter in war or sport.

International sport without a keen desire to win would be ridiculous. Sometimes, no doubt, in hot competition this desire leads to a lowering of standards, and from incidents we have seen at home we doubt if American competitors abroad always have been wrongfully accused by their foreign rivals. But the loud protests that so often are raised after an American victory themselves dispose of the charge that Americans care more about winning than do men of other nations.



POPULAR TOPICS

HAPPY NEW YEAR! Do your resolution-breaking early and avoid the strain. It is less dangerous to fall off the porch than off the roof.

A SPEAKER at the convention of the American Bankers' Association said that what the United States needs is a "country-wide mental vacation."

One of the few things the matter with this best of all countries is that too many people forget to come back from their mental vacations.

As a presidential candidate Henry Ford seems to be equipped with a self-starter. By election time he may find that what he really needs is a shock absorber.

DOCTOR G. M. STRATTON, head of the department of psychology of the University of California, says that waving a red flag before a bull doesn't make him any more peeved than waving a flag of any other color—that bulls, like other animals,

are color blind, and that it is the fluttering of the banner, not its color, that excites the gentleman cow.

Of course we believe the doctor—but we will let him wave the red flag when there are any four-footed Firpos around.

THE department of agriculture is authority for the statement that it costs the average farmer fifty-three cents to grow a bushel of oats which he sells for forty-eight cents.

Now the department should set some of its bright young men to work figuring out just how much it costs to raise a crop of wild oats.

LIKE Martin Davison—who is waiting to talk with you on page 151 we want to help our readers. Therefore we are passing along some advice to young men who are thinking about getting married.

“Never”—says a Western judge whose chief job is presiding over divorce trials—“marry a blonde. Blondes are aggressive, practical, matter of fact, restless and fond of variety. They like to roam, and unless the home is on four wheels they do not make good mates, as a rule.” He advises young men to marry brunet girls with high cheek bones, big noses, and “high and square heads.”

After finding a young lady with high cheek bones, a big nose and a square head, the young man in search of a bride can take advantage of this additional advice of a Syracuse, New York, chiropodist: “You can’t find a soul mate unless you find a sole mate. Choose your wife by the shape of her feet. In most cases the girl with low arches will be found to be cruel and exacting.”

Our own advice is to play a game of Mah Jong with the lady under consideration before signing on the dotted line. If she knows when to say “pung” and when to say “chow” proceed with caution; if she can add up the score without going mad give her an unconditional release—she is too darn smart to have to face at breakfast every morning.

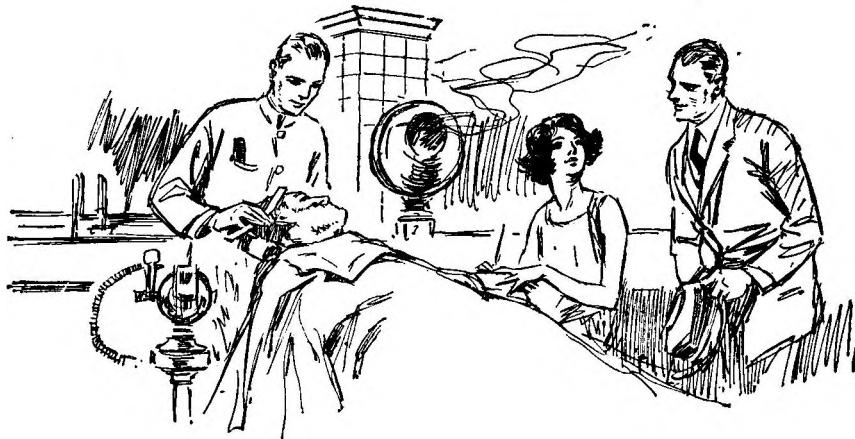
OUR idea of good sports are the people of the City of Verdun, who sent a thousand francs to the Japanese ambassador in France to be given to the relief fund for victims of the earthquake disaster. With the offering went an expression of regret that the sum, because of war losses, could not be larger.

THE Society for the Prevention of Crime made things pleasant toward the end of New York’s racing season by causing the arrest of various gentlemen whom they accused of being bookmakers. The racing crowd showed their sympathy with the forces of reform by cheering the alleged bookies. If this sort of thing keeps up even lambs will be afraid to gambol on the turf.

DON’T worry if the coal in your bin is low. Doctor Charles D. Walcott of the Smithsonian Institute reports that the heat from the earth’s surface is driving the glaciers back toward the north pole. He says that the famous Selkirk Glacier has moved back more than a thousand feet in the past seven years and that in another thousand years or so fur coats will be an affectation in the Klondike.

IT is New Year’s Eve, 1983. Several men are gathered about the electric heater in a crossroads general store, watching radio-transmitted motion pictures of that-minute happenings in various parts of the globe and listening to the chatter of a radio loud-speaker. After a while there is a pause; the screen is dark and the loud-speaker silent. An old man leans back in his chair and strokes his long white whiskers reflectively.

“Yes,” he says, “I can remember 1923 very vividly. That was the year in which we had no bananas.”



Peter's Pan

By C. S. Montanye

Author of "After the Ball Was Over," "Ten Knights in a Ballroom," Etc.

Ottie Scandrel promotes a fight he never bargained for.

LISTEN! If you have a few minutes you don't know what to do with, leave word with your favorite hallboy to refer all bootleggers, bill collectors and relatives to the janitor and get a thrill out of this.

A week after the Central New Jersey Baseball League ended its season with Ottie Scandrel's Edgemont Tigers putting the bunting safely in the safe and slicing up the championship series money, Ottie, dressed like a three-ring circus, wandered over to my gym in the Bronx and took a chair in my office—no more content with himself than a good-looking chorus girl after a peek in the mirror. Edgemont's leading citizen got rid of a dash of biography, spent a half million—verbally—and from that passed on to a review of how he intended to get rid of the time between the present and the spring training season.

He was halfway through the fairy tale when an interruption was furnished by no less than Looie Pitz, a manager of box fighters and an elderly enemy of Ottie's. Pitz wandered casually in, gave us the top of the afternoon and looked Scandrel over.

"So you're a baseball magnate now? And you own a team that won a rag somewhere

out West? Well, all I can say is that if luck was twine you could wrap up a few Christmas packages."

"Twine? What are you doing—stringing me?" Ottie grunted. "If I got luck it's because I use my nut for something else besides a place to park the castor. And my ball club ain't located out West, neither. It's forty-nine minutes from Times Square as the robin flies. Make any more wise cracks and I'll introduce your eye to the back of my knuckles."

"Here, here!" I broke in. "Every time you two boys get together you argue like a couple of rival washwomen. Behave yourselves. What brings you up here, Looie—besides your feet?"

Pitz cast a jealous glance at Ottie's necktie and took a chair.

"It's this way. I've got a lead on a live wire who punches like a train conductor, takes punishment like a henpecked husband and wouldn't stay down for the count if you offered him half of Fifth Avenue. He'll be a welterweight when he's boiled down and dried out. He answers to the name of 'Swat' McGee and just at present he's running to waste. Every time I think of it I could cry on your neck."

"Cry on Joe's," Scandrel said hastily. "I got a clean collar on. A sweet puncher, you say? And he's going to waste, is he? What's the matter with you—are you teaching voice torture now?"

Pitz sighed.

"It costs money to pick a socker out of the street and give him form. It costs money and Belmont Park give me an awful lashing last month. The bronc I put everything on but ray undershirt ran the wrong way. I'm so broke that if a trip to the Coast cost nine dollars cash I wouldn't be able to get no farther than Hoboken. Still," he added more cheerfully, "my notes are always good."

"Yeah—them on the piano!" Scandrel snapped. "Er—just give me a tab on this McGee party and I'll call in and see him some Sunday morning. I ain't got a thing to do until I assemble my ball team down in Texas next March. Maybe if I like this McGee's looks I'll handle him through the winter just for fun. The punchers always were my long suit—my patent-leather pajamas—you know."

Pitz fished three quarters of a deceased cigar from his pocket, borrowed a match and began the fumigation.

"You'll handle him through the winter just for fun—if I have a half interest in him. Because I put everything on a horse and not a thing fit don't give you no license to step in and clean up on something I discovered all by myself. Fifty-fifty and I'll take you downtown and show you that Swat's the genuine case goods. Talk to me."

A hungry look illuminated the pale-blue eyes of my boy friend. The roped inclosure and the leather pushers had been the breath of life to him before he had picked up the Edgemont ball team at a give-away figure and began to teach hitting with a regulation bat instead of the mitts. I could see with a quarter of an eye that Ottie was no more interested in what Looie Pitz divulged than Columbus about the jewelry of Queen Isabella.

He licked his lips, looked at me, buttoned a pearl-gray spat and coughed.

"Er—if this McGee looks like anything," he said finally, "I'll take him on shares with you, Looie."

"Put it in writing," Pitz requested canily, "and leave O'Grady here witness it."

An agreement was finally scratched off

and signed. This done we collected our headgear and sought the street where Ottie's big gray limousine and dark-brown chauffeur stood waiting. Pitz gave the layout an envious glance, the chauffeur an address and we piled in and sat down.

"Where did you come across McGee?" I asked curiously.

"Yeah—spill it," Ottie ordered. "Don't be holding out on us. As a half owner in this boy I want a word on him."

Pitz found a piece of another cigar in his vest, borrowed a second match and crossed his legs.

"McGee drives one of them Black and Blue taxies. Saturday night a week ago the cab company gave a benefit for its disabled employees—"

"The jobbies who went blind from watching their meters?" Scandrel interrupted.

Pitz silenced him with a blast of cigar smoke and rambled on.

"The benefit was an entertainment. They had vaudeville acts and dancing and the like. The last thing on the menu was a six-round go between McGee and a pug who was introduced as 'Young Kid' McCoy—a second-rate box fighter who probably got twenty-five dollars for his share in the show. Well, I had a ticket and was away down front. What I seen McGee do to McCoy was plenty, I want you to know. He's crude and he's rude and he's one of them babies who have got a constant grouch but if he was hanging wall paper he couldn't have pasted McCoy worse. I looked him up afterward and found out the only fighting he had ever done was with fares. He's a natural if there ever was one!"

Pitz continued to drone on and impart the remarkable virtues of Mr. McGee. If the tin-can pirate had been royalty more could not have been said about him. Meanwhile the limousine passed through a considerable portion of Manhattan and presently invaded a neighborhood where a human life was worth less than a cracked franc. This section bordered the Hudson on one side, some gas tanks on the other and was backed up by a freight yard.

"Locomotives have been there," Scandrel hollered. "I can see their tracks!"

"Where does your boy hang out—under a dock?" I asked.

Pitz made a gesture.

"We're headed for the garage where the taxi company keeps its cabs. McGee told

me that he finishes his shift at three bells every day. It's ten of now. We'll just be in time to catch it."

Two more streets and we turned a corner, drawing up before a garage that was a block long. In front of it a flock of taxicabs were being hosed off and groomed up by six or eight mechanics who knew enough about grease to fight Italy.

Ottie's blackamoor opened the front door and bowed us out.

"McGee around?" Pitz asked the nearest mechanic.

"Not yet," was the answer. "You guys in the market for a sweet-running taxi with a guaranteed fast clock and good rubber all around? We got a 1912 Ark that we're willing to let go for a thousand even. If that ain't a bargain at that figure neither was Manhattan Island for twenty-four dollars."

"Find yourself a wrench and go back to work!" Ottie bawled. "Whom do you think we are—junkmen? Beat it!"

The mechanic took a look at the John McGraw of Edgemont, mumbled something, and strolled. He was hardly under a car before a taxi shot around the corner and dashed down the street. Pitz immediately became excitement itself.

"Here comes McGee now! Get that build on him! If he ain't another Stanley Ketchel I don't know the difference between a dime and a dollar. We'll get him to put on the gloves in the back of the garage and click off a couple of rounds with some of the local talent."

As it turned out this was entirely unnecessary.

The taxi shot into the curb and stopped abruptly. McGee, six feet of bulk and brawn, with a map on him that must have ruined his watch every time he looked at it, leaped out from under the wheel and threw open the door. From the interior of the cab emerged a rough number who was only one degree more refined in appearance than the taxi pilot himself.

This party slammed a valise down on the pavement and stuck out his jaw. Two looks were enough for Ottie and myself to recognize him as being "Battling" Brannigan, a heavyweight who at one time had been a sparring partner of Willard and some of the other large push-overs.

"You're crazy!" Brannigan roared. "What do you mean by driving me down

here when I told you to let me out at the Harlem A. C.?"

"Two weeks ago Tuesday," McGee shot back, "I picked you up on Times Square and took you down to Fourteenth Street. There was seven dollars on the register. You slipped into a gin mill and forgot to come back. There's two fish and a clam on the meter now. Kick in with a ten-berry bill or I'll break every bone in your head."

"You will?" Brannigan snarled. "Come on and try it, you dizzy dope fiend! You're undoubtedly so full of the dust that you don't know what you're doing. I ain't been on Fourteenth Street since I was a child and what do you mean—gin mill?"

While the mechanics hastily dropped their tools and drew near the lad we had journeyed downtown to look at went into action.

No demonstration with the pillows could have shown the welterweight taxi chauffeur off to better advantage. Stepping into it he did his stuff and he did it rapidly and thoroughly. It was true he displayed a left that he could have checked in the garage, was painfully awkward and imagined that hooks were something used on flounders but these liabilities were more than overbalanced by a sledge-hammer right and the aggressive way in which he made himself like it. Nothing short of concrete seemed able to withstand his terrific swings.

Five minutes after the beginning of the quarrel Brannigan reposed in the gutter with his chin resting on the curb.

"Hey, Shorty," McGee hollered, strolling nonchalantly over to the doors of the garage. "Tell the boss I'm going out to get a little fodder."

"After we get through with you!" Looie Pitz snapped, bounding forward as if touched by electricity.

McGee swung around. Pitz immediately grabbed him by the shoulder.

"What's yours?" the fighting taxi driver hissed. "Leave go of my shoulder with your hand. I got enough of your patter the other night. I think you're a hophead. You make more promises than a man with a family of nine children on the brink of Christmas Eve!"

"I'm taking an interest in you!" Pitz declared.

"You talk like a bank!" the other sneered. "Drop your hand or I'll poke you one. You're keeping me from my lunch!"

As Pitz dropped his hand Ottie loomed up. He tapped the hard-hitting chauffeur and thrust a jaw forward.

"Get in order!" Scandrel snarled. "You won't listen to him but you'll listen to *me* or I'll punch you one on the end of your chin. Didn't you hear Looie say we wanted to have a chirp fest with you? Come on, we're going to roll you uptown and try and make something out of you."

"You're making it now and that's a monkey!" McGee bawled. "Who are you guys anyway—you act like plain-clothes men."

"Enough's more than sufficient!" Ottie replied, collaring the big tramp and conducting him forcibly to the limousine.

Exactly two weeks later Swat McGee, under the joint direction of the Messrs. Scandrel and Pitz, blossomed out like a flower at a local fight parlor where he turned in a good account of himself against a welter who had everything in his clouts except the arc lights. McGee copped on points and only lost a K. O. because the timekeeper was probably in debt to his opponent. Another scuffle with a promising lad who was a light-heavyweight from his ring shoes to the top of his roof lasted a round and a half. McGee knocked him through the ropes, won a lot of publicity and not a little gossip. The result of this was that Ottie and Pitz had little difficulty in signing their feed bag for a mill with one "Blacksmith" Milligan, a gentleman whose principal claim to fame lay in the fact he had once gone fifteen fast rounds with a cousin of Gene Tunney. They were spotted as the draw on a good card scheduled to hurl open the doors of a brand-new Brooklyn slam factory, late in October.

"As the kid stands now," Ottie said on the afternoon the articles were signed, "he'll need plenty work to send the Blacksmith back to his anvil. That left of his is ridiculous and he must have picked up his foot-work in a shoe store. All he's got is that right and—"

"And all Columbus had was a ship!" Looie Pitz broke in.

"He'll be shipped if we don't trim down his rigging!" Scandrel yelped. "Listen. We've got to get this boy out of town. We can never shape him up around these parts. Every time he's doing a piece of roadwork he meets one of them Black and Blue taxies and finishes the stretch sitting next to the

chauffeur and talking over them dear old garage days. The cabs will ruin him. So I'm going to remove him from temptation. I just now rented a place out on the petticoats of Edgemont. We'll blow there tomorrow."

It was at this point that the fun really began.

The lair of the Tigers and the home of Ottie's ball park, once we reached it, showed a surprising number of recent improvements. Main Street boasted *two* flicker theaters, a real-estate office that nobody had seen before and one of these drug stores where anybody with a little time can do all their shopping. The clerk in one of the cigar shops told us confidentially that the ball club's win on the pennant had boosted the hamlet more than the Rotary Club and all the traveling salesmen who ever passed through.

"Scandrel is certainly one grand little press agent," the counter jumper murmured, short changing me before I was aware of it. "And the best part of it is that you don't have to tell him he's good—he knows it!"

Two hours after the gang we had brought over from the Bronx to assist in the polishing up of Monsieur McGee had made themselves uncomfortable in the cottage Ottie had rented and were setting up a gym in the barn back of it, I met Scandrel by appointment in the lobby of the Hotel Fiasco which, in the good old summertime, was the headquarters of the home team.

"Get this, Joe," were his first words of greeting. "This trap has got a new barber shop with *four* chairs. Tie that. No more worry now about getting a kick out of a two-weeks-old safety-razor blade. Let's go down and buy a shave if only for the novelty of it."

The new tonsorial parlor was located in that part of the basement that had formerly been the meeting place of the coal bins. It was quite Longacre with seventy dollars' worth of imitation marble spread around, mirrors, a gentleman with a whisk broom and a hot-towel machine—to say nothing of three barbers and a manicurist who, as we entered, was camped beside the shop's sole customer. This was a boy tilted back for a shave and disguised with a couple of layers of lather.

We didn't pay very much attention to him at first.

"What do you know about this?" Ottie barked the instant we were inside. "We got a manicure and everything! I'll bet you can even get a hair cut here!"

With that he tore off his coat and did a swan dive into the nearest chair. As he made it the little manicurist raised a fluffy blond head and looked across at him with round, wondering eyes.

Sweet lady!

There might have been prettier girls along Broadway but I doubt it. The cuticle attendant of the Fiasco's clipping pavilion was surely a complete eyeful if there ever was one. Besides the golden hair she admitted a complexion that was like hothouse peaches and dairy cream, lips that would have made osculation popular if it had never been heard of before and a cute little nose with a couple of freckles across its bridge. Honestly, she was no more exciting than a crime wave!

The color scheme of her smart though simple little frock was black and white. For a fact, Solomon would have traded all his wives for her without bothering to think it over. And just to make matters more interesting she had one of those baby smiles—the kind that hung the S. R. O. sign out at the Winter Garden.

A barber who had been born and brought up in sunny It pounced upon a sheet and began to tie it around Ottie's neck. Mumbling something, Scandrel hurled the linen aside and leaped out of the chair. Before I could even suspect what his intentions were he was around the third chair in line and showing the blond girl all his teeth in a grin that began at one ear and ended at the other.

"Eh—now—pardon me," the conceited clown stammered witlessly, "but this is an unexpected pleasure if I do say so myself. Where do *you* come from, baby?"

The manicurist lost her smile and made him the gift of a look that would have been straight strychnine to any one with a tea-spoonful of gray matter.

"Are you," she cooed dreamily, "the village census taker?"

Ottie snapped his fingers.

"No—he works for me—the same as every one else in this dive. Don't be like that, honey. I'm a person of importance around this vicinity and I feel that we ought to get acquainted. My—er—nails are in a terrible condition!"

"In that case," the girl said, "I'll be glad to give you my services when I'm finished with this gentleman. But please remember these. I'm not going out to dinner with you to-night. I hate automobile rides and I never go to the theater unless properly chaperoned, nor do I trade telephone numbers. Oh, yes—and flirting, for all I know, is something eaten with chopsticks."

The party in the chair blew away a pound and a half of shaving soap and chuckled.

"I say," he stated, "I'm glad there's one young lady with sense. Remarkable, what?"

Scandrel gave *him* a glare and went back to his chair and the astonished barber waiting for him.

"Let's go, Antonio. Keep your thumb out of my eye and regard your conversation as money—save it for a rainy day."

While Ottie was getting the twice-over the customer in the third chair was lifted back to a normal position and dusted off. It was when he was turned loose that I first realized he was as good looking in his line as the little blondie was in hers. In the neighborhood of six feet and a recent arrival in the early twenties, this individual looked like Adonis *should* if he didn't. On the level, it was a shame that such beauty should have been wasted on a mere man. He had black hair, classical features, a complexion any show girl would have given a year's salary in cash for, eyes with lashes a foot long, a straight smeller and a chin with a dimple in it. And not alone this but he was as classy as Park Avenue and, figured from any angle, a natural disturbance.

"Kindly keep the change," he requested, handing a bank note to the butcher who had operated on him and another to the nail expert. "I hope—"

"Say," the little blondie interrupted with a gasp, "I know who *you* are! You're Peter Pelham and you were the winner in the Beauty Contest the *Film Flam Magazine* held last spring!"

Even from where I sat I could see a wave of color creep into the young man's face.

"As a matter of fact," he admitted sadly, "I am that unfortunate person. Fair exchange. Who may you be?"

"I might be Mary Garden but I'm not!" the frill answered pertly. "I'm Sue Wild—no relation to Oscar. Up until last week I was using my orange stick in the Mono-

mania Building on Times Square. But the actors bothered me something awful—telling me how good they were. When I saw this shop's advertisement in the paper I didn't hesitate a minute. I'm very fond of the country."

"You must be," Pelham murmured, reaching for his headpiece. "We shall meet again, Miss Wild. I feel it in my bones."

"He must have rheumatism!" Ottie yelped when Pelham had aired and the girl had taken her stool around beside him. "So that's Peter Pelham, is it? Ain't he the whipped cream? A regular cave man, hey?"

"I'm glad he isn't," the blondie murmured. "I hate cave men. In my opinion floors are made to be walked on—not dragged over."

While Ottie was chewing the rag, I ruminated on the subject of Peter Pelham. The name was entirely familiar. As the winner of a male beauty contest given by a movie magazine, his perfect countenance as well as his history was known to nearly every one. To begin with he was the only son of Atwater Pelham, a millionaire mining engineer and was reputed to be engaged to some society girl who traced back to the Knickerbockers and proved her pedigree by wearing them!

Around Boul' Broadway, young Pelham had something of a reputation as a dance hound, a tea tippler and a first nighter. He was frequently mentioned in the society column of various dailies or had been until he had crashed out as the contest winner. After his beauty had been broadcasted it was unpopularly presumed that the healthy and wealthy youth would elevate the screen in dress-suit dramas.

How wrong the rumors were I was destined to find out soon.

A half hour later Ottie reluctantly tore himself away from the Sheba of the scissors and file and went upstairs to prey on the lobby. As we turned into it, the desk clerk, chatting with Pelham, dropped a nod in our direction.

"That there is Mr. Scandrel now!"

Two bounds and a leap and Pretty had joined us. Before Ottie could make a move Pelham had collected his right fin and was shaking it heartily.

"I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Scandrel! Remarkable thing that you should have been downstairs in the barber shop and I totally unaware of your

identity. I'm Peter Pelham, you know. How much time can you spare me?"

"What are you selling—rouge?" Ottie growled.

The blue-blooded youth narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

"Eh—not exactly. Bluntly, I'm selling myself. If you will allow me to explain I feel certain I could make you a proposition that will be of considerable interest. Shall we sit down?"

"Yeah—but keep off my lap!"

Pelham's proposition turned out to be a trifle extraordinary. To make a short story shorter, the prize winner's confession ran along the following lines. It seemed that some friend had sent his photograph to the *Film Flam Magazine* as a joke. Pelham claimed that he had no knowledge of the fact he had won the contest over the heads of several million egotistical shipping clerks, bookkeepers and floorwalkers until he had awakened one morning to find himself famous—or infamous.

Immediately the magazine had made his profile as familiar as a wart, he explained that he had received an offer from the Fanatic Picture Productions to star in six reels of "His Fatal Beauty"—an offer that had been immediately spurned. Next—according to his Rubaiyat—his attorneys had endeavored to get an injunction against the magazine to prevent more copies from being sold and had entered suit against it for fraud and deceit. These actions had merely stirred up more publicity and had proved futile. We were told that from the minute the contest had been decided Pelham's life had turned from a thing of light and life to blight and strife.

"Really," he explained, "you have no conception of my misery. You saw how it was down in the barber shop. Go where I will I am invariably recognized, singled out, stared at like a curiosity and in some cases openly jeered at. And all through no fault of my own. I tell you it's simply maddening!"

"Where do I fit in?" Scandrel inquired curiously. "Do you want I should take a fall out of that mock turtle who sent your picture to the magazine?"

Pelham fingered a platinum watch chain and shook his head.

"No, I want to prove to the world in general and my fiancée in particular that a man can be good looking without being a

cake eater or a divan devil. I've given the matter considerable thought and the result of my meditations is such I have decided to throw myself upon your charity. In a word, I want to join your staff of pugilistic assistants, I want to become one of your welterweight's sparring partners, learn all I can from him and then endeavor to make a name for myself in the ring. At college I was something of an amateur boxer and I verily believe that with the curse that has overtaken me goading me on I can prove worthy. Don't you gather my meaning? My aim is not to be the Beauty but rather the Beast. Take me on and I will pay you any sum within reason."

When Ottie finally learned that Pelham was absolutely in earnest he came out of his trance, rubbed his hands and went to it like a loan shark after a client who had moved without leaving a forwarding address. The result of the conference was that a figure satisfactory to both was reached and Pelham departed—if anything more pleased than Ottie!

"If that ain't a hot one then neither is Hades!" my boy friend guffawed. "He must be either out of his mind or as silly as sweet sixteen. But what I care—as long as he's got accident insurance. I'll pass the word to the bunch to lay off and a good time ought to be had by all."

He got up and started wandering away.

"Where are you going now?"

"Down to get my nails shined up again. The—now—polish is all wore off. Take care of yourself, Joe."

That was Tuesday p. m.

Late the following morning Pelham, chaperoned by a valet, more luggage than the Prince of Wales, and a smart little coupé that had set somebody back eight or nine grand, blew up to the cottage and took a slant at the big sign Ottie had painted and hung out. This read:

SWAT McGEE'S TRAINING QUARTERS.

After helping himself to a look Pelham went up on the porch. As he reached it McGee, bundled up in a sweater and ready for his morning canter, broke out from the cottage in company with a few of his playmates. The former taxicab driver took one look at Pelham and began to laugh.

"Here's the stuffed shirt now, fellers! Ain't he cunning—I'm asking you? Go

right in and help yourself to the bananas, cutey. But be careful you don't skin them!"

"Are you addressing me, may I ask?"

McGee walked over.

"Listen, I got my orders to lay off you, but be careful. I used to roll stiffs like you around in my wagon and the whole troupe of you give me a terrible pain. So while you're parked here behave yourself or I'll knock you absolutely dead, you stage-door John, you!"

Pelham looked at the other's cast-iron countenance.

"You'll oblige me," he drawled, "by keeping your comments to yourself. I have no desire to have anything to do with you. I regard you more or less in the light of an unnecessary blunder perpetrated by civilization. What's more I hold you and your kind in extreme contempt."

With that he spoke to his valet and vanished inside, leaving McGee with his mouth open wide enough to drive a ten-ton truck through.

"The silly cake eater!" he managed to ejaculate at last. "I'll get that baby some day and I'll get him good—Scandrel or no Scandrel. That's a vow!"

It was.

Pelham, in white-silk ring clothes which he admitted had been made to order for him, stepped his stuff the same afternoon. Take it from me, he showed us enough. With Ottie as a sparring partner for the work-out the beautiful one soon proved beyond question that the boxing instruction he had received in the university had undoubtedly been administered by either a professor who handled mathematics or Latin.

For one thing Pelham telegraphed his punches a week in advance, was as open as a church and as uncovered as the Mediterranean. He was fast and aggressive enough but as wild as the interior of Africa and as awkward as a schoolboy giving his teacher an apple for the first time. During the ten minutes that Ottie worked him Scandrel could have dropped him when he pleased for a full count.

Pelham's swings would have gone big in an amusement park!

"What is your frank opinion?" he asked when the bout had been completed. "Have I any chance, do you imagine, to make good?"

Ottie winked at Looie Pitz.

"Why not? Fulton wasn't able to build a steamboat the first time he saw a river. Stick to me and I'll put you on Fame Avenue. You're one of the hardest sockers I ever boxed with. At least three times I thought I was due for the curtains. Don't breathe a word of this to anybody but I'm telling you straight—you're there!"

"Yes, I thought so," Pelham answered without the trace of a smile. "With your permission I'll excuse myself. I need a manicure and—"

"So do I," Ottie interrupted. "I'm glad you reminded me. I'll get right over for mine now—before you get dressed."

Both breezed with the greatest of rapidity.

The next day Looie Pitz left for the Big Town and two conferences with some important matchmakers who were ready to sign McGee for big-league scuffles—if he was able to give Blacksmith Milligan the wrong end of it. The remarkable feature of Pelham's new position was the enthusiasm he displayed. Each morning he worked vigorously with the sneering McGee and while McGee, with Scandrel watching him narrowly, pulled his punches, he burned the good-looking youth up with fiery looks and caustic remarks that Ottie didn't get. Pelham took it all in silence—dressed when his labors were over and then hurried to the barber shop of the Hotel Fiasco for a manicure and a shave.

He confessed the manicure was important if the facial twice-over was not!

"Is Miss Wild interested in him?" I asked Ottie one afternoon.

Scandrel curled a lip.

"With me around? How *could* she be? And another thing. Sue isn't so crazy for the box fighters. That's where I've got the edge on him. He may be a millionaire's son and all the world to society but I got a ball team and I mean something here in Edgemont!"

Scandrel probably did, at that, but the fact remained that when he hadn't hypnotized the blond manicurist into going out with him, Pelham had. For a straight week it was fifty-fifty with them both. Which amused McGee considerably.

"I'm laughing! Every time I think of them two twists rushing that little gal I get almost overcome! I'd like to lay the two of them like a parquet floor!"

9A—POP.

The time slowly but surely drew closer to the eve of the Blacksmith Milligan-Swat McGee mill and found the former employee of the Black and Blue Taxicab Company at the top of his form. He looked so good to Ottie that Scandrel got Gotham on the long-distance telephone and instructed Looie Pitz to lay a long piece of kale at whatever odds he could snap up along the boulevard. When Ottie came out of the telephone booth he was grinning like a wolf.

"Well, *that's* done. A little extra sugar won't worry me none. Just pardon me a minute," he went on with a look at his finger tips. "I think I'll run down and tell Sue about this."

The tonsorial division of the hostelry was as free from customers as the Sahara of steam yachts when we reached it. Scandrel promptly took a chair before Miss Wild's cute little table.

"Polish 'em up, baby. The shine you give them last night is blah. And take it easy—I got all the time in the world."

"It's a wonder you have any fingers left," the blondine giggled with a glance in my direction. "Tell me, how is Mr. Pelham? I haven't seen him since the day before yesterday when he invited me to one of the exhibition bouts in the barn."

Ottie scowled.

"It seems to me you're taking quite an interest in Pete. I don't want to knock him—I'll leave Swat do that—but, honest, outside of that beautiful pan of his and his money he ain't got a thing in the world to recommend him."

Miss Wild juggled a pair of orange sticks and shrugged.

"I hate handsome men—if that's any consolation to you. I wouldn't marry one if he was able to give me Paris as a wedding present. I'd never have any peace. Every minute he was away from me I'd be horribly suspicious and frightfully jealous."

Scandrel smirked.

"They say it's only skin deep anyhow. And that reminds me. I got two new spark plugs in the car. How about the both of us cruising over to Newark after dinner? I understand there's a new café just opened on Broad Street that's run by a trapper from Broadway and has a lot of class."

"I couldn't possibly go to-night," was the young lady's answer.

"Why not, Candy?"

She blushed charmingly.

"Well, if you must know the truth, I promised Mr. Pelham I'd go to Newark with him."

Not so good.

When Pelham, number two in the line-up of McGee's partners the following morning, entered the gym ring to begin his usual orgy of grotesque punching, there was a slight commotion near the front door of the barn and in strode a stout gentleman who registered prosperity, with a good-looking brunette on his arm whose dark eyes were as wide open as the Polo Grounds. Both bore no more resemblance to Edgemont than a show girl does to a laundress and both, once they were inside, came to an immediate halt.

"Why, there's Peter now!" the girl cried with a gesture toward the ring.

The well-fed jocko with her clapped on a pair of cheaters as Pelham, at the sound of his name, swung hastily around.

"Eloise! And—and father!" The next instant he was under the ropes. "I say, this is a jolly surprise!"

"Come back here, you giddy goat geter!" McGee bellowed. "What are you doing—holding Old Folks' Week?"

Scandrel, who had divided his glances between the two strangers, was on his feet instantly.

"That will be about enough from you!" he snarled at his welterweight, before pulling down his vest and joining Pelham. "Eh—so these here are your parents, kid? Well, do your duty."

The leader in the line of masculine pulchritude performed the honors.

"Miss Eloise van Suydam, Mr. Scandrel. Dad, this is my manager. He's making another Corbett out of me. Remarkable, what? I told you I'd show you I had something in me."

Atwater Pelham coughed.

"It took two firms of detective agencies to discover where you were. I don't know whether I'll excuse this conduct of yours or not. That lamentable photograph episode of yours was bad enough, but this might be even worse."

Pelham shook his head impatiently.

"Oh, I feel sure that you will have every reason to be proud of me. My physical condition is simply corking and Mr. Scandrel here thinks I'll be ready for the top-notchers in a very short time. I'm all ready

to prove to the world that beauty, while a handicap, does not prevent one from being successful at an occupation like this."

While he was getting the spiel out of his system Eloise van Suydam was gazing at Swat McGee like a child at a toad. She shivered and she shuddered but she kept on staring with the utmost fascination until McGee, staring back, shuffled his scows in embarrassment.

"What a perfect primordial cave man!" Miss van Suydam lisped finally. "I'm so glad that you don't look like he does, Peter. He reminds me of that brute in 'The Sea Wolf.' He looks exactly like a London character."

"McGee ain't never been in England," Ottie cut in briskly. "But ain't he the hairy ape and no mistake? Yes, he's the boy who's going to shoe Blacksmith Milligan next Thursday night over in that dear Brooklyn. Would you like to meet him?"

"I'm sure I would," the brunette replied quickly.

Scandrel made the introduction and a half hour later Pelham, dressed for the street, left with his father and the débutante.

"One sweet rib—I'll tell the knock-kneed world!" McGee hissed when the studio was cleared. "Hey, chief, I think I'll take the morning off myself. My folks always told me to be tidy and my nails look like something that has been hammered. I guess I'll drop in and see that little peroxide over at the barber shop."

"You'd better ring up a contractor and order a pair of day laborers with picks and shovels," Scandrel sneered. "Get the idea directly out of your nut. Just because a gal with a pair of round eyes comes in and hands you a look don't give you no call to immediately clean yourself up. You're a roughneck and a lowbrow. You'll never be nothing different. You can't make a silk purse out of a souse ear. Get back in the ring and click off some more wallops or instead of battling with Milligan on Thursday night you'll be fighting *me* here and now!"

As the fatal night drew closer Scandrel eased off McGee's training. Looie Pitz was still in gay Gotham. I don't know how Manhattan stood as to the Brooklyn bout but Edgemont could not have been more thrilled if the burg was entertaining Shakespeare, the Talmadge girls, Cleopatra and Dempsey himself. The gossip along Main

Street concerned nothing but McGee. I know for a fact that some of the natives even went so far as to sell the family furniture so they could get the cash down on the ex-taxi driver. Oh, the straw chewers had the greatest of faith in anything that Ottie handled.

Scandrel could have sold the population Los Angeles without the aid of a map!

While tempus was fugiting Eloise van Suydam was making daily visits to the training quarters of Mr. McGee. She came alone for the reason that Atwater Pelham, falling in love with the bill of fare at the Hotel Fiasco, had renewed an acquaintance with General Gout, an antique enemy, and was confined to his suite in the hostelry. McGee showed the saucer-eyed brunette around the works and if Peter Pelham objected to the other's interest he never made mention of the fact. The winner of the *Film Flam Magazine* contest appeared slightly worried about something.

When I felt sorry for him and requested information the living collar advertisement merely shook his head.

"It's nothing, Mr. O'Grady. That is, nothing much. Dad has been out of temper owing to his indisposition and has been rather peppery. He is a man of impulse and uncertain temper. One never knows what to expect."

"And what about this leather pushing of yours? Have you won his approval yet?"

Pelham shook his head again and smiled oddly.

"Not exactly. But I have a plan of my own. You see, to-morrow morning this McGee is putting on his last exhibition bout. Confidentially, I have persuaded father to be present. I intend to show him that I can more than hold my own against this vicious welterweight. I intend that he shall be proud of my showing and realize I am destined to eventually become a pugilist of parts."

"You'll be in parts if you let out any steam on McGee," I said. "Get sense. If you sock him harder than necessary you'll go out on a shutter."

Pelham shrugged, let a smile illumine his handsome mug and wandered away.

The last exhibition bout staged in Edgemont drew like fly paper. By ten o'clock the barn was filled to overflowing. There were spectators from jump-offs as far south as Savannah—New Jersey; to say nothing

of Atwater Pelham and Miss Eloise van Suydam, who had a couple of the best seats in the barn. There was no sign of Ottie, however, and twenty minutes were a total waste.

"Where's the boss?" I asked Rufus, my boy friend's chauffeur.

He rolled his lamps.

"Why you ax me, Mistah O'Grady? 'Bout eight o'clock dis y'ere mawnin' Mis-tah Scandrel takes the car, gits a gallyon of gas and the las' Ah sees of him is drivin' out fum de garage. Doan ax me. Ah knows nuthin'—in quantities!"

Five minutes after that McGee climbed up in the ring and gave the crowd a nod.

"This here finishes up my training. To-morrow night I link up with Blacksmith Milligan for fifteen rounds to a decision. In my bout this morning I'm taking on 'Peaches' Pelham, a beautiful fighter. Watch me strut my stuff and maybe you'll get a treat." He licked his lips savagely. "Come on, kid, don't be stalling around even if this is a barn."

Looking like a gladiator in his gleaming white-silk costume, Pelham made the ring, shed a pale-blue negligee and with a smile at both his father and Miss van Suydam nonchalantly tested the ropes and drew a breath.

"I'm quite ready, McGee."

The Roman emperors undoubtedly said the same thing in the days when the Christian martyrs were led out to slaughter!

Pelham led off with a right to the body. McGee, grinning, blocked easily and did a one-two with a short-arm jab to the head and a left to the kidneys that must have hurt. Beauty looked surprised but said nothing. He tried one of his ludicrous swings. McGee flicked it aside like a fly from a cruller and fell into a clinch.

"Ha-ha!" the welterweight laughed. "This is my last chance to get you and, believe me, I'm going to enjoy it!"

"Just what do you mean?" Pelham stammered, hanging on desperately.

"I mean I'm going to ruin you—at's what I mean! A mockie with a mug like yours don't add up right. And Miss van Suydam loves the cave-man stuff. I'll give her plenty, I surely will!"

He shook Pelham off, hooked a right to the jaw and played for the body. An angry red flush lighted up the vicinity of the other's ribs.

"You insufferable blighter!" Pelham retorted angrily. "I never gave you credit for possessing such intelligence. So you intend to beat me up? Perhaps you have heard the saying that it takes two to make a deal!"

With that he began to steam his punches up.

An instant later McGee drove another right to the jaw that sent Pelham to the mat. He tottered to his feet after what would have been twice the count had a referee been present and fell into another clinch. McGee fought him off with hooks and uppercuts and spilled him once more. This time it looked like Pelham was down for keeps.

"Is this your demonstration?" Atwater Pelham bellowed while his son was still on the canvas. "Is this the boxing exhibition you took me from my sick bed to witness? Get up and fight or I'll cut you off without a penny—I'll disinherit you!"

It might have been the threat or the promise. At any rate the aristocratic Pelham pulled himself up by the ropes and, parting freely with a quantity of his blue blood, stood McGee off with surprising gameness.

They fought in one corner of the ring, in the center of it and along the sides. Twice the former taxi driver, maddened that he couldn't put the other down for good, knocked Pelham out of the ring and twice the blue-stocking was pushed back to reel in and take it all over again.

Oh, but it was quite the brutal!

After what would have been three rounds Pelham began to show an amazing comeback. With McGee throwing science to the four winds and with no idea of anything save belting the other into oblivion the beauty-contest winner pulled a piece of infighting that had the audience cheering him wildly.

"How do you like this, you uncouth loafer!" he panted through puffed lips. "And this! And this!"

The sound of the socking was heard over the shouts of the spectators. I looked across and saw Atwater Pelham bellowing some unintelligible something—saw Miss Eloise van Suydam standing on the top of her soap box, her eyes twice as round as usual.

It was entirely too exciting to last any time longer. With Pelham beaten to a batter and McGee himself an unprepossessing

sight, the end came quickly. They had been standing toe to toe and slugging away like a couple of maniacs when the erstwhile chauffeur got through a lucky clout that slapped fairly up against the button of his adversary.

Pelham fell as if hit by lightning—in a silence that was profound to say the least.

This uncanny quiet was broken by two things. One was the sound of an automobile stopping in the road outside—the other the sudden appearance of Mr. Ottie Scandrel and Miss Sue Wild.

"All right!" Ottie yelped, pushing a way through the crowd. "I'm back now and so we can let the bout begin—"

He was interrupted by a burst of cheering that must have disturbed the slumbers of those in Honduras. A picture of perplexity, Ottie opened his mouth and stared. Then, his bewildered gaze focused on the claret-colored welterweight who was swaying like a line of laundry in a cyclone.

"I—I got him—the cake eater!" McGee mumbled witlessly.

The next second Ottie was through the ropes and up in the ring himself.

"So this is what you pull when I'm not around to watch you, is it?" he screamed. "You must smoke opium in secret! You big—"

"Close your mouth shut!" the other muttered groggily. "I'm sick of listening to you!"

Stepping over the fallen form of young Pelham, Scandrel snapped back his right. Some blind intuition told McGee what was coming and he hooked with his left. Both blows landed and rang the bell. Ottie's dive to the pad came a second before McGee slumped up and did a brodie himself.

Woof!

Another tense minute and then Looie Pitz with a valise in each hand rushed in.

"I'm back, Ottie!" Pitz hollered. When there was no response he dropped the baggage and stared around. "Hey—where's Scandrel?"

"I think," one of the spectators said, "he's the guy in the middle—on top of the dude and underneath Swat!"

And listen—he was.

The next scene in the dope-fiend drama came an instant later. Then, Atwater Pelham, arising and tearing out a handful of hair, let out a bellow that must have raised the roof a couple of inches.

"Another Corbett?" he jeered. "A boxing marvel? One destined to rapidly rise to the head of his profession? What rot! And this is what I limped over here to see. Somebody tell the boy this is the last straw. I wash my hands of him. I'm through—forever! Come, Eloise!"

The round-eyed brunette shook her head.

"I think I'll stay," she declared, "and see how—if Mr. McGee is badly injured!"

Kiss that!

Toward the middle of February Scandrel and myself were crossing Times Square when a hard-looking egg with a broken nose, crooked mouth and a jaw that had been knocked out of true came up beside us and handed us each a nod.

"On your way!" Ottie snapped. "I ain't giving no nickels to healthy beggars like you. Find a job and—"

"Oh, I say," the plug-ugly interrupted quickly, "is it possible that you've forgotten me?"

"Peter Pelham!" I gasped when amazement would let me speak.

He nodded.

"Exactly. I'm in town to stand up as best man for Swat. Yes, we've been good friends ever since he made it possible for me to get married myself. And he has a splendid taxicab company out in Edgemont. Er—he and Eloise are to be made one to-night in the Little Church Up the Street. Which reminds me. Sue asked me to be sure and give you both her regards if I ran into you. Yes, we're living in Edgemont temporarily."

"I thought you were disinherited?" Ottie broke in when he was able to find his voice.

Pelham laughed.

"I believe I am. But that's not bothering me a bit. I'm building up quite a trade as a salesman and my commissions are not to be scoffed at. Really, I'm handling a line of goods that is a wonderful seller. It's beauty-parlor supplies."

Another Montanye story in the next number.



ART AND THE NEWS STAND

WHY," asks the Municipal Art Society of New York City, "shouldn't the sidewalk news stand be beautiful?" It answers its own question: "There is no reason why it shouldn't contribute a pleasing detail to the new and handsome city that is growing up around it." Having come to that conclusion, and being more artistic than reforming, this artistic-reform society did what few reform societies think of doing; consulted the people most concerned—in this case the news dealers. Being for the most part progressive business people the news dealers were interested. They are as anxious to have eye-pleasing places of business as are any other merchants. They co-operated by telling the Art Society's committee just what their special needs are. They require protection of goods from bad weather; arrangement of counters for rapid sales at rush hours, ease in closing and opening the booths, with no loose shutters to stow away in the daytime.

Keeping these requirements in mind the committee designed a booth that seems to us to be well worth any news dealer's while to build. Without being unduly expensive it is attractive and convenient. Its gracefully curved roof leads rain away from the sales counter and gives the structure something of a pagodalike appearance. The heavy sales counters at the open sides become shutters after the day's business is over. These openings also are equipped with glazed sashes that slide down into pockets when they are not needed. It is hoped that sample booths will soon be in service at some of New York's busiest corners.

We are interested in the news dealers' demand for large and stout counters for rush-time sales. Perhaps they had the seventh and the twentieth of each month in mind. Those are the days when numbers of *POPULAR* readers are likely to demand quick service. Of course the wise thing to do is to order your copy in advance and keep out of the crush.



The Unusual Adventures of the Texan Wasp

By James Francis Dwyer

Author of "The League of the Creeping Death," "The Lone Bandit of Vizzavona," Etc.

VIII.—THE MYSTERY MAN FROM PRAGUE.

Robert Henry Blane of Houston, Texas, receives a mysterious message that summons him to Lake Como. He meets the nameless disciple of discord and destruction; averts disaster for his friendly enemy, No. 37; saves the "Billion Dollar Battalion," and entertains the Heroine of Calico, Arkansas.

TO Robert Henry Blane had come a strange message. It came like a piece of thistledown out of the air. He had turned his head for an instant while watching a weird show at the Grand Guignol and the scrap of paper carrying the words was deftly slipped onto his knees.

Before touching the paper The Texan Wasp examined his neighbors. The horror of the piece had gripped them. They were leaning forward, necks strained to the uttermost, watching the sketch that was written to tickle the jaded nerves of blasé Parisians. The handsome American adventurer was unable to locate a person whose interest was in anything outside the very grotesque and nearly disgusting scene that was unfolding in a glaucous light that added to the weirdness of the happenings.

Robert Henry Blane unfolded the slip of paper and read the words penciled on it. They were few but their import was tre-

mendous. The big Texan read them again and again, holding the sheet forward so that it struck a roving ray of green that fell from a badly fixed shutter. The message ran:

If Robert Henry Blane could be at the Lake of Como on June 27th The Man from Prague would like to speak to him.

The Texan Wasp forgot the grisly horror that was dragging itself toward a shrieking climax. He had no interest in the limb-dragging leper who had come back from the hell of Molokai to choke the wife who had become the dancing queen of Paris. His eyes drifted away from the stage set that showed the gorgeous apartment of the wife, set high above that Rue de Rivoli, the woman crouched upon the window sill, the dreadful, leering deformity that was her husband blocking the path to the door. The Wasp was thinking of The Man from Prague.

An eccentric writer, hidden away somewhere in the slums of Vienna, has asserted

that big wars and big revolutions are made not by the mass nor by the then leaders of the mass. He asserts that they are made unconsciously by the unknown individuals who will get the spotlight *after* the war of the great upheaval. The dreams of these persons, who may be living in abject poverty, have a strange and extraordinary effect upon the world. The dreams act as a great leaven that breeds discontent. The world labors in an effort to get these dreamers out of the ruck. Thousands and millions of men die in the upheaval, then out into the quiet that ranges after the battle fires of dreams!

The Viennese writer names a score of these people. They took no part in the Great War but they are now prominent in Europe. He, curiously, accuses them of being the cause of the war. He thinks if they had never been born there would have been no war. The soldiers and the generals, the statesmen and the politicians of 1914 were but the dead lava crust that was pushed forward by the throbbing, liquid fires that none could see. The throbbing fire of dreams!

Robert Henry Blane had read the article and although The Man from Prague was not mentioned by the writer Blane added him to the list. Somewhere in the tortuous streets of the old, old city of Prague there had lived one of the dreamers whose dreams upset the crust of nations. War came! Austria turned out her millions, her cannons trundled off across the landscape, her airmen flailed the winds of heaven. The dreamer didn't take part in the upheaval. He was saving himself.

Austria was shattered, then people began to hear of The Man from Prague. That is, the people who had their ears to the ground. He stepped lightly, did this man. It is the new method of doing things in Europe. The great man is never seen, his name is sometimes not known. He puts forward a number of little manikins and a number of these manikins get shot and knifed nowadays.

The Texan Wasp, walking back to his hotel, thought of all the slinking, furtive, headless-and-tailless rumors that were connected with The Man from Prague. Possibly fifty per cent of them lacked a base. Rumor is busy nowadays. Other men who had become powerful had been clutched by the camera—great industrialists and

profiteering scoundrels who had made millions by pulling strings in the background, had been badgered and tormented by leggy reporters and photographers who had run them into their palatial lairs, but The Man from Prague remained as remote as the Dog Star.

Into the new welter of European trickery and duplicity he thrust an invisible finger. He was credited with a thousand affairs that defied solution. A statesman shot at on the Unter den Linden, a banker assassinated in the Prater at Vienna, a coup d'état in a one-horse state, a slump of the mark, an attack on the franc, everything and anything was credited to him. People whispered his name in corners, whispered it in a dozen tongues. He was The Mystery Man from Prague!

Many persons, and Robert Henry Blane was one of the number, doubted his existence. These doubters believed that the people on the street, unable to explain things, had fashioned, Indianlike, a god upon whose head they could throw the blame of assassinations, new wars, money depreciation, food riots, train smashes, robberies, and the million and one ills that harry poor old Europe. The unbelievers grinned as they listened to the breathless gossipers who tagged the monster with every knot in the twisted and tangled skein of world trouble.

The Texan Wasp occupied a front room in a small hotel on the Rue Chauveau-Lagarde that is close to the Madeleine. After the performance at the Grand Guignol he returned to the hotel and sat for a time at the window overlooking the narrow street. An electric lamp, heavily shaded, was the only light. In the soft gloom Robert Henry Blane considered the message. Was there really a person known as The Man from Prague? If so was he the controlling force in a slight percentage of the affairs that had been credited to him? Granting there was such a person why did he wish speech with Robert Henry Blane, one time of Houston, Texas?

The Wasp sitting at the window spoke aloud as this question came up for an answer. "I'd like to know how he heard of me and what he wants with me?" growled the big Texan. "His note seems to suggest that I had applied for a job, and I just didn't. I never hunt jobs. They come to me."

Mr. Blane switched on the overhead lights and picked up a "Continental Bradshaw." The mysterious person had left the American little time for a decision. He wished to see Robert Henry Blane at Como on June 27th and he had signified his wish on the evening of the twenty-fifth! An express train left Paris at eleven forty-five in the morning, tore down through Lucerne and Bellinzona, dropped through the St. Gothard and reached Como at four thirty-two in the afternoon of the following day. If the Texan Wasp took this train he would be in Como in time to keep the appointment.

"But why?" questioned the American, rising to his feet. "Why should I go scurrying down through France and Switzerland to see——"

Robert Henry Blane paused abruptly in his little soliloquy. Something had fallen upon the floor and had slithered under a couch, making a soft rustling noise as it moved over the polished boards.

The Wasp stooped cautiously and picked up a small spill of paper. He unfolded it and read the dozen words scrawled upon it. They were:

It is very important that you should meet The Man from Prague.

Robert Henry Blane walked swiftly to the window and looked out. The old houses immediately fronting the hotel were in darkness. The Rue Chauveau-Lagarde is not more than twenty feet across, and the American could see plainly the windows of the corresponding floor opposite. They were the windows of a dressmaker's showroom. The blinds were drawn and the words "Robes," "Manteaux," and "Lingerie" painted on the blinds did not wiggle in the slightest degree under the scrutiny of the American. Yet The Wasp was certain that the spill of paper that had whizzed into the room had been catapulted from one of the windows opposite!

He put out the lights and watched the street door leading to the dressmaker's rooms. He watched it for a long time, his thoughts upon the wild and wonderful stories that were connected with The Man from Prague. The will-o'-the-wisp was growing real as the minutes passed.

Paris dropped into that whimpering stage that it assumes in the ghostly hours that run between the activity of the day and the

first bustle of the dawn. Those hectic, spindle-legged hours that seem filled with weird and shameful happenings. Revelers from Montmartre halted their taxicabs at the corner of the Rue Chauveau-Lagarde and the Rue Pasquier and rent the night with guffaws that shot up like cannon sounds after intervals of sinister whispering. Slinking figures were spewed up by street angles and were again consumed by them. Now and then a scream rushed up like a red thread from the Boulevard Malesherbes.

No one came out of the door opposite. The Wasp rose and drew the curtains of the windows. The June night was a trifle warm. Thoughts of the Lake of Como came to his mind. Pictures flung themselves up before his eyes. He saw Cernobbio and Bellagio, the mountains springing up from the glorious lake that some one has described as a jewel dropped from a ring that the Almighty wore upon His finger!

"I'll take a run down without thinking of our friend," muttered The Wasp. "He can dance his own little minuet unless it suits me to partner with him."

The little town of Como squatting at the head of the glorious lake seemed quiet and sweet to The Texan Wasp after hectic Paris. He settled himself in a small hotel on the Piazza Cavour and from his window he could watch the cars of the funicular railway that drags visitors up the steep slope of Brunate from whose summit they can see the Alps and the Plain of Lombardy as far as Milan.

He had barely bathed and changed his clothes when there came a message from the man who had made the appointment. Not a pleasing message to Robert Henry Blane. An unknown had left a note at the hotel and the wording of this note roused the anger of the big American. It read:

The Man from Prague is delayed. Wait where you are and hold no converse with any one. You are selected for a big undertaking.

"It looks as if I had put in an application for employment," growled The Wasp. "It surely does. Well, I'll wait and see what Bill-of-the-Wisp wants to propose."

To cool the irritation roused by the note The Wasp left the hotel and walked along the little quay. Fivescore boats were drawn up on the sloping water front, boats that looked delightfully luxurious with their cushioned seats for two. The Como folk

admit that some honeymooners do go to Venice, but that nine tenths of aristocratic Europe spends that period of enchanting sweetness, which the French so nicely describe as the *lune de miel*, on the Lake of Como.

And The Wasp, wandering along the quay, received proof that the honeymooners come from far-away places. He heard the speech of his "ain countree." A piratical-looking boatman had landed a very young and very small clergyman who was accompanied by a bride who was younger and smaller, and the boatman's conception of the work that he had done in pulling the couple out beyond the Point di Geno was in direct opposition to that held by the parson. The passengers were obviously honeymooners. They had that delightful "Let's-stay-together-so-we-won't - lose-each-other" look that only a sweet honeymooning couple can spread upon their features.

The parson was no quitter. He was small and he lacked a knowledge of the Italian tongue but he was perfectly certain that no truculent boatman could kill him. His little bride had doubts about this and Robert Henry Blane was amused at the manner in which she tugged fearfully at her husband's sleeve and whispered advice about the desirability of acceding to the pirate's demands.

A loud-mouthed fellow was the boatman. He lifted up his garlic-scented voice and the members of his craft lurched up to help in the looting. The boatman demanded twenty lire more than the passenger was prepared to pay, and to the protesting clergyman's "*Troppol! Troppol!*"—the little man had evidently thought the Italian equivalent of "Too much" was a good word for a Continental tour—he screamed loudly, shaking a black and unreasonably large fist in the fare's face. Robert Henry Blane decided to take a hand in the argument.

There are two ways of acquiring a foreign tongue. One is the formal method of universities and colleges. The other is the "acquired-on-the-spot" method and it tells to the native something that correct speech does not. It proves a residency of many days.

The Texan Wasp used the informal speech. In the argot of Lombardy he told the boatman to lower his fist and his voice. In a swift throaty jargon he begged the pirate to give him details of the trip.

The boatman took one glance at Robert Henry Blane and saw careless force. He hurriedly deflated his chest and brought his fist to his side. It would be a delight for him to explain to the distinguished signore. The affair was as follows. He had taken the parson and his signora out beyond the point and had pulled them well.

"How far?" questioned The Wasp. "Don't lie!"

"Nearly to the Villa Taglioni, signore. A long and tiring pull."

"And you want forty lire?"

"Si, signore."

Robert Henry Blane turned to the small parson and his timid bride. "If you give him more than fifteen lire you are being robbed," he said. "Hand him that much and see if he howls."

The boatman did howl. He called on his patron saint, San Michele of Cremia, to see how he was being robbed. The Americans who were all as rich as the Dukes of Lombardy were sweating the poor!

His temper made him forget the presence of Robert Henry Blane. He made a rush at the parson but The Wasp seized his shoulder and flung him backward.

The boatman stumbled, pulled himself together, then, fully aware of the fact that the attempt at graft had been frustrated by the interference of the distinguished stranger, he charged the tall Texan.

The Wasp received the attack coolly. He had his back turned to the sloping, slippery quay, and using the same tactics pursued by a matador when a crazed bull charges he side-stepped the rush and then adroitly used his right shoe to increase the speed of the rusher. The shoe was used with such good effect that the boatman could not halt himself. With arms flung wide he stumbled down the slimy incline and plunged headlong into the cool water of the lake.

The bunch of pirates who had supported the fellow in his demand for money turned against him now. They jeered coarsely as he clawed himself back onto the landing stage and when he showed a desire to renew the attack they shouldered him off to a shelter and drowned his wild remarks with loud laughter. They had been given a free show and they were satisfied.

Robert Henry Blane found himself walking along the waterside with the little clergyman and his bride. The parson introduced

himself. He told The Wasp that he was the Reverend Thomas Browne, the pastor of a small church at Calico Springs, Arkansas, and that the good folk of Calico Springs had collected the money that brought him and his bride to Europe on a short honeymoon.

"They must like you a lot," said The Wasp, amused at the manner in which the little clergyman had opened up on the manner in which the honeymoon funds had been obtained.

The Reverend Thomas Browne glanced at his blushing bride. "They like her," he said softly. "You see it wasn't actually my flock that forked out for the trip. It was the whole town of Calico Springs. Episcopalian, Catholics, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists and Unitarians. They thought that my wife——"

"Please, Thomas, don't," protested the bride. "You must not tell!"

"But I must inform this gentleman of the reason for their devotion," cried the clergyman. "I cannot let any one believe that my silly little sermons got us a trip to Europe! Dearie, I must tell! This gentleman helped us out of a little tangle and I would like him to know about you."

"Then tell about it at some other time!" persisted the embarrassed blushing bride. "Not now!"

"Please let me!" pleaded the Reverend Thomas. "It pleases me so much."

"Then I'll run away while you are talking," cried the wife, "and when you have finished your story I will come back." With a little bow to The Wasp she skipped across the Piazza Cavour and found herself a seat under a leafy plane tree.

The Reverend Thomas Browne turned to The Texan Wasp and looked up into the handsome face that was some eighteen inches above the parson's head. "Possibly you have heard of Calico Springs?" he said. "It has been in the papers recently."

Robert Henry Blane, desirous of pleasing the little man, ran his mental eyes back over the news from home that he had absorbed from the Paris editions of the *Tribune* and *Herald*, and, by a tremendous mental effort, he dragged out the item. "Why, you had a great flood in your town!" he cried.

The parson was delighted at finding that the distinguished-looking stranger knew of the troubles of Calico Springs. "You said

it!" he cried. "A great flood we had! A tremendous flood!"

"I read an account of it," said The Wasp. "If I remember rightly a dam burst at the back of your town and the water swept away a whole section. I recall the story distinctly. The paper had a long account of the happening and it made much of the bravery of a telephone girl who stuck to her job with the water up to her waist, calling up subscribers to tell them of the danger."

The Reverend Thomas Browne became an inarticulate and emotion-struck idiot. He gripped the hand of Robert Henry Blane and gurgled like a baby. For an instant The Wasp thought the little man was stricken with apoplexy, then the clergyman regained control of his voice. "Did they——did they write about her over here in—Europe?" he gasped. "Did they? Did they?"

"Certainly," answered The Wasp. "There was a cabled account from New York. I read the story in Paris."

The Reverend Thomas Browne, still holding the hand of the big Texan, started across the Piazza Cavour to the seat on which the bride was resting. Mrs. Browne looked up as the two men approached, her face showing surprise at the manner in which her small husband was towing the tall Texan.

The Reverend Thomas brought Robert Henry Blane up with a round turn in front of the seat. He pointed to his bride, his blue eyes swimming with moisture. "There she is!" he cried. "There's the telephone operator that you read about! That flood brought us to Lake Como! The good people of Calico Springs paid the honeymoon expenses of their local heroine, and, of course, I had to come along!"

The bride tried to halt the Reverend Thomas but his words were as uncontrollable as the flood waters that had brought out the courage and endurance of the girl he had married. He told the story in detail. Never was there such bravery. The bride fled before the praise which he unloosed. She became annoyed, and to sidetrack the matter in dispute Robert Henry Blane made a suggestion. He told the couple that it was seldom that he had an opportunity of doing honor to an American heroine, therefore the Reverend Thomas Browne and Mrs. Browne were to be his guests for dinner that evening. The happy prattle of the honeymooners made The Wasp forget

The Man from Prague and the message that had brought him storming down through the St. Gothard to the Lake of Como.

It was a great meal. Robert Henry Blane had fallen upon a maître d'hôtel and terrorized him into tense activity. He had a chef brought before him and the fellow perspired under the demands which were made upon him. He told the chef that the dinner was in honor of a woman who had saved a town. Had the chef ever cooked for a person who had saved a town? The perspiring stove lizard admitted that he had not. He had cooked for an emperor, three kings, a czar, five princes—

"Pooh!" snorted Robert Henry Blane. "That's nothing! Nowadays Europe is filled with royal floorwalkers who eat at three-cent pensions. They couldn't save their own nightcaps when the flood struck them! This lady saved a town! Go down into your glory hole and toss some anthracite into the stove. This has got to be some meal."

The chef made a dinner that delighted the little bride from Calico Springs. There was a rice consommé that the cook refused to omit; there was salmon trout from the lake with garnishings that made the fish something that a gourmet might dream of; there were lamb cutlets in bread crumbs with little potato croquettes; white asparagus, the blanched asparagus of Italy; cheese from a goat farm way up on the slopes of Monte Legnone; and there was ice cream—the delightful Italian *cassata*—that was brought to the bride with a little American flag flying gayly from its frozen pinnacle.

The heroine of Calico Springs was very happy. So was the Reverend Thomas. In tasteless Vichy, which The Wasp drank much to his dislike, the little parson pledged friendship with the handsome adventurer.

"If you ever come to Calico Springs you must come and stay with us!" he cried. "We were a little lonely this afternoon. You see in our town we speak to every person we meet on the street, so it comes hard on us to wander round for weeks and not have a single person bob his head and say 'How d'ye do?' We think Europe is wonderful and all that, but now and then we get an awful longing for the Springs. It's homey there and folk are honest and straight."

There came a little interruption as they

sipped their coffee on the terrace. A messenger boy delivered to Robert Henry Blane a note which the Texan begged permission to read. It was a scribbled message on a small square card, and it ran:

The Man from Prague is here. Hold yourself in readiness.

It was only the presence of the Reverend Thomas and his bride that prevented The Wasp from openly consigning the mysterious unknown to a warmer climate than Como. He smiled grimly as he tore the card into fragments. The delight expressed by his guests had more than repaid him for the run down from Paris, yet there rose within him a tremendous desire to let The Man from Prague understand that there were a few carefree souls in Europe that his money could not buy.

The polite parson of Calico Springs wondered if their host wished to leave them. He mentioned his doubts. "You may have business matters to attend to?" he murmured.

"Not yet," laughed The Wasp. "I may be busy later in the evening, or I may not. It is a—hello, look at the cavalcade!"

The cavalcade consisted of five handsome automobiles that rolled across the Piazza Cavour and pulled up before the hotel. From them descended fifteen well-groomed and important-looking men, conspicuously American in dress and manner. Their remarks came up to the three on the terrace, the hard, resonant Americanese biting through the soft chatter of the crowd of Italians who gathered to see the newcomers.

The Wasp questioned a waiter. "Who are they?" he asked.

"It is a delegation of American bankers, signore," answered the man. "They have come down from Cadenabbia. They go on to Milan to-morrow morning and from there they go to Paris."

The Wasp translated to the Reverend Thomas and his bride. The fifteen constituted the famous "Billion Dollar Battalion" that was visiting Europe to see what steps could be taken to prevent the saber-jangling countries of the Old World from hopping into the abyss of bankruptcy. The European press had featured the visit. A few papers had applauded the fifteen, others had jeered. A number of radical sheets were openly insulting. They suggested that

Uncle Sam was giving his creditors the once-over. They advised the near-bankrupt States to hide the ledgers that told of the cash spent in buying guns, ammunition, decorations and other matters that old Uncle looked on with a hard eye.

The heroine of Calico Springs was delighted when she heard of the itinerary of The Fifteen. "We might travel on the same train!" she cried. "It would be splendid. People might think we belonged to the party. Thomas, dear, you look like a wealthy banker."

"I am," said the gallant parson; "I have you; and now as we have a long journey before us we had better retire."

Again they thanked Robert Henry Blane, repeated their invitation regarding a visit to Calico Springs, then left him alone upon the terrace.

The Wasp, leaning over the railing, watched the street. Four of the five automobiles that had brought the bankers had disappeared, the fifth was parked some twenty feet from the door of the hotel. It was a closed car, and having nothing to occupy his attention the Texan glanced at it from time to time. He wondered idly why it had not followed its companions to the garage.

Pedestrian traffic lessened as the hours passed. The Wasp remained upon the terrace; the lone automobile still stood in the street. To the eyes of Robert Henry Blane it seemed to be without chauffeur or passengers.

The car attracted the attention of a policeman. He walked around it. He opened the door, and, to the surprise of The Wasp the door immediately was wrenched from the officer's hand and closed with a bang! An occupant, evidently annoyed with the inquisitive cop, bade the policeman to go on about his business.

The Wasp was alert now. He leaned out over the railing and listened. The officer wanted reasons. A bullet head was thrust through the window, and a voice, deep and threatening, gave reasons with such promptness that the cop walked swiftly away. The head disappeared within the car, leaving Robert Henry Blane a little startled and much surprised. The Wasp had recognized the bullet head! He knew the deep, gruff voice that had flung out a few swift reasons to the surprised cop. The man in the darkened car was No. 37! He was the tire-

less and intelligent man hunter who ranged from one end of Europe to another and gathered in criminals like an expert fisherman gathering shrimps!

The Wasp dropped back onto his seat, his eyes upon the closed car. The great sleuth had evidently journeyed in the company of the bankers, but instead of dismounting with the "Billion Dollar Battalion" he had remained inside the automobile! Robert Henry Blane asked himself the reason. He had not seen No. 37 since the night at Carcassonne when the sleuth had told him of the League of the Creeping Death and the designs of the extraordinary secret society that had as its aim the destruction of the great and good. Months had slipped by since that night but he, Blane, had not crossed the track of the sleuth. Still he had heard of the doings of the man hunter. Here and there through Europe the trail of the great lariat thrower of the law was now and then made evident. A queer, vile Russian had been cornered at Vevey and the capturer had given no name. A very "hush, hush" affair had been scantily reported from Strasbourg. The criminal's name and position were not mentioned by the press and his ultimate goal was not recorded. It was guessed at, though. Some said that a destroyer took the criminal swiftly toward a certain spot in South America where wrongdoers dropped into the pit of forgetfulness dug by their own deeds.

There had been another sensation. At Ostend, in the height of the season, a dazzling adventuress, who claimed close relationship with a European ex-monarch, had been removed hurriedly from the casino tables screaming like a she-devil as she was carried away. A gentleman friend had interfered with the bullet-headed abductor and had received for his trouble a blow in the face that laid him flat on the carpeted floor. The disposition of the lady was a matter upon which the stern heads of the Belgian police would not talk.

Robert Henry Blane continued to watch the car. What was the sleuth's motive? It was natural to suppose that some protection would be afforded to the distinguished company of bankers—a casual escort that would brush away half-crazed folk who might be attracted to The Fifteen, but the alert presence of the greatest man hunter in Europe was another matter.

A small, thin man who had slipped out

onto the terrace without attracting the attention of the American now rose from his seat and shambled over to the Texan. In a manner that was slightly apologetic he leaned over and addressed Robert Henry Blance.

"Pardon," he murmured. "You seek an appointment?"

The Wasp looked him over coldly. "Who said so?" he asked.

The thin man was evidently upset by the counterquestion. He swallowed hastily, glanced nervously about him, then lowered his head and spoke in a hissing whisper. "I thought your name was Robert Henry Blane. Is it so? Then it is you that I was to speak to. I was to tell you where you would find the person you wish to speak to."

There was a little interval of silence. A rebellious feeling within The Wasp prompted him to tell the messenger where he could go and cook waffles without a gas stove, but he restrained himself. The quick glimpse that he had of No. 37 in the darkened car had excited his curiosity and wonder. Was there a connection between the presence in Como of the great detective and The Man from Prague? Monsieur Blane found that he was gripped by a mad desire to find out.

"And where can he be found?" he asked coldly.

The thin man moistened his lips. "You must walk up the Via Plinio, cross the Piazza del Duomo and continue along the Via Vittorio Emmanuele. Some one will speak to you and you will answer with one word. You wish to go?"

"Sure. And the word?"

"The word is 'Discord.' You speak Italian, monsieur? Well, say it in that tongue. It will be *'Discordanza.'*"

The fellow stood looking down at the Texan and his silent watchfulness annoyed Robert Henry Blane. "Go away!" snapped the Wasp. "You have delivered the message, have you not?"

"Yes, yes, monsieur," stammered the startled messenger, "but I was to find out when you would come?"

"I will come in good time," replied Blane. "Just for the moment I would like to be alone."

The thin man nearly fell over himself in getting away from the irritable American. He slipped like a scared bug into the pas-

sage leading from the terrace. The insolence of the tall adventurer to whom he had delivered the message astounded him. On previous occasions he had delivered similar instructions as to the manner in which his chief might be interviewed, and the persons to whom he had delivered the orders had received them with awe. He damned the impudence of all Americans as he crept away.

The Wasp, certain that the fellow had disappeared, stooped and picked up a handful of small pebbles from the floor of the terrace. Carefully, and yet acting with a certain careless manner that would not stir the suspicion of a watcher, he tossed a pebble on the top of the closed and darkened car that stood in the street. He followed the one pebble with two more.

For a few seconds he waited, then, one after the other, he carelessly dropped seven pebbles onto the top. He wondered if the astute sleuth within the machine would count the tiny missiles and find in their number the figures that made his distinguished alias.

Mr. Blane guessed that the man hunter would count the taps made by the falling pebbles, and he guessed aright. To the keen eyes of the Texan there appeared a faint lightening of the black patch that marked the window on the side toward the pavement. He realized that the detective was looking up at the terrace. The Wasp struck a match, pulled out his watch, and for quite half a minute examined the face of the timekeeper. The match burned out. He dropped it and looked down at the car. The face had disappeared from the window.

The Wasp rose, sauntered through the passage, down the stairs and through the corridor of the hotel. A soft breeze came from the water. The descending and ascending cars of the funicular that carried the cliff dwellers of Brunate looked like two gigantic and phosphorescent caterpillars who were intent on keeping an appointment at a spot halfway down the mountain. The soft whisper of a guitar came from the lake in which the stars shone like daisies in a submerged field.

Robert Henry Blane followed the instructions of the thin man. He followed the short Via Plinio, named in honor of the elder and younger Pliny who were both born at Como. He crossed the Piazza del Duomo

upon which the splendid cathedral benevolently looks and he continued along the Via Vittorio Emmanuele till he was near the Via Tridi. At the corner of the two streets a slouching, ruffianly person addressed him in Italian.

Was the signore looking for some one?

The signore admitted he was.

The fellow asked if there was an address. Possibly there was not, but there might be a word.

"*Discordanza*," said The Wasp.

The ruffianly one turned into the Via Tridi, stopped at the third door, kicked softly with his shoe, then, as the door opened waved The Wasp forward into the dark passage.

Monsieur Blane was alert now. His muscles were tense and his fists ready as he stepped into the passage. His thoughts were centered on a dwarfed revolver of American make that rested in a specially made pocket. The revolver seemed to sense the blackness of the passage into which the Texan had carelessly stepped. It chattered of danger.

A flash light bit yard lengths out of the condensed gloom. It struck the visitor and climbed up his tall length till the circle of light enveloped his face. It sprang away again, brushed the darkness from the flooring boards and retreated before the American as the bearer of the light whispered a soft, "Follow me."

The Wasp counted his footsteps. Eleven straight ahead, five to the right, three steps onto a raised passage, five along the passage to a door. He checked the numbers in his head. Many times he had been called upon to make a departure from dangerous places where illuminants were not in favor for the moment, and he had found that a record of the ingoing passage was exceedingly useful.

The bearer of the flash light knocked, there came a gruff answer, the door opened, unloosing a volume of light, and Robert Henry Blane moved into a spacious room. A really vast room, lighted by an enormous chandelier.

The Wasp took in the furnishings of the room with a single glance. The chamber was a blaze of gilt, a rather brazen and vulgar display of gold veneer. Huge mirrors in yellow frames rushed up toward the high ceiling; chairs that sat up like beaten nuggets lined the walls. A rather barbaric

display of uncomfortable and useless articles.

The big Texan looked for a human occupant. There was none as far as he could see. Then, as he wondered as to who had given the order to enter the room, the same voice came from the rear of an enormous leather screen that occupied one corner of the room.

"You will pardon me, Signore Blane, if I do not appear," said the unseen speaker. "I never speak face to face with any of my callers."

The retort of The Wasp came without a moment's hesitation. "And I," he replied, "never speak with any one who hides behind a screen."

There was a long interval of silence. A clock upon the mantel spoke of the insolence of the visitor to the other pieces of furniture. "Woof, woof!" it ticked. "Nerve, nerve! Thick, thick! Woof, woof!"

The voice from behind the screen broke in on the muttering of the clock. "Perhaps you are right," said the unseen person. "It is a habit of mine but every law has its little exceptions. Why should you demand a face to face audience with me?"

"I didn't ask for any kind of an audience," retorted The Wasp. "You did the asking, but I assumed that any person I spoke to would be visible. But that's not here nor there. I'm off."

He turned to the door that had closed softly after he had entered but the man behind the screen spoke again before the American's fingers could grip the handle. "I'll come out," he said sharply. "Wait one moment."

A minute passed, then there stepped from behind the screen a tall, thin man who wore a dressing gown of gray silk, corded tightly around his waist. Only the upper part of the face was visible. Large, dark eyes, set close together and lit up with a light that suggested fanaticism, regarded The Wasp over the tip of a black fan which the tall one held so that it completely covered the nose, mouth, and the lower section of the face. The hand that held the fan was long and lean, the bones emphasizing their presence and conjuring up a picture of thin poles beneath sagging, gray-tinted canvas. A rather ludicrous figure in a way, and yet, as the Texan glanced at the man, he felt that there was in him that queer, unexplainable lambency that characterizes

great dreamers and great fanatics. Mohammed might have had such eyes; they might have been the eyes of Savonarola, of Torquemada. They were illuminated with the fires of belief; hot, mad fires that bring trouble to the world unless they are held back by the cooling influence of common sense.

The voice in which he addressed The Wasp was raised slightly to show his displeasure at the tactics of the American. Words here and there broke away from the control and were kept down with difficulty. They had an inclination to shriek.

"You are right in saying that you did not ask for an audience with me," he said. "I wanted you to meet me because I thought your services would be valuable to me. You have come and now I can tell you what I want." He paused for a moment and regarded the handsome adventurer. The cool, gray eyes of Robert Henry Blane met the bright, dark eyes of The Man from Prague, and they were not a whit disconcerted by the scrutiny of the mysterious person who was troubling Europe. The Texan Wasp, in his time, had looked at many men without flinching.

The other went on, speaking swiftly: "I can offer you any reward that you ask. Any sum that you name will be met. Money is a small thing when compared with service. I can offer you a bigger salary than the president of your country."

"For what?" asked The Wasp.

The other paused for a moment before answering. "For making an attempt to upset the rule that exists in your country!" he said sharply. "Listen, don't speak for a moment! I am an iconoclast and the iconoclast always goes before the builder. Ground must be cleared before we erect new buildings. It is the law! We must have the destroyer who pulls down old walls, roots up old foundations, levels the ground and puts things in order for the architect of to-morrow!"

The voice had got from beyond control now. It carried with it a thin, high note that was painful to the listening Texan. It was the note that told of a mental engine in distress, of a brain "knocking" for want of proper attention. To Robert Henry Blane there came a feeling that the mental bearings of the other had been burned out by high-powered egoism upon which no one had poured the cooling oil of common sense.

The Man from Prague had climbed suddenly into a seat that offered difficulties.

"I'm listening," said The Wasp as the other paused.

"I want to send you to America!" cried the tall man. "I want to send you there with funds that will buy a path through steel walls. Do you understand? Not paltry remittances sent to you in a niggardly manner, but credits that will astonish bankers! Yes, credits that will astonish the fifteen fools that are at your hotel this evening! I can do it! I have the money! I have thousands and thousands! Millions and millions! I have all I want for the work!"

"And what is the work?" asked the Texan coldly.

"Destruction!" answered the man in the silk dressing gown. His lean hands pressed the fan against his face, suggesting the existence of a contrary desire to lower the shield and bark the word into the ears of the unmoved person who confronted him. After a little pause he repeated the word again, repeated it lovingly as if it were the essence of a prayer, a concentrated slogan of hope. "Destruction!" he cried.

Curiously, Robert Henry Blane remembered in the silence that followed, a paragraph of the article which the strange Viennese writer had published. It remarked that to many of the young men, who were filled with pride and ambition, the frightful war had seemed an opening course of life, and, with that bloody beginning to the feast, they naturally had expected more thrilling dishes to follow. Reasoning thus, the writer had attempted to explain the mad desire to destroy that was evident throughout the world. The Wasp thought The Man from Prague was one of the persons to whom the writer alluded. Blood was necessary to the fellow's life.

Robert Henry Blane put a question. "Tell me in what way you wish this destruction to be carried out?" he asked quietly.

"In every way!" cried the other. "In all ways and in every way! With words, with money, with sneers, with smiles, with fire even! Destroy their faith, their stupid beliefs, their confidence, their pride, their patriotism! Destroy everything that they rest on! Destroy the little, fat pillows upon which their fat, bourgeois souls are squatting, then we will offer them a real base, a

strong, modern base upon which they can rest!"

A smile rested for a moment on the handsome face of The Texan Wasp. The other noted it. "What makes you smile?" he asked angrily.

"I was thinking of a couple I met today," said the American quietly. "I was just wondering what could replace what they and their townspeople possess."

"How? Why? What do you mean?" snapped the man in the dressing gown. "What have the fools got?"

"I don't know quite what they've got," answered Robert Henry Blane. "It struck me that it was something rather nice and homey though. It seems a sort of mixture that you'll have to go some to beat. The bride of the man I was speaking to saved a few hundred people from death by plugging in telephone calls with the flood water up to her waist, and the folk of her town were so impressed with her courage that the good old sports got together and scooped up enough money to pay her honeymoon expenses to Europe. It's possibly a small matter to you, but—well, it sort of hit me square in the middle of my emotional solar plexus."

There came an interval of silence. The dark eyes of The Man from Prague regarded the adventurer. In their blazing depths showed surprise, annoyance, anger. The long, bony fingers clutched the handle of the fan as if they had a belief that the article was a knife.

The silence was interrupted by a soft knock on the door. The apostle of destruction barked an order, the door opened and the ruffianly looking person who had addressed The Wasp at the corner of the Via Tridi entered the room.

The newcomer looked from his master to Robert Henry Blane, then again glanced inquiringly at The Man from Prague. It was plain that he had a message and waited the word to speak.

The lover of destruction turned to The Wasp. With a look of simulated astonishment he leaned forward, his eyes upon the face of the American. In the queer, slithering Magyar dialect he cried out: "There is blood on your face!"

Robert Henry Blane did not move a muscle. He understood what had been said to him but in his checkered career that test had been applied to him before. He said

softly: "I do not understand. What did you say?"

The Man from Prague turned to the messenger and in the same tongue that he had used in testing the lingual capacity of the American he asked sharply: "Have they found out?"

"Yes," answered the man.

"Where?" questioned The Man from Prague.

"In the car," replied the other. "Hiding and watching the hotel."

The Man from Prague glanced swiftly at the Texan. Robert Henry Blane was examining a flight of gilded cupids on the ceiling. His complete lack of interest would have fooled an angel.

The Man from Prague gave hurried instructions. Some one was to see some one else, means were to be taken immediately. The Magyar dialect was hard to follow when it took on high speed. The ears of The Wasp were strained to clutch the words. He seized upon one here and there and strung them together by guessing their connecting links. Something was to be done to a certain person hiding in an automobile in a street. And there was no indication that the "something" was to be of a kind and charitable order. Quite the opposite. It seemed to the Texan as his ears grabbed at the quick-flowing words, clutching an expression here and there, that the creed of destruction advanced by the madman from Prague was to be put in operation. The thoughts of The Wasp were on the darkened car on the Piazza Cavour, the car in which sat the greatest sleuth in Europe. He wondered what was being prepared for No. 37!

The messenger slipped through the door and The Man from Prague turned to the American. He began to talk in a quiet tone that carried a sneering note. "It has dawned on me that I made a mistake in sending for you," he said. "I thought from what I heard that you were a person that would be useful. I thought that you—well, I thought that you were an adventurous person who was free from all mawkishness."

The slight scar on the right jaw of The Wasp that was not noticeable when the face expressed good humor showed white and sinister under the words of the other. The spirit of good temper left the gray eyes and was succeeded by a fighting look that might have stopped the prattle of a more obser-

vant person than the man in the gray-silk dressing gown.

The apostle of disorder went on: "I could offer you any reward that you named. I could offer you a sum that would be beyond your wildest hopes. But I won't! You started to talk about a silly girl who saved some one from drowning and stuff of that sort. What is that to me? Tell me? What is all that to me?"

He lifted his voice and screamed the questions at Robert Henry Blane. Again there came the shrieking undertone into his words. He was angry, violently angry, and he took no pains to hide his temper. The simple story of the heroine of Calico Springs had stirred a consuming hate against the man that he had thought of employing.

"I might have known!" he screamed. "I should have been wiser! I have wasted time in speaking to you. If I had considered a moment I should have cut you out as a possible employee! I know the American people! They are all fools! They are—"

"Easy!" interrupted The Wasp. "Hold your horses! You're going down an incline!"

"Going down what?" shrieked the other.

"Going down an incline," said the Texan, his gray eyes fixed on the frothing egoist. "I said to clap on your brakes before—"

"I am speaking!" cried The Man from Prague. "I am telling you that I know the sickly sentimentality of the American people! I know their mawkish desire to help! I know their idiotic—"

The little résumé of the faults of the American people was suddenly interrupted. A very hard fist leaped up from the hip of Robert Henry Blane, whizzed swiftly through the air, smashed the black fan covering the lower part of the egoist's face and landed on what is known to ring followers as "the button." A fine, well-placed blow. For the faintest fraction of a second The Man from Prague seemed to oscillate softly with his feet an inch from the floor, then he crumpled hurriedly and flopped heavily upon the Bokharan rug that covered the parquetry. For the time being the work of the destroyer was halted by a small dose of his own medicine deftly administered by a person who refused to join the colors.

The Texan Wasp didn't glance at the man on the floor. He stepped to the door, opened it and passed into the darkened pas-

sage. He was very annoyed. The criticism which the vicious fanatic had aimed at Americans angered him curiously. It cast a reflection on his own intelligence. He, Blane, had been stirred by the story which the Reverend Thomas Browne had told of his little bride, and he resented the impertinence of a long, ghostlike foreigner who found it mawkish and sentimental.

"The conceited ass!" growled the Texan. "If I had him near the lake I would drop him in!"

The passage was quiet. The Wasp remembered the little records he had taken while coming to the room. Cautiously he started to retrace his steps. There was the man with the flash light between him and the street door.

The American hurried. He realized that the man he had sent into dreamland might recover at any moment. And he guessed that the apostle of destruction would come to his senses in a mood that would be in no way friendly to the man who had walloped him on the jaw. Robert Henry Blane pictured the ridiculous face of the egoist as the blow landed. The fellow was bragging so loudly of destruction that it seemed strange when a snappy little jolt to the jaw could silence his jargon and send him whizzing into slumberland.

Blane had nearly reached the street door when he stumbled over an obstacle on the floor. The obstacle immediately resented interference. Two muscular hands gripped the right ankle of the Texan and brought him swiftly to the boards. He had tripped over the guard who had stretched himself across the passage to enjoy a nap!

It was a very short and sharp engagement. As The Wasp fell he heard the far-off buzzing of a bell which convinced him that The Man from Prague was recovering somewhat. The guardian of the door had also heard the bell. He unloosed a cry for help that woke the echoes of the passage. Robert Henry Blane felt for the fellow's throat, luckily found it, and effectually stopped a second yell. He did more. His iron fingers shut off the breath of the guard so cleverly that the man gurgled and lay still.

The Wasp sprang to his feet. Some one had answered the bell. There came excited cries and orders from the end of the passage. A blaze of light routed the furthermost masses of gloom and advanced up the

passage. The high-pitched voice of the great egoist rose above the clamor.

Robert Henry Blane dashed to the door. He found two locks and thrust them back. He gripped the handle and pulled. The door would not budge.

The seeing fingers of the American raced up and down the jamb. They found a button. The crack of a revolver was followed by deafening echoes. The Wasp pressed the button and again pulled at the handle. The door opened. A hand gripped at the Texan's collar. He tore himself free, sprang into the Via Tridi and dashed away into the night.

The Texan Wasp made for the Piazza Cavour but he chose a different route to that by which he had come. He raced through dark and narrow streets till he reached the Via Unione, followed this to the Place Volta, then by a narrow street to the Lungo. His thoughts were centered on one matter of supreme importance. The conversation between The Man from Prague and his rufianly follower buzzed within his brain. The scraps of the Magyar dialect that he had clung to became rimmed with colored fire as he ran. Something was to be done to some one who was within a darkened automobile, and the something was not of a friendly character.

The Wasp ran faster. For a second he remembered the room in the narrow street at Carcassonne where he had sprung upon the man who carried with him the peculiar odor of crushed marigolds. Some one had rescued him, Blane, when death was placing soft and silent hands upon him. And that rescuer and the man in the darkened car were identical. The great man hunter, No. 37, was the active force in old Carcassonne and the marked victim in Como!

Running at full speed Robert Henry Blane reached the Piazza Cavour. Half blinded by perspiration he glanced at the street before the hotel. The darkened car was still standing some twenty feet from the entrance!

The Wasp halted. He glanced around the square. There were no signs of immediate danger. The piazza was nearly deserted. The notes of a song floated in from the lake. The illuminated caterpillars that went up and down continuously on the slope of Brunate moved noiselessly away from each other after meeting halfway up the

mountain. The clock in the curiously constructed Broletto chimed eleven.

The American took a scrap of paper from his pocket and, pausing for a moment, scribbled a few words upon it. It was a short message reading:

Hop for your life. Something is going to break loose. They know where you are.

BLANE.

At a swift walk he approached the darkened automobile. He rolled the scrap of paper into a pellet, then, without halting in his stride, he whisked it deftly through the open window of the car as he passed. He reasoned that the detective would be alert and that he would read the message immediately by aid of a flash light.

Robert Henry Blane, walking swiftly, crossed the street in front of the car and dived into a dark passage. He was certain that the man hunter, if still in the auto, would slip out the far door of the machine and make for the same spot. No. 37 was too clever to make his retreat from his hiding place more noticeable than was absolutely necessary.

The guess made by the Texan was correct. He had hardly reached the dark passage when he saw the door of the car open. The short, muscular form of the detective crept quietly onto the street. The American watched him. Like a very alert cat the sleuth swiftly crossed the street and plunged into the gloom.

"Blane?" he whispered.

"Yes, I'm here!" murmured the Texan.

"What is happening?"

"I don't know."

"But why the note?"

"I heard something. Scraps of a confab between two persons who are not friendly disposed toward you."

The detective grunted. "There's a few around here who are not friendly with decent folk," he growled. "I'm thankful to you for tipping me off. I saw you when you tossed the pebbles on the car. Here long?"

"Came this afternoon," said The Wasp. "Had an appointment to keep."

The conversation ended for the moment. The two stood together and watched the darkened car. Robert Henry Blane wondered if he had made a mistake regarding the few scraps that he had rescued from the slithering speech of The Man from Prague. He had no wish to discuss with the

detective the manner in which he had acquired the information. That was his own affair. Tipping him off to an immediate danger was simply paying off an old score. Besides, to the Texan there was a great desire to foil the plans of the egoist who had talked of the mawkishness and sentimentalities of Americans.

From far off came the heavy rumbling of a motor truck. The noise rushed down a narrow street onto the piazza and spread, brazen and nerve-destroying, over the silent square. It drummed against the closed shutters of the houses, bringing grunts of anger from hot and sleepy persons within.

The roar increased. It became a very devil of a noise. It shook the ground. It was a canopy of disorder thrust out over the town, the throbbing of the engine being interlaced with the harder and more forceful streaks of sound made by the wheels grinding the cobbles.

A policeman near the water front was stirred into attention. He came hurrying across the square with a "what-the-dickens" run that was ludicrous. Como was a resort and ruffians who ran army camions wild after midnight were undesirable citizens.

The narrow street choked with the barbaric uproar. It carried a sinister suggestion of unbridled power. It was threatening, alarming, menacing.

The cobbles shrieked under the iron-shod wheels as the camion rolled into the square. The Wasp and the detective leaned forward and watched the thing. They sensed a tragedy.

The great truck swept in a drunken manner across the street, struck the pavement and bore down in a slouching, reckless way on the door of the hotel. Its speed increased. The policeman broke into a run, blowing his whistle furiously as he raced toward the camion that was running amuck. A woman peering from a half-opened window shrieked loudly. A waiter before the door of the hotel turned and dived like a startled rabbit into the house.

The wheel of the truck tossed aside a small pine tree in a tub that was taking an airing, then it charged straight at the darkened car in which No. 37 had been hiding!

It roared down on it like a tank on a concrete shelter. It struck the rear end of the automobile with irresistible force. It lifted it, held it wedged for an instant against the pavement, then ground it remorselessly.

The noise of splintering wood was added to the mad racket. The body of the car was crumpled up as if a monster mouth had pounced upon it. The sidewalk was strewn with varnished fragments; pieces of glass descended in a shower.

The driver of the truck had sprung from his seat the moment before the drunken machine had struck the car. He leaped to the street, turned, and ran swiftly in the direction from which the truck had come. Robert Henry Blane, standing in the dark passage, saw the policeman make an ineffectual attempt to stop the fellow, then, as The Wasp swung round to speak to his companion he found that the sleuth was not there. He looked again at the flying figure of the driver. Speeding after him at a gait that seemed altogether out of keeping with his rather burly form, was No. 37!

The Wasp, a little astounded at the happening, kept on the outskirts of the crowd that gathered around the stalled truck and the wrecked automobile. The American was cautious. Some one had made a very definite attempt to send the man hunter to the other world, skewered with the splinters of the battered car. To the police and half-dressed onlookers it was simply an affair in which a drunken driver had collided with a parked car and had bolted at finding what a mess he had made of the machine. Blane looked for the officer who had spoken to No. 37 earlier in the evening, but the fellow was not there. He had evidently gone off duty, so there was no suspicion that the collision had been engineered with the view of killing or disabling any person.

The Wasp considered the happening. He was certain that the whole affair was the result of the instructions which The Man from Prague had given to his ruffianly follower. The impudence of the apostle of destruction amazed the Texan. Europe was certainly going to the devil. Quiet, sober old Europe with the dust of the centuries on it was running the wildest sections of the New World off the map.

The Wasp considered his own safety. He was evidently under the eye of persons in the pay of The Man from Prague. Curiously his mind recalled an interview he had in the long ago with Ferdinand Darren, "Count of Pierrefond." The great gambler had told the Texan that he, Darren, seeking peaceful sleep, tried to imitate the natives of New Guinea who slept in trees

after hauling up the ladders by which they had climbed to their lofty perches. Robert Henry Blane wished that he had a tree.

Some one in the crowd mentioned Brunate. The Wasp overheard the answer. There was a special late car up to the high peak!

The information solved the problem in the mind of Robert Henry Blane. Brunate, twenty-five hundred feet above the town, was a refuge that could not be reached after the cars stopped running.

Swiftly The Wasp slipped away from the crowd. Running at top speed along the Borgo Sant' Agostino he reached the station in time to spring into the last car. It slipped up the high hill and Como dropped away as it climbed. Mr. Blane, watching the lights, thought it rather a mad town at the moment. A little too wild for the sound sleep which he longed for greatly. He felt a great admiration for the New Guinea natives who haul up their ladders after sleepily climbing into the treetops.

At the Central Station in Milan the Paris-Lausanne express was on the point of sweeping northward through the Simplon tunnel on its picturesque run. Bells rang and station officials bellowed warnings.

The gold-laced conductor blew his whistle. The engine snorted. A proud engine. It was dragging northward the "Billion Dollar Battalion" that was giving Europe the once-over. They were occupying a special carriage at the rear of the train. Next to the special carrying the fifteen American bankers was a second-class car, and in one compartment of the second sat the Reverend Thomas Browne and the little bride who was the heroine of Calico Springs.

The train was moving when commotion itself blew onto the platform. A long-legged person dashed through the turnstiles, cleverly evaded the tackle of two officials, streaked by the bankers' special car, rushed past the second-class compartments, clutched the brass rail of a corridor first-class and hauled himself aboard. A perspiring conductor who started to read the riot act caught the cool gray eyes of his tardy passenger and mumbled some unintelligible remarks about danger.

"Are you speaking to me?" asked Robert Henry Blane.

"No, signore," stammered the conductor. The Wasp entered a compartment and

sat down. He had not slept as well as he expected. Half a dozen questions had danced through his slumbers, prodding him at times into wakefulness. They had clustered around him, demanding answers. "What prompted the murderous attempt on the life of No. 37?" "Was The Man from Prague anxious to harm the fifteen bankers?" "Was the apostle of destruction connected with the League of the Creeping Death?" "Would the little parson and his bride be in danger through traveling on the same train as the distinguished financiers?" "Was No. 37 aware of the presence of the Prague person in Como?" And, lastly: "If a girl had the courage to stand at her switchboard and send out calls with flood water up to her waist would it not be possible for a two-fisted Texan to ride along with her on her wedding trip and keep his eyes open for danger?"

The train roared northward through interesting country. By armfuls of olive trees, by Stresa and Baveno with glimpses of the Borromean Islands where "little chunks of Paradise squat soft in sapphire blue."

Robert Henry Blane was not interested in scenery. With apparent carelessness but with eyes and brain alert he wandered through the train, sifting the passengers. French, Italians, Americans, Swiss and English; a sprinkling of Germans, Swedes, and Norwegians. A cosmopolitan train. A dozen tongues in use in a single carriage. The Wasp listened and moved on; stopped, listened, and moved again. He was searching for something, something that he had a dim idea he might find.

He invaded the second-class carriage in which rode the Reverend Thomas Browne and his bride. The little couple were in ecstasies. They sat side by side, holding hands, their eyes feasting on the flying landscape. "Had Mr. Blane seen Lake Maggiore? Had he seen the islands? Wasn't it all beautiful? What a lot they would have to tell to the good folk of Calico Springs!" The Reverend Thomas showed his diaries; fat, bulging diaries. He had planned—and he told this with visible self-consciousness—to give a series of lectures in aid of the poor who had suffered most by the flood. Robert Henry Blane had difficulty in getting away from the two delighted honeymooners. A sight of their glowing faces would cure any one suffering from gangrene of the soul.

For the third time The Wasp loafed through the corridors. He walked the train from end to end, excepting the special wagon in which rode the "Billion Dollar Battalion." He had a vague feeling that his eyes or ears would locate something of interest. It was a queer feeling that he could not get rid of. It was the result of the six questions that had troubled his sleep.

Through Dromodossola and on toward the tremendous tunnel that drives through the very stomach of the Leopontine Alps. A burrow over twelve miles in length with a mile high of mountain above it! The appalling Simplon, unequaled in the world!

And as the train raced toward the black opening like a rabbit making for its hole that which The Wasp had sought came to his ears! It startled him. It dragged him suddenly from a daydream that pictured the face of a girl of the long ago sitting with a tall wanderer from Texas in a fairy train that swung them by wonder scenery the like of which they had never seen. The girl was Betty Allerton of Boston, and the man Robert Henry Blane, one time of Houston, Texas.

The something held The Wasp at rigid attention. It came from behind him as he stood in the corridor of his own carriage. It made him tense and watchful. He experienced a little thrill of horror, a queer feeling of morbid expectancy. An inner self suggested that he should brace himself to resist an approaching danger. What Robert Henry Blane had heard was the slithering Magyar dialect in which The Man from Prague had conversed with the henchman detailed to maim or kill No. 37!

The Wasp did not turn. He listened, listened with ears strained to catch the purport of the whispered words. The slippery tongue evaded him. The words flowed into each other, making a gurgling stream that slipped by in a maddening fashion.

One word came clearly to The Wasp. It was the Magyar word for "burrow." It was followed closely by another that suggested hurry. The whispering stopped. Cautiously Robert Henry Blane turned. Slipping awkwardly through the passengers who cluttered the corridor and stared through the windows were two tall men wearing caps of the old type that possessed earflaps which were turned up and tied together by strings. One of the two carried a small bundle wrapped tightly in black oilskin.

Robert Henry Blane followed the two. They were making for the rear of the car in which he had taken his place. Behind his car was the second-class carriage in which rode the Reverend Thomas Browne of Calico Springs and his little bride; after the second-class car trailed the special car that carried the "Billion Dollar Battalion."

With a swish of hot air along the corridor and a little chorus of "Oh's" and "Ah's" the express dived into the terrible burrow. A strange, bold deed for the electric motor. Twelve miles away on the other side of the majestic peaks was Switzerland; behind were the sunlit slopes of Italy. Above the arched roof of the tunnel was a mile high of red clay, granite and crystalline-schist heaved heavenward in the days when the world was young. Man, boring like a maggot in a gigantic cheese, had driven a little hole through this terrifying mass, and through this hole ran the electric-driven trains packed with travelers.

The Wasp hung to the two tall men who whispered to each other. The roar of the train was deafening. Passengers in the corridor slipped back into their different compartments, a little awed by the knowledge that a mile of earth and rock rested on the ceiling beneath which the train scuttled like a frightened lizard. Robert Henry Blane was glad that the press in the corridor lessened. It gave him a better chance to observe the two. He got closer to them. The belief that they meditated something evil, something unclean, grew as he watched.

The two reached the rear of the car. Behind them roared and rattled the second-class carriage containing the heroine of Calico Springs, and behind that again came the special with the fifteen bankers.

The Wasp was an example of careless watchfulness. The train roared up the gradient that leads to the highest point of the wonderful burrow. The man carrying the package wrapped tightly in black oilskin cut the string and uncovered it furtively. Gusts of wind swept through the car. The little air demons that live in the dark Simplon snatched at the cap of the man with the bundle. It was whipped from his head and with a growl of rage he flung up his right hand to recover it.

The train lurched. The fellow cannoned against a brass guard leading to the side door. His companion cried a warning. The oilskin wrapper of the small bundle fell to

the floor, carrying with it a sprinkling of gray powder that evidently had found its way out of the inner covering of brown paper. The Wasp moved closer. The eyes of the second man swung upon him, queer eyes that showed red in the dim light at the end of the car. He cried out a warning as Robert Henry Blane moved closer.

Robert Henry Blane became a panther ready to spring. The second man, who had ordered Blane away, now stooped to blow the gray powder from the platform. He dropped upon his knees and fanned it with his hat, and, as he did so Fate brought the matter to a head. A brakeman, lurching through the train from the rear, stumbled out of the connecting passage to the second-class carriage. The dim light made the man on the floor for the moment invisible. The brakeman tossed away the butt of the cigarette he was smoking. It fell upon one end of the little trail of gray powder that the fellow was brushing away. There was the spiteful hiss of an awakened snake, a flare that lit up the rear platform, a quick flash of flame as the spoonful of explosive that had oozed out of a badly packed bomb exploded. A stream of curses came from the man on his knees. The brakeman roared a question. Robert Henry Blane sprang.

It was a crazed man that The Wasp clutched. A madman whose god was Destruction. The American was interfering with what the fellow thought to be the most wonderful work that was ever intrusted to any one. He had been ordered to throw the bomb from the rear end of the car so that it would encompass the destruction of the "Billion Dollar Battalion" traveling in the special. And the actions of a fool brakeman and an interfering tourist blocked the great work!

The American received a blow on the back of the head that partly stunned him. The bundle carrier managed to gain possession of the door handle as the grip of the Texan weakened for an instant. The second thug had leaped upon the back of Robert Henry Blane and was endeavoring to strangle him with a well-placed garrote.

The wriggling snake with the bundle was possessed of the strength of a maniac. While his companion's grip tightened he fought to open the door. The wind torrent

increased. The fellow shrieked with delight. He was winning out.

Robert Henry Blane made a final effort. With the blood pounding madly in his head he swung himself around, packed the man clinging to his back in the aperture of the door, then, as the clawing devil made a further attack, the Texan put all his remaining strength into a punch.

The blow landed. It struck the wet forehead of the bomb carrier. He crumpled like a string of macaroni that has slipped from a fork. Some one in the corridor pulled the alarm. Blane, as he slipped to the floor of the platform, heard the squealing of hurriedly applied brake shoes. The express was pulling up.

Ten minutes later Robert Henry Blane, quite recovered from the struggle, listened to the remarks of a bullet-headed man who had come from the special car that carried the fifteen bankers. A strange, bulldog type of man with eyes that were like frozen hailstones, a mouth that was but a lipless line, and a chin that had thrown peace to the wind. He was a man feared by criminals. He was known from the white city of Cadiz to odorous Archangel, and from romantic Stamboul to the far-off Hebrides. He was No. 37.

"They wish to make you a substantial present," said the sleuth. "Not a little thing. Something big that—"

The Texan laughed. "Tell them to keep it," he said quietly. "I had never a thought of them. I was thinking of a little American girl who is on her honeymoon. She's riding with her husband in the second-class. Saved a town, man! What do you think of that? Plugged in calls on the phone with the flood up to her waist. And, listen! The folk of her town sent her and her husband on a honeymoon trip to Europe. The folk of Calico Springs, Arkansas! Did you think I wanted that honeymoon trip mucked up by a madman? Come along and I'll introduce you to her and her husband. You consort so much with criminals and near criminals that it will do your soul good to chat for a few minutes with a clean American girl that carries more grit in her system than you and I together. Come along!"

Another Texan Wasp story in the next issue.



Talks With Men

By Martin Davison

THE name signed to this article is not mine. If what I write is to be literally true and not a sort of journalistic hokum the secret of who writes it must be one shared by just two people—myself and the editor of *THE POPULAR*.

The editor asked me to write this and the papers that follow. The argument that he used was something like this.

"Look here, Davison," he said, "you have been talking to me for an hour about men you know and what made them fail or get on in life. Write it down. It's good stuff. No, don't write it, talk it. Dictate it to a stenographer. Let some of the fellows who read the magazine have the advantage of the things you have found out for yourself."

Talking is not writing. I thought I could talk about all I knew in two or three pages, but now I find it will take more than ten times that. I find, as the saying is, that I have a message. I know something, or think that I know someth'ng, about life that I want to communicate to others. It seems to me important, inside stuff, the real facts in the case. It is firsthand information, either from experience or from the confidential talks of men who have had the experience.

When I left school at sixteen I looked at older men, men of experience and success, with a reverence not untempered by curiosity. I wanted to ask them questions, questions the books did not answer. Part of the time I was snubbed and part of the time I was too bashful to ask the right questions. For a long time I never learned anything save from experience. Most of what one learns in the art of life comes from living. What the books are really for is to check up and codify, to make orderly and concrete for us the things we have already lived and subconsciously understand.

It would be idle for me to recite my qualifications as an adviser, although they are considerable. It is enough to say that I have known all sorts and conditions of men—and known them well; that I have lived in all sorts of places, that I have been friends with the seller and the buyer, the employer and the employed, the sick and the well, the rich and the poor, the fortunate and the unfortunate. I know that I can pick winners in the race of life, for I have done it repeatedly.

It took me at least twenty years to learn how to talk to men and women, and I worked on the job every day. I discovered that the finer art of conversation is not in telling people things but in getting them to tell you things.

The art of asking questions so that the cross-examined shall talk truthfully and freely and not for an instant discover that he is being questioned—that is a whole subject in itself. I know something about it and it has helped me to a knowledge of many things. Even the most taciturn of experts will thaw out and tell me something really new if I stay with him long enough.

When I decided to give these pages the title, "Talks With Men," I was thinking partly of the men to whom I am talking now and partly of those whose faces and voices I know, and whose conversation and advice furnish, in a great measure, whatever of value you find here.

I have a big subject to write about—the art of getting the most out of life, which means the art of putting the best of yourself into it. I must begin somewhere so I will start by telling you what I have learned in the last twenty-five years.

The Art of Keeping Fit

THE doctors are beginning to study health as well as disease. Here is what they say. Breeding counts for a lot, but that principle of variation that makes a man different from either of his parents holds out for those with a poor physical ancestry that ray of hope that makes life such a magnificent gamble after all. So we may forget our ancestors.

The great slayers of mankind are not armies of men but those vaster armies of microörganisms that continually are striving for a foothold and a conquest in the body of man himself. The majority of men who fail physically in middle life are brought down by the poisons left by some acute disease, such as a fever, beaten off years before. Those who live to ninety and beyond—and I have known several of them—are not so often exceptional in vitality as in the fact that they have never been seriously ill.

All we can do is to be reasonably particular about the air we breathe and the things we eat and drink. A man who washes his hands frequently and is rather fastidious as to what and where he eats and drinks has the best chance. He ought to visit regularly a dentist who is interested in the health of his patient rather than beautiful bridge work and who is ready to order a tooth out when it is dead. The disease that causes so many sound teeth to fall out in middle life is the result, often, of faulty dentistry in youth, but quite as often is caused by a bad occlusion, a faulty setting of the teeth which places undue strain on them, and which can be corrected by a good dentist. This is the absolute conviction of the dentist who gets the highest fees in New York for prophylactic treatment. People have been cured of rheumatism in the feet by having their teeth cleaned.

Another dangerous focus of infection is a sore throat. If you feel ill and don't know why visit both the doctor and the dentist and have all the X rays taken that they suggest. You may have an infected tonsil.

THE digestive tract sometimes becomes a focus of slow infection. This is a matter for the specialist. The next great discoveries of the medical profession will be as regards diet and nutrition. Patent medicines are of no use to the man with anything seriously wrong with him. If a man is under par and stays so without any reason that he can find, his best friend is the best physician in the neighborhood. We have often heard people remark that whereas surgery has made enormous advances medicine has been standing still. This is far from the truth. The up-to-date doctor has a lot of things at his disposal that no one dreamed of twenty years ago.

All the above, however, has to do with the negative and comparatively uninteresting side of keeping fit. Prophylaxis is all right in its way, but there is another, more attractive side to the art of being at one's best physically. To build up health and organic vigor is to build up resistance to disease. The trainers of prize fighters discovered things about exercise, fresh air and diet that the doctors had overlooked.

Here's where we say good-by to the doctor.

THE prize fighter trains for a hammering in the ring. We are going to train for the enjoyment of life, for efficiency, for clear thinking, for physical energy. We will go to the man who has proved himself the best physical trainer this country has ever known, not by what he has said or written but by what he has done.

He has never advertised, his patients have advertised him. Doctors go to him, senators, millionaires and judges. It is hard to get him to talk so we will watch him at work in his sanitarium out in the country. He pays no attention to the muscles of his patients. It is what they can do that interests him. He is not training piano movers or acrobats, so there is no apparatus in his exercise room. His patients toss medicine balls at each other till they perspire. Then they wrap up and drink hot water till they perspire some more. After that the speediest bath and the briskest rubdown and then a rest before breakfast. Sometimes they jog the dusty roads for miles on foot, sometimes they ride hard-trotting horses till they sweat again. Plenty of perspiration, plenty of hot water, plenty of rest before and after meals. The meals are good American cooking that needs no beer to wash it down nor wine to cut the grease. Plenty of vegetables, not too much meat, a cup of coffee in the morning. The trainer's idea is that it takes effort to get health and he sees that his patients make the effort. The man who has lived on whisky needs no cocktail before dinner, the cigarette fiend has no time to inhale smoke into his lungs. In six weeks, under this régime, we have seen wrecks turned into healthy men.

Here is what this great trainer said to a departing friend:

"You'll be all right now and can do what you want if you take your setting-up drill and hot water and bath every morning. But remember this. *Never ride any place you can walk. Walk all you can.*"

IT must be remembered that the above is a six weeks' intensive course in sane living for men who have abused themselves either by overwork or indulgence. No one should attempt any mental work or business and a course like this at the same time. A man who is already fairly fit needs no such arduous course. Roosevelt kept fit with a few hours' exercise a week and might be living yet if he had kept out of the South American jungle and eased up a little as he grew older. A man over forty should be careful about not overdoing exercise.

Walking is the best exercise but it takes a five-mile walk to get up a sweat and that means an hour and a half. Twenty minutes setting-up drill and a little less walking will do the trick. There are numerous setting-up systems advertised. They are all good, if you don't try too much at first and stick to it. Never mind the muscles of the arms. It's the place where you live, the place your waistcoat covers, that counts. Handball and tennis are concentrated exercise and good for young men. Golf is good for older men, one of the greatest hygienic discoveries of our time.

But you need play no games to keep well. The cheapest exercise is just as good as the most expensive.

Practically any exercise is good but the least beneficial is probably the juggling of heavy weights with the idea of developing big bunches of muscle on the arms and torso. The boys who have their pictures taken dressed in leopard skins

and with biceps flexed may be all right in the photograph gallery but they are not much as athletes.

Whatever exercise you take, begin easily but force yourself a little as you go on. If you have ever obeyed the commands of a good football coach, or riding or boxing master, or athletic trainer of any kind, you know how it is done. If you have the money and the time a short course under any sort of athletic instructor, whether it be golf, or boxing or tennis is a good thing, not so much for what you learn about the game—that comes only with practice—but for the moral discipline.

In diet, avoid sweets as much as possible. Cane or beet sugar is a new, concentrated food. The scientists have not yet discovered just what it does to the human body. Smoke if you want, but never before breakfast and don't inhale. Eat whatever bread you want but keep away from greasy foods or things that are highly salted or seasoned. If you find yourself drinking an inordinate amount of tea or coffee, cut it out. Too much coffee put a celebrated athlete, a friend of mine, in bed for six months. Don't bother with freak health foods. A moderate variety of the freshest foods on the market, well cooked, is the best.

Every one knows what regular hours are. A man should snap out the light seven or eight hours before he expects to jump out of bed. The best time for that is, ordinarily speaking, for a city man, an hour before he sits down to breakfast. And the best time for breakfast is that which allows him half an hour at the table and no hurry afterward.

Quite as important as anything mentioned above is the mental attitude. To be cheerful, to take a sane and optimistic view of things, to try and find the good points in those about you, to be kindly and charitable and forgiving and helpful—these are all necessary if you want to keep fit.

This all may seem very simple but the real truth has a way of seeming simple when you say it, and much harder when you try to live it.

A system built on the example and advice of the great trainer, persisted in for a day or so, or a week, will do you no good. The trainer's patients do as much in a week as you will do in a month. They take six weeks. You take six months and at the end of that time you are likely to keep right on.

BEFORE agreeing to write this series of talks I stipulated that I was to see all letters that they brought forth and to have the privilege of replying to such as I saw fit. I shall be glad to answer any letters from those who are in earnest and who inclose a stamped, addressed envelope.

In future issues I will talk about all manner of things. I have only scratched the surface on this one topic. I will talk about good and bad habits, smoking tobacco, games, business, love and marriage and things in general. Next time it will be about the young man who is trying to get a position. Just now the stenographer is getting tired and my throat is getting dry.





Lord of the Barren Lands

By Edison Marshall

Author of "The Call of the Blood," "The Isle of Retribution," Etc.

(A Four-Part Story—Part IV.)

CHAPTER XXI.

WOLVERENE'S hands and feet were bound and presently he was locked in one of the cabins to await his execution. The natives filed out of the courtroom; at last only John and Ruth were left. He turned to her to find her pale and indignant, looking at him with accusing eyes.

"I can't think that mock trial was very wise," she began.

He looked at her significantly. "It wasn't a mock trial," he said.

"Oh, I suppose not, in a way. But at least you held it wholly for effect—as an example to the people and to put fear into Wolverene. But I'm not sure but that you'll undo all the good you might have done when you suspend the sentence—or however you intend to get out of it."

His quiet gaze alarmed her. "It certainly would—undo everything I have done so far—if I *should* suspend the sentence. That is why I'm not going to do it."

He turned toward the door but she was suddenly afraid to have him go. It was not that she believed that he meant what he said—that he actually intended to carry through the grim sentence he had pronounced in this courtroom of exile—yet she was ill at ease and dismayed. "Wait a minute, John," she requested quietly. "I usu-

ally leave almost everything entirely to your judgment, but I feel that I would like a voice in this matter of Wolverene. You know I have been a missionary; it has been my special province to attend to spiritual problems."

"I don't feel this is a spiritual problem. It is a problem of law."

"You take your own law pretty seriously, it seems to me."

"It is not altogether my law—it is a law of nations and of commonwealths over all the land—and it is the individual's duty as well as the duty of elected officers to see that law is obeyed—and fulfilled. It is the law that when one man kills another he must pay for that killing with his own life."

"A brutal, savage law—a law of the Middle Ages!" she cried, fully wakened now. "I believe in putting murderers into prison where they can't kill any more, but to slaughter them—in vengeance—is terrible. John, have you forgotten the Commandments? Don't they say simply, for all to see, 'Thou shalt not kill!'"

"And isn't there another saying, not to be doubted, that 'he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword?' It doesn't say to take his sword away from him, or that he deserves to be killed with the sword, or that perhaps he will when retribution takes its course be killed with the sword. It

says he *must* be killed with the sword. You can't get away from that word *must*.

"I agree with you it's wrong to kill a man in vengeance," John went on. "Vengeance is never right—though maybe it's human. But it isn't wrong to kill a man so he can't kill you—to put him away where he sure can't kill anybody else. And it isn't wrong to teach by example that he who kills gets killed."

"Oh, I know you are just talking!" The girl spread her open hands. "But John, I do want you to reassure me. John, I want you to tell me, simply and truthfully, how you intend to handle this case—what you are going to do with that reckless, hunger-mad savage."

"I thought I made that plain." John's homely face was sober as she had never seen it. "He is going to be hanged—until he is dead—within this present hour!"

There was no further hope of disbelief. She suddenly knew John meant exactly what he said and that it all depended on her own strength whether or not that grim sentence was carried out. It would not suffice to play the pacifist's part, to wait quietly and to trust to her hopes and prayers to save the murderer's life. Bitter experience had taught her that the mere dreaming of a dream did not make it a fact, that the prayer with the straining muscle behind it was the prayer that came true. Lately she had been brought face to face with reality. Things that had seemed incredible to her had come true to her—not just to some one else far away, whose life was not close to her; facts too horrible to accept had been thrust down her throat. The idea of this execution filled her with horror, but mere disbelieving it did not make it untrue.

She began to use every power of persuasion she had—eloquence and logic, anger and personal appeal. "John, you wouldn't commit murder," she told him. "You're not *that* savage. And that's all it would be—murder—for you to take that man's life. I don't say that he doesn't deserve to die but—"

"And it's queer, but I don't say he *does* deserve to die," John interrupted thoughtfully. Yet she was not encouraged; he was not yet won to her side. "I ain't sure that it lies with me or any man—or any earthly judge—to say who deserves to die and who deserves to live. We've got theories and

that's all we have got. Maybe if people didn't deserve to live the Lord would never let 'em be born, and anyway, we can't be arbiters as to who should live and who should die. That's way beyond us—"

"But don't you see that's what you're trying to be—an arbiter of life and death?" the girl interposed.

"Maybe, but let me finish. I'm not hanging this man for punishment—because he deserves to die. It ain't my right to try to punish him for the things the Lord let him do. I don't know anything about death, either. It might not be any kind of a punishment, for all I know. But it is my right, and my duty, to make this world just as well run and decent as I can. I'm not in heaven yet—the world is all I got. It's my duty to look on things from a worldly point of view, not as if I was a judge leaning out of heaven. I know that people have found out long ago that in order to have a decent world to live in they've got to take the men who kill with a sword and kill them with a sword. That isn't taking any heavenly powers on my head—I don't dare to take heavenly powers on my head, for fear I'd be struck down like Babylon. That's just horse sense—to kill him so he won't kill any more people, and so everybody can get it through their heads it doesn't pay to go around killing people. It's a plain matter of business altogether, I guess. The punishment has sort of got to fit the occasion. Punishment isn't just the word, either. It's more like the premium you pay for insurance—the premium just stiff enough to underwrite the world against such crimes occurring again.

"You said it would be murder to hang Wolverene," John went on. "It's no more murder than if I would kill a wolf who is trying to steal one of the children. I haven't any God-given right to sit in judgment on a wolf and say he ought to die for carrying out his natural instincts. I only know that if he don't die he'll maybe cause me to die, so I kill him, every chance I get—naturally and without feeling especially mad at him. This man's a human wolf, killing when he wants to, and I'm just the agent of society in general that has long ago decided human wolves must die. If we don't kill 'em, they'll kill us, and finally there won't be anything left but human wolves, devouring the bodies of the people."

"But you have no *right!*"

"I've got the right of necessity. I told you that before."

"And you mean to tell me you will deliberately risk the judgment of the Lord—not to mention our own laws—by doing a deed like this? That you'll dare to hazard the immortality of your soul—"

"I don't know nothin' about my soul. I can only do what seems best in this world—just as the Bible says to do—and let some One higher than me watch out for my soul. I don't feel I'm risking the wrath of the Lord, because I don't think He'll judge me any more than I judge Wolverene—for doing what is natural for me to do. I can't think now about what society will do to me for taking the law in my own hands. But I know this Northwest country—and I know every white man will believe I did the only possible thing to do."

"But why don't you hold him prisoner until an agent of the law can reach you? Why don't you turn him loose to die in the mountains? Anything better than his blood on your hands."

"Don't you worry about them hands. They've had blood on 'em before—every man's hands must get blood on 'em from time to time if he's going to take his part in the big war we are all in. I can't keep him prisoner, Ruth—simply 'cause we've got nothing to feed him with. It's better to hang him than let him die of starvation, because with hanging him we're getting the most out of him—I mean, in the way of example to the others. To starve him would kill him just as sure, and we'd miss all the good effect his execution will have on the people; and one of these days, when a wolf-man gets hungry enough we'd have another murder. Ruth, I am bound that man won't escape me, to kill some one else some time. I'm bound that these people shall know men can't commit murder and get away with it. That's why I can't turn him loose in the woods. He's violated the law that men have made for the good of everybody. He's got to pay for it with his life."

"But he'd die anyway, John! The fate of this village is already sealed. You say we're far from law now—why not show a little mercy? It isn't as if you can help anybody by killing him—these people are already past help."

"But they're not. I haven't given up yet, Ruth. When I do I'll let you know. Out here law must be enforced more strictly

than any other place. And we'd might as well give up right now if we spare Wolverene—if we put off his sentence one hour. Before the night was over some other of these hunger-maddened men would kill somebody else, and soon there would be enough killing that this unimportant death I'm planning to-night would seem a mighty small matter. In a little while the human wolves—those with the least mercy and the sharpest axes—would be alive, fighting among themselves, but the rest of us would be dead. All we've built, all we've fought for, would be lost. I'm not going to give up the fight for the sake of one insignificant life—for the pleasure of getting out of one disagreeable job. Ruth, I've made up my mind. The last little edge of hope I've got for this village, and for you too, is to keep order, to keep discipline. That man has got to die!"

He turned from her then to give certain orders to a native that knocked at the door. The hour was almost up, it seemed; and certain preparations had been completed at the end of the village street. Ruth remembered with clutching fear and horror that a tall spruce tree, black as night now in the deepening twilight, stood like an outpost guard at the end of the row of houses; and it came often into the talk between John and the natives.

Oh, there was no swaying that man of iron with her eloquence or her tears! All her entreaties had been in vain. There was no more mercy in him than in the snows that swept his dark and savage home. At this moment she believed she hated him with a real and lasting hate; that he was banished from her heart forever. She had forgiven his brutality with Vashti, she had tried to forget his blood lust when he had killed the wolf in the cabin; but his conduct now could be neither forgotten or forgiven. She would not bless him in her thoughts again. She would steel herself against that strange warmth that sometimes overswept her—a warmth more kindly than that of the blessed sun which she had almost forgotten in these twilight days of winter—at the sight of his smile, the touch of his hard, rough, awkward hand. All this must be forgotten now. He was flying in the face of her words, her faith, her tears—all for a dream he could not put away.

She could not fight this man's relentless will with words alone; and her prayers were

impotent too. Edward had prayed for the salmon, but his entreaties did not tear away the restraining webs that Vashti had stretched at the narrows. She must fight John with his own weapon of *deeds!* If these awful weeks had taught one thing, they had taught the truth of John's warlike philosophy—that there is no conquest except by battle; that the man who lays down his arms lays down his life.

A queer tremor passed over her. Sudden excitement brought a flush to her pale cheeks, a luster to her hollow eyes. John was right; one deed was worth a thousand words; she might do more with one motion of her arm than by all her entreaties. John had showed her the way in weeks past; she might yet defeat him in his own field. There was still a way to save the condemned man and thus save John from himself.

Her heart fluttered and raced but her hand was steady as she reached for one of the sharp knives among the kitchen supplies. She tucked the blade into her sleeve, then crept out into the twilight. The way was clear; practically every one in the village was down at the end of the darkening street, waiting to see if the white man would keep his word. No one saw the girl slip quietly back of the row of houses and emerge at last at the door of the cabin where Wolverene was a prisoner. It was hardly the work of an instant to loosen the iron hook that locked the door. In an instant more she had slipped through and into the almost total darkness of the room.

Her excitement as well as the strength of her intent had so far kept her from any great degree of terror. She gave no thought to the fact that she was alone in the room with a brutal, blood-mad man, a cruel and inhuman murderer. If there had been one instant of waiting and inaction terror would have been quick to seize her; but this she was spared. Instantly she made out the long shadow of the murderer's form, lying just where John had left him on the floor. He was just a blur in the dark room but she caught the whiteness of his eyes as he glanced toward her.

"Don't make a sound," she murmured in English. Wolverene had some knowledge of the tongue; and she felt that in his extremity he would understand. "I've come to let you go. But you must promise to disappear at once into the woods—and not come back. Tell me quick—will you go at

once, and not do any more murderous wickedness—"

Wolverene did not fully understand even this simple English but his perceptions told him she had come to free him and he spoke a single syllable in assent. He would promise anything now! The girl had a ridiculous impulse to lecture him, to explain that she was not in the least condoning his deed but was only trying to save John from himself; but this she recognized as hysteria and repelled it at once. The savage did not want her explanations; he only wanted the feel of her knife blade on his bonds.

"You must go right up the ridge—don't stop for anything," she told him, "and thank God that you're not hanging from the gallows." She crept nearer, not dreaming that his keen, savage mind had already made other plans than hers—that he had thought of several things he must stop for. There was only death for an empty-handed man in the snow-swept forest. He must at least take time for a surprise attack on John—an easy thing to do in the shadows—the theft of the storehouse keys from his shattered body, and the procuring of what few supplies remained. The white squaw had told him he must not make a sound, and that was true; nor must she make a sound until he had time to do all these things and escape into the forest. There was only one way to silence her for sure; and this was the first thing he must take time for. Fortunately it only required a few seconds; his talon fingers at her throat when his hands were free, and then the shattering blow with a piece of firewood across the skull. He thought of firewood before he ever remembered that a knife could be used for other things than cutting thongs. All these little plans could be carried out in the space of a few minutes. He saw the faint glimmer of the knife's bright steel.

But before Ruth could ever find and cut the thongs the door was flung open and some one sprang swiftly through. A strong arm encircled her shoulder; a hard hand closed gently but firmly on her hand that held the knife. She was too late in her errand of mercy; and John had defeated her after all. She was suddenly crushed and helpless under the iron of his will.

She sobbed once, bitterly and hopelessly, but she did not try to throw off that encircling arm. It was more a caress than a

restraint, yet she had no strength left to rebuke him; and indeed the need of tenderness even from him was more compelling than in any moment of her life. "It won't do, little girl," he was saying to her. "Ruth, I can't let you do it. Good God, I wish I could—for you—but that sentence has to stand."

Indeed, he was the executioner come for the condemned. Behind him were his impulsive natives, carrying firebrands that threw a strange flickering glamour over all the snowy street. She stood back, and now they were lifting Wolverene to his feet, and now they were marching him away. For a moment more John lingered beside her.

And now she made her last appeal—the eternal appeal of woman. "John, you've still got time to commute that sentence," she told him swiftly, quietly. "I want you to—for me—for no reason except that I want it. Maybe you're right in what you told me, but that's all past."

She saw in his face, strange and white in the weird light of the firebrands, that he was still unmoved. "I've just got this to say," she went on. "We've been drawing nearer together here--since Edward went away. We've been getting closer—more important to each other. But I want to tell you that unless you save that man's life, prevent this awful deed, there can never be anything more between us than there is now. Whatever hope you have of my love, you can give it over forever if you let this thing go on."

But the flame of his youthful idealism still lit his darkened life, even as he looked into the girl's eyes, as the bright torches of his natives cast their weird radiance into the chill and hopeless dark of the early night. The time might come, if he lived, that this flame would burn to ashes, and then he would take all that life offered no matter the price, hold no theme so dear but that he would barter it for a moment's pleasure, and like Faustus, sell his soul for his heart's desire; but that time was not yet. He knew only one course of duty to-night and his inner law would not let him disavow it. Such is the glory, even if the folly of youth.

The call she made to him went deeper than even she, with her woman's wisdom, could guess; but his law would not let him answer. He was like a martyr foolishly dying at the whim of a cruel and careless

king; but he would gain the reward of his dream.

He turned away. The men led their captive to the great, dark spruce at the end of the street where a rope hung like a serpent. John himself spoke the word of death in a voice that was never more quiet and firm. Wolverene died as he lived, sullenly, hatefully, and unpenitent, and his form hung black against the rising moon.

Far away the wolves howled, so faintly that the ear could catch only the tremor of the chorus—and the song was like a dirge for one of their own dead.

CHAPTER XXII.

Ruth found that she did not mourn for Wolverene. Surely the villagers were better off without him and had a better chance of coming through. The thing that rankled now, that would not let her rest in the long, bitter night that followed the execution, was the ignominy of failure. She had not been able to soften John's stern creed. He had proven himself the same bloody, remorseless man who had beaten Vashti into unconsciousness, who had met the wolf in single combat in Trotter's cabin. She had failed to appeal to his reason and at last she failed to reach his heart. The former only angered her; the latter cut like a whip.

That night she sounded the depths of despair. The battle no longer seemed worth the winning. All the way through, since she had come to this famine village in the snow, a strong hand had held her up above its misery and hopelessness, but now it was taken away. She had come to rely on John. Somehow, he had sustained her; and there had been almost happiness in fighting at his side. And she had fought for him even more than she had fought for her own life. She could not deny this, now. The truth swept her in a flood. Her basic love of life had been only a lesser factor. For John's sake she had remained cheerful and patient.

Was this the way of woman? Must love be woman's only star? Was it their fate to weep and suffer, toil and die, only to find at last that no one really cared? Must their star set at last in ignominy and despair? Was woman no more than this—to give all her love and then be thrown away?

She had given Edward almost all her affection; but it was nothing to him. She had remained unblessed and unprized. In

these weeks she had given John even more than she herself had dreamed—somehow, John had begun to fill the aching void in her heart. In spite of all that separated them this was profoundly true; she was not yet ready to give him her love, yet it was for his sake, never for her own—woman can never endure for her own sake; but always for the babe at her breast or her lover in her arms—she had endured all, and she would have continued to endure till the curtain fell upon this drama of death. But now he had showed her how much he really cared! He had not turned one jot from his course for all her prayers, even for the direct appeal that she made to his heart.

What was left now? She thought she knew very well, as she lay wakeful in her bed of skins. Some of the weaker ones in the village had already found out; one by one the names were called, and soon hers would be called too. It might not be long now; she could not fight on without hope. The tower of her hope had fallen. She could not even meet her fate with a high heart, because woman can never fight alone. To-night she was utterly and hopelessly alone.

Troubled sleep came at last; and it appealed to her as somewhat ironical that in the morning John should greet her with his familiar, cheerful smile. Last night's mood swept back to her; but she put it instantly away. After all, she could not stop playing the game. Perhaps that, also, was part of woman's ironic destiny. No matter how little he cared for her she could not shut away the appeal he made to her and she could not forsake him in his extremity. Besides, her keen perceptions told her that her only shadow of happiness lay in playing this bitter game through to its inevitable end. The loss of her own hope could not affect her duty.

She gave little sign of her night's despair. When John began to talk over his day's plans she listened with unfeigned interest, giving him suggestions and helping him all she could: "I don't know how many of the men are gone on their trap lines—I won't know till I check up—but I suppose there'll be the usual falling off," he told her. She noticed now for the first time an odd hesitancy in his voice—never noticeable before—and a queer look of strain about his hollow eyes. "Ruth, it's the hardest thing we have to fight, now. It's the only real prob-

lem we have left. I don't think there'll be any more murders—that business last night will put an everlastin' crimp in anybody's idea they can get their grub by the simple process of murder. But we've got to manage somehow to make those men trap."

"I don't see how you can take away their fear," the girl commented. "They saw the child torn down within fifty yards of a house—no wonder they don't want to go miles away into the forest."

"But, Ruth, they can't see that it's only one chance in a thousand that they'd meet the wolves—and it's a thousand chances to one that they'll die of starvation if they don't get busy and trap. I don't say that it isn't a real danger now—considering that the animals are stark crazy with starvation. No one who saw that attack a few nights ago can possibly doubt it. The cusses seem to realize we're helpless against them—they've got an uncanny instinct at a time like this. Do you wonder that I've always looked at a wolf as half animal and half devil—do you wonder that I've feared 'em and studied 'em and marveled at 'em all my life? They lurk around this village as if they knew we were doomed—waiting to take possession. Ruth, they're the spirits of Famine itself."

"Our fight now has centered down to a fight against the wolves. If we can lick them, we win—if we can't, we lose, sure as I'm standing here. Maybe in the beginning it was like that, and will be in the end. It just seems to me that all we're fighting has kind of become personified in them. If we can scare away that pack the men will get new heart and they'll go out and really trap. More game will come into the country too and make trapping easier. They're starving and they're desperate—no one can doubt that—but it would be easy enough to drive 'em off if we had one gun. Of course, for that matter, if we had one gun we wouldn't have to drive them off. I could kill enough caribou to keep this camp through the rest of the winter."

The girl found herself listening with the keenest interest. She could not help but share this fight with him; she forgot her own misery in his zeal. "There's no chance of help coming?"

"Not for months yet, Ruth. Sometimes I try to think there is, and then when I think what a ten-thousandth chance it would be I have to give it up. Of course

the snow is packed and a man can get over the passes easy now, but there's no men to get over the passes. You remember that one native went for help—Red Fox they call him—but that help can't come for months, and that's the only help we can count on. We've got to find some way to beat the game—now."

"And there's no gun in any of the empty cabins downriver?"

"No. I had some of the trappers investigate. Of course you know old Wassegawin saved his old muzzle-loader, but didn't save any powder—even if a man could fight wolves with such a weapon."

The girl's quick mind was busy and presently she hit upon an idea. "Would the powder that's in a rifle cartridge work in a muzzle-loader?" she asked. A spot of color, as of hope, glowed in her cheeks.

"We'd sure give it a try if we had any."

"What did you do with the rifle shells you had when you lost your gun? You didn't throw them away, did you? Are any of them among the supplies?"

"Ruth, I think I know where they are—part of them at least. I think I left them with that extra duffel back there on the trail—you remember, when we left the canoe and went on with the sled. We wouldn't have any caps but maybe the primers would work somehow and maybe we could make caps. It would be smokeless powder, but sure it would fire some kind of a charge. By Heaven, it's worth trying. At least we ought to be able to kill off one or two of those gray devils and scare the rest away. Ruth, I'm going to cross the ridge and look for them to-day!"

No wonder his eyes glittered. There was powder only for a few loads in the handful of brass shells; it was not the kind adapted for muzzle-loaders and he had no caps; yet it was a rift of light through the clouds. The gun itself would have been only a curiosity in a modern gun store; but yet it was a superior weapon to that which Daniel Boone carried into the wilderness, and which made American history. It would increase his own strength a hundredfold.

He would not at first hear of her accompanying him on the expedition; but she convinced him at last that she was safer on the trail with him than alone in the village. "John, I simply won't stay here alone again—after what happened yesterday," she told him. "It was a wonder that Wolverene

didn't kill me instead of the squaw, and who knows when another Indian will go mad and try to get into the storeroom by killing me? How do you know but some of Wolverene's friends will try to get even? You won't get back till to-morrow evening—it would mean all night here alone. I'm coming with you whether you want me or not."

In the light of yesterday's tragic event John was convinced; he believed that she was really safer on the trail with him than left to spend the night without protection in the village. On his own account he did not give the wolves more than a passing thought, not because he did not realize that there was some element of actual danger but simply because he had no choice but to face them. It was not in his philosophy to give precious time and thought to problems that could not be solved. That long journey through the forest and up the steep mountain had been forced on him by circumstance; and he accepted its perils as an inevitable part of the undertaking. Besides, it was only once in a thousand times, even during famine, that the wolves hunted men, and the famine's odds of death were a thousand to one. There really was no argument in John's mind.

Were the danger doubled and doubled again he would have gone on just the same, although he might not have taken Ruth with him. Even a thousandth chance is better than no chance at all. If the wolves howled at the gates of the village he would have to face them; he could not wait a few days more for them to go away. For certain reasons known to John alone this journey could neither be given over nor postponed.

From time to time queer fancies, dimly seen, lurked in his fevered brain, and prophetic pictures passed in review before his staring gaze; but these he dared not heed. It might be that they were merely the hallucinations of starvation; but it was stern and certain reality that was driving him forth upon that long and perilous trail. Just what that reality was Ruth herself did not guess.

She did not doubt but that this was the crisis. On the results of this journey depended life or death, the survival or the extermination of the tribe. She felt confident that if they failed now they would not likely have strength or heart for another enterprise. Even John's magnificent strength

had begun to break these past few days, sure sign that he had entered into the second, deadly stage of starvation; and although it was still great it would pass quickly from henceforth. What she did not know was the absolute urgency of immediate relief; that were the expedition postponed a few days—perhaps only a single day—it could not be attempted at all. She did not know that her idea had been put forward in the nick of time—that it had found John also at the verge of utter despair.

She did not know that the few pounds of meat they had with them—John's fair share of the wolf he had slain with his last pistol shell—had stripped the storehouse. He had given the last ration that he could give.

CHAPTER XXIII.

John decided not to take the empty muzzle-loader on the expedition, because it would be a useless encumbrance. It could not possibly be loaded until the brass shells were brought to the village, taken apart, the lead filed round, and caps fabricated. His own and the girl's sleeping robes and such other duffel as they would require on the journey were piled on a light sled; and for food they took all that was left of their ten pounds of wolf meat. They started off together through the deadly chill of the long, slow dawn.

The first discovery that John made on that journey was the tragic, though as yet slight, impairment in his own strength. It was a sign not to be mistaken. There had been a time when he would scarcely have noticed the steep climb, and the sled would have slipped along behind him as if by its own volition; but he was well aware of both now. There had been a time when he could have lent a great part of his strength to the girl at his side and had plenty left. Now, because he knew he ought to save himself for the steep heights to come, he let her toil up the grade unaided.

The dawn ushered in a typical winter day, skies gray at first but waxing pale blue as the sun rose higher behind the hills; the cold so intense that not even the slightest mist could live, and scarcely a breath of wind over the far-reaching wastes of snow. As they plodded on a wan, impotent sun rose and flashed over the drifts, and although its beams were a cheat, at least it

showed their mountain home at the fullness of winter beauty. Nature had printed the landscape in but two tones—black and white—but all the hues of Turner could not have improved upon it. They saw the spruce in black patches against the ineffable whiteness of the mountainside; and they were stilled and awed by a power and majesty behind them. Beyond the mountain the lofty and jagged peaks signaled high secrets out of man's reckoning. Below them the forests stretched until the eyes tired of the strain of trying to find their end.

Shortly after noon they emerged into the high parks where the wind had a freer sweep, to find the snow perfectly crusted and packed, with the result that the sled was drawn with greater ease. They had already mounted thousands of feet. Caribou River was but a curved trail of glare ice between the feathery fringes of the snow. So far they had made unusually good time. They could see plainly the white crest of the divide against the sky. Indeed, their venture so far had been so free from mishaps or delays of any character that John's forest superstitions began to manifest themselves within him. He had none too much confidence in Fortune's smile; and he put no trust whatever in a smiling Nature. It was quite like both to buoy a man up with false hopes, and then shatter him to earth. When the wild showed this mood of calm and beauty he had learned the wisdom of being especially on guard. She usually had something extra special in store.

Yet there was no sign of danger. The only living thing they saw was a fairly large herd of caribou bulls—too compact and powerful a band to waken much interest in any ordinary pack of wolves—and once a red fox slipped like a glossy shadow over the long curves of the drifts. There were no distant snowslides for the reason that the snow particles had been welded into one motionless mass in the forge of the cold; and certainly no storms impended. They climbed higher and higher through the park lands and in the early afternoon emerged onto the glittering, treeless mountainside that led to the divide. Apparently they had only to climb the remaining two miles of grade, cross and descend as far as their duffel, build their fire and make their night's camp. In the morning they could return with the precious rifle cartridges. Now

they were swept upward by their rising hopes.

But they hoped too soon. Seemingly the solitudes, intent upon their destruction, could not endure to have them hope. John's secret warnings had not yet been proven lies. The first thing that caught his eyes as he labored up the last short, steep pitch that led to the more-or-less-level plateau of the divide itself was the figure of a wolf, looming huge in the stark whiteness of the snow.

Both saw him at the same instant. Apart from their immediate reaction of fear both of them knew it was the most compellingly vivid sight they had ever beheld, the most moving instant of their lives. If there had been one spruce struggling for life on that bleak plateau, one shrub, or even one gaunt crag from which the wind had swept the snow, something of the savage grandeur of the scene would have been lost. As it was, the picture seemed to burst upon them as might the next world burst upon one who dies a violent death. The whole mountain realm seemed only a background and a frame for the wolf, like a sculptured form in yellow ivory mounted on a vast pedestal in that eternity of white.

For an instant he alone held the eye; and no man could have turned his gaze away. He evidently was the pack leader; a gaunt old male with shaggy shoulders, and the clear air and snow-white background accentuated his great size. For an instant he stood peering, absolutely motionless, and the man and woman in the sled returned his gaze.

Behind him, all standing in strange fixed attitudes, were his pack brothers—about ten huge, gaunt wolves. There had been a greater number in the tall, but they had had many casualties in these months of famine. Some had died in a vain attempt to pull down one of the old bulls in the caribou herd—lashed to impotency beneath the razor-edged hoofs—and some had been the victims of the ancient creed of wolfdom, that the weak are fair prey of the strong. No phase of forest life is more terrible, but it was true. When Famine comes to lead them, pack law itself is forgotten and the wolf that slips on the snow does not rise again, but is devoured by his fellows. These wolves also stood staring with luminous, yellow eyes, evidently startled into immobility by the sudden appearance of the two

humans. The farthest of the band was not more than a hundred yards distant.

As soon as John could catch his breath he raised his voice in a great shout. He put all the power of his lungs behind it, and it was a veritable bellow in the profound silence of the heights. It was his first impulse, learned in years of contact with the creatures of the wild; and whatever the extremity of his terror this warlike roar gave no sign of it. His one hope was that he might frighten the wolves from his trail before they sensed his weakness: perhaps they were not yet so inured to Famine's madness but that a little of their hereditary fear was left. At the same time he made a sharp, threatening movement toward them.

But these mountain demons were not to be deceived. Suddenly the old gray leader knew—far down in his cunning brain the strange processes of which no man can trace—that here was fair game for the fangs. The time was past that their tali forms could chill his wild heart with terror. He had forgotten most all terror long ago—when his master, Famine, first hounded him across the snows, before ever the weird blue fire of madness came into his fierce eyes. Besides, perceptions that are beyond man's ken told him that these two were helpless to do him harm. He uttered a sharp, deep sound that was instantly echoed by every member of his pack. John could not mistake that signal. He knew its meaning in the little fragment of an instant before the pack launched into its attack.

He saw them spring forward as one, every voice raised in that indescribable yell with which the pack bears down upon its prey. It was the killing cry that signifies the prey has been run down, and that its capture is no longer in doubt. Ruth's scream was instantly smothered and lost in its swelling volume. John's own shout of attempted intimidation was cut sharply off as his mind searched desperately for some means of escape. They had met the enemy on his own ground, seemingly decoyed to their deaths in this empty wilderness of snow. There were no trees to climb short of two miles down the glittering mountainside. There was no time to build a protecting fire before the wolves would be upon them, and no fuel except the sled. It was not a matter of minutes until that savage pack leader would be leaping upon him. It was hardly

even seconds. There was scarcely even time for thought.

Apparently without pausing for thought, as if the idea had flashed like a light the instant the wolves had sprung forward, he took the only possible chance of safety. He did not wait to transfer his idea to the girl. He trusted to his swift muscles rather than to his hesitant speech. He scooped her into his arms and with the impetus of his own leap pushed her on to the loaded sled. "Hang on!" he yelled above that frantic yell of the wolves. With one lurch of his shoulders he swung the sled around so that it pointed down the steep, icy grade toward the village; and then with one great thrust he started it downhill and leaped upon it.

The entire incident had been one continuous movement, incredibly swift, since the wolves had first sprung toward them. Even now there was no effect of pause or retardation, but rather a rapid and breath-taking acceleration. The sled started with a rush. Ruth had been almost dislodged as John had whirled the sled around, but now she lay flat, gripping its sides with her hands. Behind her and above rode John, lost in wonder as to whether or not he had acted in time.

The wolves were still gaining on the sled but their rate of gain was ever less as the sled gathered momentum. The wolves were simply racing down that sunlit, glistening slope, their long dark bodies stretched at full length, their lean muscles hurling them forward in great, flying leaps. The rush of his descent, the frenzy and the movement, did not in the least tend to blur or obscure the picture in John's eyes; he saw it all with almost preternatural vividness as he lay with head turned, not trying to guide the speeding sled, waiting to see if he would win the race. The wolves were upon him now, close enough that he could almost touch them, and now their own speed was their handicap. In that soaring, headlong descent they could not direct their attack; and they slid helplessly when they tried to check their flying pace. This fact alone was Ruth's and John's salvation in those first, crucial seconds before the sled could gather an outdistancing speed; otherwise they would have certainly been dragged from their sled and slain. One lean, far-leaping wolf misgauged his distance and leaped completely over the sled, skimming over their heads like a winged thing and strik-

ing the snow in front, from where he was knocked howling. Only his own speed prevented a smashing impact that might have upset the sled. The old pack leader himself aimed more true—as becomes one who can pull down a bull caribou in one leap—and he bounded squarely on to the sled. But before he could secure a firm foothold and send in his fangs a lurch of John's body hurled him off to turn incredible cart wheels in the snow.

But the sled was well started now and it was gathering speed like a meteor in the sky. The whole pack came yelling just behind—some of the wolves in fact running beside the sled but unable to gain time sufficient to attack—and John witnessed their vain effort to stretch themselves into another notch of speed. They were at the height of that incredible running pace that is one of the greatest marvels of this marvelous breed of mammals; but yet they could not gain. Indeed, the sled was slowly, surely drawing away from them.

The snow had crusted to the consistency and almost the smoothness of ice; and the mountain itself was not such as would be deliberately chosen by a tobogganist. The grade was of course perilously steep; and now with the passing seconds the sled began to gather a breath-taking and frightful speed. It did not seem merely to glide; rather it appeared to be falling through the empty and unrestraining air. The frenzied pack dropped farther and farther behind. The stream of air back over Ruth and John was at first a cold breeze, then a brisk wind, at last a veritable hurricane. At first it was without sound, then a low whistle grew into a siren wail, and at last it roared above them until it shut out even the running song of the pack behind. There was no estimating that deadly speed. A sprinter, doing a hundred yards in ten flat, travels approximately twenty miles an hour. A wolf racing for his life for a short distance on the level runs nearly twice as fast, and here, soaring down the hill, they must have increased that pace to a full mile a minute. How much faster his sled was going John did not pause to wonder, but he knew that the wolves were now but blurred, distant forms in the snow dust, and that the rush of air was such Ruth could not open her eyes. He heard her cry out, a sound that was instantly diffused and lost in the blast; but it was not an utterance of terror. Partly it

was in relief at the momentary escape from the wolves, and partly it was the expression of a sheer transcendence of sensation above any experience of her life. This was tobogganing with a vengeance.

The smooth sheet of snow whipped past in a white blur. John felt that he was losing consciousness from the sheer speed of the descent and in a few seconds more would be as helpless as if torn down and surrounded by the wolves. With a distinct effort of will he rallied his swiftly scattering faculties to seek some way to check the sled's deadly pace.

The descent had lost its reality and was like a falling, rushing dream. Curiously enough the white snow began to look gray, the blue sky was gray too. The sled was darting like a falcon in flight; and partly from sheer inability to breathe that rushing air, and partly from the rush of blood into his brain he was soon all but insensible. But he knew he must not yield to this strange anaesthesia. He must act, and act soon; they would not long be able to hold to the sled. Besides, somewhere there was a bottom to this void into which they were falling. Below them, not far off, lay the park lands, broken by scattered clumps of timber, and below these the heavy forest in which the racing sled would be broken to kindling in an instant. There were perilous heaps of stone hidden under the snow; and now he recalled the ghastly fact that the deep and rocky gully of the upper Caribou crossed diagonally not far from the bottom of the present bare mountainside.

He thrust his foot out behind and tried to sink his boot into the snow crust as a drag. The snow dust flew, but he could not see that their pace was checked in the least degree. They were falling, not just gliding on the snow. Already the time in which to save themselves was tragically short. Dark trees loomed ahead in occasional somber groups. This was the beginning of the park lands.

By a swift movement of his foot on the snow he was able to swerve the sled and avoid the trunk of a stunted spruce that had loomed directly in their path. They passed between two other trunks, a gate none too wide, and for an instant more were in the open. And now John saw, in one brief glance when he opened his eyes into the wind, that his single chance to avoid disaster was at hand. Other tree clumps ob-

structed their passage farther down; and in these their wild ride must end.

Just below him, perhaps a hundred yards below the spruce clump, they would encounter the deep, abrupt gully of the upper river. There could only be one fate for them if they ran into it at their present speed; they would certainly be shattered and slain among the boulders of the river bed—as certainly as if hurled there by an express train. But now they had met a short but rather abrupt rise in ground on which the snow had drifted deep; and it offered the riders' first and only opportunity to break the wings that were speeding them to destruction.

There was no time for conscious thought, no anticipation of consequences. John sensed his chance in the twinkling of an eye, and he took it with that lightning capacity for acting that he had learned in many a crisis. With one powerful lurch of his body he broke Ruth's hold on the sled and both of them rolled into the snow.

The useless sled darted on, to be smashed to kindling against the tough trunk of a spruce a hundred yards below and not far from the edge of the gully. If its two fallen riders had encountered any sort of an immediate, fixed obstacle, whether tree trunk or snow-covered crag, they would likewise have been destroyed. As it was there was no swift cessation of their headlong flight; they slid on, almost like a sled itself, up and over the snowy rise and into the deep drifts on the other side. Here the cushions of snow served to check their flying pace, yet they were hurled on clear into the thinly crusted snow under the trees of a small spruce grove. Still clasped in each other's arms their catapulting bodies ceased to move.

It was a comparatively gentle halting, yet for a long moment they lay all but unconscious in the deep snow. The violent shock to their respective nervous systems accounted for this apart from any physical injuries they might have received from the fall. But presently John opened his eyes, remembered everything, and sat up in the bed of snow.

Every muscle moved in obedience to his will; and there was no cause to believe himself injured. But the girl still lay with closed eyes. The man knew one instant of oversweeping despair as the thought came that perhaps his great fight was lost—that

her beloved life no longer dwelt in the wasted loveliness of her body.

Yet almost instantly she opened her eyes. She looked into his homely face, now so white and drawn, and the ghost of a smile was wakened at her lips. "That was the first time—John—that you ever—held me in your arms," she told him slowly, with a grave and tender humor. She caressed the snow from his shock of coarse, black hair. "I want you to hold me some more, John—only stay still, if it's in you to stay still—one minute. What does anything matter now?"

But he could not answer that childish appeal. The night of rest was not yet won, unless it be the strange night into the shadows of which no man can see. Rising faintly above the subdued sound of her voice they heard the running song of the wolves. The pack was still in pursuit.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Several events of considerable moment had transpired in the life of Serge Vashti since his lamented meeting with John on the lake shore. One of them, and by far the most important, was the chance discovery that a reception committee had been appointed by the provincial government to wait on him when he arrived at the far trading post that was his immediate destination. They were, it appeared, very insistent committeemen. So bent were they upon making his acquaintance that they had made a journey of some five hundred miles with that end in view. They were especially determined that he accompany them back to the seat of the provincial government, so they had brought with them very curious rings of steel by which they could definitely attach themselves to him.

Curiously enough, Vashti did not appreciate this honor. He at once decided that the committeemen should wait on him in vain. It was not that he was excessively modest; it was just that he feared they would be rather too insistent as to how he spent the remaining years of his life. The Dominion government has a long and most unpleasant memory; and Vashti was willing to go to considerable extra trouble to avoid any contact with it or its representatives. Fortunately Vashti had a good winter's supply of grub and a good rifle now that he had removed the mud with which John had

spiked it. He decided to spend the first few months of the winter in a certain remote cabin in the forest, and when the snow was packed over the passes he would go down into the Caribou country, follow the Nenamanah down to its mouth, follow the sea coast to Point Fortune, from where, with good luck, he could take ship for the Orient.

It was during his stay in the cabin that he met Red Fox, on his way out to summon help for the starving Caribou Indians. His conversation the night he had spent with Vashti had been of peculiar interest to the white man; especially regarding the failure of the salmon run, a mystery that Vashti would have found easy to clear up. Also, Red Fox had let fall another point that grew in interest in the lonely days that followed. He said that the tribe possessed no less than eight skins of silver fox, but even this treasure could not buy food when food was not to be had.

Eight silver fox, Vashti remembered, would not only buy passage aboard a trans-pacific steamer, but at the current rate of exchange would keep a man in luxury a long time in the Orient. Eight fox skins were worth a considerable number of illegal salmon, and surely they were much easier to procure.

Vashti's flight to the Outside would carry him straight through the Caribou village; and he could easily afford to spend a half day at profitable trading. No one would have to know his identity; and besides, there was no danger that the Indians had read a certain offensive circular sent out by the Dominion government requesting all good citizens to assist in his taking dead or alive. He would arrive there, do his trading, and depart months before Red Fox could return with help from the post, and since he was obliged to wait till the snow packed in the passes he would probably find the natives in an extremely good trading mood. He would only take a small quantity of his pemmican into the village proper, leaving the rest concealed in the thickets; but even though he took them all there was no danger that the natives would strip them away from him by force. Red Fox had made the point that there was not a single loaded firearm in the village.

Now the snows were packed and there was no need of further delay. Indeed, the longer he stayed now the more danger of

that officious committee coming to look for him. He would take his supplies on a hand sled, and by killing game as he went and traveling fairly hard, complete the long journey to Point Fortune before the ice broke in spring. The profits of that half day spent at Caribou would help greatly in expediting the journey farther on.

There was but one doubtful point. It might be that John Carlson and his *klooch* were at the village; although he thought it much more likely they were trapping somewhere along the chain of lakes. In such case John would likely already possess the skins, bought with the trophies of his rifle. That gun alone, even in this winter of scarce game, would more than suffice to break the famine. However, everything might turn out nicely after all. He had no wish for further personal combat with the man, but there is such a thing as ambush—no one knew better than Vashti how effective it was—and he might not only procure the fox fur but also pay for the blows John had dealt him on the lake shore, blows that smarted even yet. He would have to reconnoiter carefully, watch his step, and await his opportunities.

He started out on a clear, icy dawn, taking a short cut that led over the divide a few miles below the usual crossing, but yet which brought him down to the Caribou River halfway down to the village. It was just as well to avoid the established lines of communication, even in this sparsely settled land, until he entered the refuge of the forest beyond the bare sweep of the divide. By the time he had marched several days' journey through the solitudes and reached the divide he had decided that this was a foolish precaution; he had not seen a single snowshoe track. Presently he came to the satisfactory conclusion that he was the only white man abroad on the Caribou side of the range; and thus the rich furs would become his for little more than the asking.

One of the guesses that Vashti made was entirely right—John was not, at present, in the shelter of the Caribou village. Neither was the white girl whom Vashti had once been taught not to call a *klooch*. At this moment John was sitting at her side in the drifts, listening to a strange and terrifying chorus that swelled and grew with incredible rapidity. There was no time to comfort Ruth in his arms. The battle had swept

on apace. Already the foe were but a few hundred yards away.

There was no time whatever for Ruth to tell him of a discovery scarcely less momentous than life itself, or to yield to the half-sad, half-glorious impulses that were born of this moment of greatest travail. It was the most strange and moving moment of her life, but already it was cut short. Even now John was snatching her to her feet; and the lurid light of battle glittered again in his eyes. She could never rest. She could never yield to the eternal peace that she had glimpsed so far away and dim as she lay in the drifts. Always this unconquerable warrior must be lifting her up, hurrying her on, driving her forward as he cleared the way with his flashing steel.

"The ax is on the sled," he was telling her now, speaking in the rough, swift speech that had marked many a crisis. "I can't get it, bring it back, and build a fire before those devils will be upon us. Up this tree, Ruth—tie yourself up there if you can."

He was thrusting at her now, and seemingly his energy alone lifted her up the trunk and into the lower limbs. Yet even now it was evident that he did not intend to follow her into this temporary safety. Even now he was turning to go.

"Oh, come—come!" she cried after him in frantic appeal. "Oh, they'll be here in a minute!"

Except for one movement of his arm as he ran she would not have thought that he had even heard. Thus in moments of crisis he had always answered her most earnest appeals, this masterless man she had followed through the wilderness. She could beg on her knees for a moment's comfort in his arms, and yet no matter if all gates of hope were closed he would still leave her and die fighting. Such was his law and her tears could not change it. She guessed his intention well enough. He had left her in the safety of the tree while he ran the hopeless race to the village, there to recruit his natives and return to her aid.

To her it was beyond all reason that he would not be pulled down by the pack before he could go a tenth of the way to the village. Why had he not climbed the tree with her instead of taking this reckless chance—waiting at her side until the pack gave up and went away? John alone knew the answer; that the wolves were infinitely patient and that a killer no less deadly

would be their ally in the long hours to come. That killer was the arctic night, not to be endured without fire or shelter.

It was only a moment after that the chorus of the wolves increased to a din in her ears, and the whole pack swept down the hill, over the slight rise where John had hurled her from the sled, and into the little grove of trees. They passed directly under her at full tilt, but their keen senses were not to be deceived. Almost at once they came to a sliding halt; and the greater part of them whipped back under her. The chorus came to an abrupt end as they stood motionless beneath, their fierce yellow eyes fixed upon her with a grim and terrible intentness. One or two others sprang on through the trees after John, but the rest crouched patiently, panting from the run, under her tree. They seemed to know that she must soon come down to them. They were patient; and their victory seemed certain in the end.

Almost at once John was lost to sight among the distant trees. She noticed vaguely that he had started in the direction of the wrecked sled, evidently to procure the heavy ax with which he must fight his way to the village; but how could such a weapon withstand the four hunger-mad wolves that had taken his trail? In just a moment she would hear their cries of terrible triumph. Yet as she waited the strange, grim silence grew and deepened.

But John had not left her in the face of certain death. He had seen his fighting hope and he was trying to make the most of it. He had guessed that the pack would divide when it reached Ruth's tree, and it might be that with the aid of his ax and by taking a trail that was hard to follow he could push on through to the village. Now that he saw only four of the starved creatures on his trail he was considerably emboldened; he believed he saw a way to escape them. The great issue at stake now, the fear that almost destroyed him, was whether or not he could make the long race to the village and return with his natives in time to save Ruth. He knew—just as the waiting wolves themselves seemed to know, by the mystery of instinct—that the cold would soon loosen her hands and cast her down.

By mushing swiftly he was able to recover his ax before the first of the four

wolves overtook him. John avoided his leap and struck at him with the blade as he sped past—a powerful blow that would have severed the creature's vertebræ if it had struck true—and then backing up to a tree prepared to fight. But now they saw him brandishing the steel the four wolves showed less inclination to push the attack. They seemed to realize that the pack was divided and thus felt the lack of the supreme pack strength. They hesitated, looking for safe openings, and John saw his chance to slip to the next tree. From thence he passed to another tree, making always for the frozen river a hundred yards beyond.

Whenever he advanced the wolves sprang forward yelling, but always halted again when he turned to face them. For all his frantic need of haste he could not go on boldly and defy them. It was a deadly, closely played game even in this patch of close timber, not only because at any moment one of the four wolves might spring upon his shoulders and tear him down, but also from the danger of tripping, always a possibility when mushing in comparatively soft snow over concealed underbrush. Should he fall even for an instant he would not quickly rise again. The wolves were looking for just that chance.

He had noticed on the way out that the brisk wind down the valley had blown the snow from the frozen river, leaving it smooth glare ice. This he thought offered his own chance. At last he reached a tree within forty feet of the bank; then waiting his opportunity he dashed out upon the ice. The wolves came leaping behind him but they were not shod for this kind of walking. They slid helplessly past him as they tried to attack.

He swung his ax down again, narrowly missing one of the wolves, then with his snowshoes under his arm he began running boldly down the glasslike ice. The wolves loped along beside him, like a hell pack beside their master, and from time to time they made ludicrous attempts to spring out toward him on the green ice. But now John had every advantage; they slipped and skidded when they tried to charge, in imminent danger of being struck down with his ax.

It was not all smooth going. Once a turn in the river brought him to a short stretch where the ice lay hidden under snow and again he had to make a flying run for the

safety beyond. Sometimes he had to climb piles of snow-covered driftwood, with the wolves leaping from log to log behind him. Yet he was winning out so far as his own safety was concerned. The river grew steadily in breadth, the ice sheet almost unbroken. Surely he had every chance of ultimately reaching the village. The thought that plagued him and terrified him was that the time ran while the miles but crept; that the first shadows of night were already lowering ominously and he had traveled but a small fraction of the weary route he must cover before he stood at Ruth's side again.

For all his hope and natural optimism that had held him up until now his common sense told him surely he could not win. It was not merely a fear with him; it was a tragic conviction. He had taken too long to fight his way from the sled to the river; the chance was too long at best. Hurry as hard as he might there was one enemy—an ancient enemy to every son of this North country—that would not wait for his return. He could not beat the fatal cold of the arctic night—the cold that no inactive human being can endure without blankets or fire or shelter. The death that dwelt in that below-zero temperature after some hours of exposure was just as sure, as far removed from any element of uncertainty, as that of being held under water; such was not a belief with the sour dough, it was proven knowledge. It did not matter whether the temperature was forty, twenty, or only ten below zero; it killed just as surely and without appreciable difference in the time required. This arctic cold would not spare Ruth in the long hours required to run on to the village and return to her with help.

Suddenly he hated himself that he had ever left her. A remorse so bitter and black that it was almost madness—of a depth impossible to any nature less profound or intense than his—descended upon him and bowed him down. For all his love for her, his months of service, this was nothing less than betrayal. He had left her to die alone in the night so that he might play a hopeless chance!

This had always been his curse; never to know when to give up. His place was at the girl's side in her hour of final travail, not running these empty woods on a useless quest. She had been right after all—all the

way through, perhaps—and he had been wrong.

He had not stayed to comfort her, to sustain her in that awful moment when the shadows lowered, to hold her in his arms in her hour of need. Such had been his place and his duty but he had betrayed both and his love too. He had left her to meet her fate alone in the chill and hopeless darkness—her weeping unheard and her cries unheeded. It had been his single great opportunity for service; but he had let his iron will cheat him out of it. That masterless will of his had been his curse all the way through; and now it had laid upon him a curse that seemingly could never pass away.

He came to a dead halt on the ice. Was it already too late to go back? But before he could answer his thought wandered into new fields. For an instant he stood looking about him, wondering what had startled him. The wan light of the afterglow filtered through the snow-bowed branches. The trees stood voiceless and inert under the white load. The wolves had vanished, suddenly and without trace.

Evidently it was their sudden absence from the river bank that had called him from his unhappy train of thought; and a secret amazement, a vague excitement that he could not analyze slowly overspread him. Why had they turned so suddenly? He had expected them to give up after a certain time and return to their fellows, but it was not the lupine way to act with such startling suddenness. Peering intently, he caught just a glimpse of a gaunt form between the far trees; and there was something of tremendous significance in the way the brute was taking advantage of cover. Not since the gentler seasons had Famine's attendant concealed himself in this way. The wolves had gone because they were *afraid*.

John's pulse leaped, and standing perfectly motionless he studied intently the long river valley in front. In a single instant he understood the thrilling source of the wolves' fear. In that same instant the dead ashes of his hope leaped again into flame.

In the middle distance walked a man, drawing a loaded sled. He was white; John could see his face in the dying light. In his arm he carried a rifle—the little instrument of wood and steel that might yet win

all he had ever hoped to win—still the symbol of death to the hunger-mad wolves.

CHAPTER XXV.

John raised his voice in a great shout, then dashed toward the man at top speed. It never so much as occurred to him that he would have difficulty in procuring the man's aid. It was an old law in the North that white men helped one another in extremity, a law that was written down long ago for the guidance of all mankind but which necessity still enforces in the less-settled regions of the earth. It was only when he drew near enough to identify the man as Serge Vashti that he foresaw certain complications. The greater proportion of even the notorious bad men of the province would not refuse aid in such an hour; but Vashti was a man despised even by the outlaws themselves; and besides, he had a personal grudge against John.

Yet the latter did not pause but still came rushing toward him, calling at intervals. His hope now was that he could approach near enough to make a flying attack before Serge guessed his intention. But this was not to be. The fading light gleamed on the steel of the rifle barrel as Vashti threw his weapon to his shoulder.

"Stop where you are or I'll put a hole through you," he called menacingly. "It's Carlson, ain't it? What d'ye want?"

John heard the distinct click of the rifle hammer and he halted. "I want to talk to you," he answered. "Put down that gun. I ain't going to hurt you."

"You're dead right you ain't going to hurt me. If you want to do any talkin' do it where you are. This is a little different from the last time we talked together, ain't it? It's me that's giving the orders now. What do you want?"

"Help—not for me, but for a woman," John told him simply. "I don't care how much you've got against me, you can't refuse a woman's call for help."

"I can't. huh? If I go to help her I'll leave you where I'll find you when I get back. The same *klooch* you had with you before, huh? Put up your hands, you coyote. I'm going to fill you so full of holes she can see right through you."

Vashti meant what he said and John knew it. This was better than the outlaw had ever dreamed; to encounter John in

need of help and unarmed in the forest. He could pay mightily for the beating he had at John's hands on the lake shore. The deep lines of rage and hate deepened on the wolfish face as he threatened with the rifle. Knowing the extremity of his danger John's mind sought desperately for some means to turn the tables.

He knew his enemy of old and he knew he must keep a brave front. Like most cruel and degenerate men Vashti was a coward at heart; and his cowardice gave John his only shadow of a chance. "I'm not afraid of rats, or skunks either," he said with biting scorn. "I ain't in the habit of putting up my hands when a dog barks. I've thrashed you before, Vashti, and I'll do it again. A yellow coyote never won against a man yet."

"And a dead man never licked nobody, did he?" Vashti answered, almost inarticulate with fury. "Carlson, I got you just where I want you. I've seen how you can fight, and now I'll see how you can kick. Put up those hands!"

John shook his head, coldly and with a perfect simulation of self-assurance. "No, you won't, Vashti. Go ahead and shoot and see how long before my natives will have you swingin' on a tree. There's a band of them coming along any minute now—with my rifle—up this river—and if they found me with a bullet in me they'd know just where to look for the man who did it. Your shoes make a pretty clear track in the snow."

Vashti's old curse, his cowardice, whimpered within him; and for all his murder frenzy he found himself hesitating. It was true that the river was the main trail up the divide and natives from the village passed along it rather frequently. It might be true that John had such hold on the tribesmen that they would avenge his death. However, if the crime could be concealed for one night he would have a start that could scarcely be overtaken. He believed that John's rifle was the only gun the villagers possessed, and needing it daily to secure meat, a long, armed chase of the murderer was out of the question.

A half-animal cunning took possession of him; and he concluded it would not be safe to shoot John down here on the river bank. Even though he should haul the riddled body away on his sled there still might be telltale signs that would reveal the crime

to natives passing by later this same night. He had killed before; and he remembered that there was always certain evidence. But the crime would be safe enough if he could first drive John back farther into the forest. Perhaps his foe would not guess his deadly intention.

"Turn around and walk onto the ice," he commanded shortly. "We're going to take a little stroll."

John turned around but he did not at once move forward. Instead, he listened with all his ears for Vashti's nearing footsteps. He must play his game with superlative craft from now on. He already had thought circles around Vashti, guessing at once the bloody reason behind this present command, but it suited his strategy to pretend ignorance. For himself he had but one objective; to decoy Vashti into reach of his arms.

The man paused a few yards behind him. "Walk on, if you don't want a hole through your back," he said. "It's the only chance you've got, Carlson."

He spoke truer than he knew. John already was glimpsing the far gleam of a remote chance of escape and life, a chance that did not in the least enter into Vashti's plans. He did move on a few feet, to encourage his enemy to draw near. And to encourage him still more he now lifted his arms into the air.

Vashti was considerably emboldened, and in an effort to hurry his prisoner, hastened his step until he walked scarcely ten feet behind. He supposed surely that his cunning was achieving its purpose; that John obeyed in the hope he would be spared. He went reluctantly, yet he was steadily, surely being forced into the heavy timber within which any kind of evidence could be long concealed.

When John reached the ice of the river he halted again, as if in doubt as to the direction Vashti wished him to take. He did not make the mistake of turning to face his foe, and again the latter shortened the distance between them. "Turn up the river," he commanded. "I'll tell you when to turn off."

John trudged slowly ahead, his arms raised in the air, and Vashti walked with cocked and ready rifle behind him. Concerning this present situation but one great problem remained in John's mind and to this he gave sober, cool deliberation. Vash-

ti's eagerness was costing him his caution; he was ever walking closer behind his enemy. In a moment or two more he would doubtless blunder into the range of John's arms. The question was whether or not he would hold his fire that long. Any instant that John trudged with raised arms up that icy trail might be Vashti's instant of opportunity.

Yet he still hesitated. It was a wise thing, he thought, to advance some distance on the ice before entering the heavy woods; the break in the tracks would further delay the finding of John's riddled body. He rather prided himself on his cunning. He did not guess that this seeming wisdom was playing him false; that every step he took increased John's chance. The man halted from time to time and always Vashti had to push nearer to force him on again. At last he halted beside a snowy thicket, a place that Vashti already had picked out as an excellent point from which to enter the forest.

"Turn to your right there, if you don't want a bullet," Vashti howled. In his eagerness he pushed the end of the barrel against John's back.

There was a most startling and amazing answer. The right arm that had been raised high slashed down and back like a scythe, with the entire energy of John's whirling body behind it. His forearm struck the rifle barrel, knocking it to the left, and although Vashti's finger managed to press the trigger the bullet went wild. Then the long apelike arms reached and gathered him in.

There was still enough strength left in that wasted frame to lift the man off his feet and with a powerful wrench hurl him face downward in the snow. Before the man could recoil John had picked up the rifle, ejected the empty shell, thrown in another from the magazine with one operation of the lever, and aimed its black mouth at the fallen. The man had got part way to his feet by now, but when he saw the small black circle at the end of the steel he wisely refrained from advancing nearer.

"Get down on your back and stretch up your arms," John commanded in a tone of deadly meaning. Vashti obeyed promptly—his full, ugly length soiling the immaculate snow.

Guarding him with the greatest care John reached a long arm, unfastened his cartridge belt and snatched it from about his waist.

Using it like a whip he administered one cruel blow at the side of the blond head, not so much from the need of vengeance but rather to make sure he would not have interference in the critical hours to come. It would be some moments, at least, before Vashti would again contemplate homicide. Wholly careless whether or not the cold claimed him in his absence, John left the man sleeping peacefully and raced back to the sled. Here he procured all the other rifle shells he could find, and his own ax. He did not load himself with food. The race was certainly to the swift. He did, however, pocket the first edible thing he laid his hands on; a stick of nutritious jerked moose meat.

Then he turned up the ice trail into the deepening twilight.

CHAPTER XXVI.

When the crunch of John's snowshoes had died away and the yell of the four wolves that followed him had dimmed to a tremor Ruth knew solitude in its final depth. She knew to the full that unspeakable loneliness, infinite as space, that follows a final parting; because she did not dare to hope she would ever see John's face again. She was alone with the winter forest—wholly, eternally, hopelessly alone.

The wolves crouched on the snow beneath her did not in the least break the spell of solitude. They did not appeal to her as creatures of flesh and blood; as the light dimmed they seemed more and more like shadows, specters that possessed no life. They were simply the spirits of the winter forest, and as the cold gripped her, she began to think of them as a natural part of the landscape, motionless and eternal as the trees themselves. It was hard to see them through the snowy branches of the spruce, and after a certain time her interest in them largely passed away. Her only interest now was the growing cold.

There was a time, in the first hour, that she had been distinctly uncomfortable; she had shivered until some of the snow slipped from the lesser branches and her hands had burned in her big mittens. Then she had experienced certain pain, a rather dull, queer pain, not sharp at all, and this had lasted perhaps another hour. At no time could it compare with the sharpness of the famine pains she had experienced at inter-

vals during the past months; and like them it completely passed away. There was no particular physical sensation left—even the discomfort of her position in the branches—but yet her brain now seemed to be preternaturally active. Her thought moved in great, sure circles; her thought pictures were particularly vivid. Although her physical self was dulled, for a time she was more acutely aware of certain abstract truths than ever before.

The moments passed and made hours; but they were something beyond her, merely the eternal progression of time of which there is no beginning and no end, that was before her birth and would be after she died. She did not move down the hours; they passed her by as if she were nonexistent—neither fast nor slow—a passionless march as when the world was without form, and void. The time was no longer hers, and she its orbit: she was simply not cognizant of time. It was true that the light died and the shadows grew, but this was because the world turned on its axis and time stood still, for all she knew. Perhaps she was escaping from time simply because she was escaping from life; perhaps she was rounding into a fourth dimension with those that have gathered the eternal reaches of time into the palms of their hands.

But this was delusion as far as the three-dimensional earth was concerned, no matter what its truth hereafter. She had sped far in this short space of waiting. Life's more limited vision swept back to her and she thought of trying to hold it. She *must* fight for life so long as she remained of life; such had been John's basic teaching. Was not all this a battleground? Were not the wolves waiting under the tree?

She thought of tying herself to the branches so that she would not fall when the ice broke her hold on the limbs; and although she had no ropes she at once remembered her strong belt of leather. It was not until she tried to reach into her parka and unfasten the belt buckle that she realized how deeply the cold had already fastened upon her. Her fingers would hardly seize the strap and the buckle resisted all her efforts. Presently she gave up trying and went back to her dreams.

Twilight was quite deep now. The whole forest world was silent beyond belief, all snow swept, all desolate, all forsaken. She dozed off only to waken with a start as her

hand was slipping from the sustaining limb. She must not drift to sleep again! That meant *death*—to drift away into a sleep—and John had taught her she must fight for life as long as living breath remained. John was absent now, conquered himself most likely, but his ancient enemy, but his creed commanded her still. Yet for all her resolution she dozed again and again wakened to find her hand slipping from its hold.

She fought against sleep a long time after that. It was curious how the skein of her thought became tangled and what a procession of strange images flooded her mind. She was with John now, in an airplane, and they were riding together out of this land of horror and death. Suddenly the wings were crumpled! It dipped in its flight! It was falling to disaster and destruction!

She woke with a sharp scream as she herself fell from her seat on the tree limb. The branches rustled and crashed as her body dropped through and her hands grasped in vain at the limbs. Once she all but checked her fall as her arm hooked over a projecting limb, but the quickly flexed muscle was not powerful enough to hold and she dropped down into the deep snowdrift under the tree.

It was not through any effort of hers that the waiting pack did not at once spring upon her and tear away her life. She fell stunned and for a long moment lay deeply unconscious. The thing that saved her, for the moment, was the wolves' terror at her sudden fall among them. The rustling branches and her dark body dropping down recalled no man knows what of forgotten terror. They sprang back, hair bristling; then watched her in eerie silence.

Even when they recognized her and made up their brute minds about her they did not at once leap to the attack. There was no answer to this. The way of the wolf is beyond the wit of man to prophesy or explain. Perhaps they simply sensed there was no cause for haste, that she would lie where she had fallen, and they could be patient for a moment more. Perhaps they thought her already dead and were playing the cautious game all animals play with carrion. It is hard to believe that any echo of their first terror still lingered. They moved quietly toward her, in absolute silence. No tooth was bared, every motion deliberate, almost casual. They communed in secret ways. They were a strange com-

pany, these wolves. They were the spirits of the wild, the embodiment of the raw forces that war with men.

The girl opened her eyes to see a huge, gray wolf standing almost within striking range of her throat, watching her intently with lurid, yellow, luminous eyes. The twilight was not yet so deep but that she could see him plainly, and she could see plainly his gray companions that moved about so quietly immediately behind him. The shadows were just dense enough to emphasize the blue and yellow fires that played in their eyes, and perhaps to make the creatures seem larger than any earthly wolves. Almost anywhere she looked she could see those twin lights glowing and paling in the deepening shadows.

She knew by infallible instinct that she must not move. It was as if they were waiting for her to die—an end surely not far off—and certainly the whole pack would pounce upon her in an instant if she showed any sign of life. Her only prayer now was that they would wait a few minutes more. In that short time the cold would put her definitely out of their power to harm. She was acutely conscious now—perhaps because her very effort to save herself from the fall had released a flood of reserve energy and heat—but very soon she would fall to sleep again. Even the terror of the wolves could not keep her awake. What they would find lying where she had lain would be nothing of value, nothing for which she would care.

But already she thought that the lesser wolves, waiting behind their leader, were becoming restless. Their motions were more abrupt and eager; and evidently the last of their mysterious reluctance was destroyed in the raging fire of their hunger. Even now were they crouching to attack? As she waited the whisper of their feet on the snow was stilled and the only sound left in all this eternity of silence was the roll of her own pulse, the wild beating of her own heart. She strained into the shadows.

The wolves were standing perfectly motionless, but even she was woodswoman enough to know that they were not now crouched to attack. They were all staring away down toward the frozen river and they suddenly seemed to have forgotten her. As she looked one of the wolves—a young female—turned and trotted away into the farther thickets.

At that instant a deadly, almost forgotten voice spoke over the snow. She could not mistake that sharp, sinister sound, and every one of this gray band knew its deadly meaning. Something sliced the snow just at the feet of one of the farther group of wolves; and the animal sprang swift as a shadow into the darkened coverts.

Even hunger was forgotten in this contagion of fear that passed from wolf to wolf. The rifle spoke again, followed by a war cry that settled once and for all the identity of her savior. And now John himself came running between the trees, firing and shouting as he came.

Only one wolf snapped at her as he leaped past, but though his teeth tore her parka they did not reach her flesh. With a tremendous effort of will she struggled to her feet, more in fear that she would be hit by a stray bullet than through any idea of aiding in this last battle with the wolves; and John bellowed like a wild beast himself when he saw that she lived. Still shooting as well as he could in the dim light he raced to her side.

"We've won, we've won, we've won!" he roared, nearer hysteria than she had ever seen him. He fired at a gray shadow speeding among the distant trees, the last of the band except one that had fallen almost at her feet. Holy words that she had heard on Edward's lips the night she had first come to the village poured from the man's thankful heart; but there was no impiety in their use now. He was the missionary—and his mission had been to save.

Presently she collapsed in his arms, because there was her rightful place to rest.

CHAPTER XXVII.

In the light of the flickering camp fire, in the silence of this winter wilderness, John fought for Ruth's life, as bravely and as indomitably as on that long-ago night when she had first wandered into his camp. Cold and exhaustion were again his enemies, only now the frost seemingly had penetrated to the inner fountains of her being. He was tired almost to the point of collapse himself; but in this last crisis a marvelous reserve strength came to his aid. He had never yet guessed the existence of this strength, yet now it flowed abundantly from his lean wasted form, sustaining him in his need.

Every trick of first aid he knew he put into play. He quickened her failing circulation with the action of his rough, strong hands, he thawed out the frozen parts, he warmed her beside a roaring fire that gleamed like a beacon to a hundred hills. He wrapped her like a mummy in the cold-proof robes that he salvaged from his wrecked sled, and administered hot drinks heated in the coffeepot likewise salvaged. When her circulation was restored and the warm sweat stood at her temples he fed her without stint—restraining only when he feared he would do her harm.

Broth he made for her out of the rich, dried meat he had procured from Vashti, and for himself he broiled the strong, nutritious flesh of the fallen wolf. Before the night had half worn away he knew that the girl was saved and the hold of the frost upon her definitely broken. Then he lay at her side and slept, waking only at intervals to feed the fire with fresh fuel.

They slept far into the morning; then he rebuilt the sled the best he could, loaded the girl and his supplies upon it, and with the precious rifle in his hand started back to Caribou. The way was all downhill and the sled seemed no tax at all upon his rapidly mounting strength. Before another twilight laid its shadows over the land they had reached the safety of the mission house.

The remains of the dead wolf were immediately divided among the various families in the village, John reserving just enough for his own and Ruth's breakfast. It had been a huge specimen of the breed, weighing over a hundred and fifty pounds in the fat days of fall, and even now there was a bite of food for every man, woman and child in the village. Vashti, it appeared, had not come to the encampment with his sled load of supplies for trading. He had given up all dream of silver fox and had decided to give the villagers a wide berth.

In the morning John left Ruth snug and warm in her bed and accompanied by Tough Stick hunted for caribou in the high parks. This high-powered gun of Vashti had none of the natural limitations of a pistol and when the two hunters encountered a small herd of bull caribou they had tracked for some miles over the snowy hills John downed three of them before they raced out of reasonable range. These animals had fed well on caribou moss, and as they were large woodland caribou they averaged well

over four hundred pounds apiece. The famine was surely and definitely broken.

When John and a half dozen of his most faithful men came dragging these carcasses into the village the entire population ran to meet them with streaming eyes. John smiled at their fervor, and never scorned it; but he did not at once administer a ration. Instead he took aside Wing of Eagle, the medicine man, for a small conference.

"I think you have a silver-fox skin for sale," John began with an undeniable twinkle in his gray eyes. "Go and get it."

Wing of Eagle was considerably disappointed; this was a severe blow after his rapture at the sight of the loaded sleds. He had hoped John would forget about the silver fox, continuing to support the villagers without any payment whatsoever.

"That trade—him off," Wing of Eagle announced solemnly.

"Yes? Wing of Eagle, do you want any of this meat?"

The Indian looked at it a long time—the white fat, the glint of red at the throat where John's blood-letting knife had slashed home. Tears of longing crept into his cunning, avaricious eyes. He nodded vigorously. "Me get um skin," he announced.

While he was gone John made what was very near to a speech—in the vernacular. "The famine is broken, my friends, because of his gun which is in my hands," he said. "This is no longer a famine village and the rationing of food may be conducted somewhat differently than in the past. That will depend upon my will."

He glanced at Ruth, who at word of his return had risen from her cot and had come forth to meet him. Instantly he was grave again.

"To-night there will be a great feast of which I will be host, and some of this meat will be eaten. Only those will be invited who first bring me a piece of fur—the best in their house. In a moment you will see Wing of Eagle come with his silver fox, and the seven others of you who likewise have silver fox"—John repeated their names—"may bring theirs also. Providing, of course, you wish to be among those that feast to-night."

The old chiefs nodded and grunted, the young braves nodded and grunted, soon all the tribe were nodding and grunting with great enthusiasm. These were savages but

in their stern homeland they had learned the basic facts of life; and they knew that this was just. The white man had brought them through the evil season and by an old law he was entitled to his reward. Had he remained silent on the point they would have surely kept the skins, for such is the law's procedure, but now they must pay according to their means. They turned to their huts and left him alone with Ruth.

"You are a profiteer!" she told him.

"Nothing of the kind," John answered. "Everything that is good should be paid for—that's one of the rules of the game." He grinned cheerfully. "Even a missionary shouldn't work for nothing providing he gives something of value. This isn't an angel's world, Ruth, yet a while. It's a battle and to the victor belongs the spoils when there are any spoils."

"I thought you did everything because you thought it was your duty."

"I did it for the satisfaction I got out of it," he told her earnestly. "I guess it is one and the same—the great satisfaction of duty done. But if there's any material rewards I want 'em—all I can fairly take of 'em. I may be a missionary, Ruth, but I'm a man, too—not an angel. The time to be an angel hasn't come along yet, and I hope it won't come till you and I—till you and I have a few more little wars to win together."

The natives brought back their furs and laid them in a shimmering pile of glossy loveliness. There were eight silver fox, several blue fox that were no more blue than moonbeams, but which were hardly less beautiful than the gorgeous silvers, and the rest were practically all cross fox. The poorest skin in the lot was a beautiful dusky golden fisher. Only one native attempted to present an inferior substitute for his best skin, whereupon the other natives made such an uproar that he speedily fell into line.

John gathered the skins into his arms, such a treasure as a wilderness lord might send as a gift to his czar, and deposited them in the safety of the mission. Vashti would have done murder for them, sweetly and gratefully; but Vashti was far down the river now, traveling fast as possible so as to make his grub last through to Point Fortune, and his opportunities for homicide were indefinitely postponed. The furs safely locked up, John gave orders for the preparation of a feast.

It was in a sober hour following that full feeding that John and Ruth found opportunity to discuss certain matters of preponderant importance in their lives. They had been merry and light-hearted when the loaded platters of caribou flesh had been passed about; but no laughter dwelt on their lips now and they were solemn with that dear, precious and almost ludicrous solemnity of youth. They had been through fire; no one could deny it. Unbroken, unbeaten, unembittered they had come through.

As the moon rose and the trees laid long shadow bars over the snow in its light, as the mysterious winter night darkened the village street and the frost-blasted trees cracked at long, breathless intervals, a strange but eternally beautiful ceremony was performed in this little, crude mission house lost in the empty drifts. Under the imposing arch of a cathedral it could not have been more heartfelt, more moving, more significant. Some way, it imaged the greatness of the race; it symbolized the progress of the ages. It was the service of baptism into the church.

Her clear, earnest voice, speaking so low and with such feeling in this humble mission house, was the most profoundly moving sound John had ever heard. Her tears, no less holy than the water drops that she sprinkled on his coarse dark hair, fell on his brow as she spoke those last, tremendous words: "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—Amen."

After this the two stood together at the threshold and watched the moon rising in cold glory over the spruce. No matter where their fortunes carried them—even into the treeless barrens of a great city—this wilderness moon would bless them still. They stood making plans, the rosy plans of youth that soared like gorgeous birds.

The furs would pay for John's training in law or medicine, or some other equally honored profession, at some great university far to the south. He was still young enough to begin at the beginning. Ruth glowed at his side as he talked, for she was recalling the inspiring life of another backwoods American, one who in youth might have looked not greatly different from this gaunt, homely woodsman at her side. That man had also been a fighter, a Christian

soldier if the term was ever truly used. He had possessed to the full the steadfastness of ideals that she saw and loved in John, the courage, the iron will, and the faith such as had won this battle amid the snows.

Why should her lover not go on? What greatness was beyond the reach of those hard, calloused hands? The conflict here had been of the most simple, primitive kind, waged against primitive foes; and the adventures she had undergone with him merely the raw and elementary struggle for survival in an inhospitable land; yet he had been trained and hardened, and why should he not win the more complex conflicts of civilization? Would not that strong will dominate wherever he went? Could wickedness and corruption, oppression and scorn stand in the sweep of those long, strong arms? As her hand touched his she felt the surge of his inner power.

"You'll not stop here, John," she told him. "It's just the beginning." Inspired, she pointed to the east where a twinkling light shone at the spire of a tall, black spruce. "It is your star, and it's just now rising up from the forest," she went on. "It has a long way to climb before it sets. John, I won't let you stop even if you want to."

He turned to her, smiling dimly. "That means—you're going with me all the way?" he asked. "I can't go on without you. But with you at my side there'd be nothing too big to tackle—hardly anything we couldn't win."

Youth was speaking, and youth answered, joyfully, hopefully, rather solemnly, as becomes such moments. "At your side—always."

It did not frighten them to hear the faint, far-distant lamentation of the pack, starving and in despair on some snow-swept moonlit ridge. The wolves had been beaten and driven back to their mountain strongholds but they would live to fight again. As long as the forest itself endured the woodsman would pause in his work at the first notes of their weird chorus, and his hard fingers would lock tighter about the hickory handle of his ax. The battle was not won as long as they ran in Famine's train along the ridges. "*Arr-ree, arr-ree, arr-ree,*" the pack sang—the sobbing song that is somewhat the song of life.



The Trail of the Cross-gaited Horse

By Frederick R. Bechdolt

Author of "The Fight for the Copper Ledge," "The Passing of Quong Tuck," Etc.

Demonstrating the proposition that two guns do not necessarily equal one good man.

MacBROOM, the general manager of the L I, was talking things over on a summer evening with two guests who had ridden to the ranch house for the conference. He waved away the cigar which the sheriff offered him.

"Never used whisky or tobacco in my life," he announced aggressively. He was one of those prematurely bald men who always suggest figure columns; and there was a carefulness in his attitude which made him contrast sharply with the others. He and his neatly arranged desk beside which he was sitting looked out of place in this long, bare room with its pair of enormous polished steer horns over the mantelpiece, its log walls adorned with coiled rawhide reatas and headstalls, the Winchester carbine standing in one corner and the big six-shooter on the table.

Old Wes Harding of the Two Bars, the L I's nearest neighbor, settled himself upon a chair which he had turned back foremost, striding it as if it were a horse. He tucked a cud of chewing tobacco into his lean cheek, lighted one of Sheriff Welch's cigars and, after two unsuccessful attempts at range finding, projected a bright amber stream through the open doorway.

Sheriff Jim Welch tilted his chair against the wall and hung the high heels of his boots

over the rounds, facing the entrance after his invariable habit. He was the youngest of the trio; the black mustache which he had grown since he came into the office helped to make him look purposeful but nothing could have made him look sedate and there were still times when he found it necessary to glance down at the silver star on his vest in order that he remember the law's responsibilities.

From the outside there came to them the rustle of the evening breeze in the tall cottonwoods, the soft drawl of a cowboy talking to his companions over in the bunk house, the smell of sweaty saddle horses in the corral. Somewhere a cow called for her calf; a coyote shrieked and then fell silent.

"When did this business start?" The sheriff was looking at Harding as he asked the question. The cowman clutched both ends of his drooping mustache in one hand and drew them far below his chin.

"Always has been some rustling on my range and the L I used to lose some young stuff, of co'se, before old man Lee sold out. But nothing bad. Since MacBroom come things has got worse."

The L I's general manager flushed and his eyes were unpleasant as he interrupted the speaker.

"It happened that Jess Lambert and his

pardner settled over on the North Fork just about the time I took charge," he said coldly.

"Yo're blamin' them?" Welch drawled. "Got any evidence?"

"Last spring round-up," old Wes had taken up the thread again, "Jess Lambert fell out with MacBroom. There was some argyment about a maverick. Jess he 'lowed 'twas his, and MacBroom claimed it for the L I. You know the way them things goes. Well, when they got done fussing the boys put the L I iron on the yearling, and Jess give it out cold for all hands to hear that after this he aimed to throw a long rope whenever there was anything in sight. Right then the stealing began to grow fast. I've lost a heap of young stuff, mostly steers; and every so often there's a cow killed or crippled and the calf a-missing. Same way with MacBroom."

"Looks bad," the sheriff agreed, "but that ain't hardly enough for the grand jury, Wes."

"Pretty nigh enough for a necktie party, though," Harding answered grimly.

"Wasn't there," Welch turned to MacBroom, "some trouble between your outfit and Jess Lambert because he'd fenced up the water on his quarter section?"

"Yes, sir." MacBroom stiffened visibly in his chair. "And that's not settled yet. The L I owns that water. You know as well as I do that these nesters are going to drive the cowmen out of business if they keep on. I've taken this matter up with the directors and they're back of me."

As he was speaking two cowboys passed the open doorway. The sheriff's eyes grew narrow as he looked upon them. In place of the single six-shooter which every man wore in those days each of the pair was adorned with two.

"I see." Welch's drawl had grown softer than usual. "And so you done hired 'Lon' Woodruff and Bill Stone."

"I'm under instructions to protect our range," MacBroom told him. "Maybe you don't know that this fellow Lambert used to have a different name before he came to the Panhandle."

"Jess has been tough," the sheriff acquiesced, "and I'm not saying he wouldn't rustle cows to-day if he got the chance. But there's a heap of men in this country that's wearing new names. Your hired gladiators has both of 'em swapped handles

since they come to the Canadian. I don't just see——"

"Ain't no need of your seeing anything, Jim," Harding interrupted briskly. "All we're asking is that you fellers down to the county-seat don't shove your noses into this mess. We'll clean things up."

But the sheriff shook his head.

"The trouble with that sort of business is that it don't clean nothing up. It just makes a cattle war and when the killing gets too plenty the gov'nor sends along the Rangers. No. I aim to do what hanging is done in this county on Jedge Williams' orders. So I'll have to keep an eye on things." He rose. "I have got to make town before to-morrow afternoon. Reckon I'll turn in."

Old Harding dismounted from his chair and stretched his arms.

"My womenfolks," he said, "will be waitin' up for me. I better be shovin' on for home."

Ten minutes later he was driving down the road which wound eastward along the valley flats. To his right the low bluffs loomed deep black against the starlit sky; to his left the wide plain stretched away in the darkness which hid the twining streak of timber beside the distant river bed. The sleek little mules hung to a swinging trot; they knew as well as he that home lay twenty miles away; the buckboard rattled briskly on; the soft night odors mingled with the smell of fresh dust from the shallow wheel tracks. And as the scents came to his nostrils there was something in them that awakened memories of days less than a decade old when the first cattle came into this country and men had held their herds against marauders, red and white, without recourse to courts of law. His blood ran faster as he seemed to smell hot powder smoke again and he threw back his grizzled head. His voice boomed, mounting toward the stars:

"Ol' Ben Johnson ridin' by
I says yo'r hoss will die;
If he does I'll tan his skin;
If he don't I'll ride agin."

His thoughts were neither of decrepit horses nor of aged men; but he had sung that stanza on more nights than he could count, guarding the sleeping cattle on the bed ground. So now he sang it over and over and lived again the fierce existence, when he had killed that he and his might

live, before—as he was wont to put it—the Panhandle country began to go to hell.

"Ol' Ben Johnson ridin' by
I says yo'r hoss will die;
If he does—

"Giddap, mules; the womenfolks is waitin' fer us."

Being a headstrong and enthusiastic man he often went wrong in his reckonings. His womenfolks were up but only one of them was waiting. The other was hoping with all her young heart that he might dally for a little while longer.

A yellow square of light revealed the room where his wife was sitting alone within the low whitewashed adobe house. Young cottonwoods murmured ceaselessly to the whispering night breeze, shrouding the building in checkered shadow as the waning moon began to climb above the summit of the eastern bluffs beyond Plum Creek. Down by the stream the shade was deeper where his daughter stood, the sole remaining ewe lamb from a flock of four. Wes Harding had always been a vigilant shepherd and of late his watchfulness had become more grim; but judging by appearances there was some danger of an empty fold.

A streak of moonlight fell athwart her upturned face, showing the soft curve of her parted lips; her eyes shone, bright with a young girl's newly awakened love. The neighboring pool of shade obscured the burly figure beside her; but the wide-brimmed hat was pushed well back allowing a two-colored forelock to gleam in the darkness. Any one in this end of the country would have known Jess Lambert by that alone.

One listening for the last two hours might have been puzzled as to what entertainment they found in each other's stilted conversation. The Panhandle was not prolific of what one might call polite topics in those days and its young people had not mastered the banalities of small talk. So for the sake of being near each other they had borne the irk of lame, colorless remarks interspersed with long awkward silences. Until she realized that her father would be well on his homeward way and recalled certain grim promises which he had made to her.

"You must be going now," she said.

Lambert came a step nearer and the moonlight disclosed the pains to which he had gone before he rode those thirty miles to make his call on her; the struggle to

comb back that unruly mop of tow-colored hair; the close shave; the crimson neckerchief knotted loosely in front; the cleanliness of his high-heeled boots. And still his costume held inerasable suggestion of the corrals. The sweat marks on the leather-banded Stetson, the bulge of the thigh muscles beneath the tight jean breeches, and, above all, the reckless lines on the big face marked him as one of those young rowdies of the saddle who are too hard to wear adornment well. There was a latent flicker in those bright blue eyes, as if they were ready to burst into a blaze of hilarity or fierceness at an instant's notice. By way of answer to her bidding he pronounced her given name.

"Rose." His voice lingered caressingly.

"You must." The flush was deepening on her cheeks now and her breath came faster. "He told me he was keeping his double-barreled duck gun loaded with buckshot for you."

"I can't see what he holds agin' me," he was beginning, but she interrupted swiftly.

"He says you drink and carry on in town and are forever playing poker."

"I ain't so bad in town as a heap of others," he drawled, "and as far as poker goes, your pa plays a right stiff game himself."

"He claims," she went on almost under her breath, "you took a different name when you come up here with a trail herd from southern Texas."

"Reckon one name's just as good's another," he answered easily. "What I done down there was done fair. It happened the wrong man was elected sheriff; that was all."

"I may as well tell you," she spoke as one who dreads not so much the disclosure as the fruits of it. "He thinks that you and Ed Maley are rustling cattle on his range."

"He done said that!" His voice had hardened and there was a light in his eyes that made her catch her breath. "Mac-Broom has been a-talking to him."

She nodded.

"He drove over to the L I this afternoon." She checked herself and laid her hand on his arm. "Hark!" The night breeze carried the voice to them; they could hear the words above the distant rattle of the buckboard:

"Ol' Ben Johnson ridin' by,
I says yo'r hoss will die—"

Jess Lambert smiled down on her. The devil had departed from his eyes and they were tender again.

"Well! Well! Your pa has got some funny notions," he said lightly. "Him and MacBroom. Anyhow I don't wish to be packing any of them buckshot of his. But I aim to see you again. On Thursday afternoon I'll just sort of happen along up Plum Creek where them old buffalo trails cuts down the bluff. And if you would be riding that a way—"

"Yes. Now go," she whispered.

"Absent owners," Sheriff Jim Welch told Wes Harding a month later, "makes rustlers. When old man Lee run that L I there wasn't any trouble. He done sold out to a bunch of Eastern stockholders and there ain't one of 'em that would know his own photograph if he saw it on a cow. All that they know is dividends. They hired MacBroom because they wanted a good business man for manager. And right away the stealing started. It's the same way with them big English outfits down on the Prairie Dog Fork. They're just a temptation to cow thieves; and on top of that their bosses always fetch in some barroom gladiators from Dodge or Fort Griffin to guard their range. There's been more men killed during the last six months in the Panhandle than there ever was in the Injun fighting days."

All the morning they had been riding the L I range; they had stopped for dinner at the ranch house and the sight of MacBroom at the table had somehow roused the sheriff's rancor. Ever since noon, while they were swinging round a wide semicircle toward the Two Bars through the plateau country south of the river valley, he had remained silent. Until they pulled up their ponies where the land began to break toward Plum Creek and he relieved his feelings.

Harding took careful aim and shot a slender amber stream toward an inquisitive prairie dog who promptly somersaulted back into his burrow.

"Never did like them two-gunmen, myself," he acknowledged. "They ride the fat hosses and go to town when they please, which makes the other hands sore. And none of 'em's worth a damn when it comes to fighting."

"Well, you take them two loafers, Stone and Woodruff," the sheriff continued. "MacBroom, he sets between them at the table like they was stockholders in the company. He don't step outdoors for a drink of water without one of 'em's along. Ain't a man on the L I but knows how they got that place of theirs over on the north side of the river by laying behind the hill and shooting the Swede that had filed on it when he come out of his cabin one morning."

"That," Harding agreed, "wasn't a nice killing. Trouble was nobody could prove it on 'em."

"And now," Welch growled, "they own the Box Bar brand and run a pretty good-sized bunch of cattle over there along with 'Slim' Cheney, who ain't no better than they be. And MacBroom, he pays 'em a hundred a month to eat the L I's chuck. No wonder some of these here cowboys goes to rustling."

The cowman tugged upon his drooping mustache.

"All the same," he said steadily, "me and MacBroom can settle this here business, if you'll only leave us be. Ain't no call to put the taxpayers to no expense."

"I reckon I'll take a hand," the sheriff answered pleasantly. "I have got an idea it will save trouble. That's why I wrote you I'd come out to-day."

They jogged on, skirting the creek's little valley. Now and again they swerved their course to look at a group of cattle. For a time their talk was all of the brands which they read: Harding's Two Bars, the L I of MacBroom's employers and occasionally the iron of some more distant outfit.

"That spotted cow," Welch said at length, pointing to the animal in question, "makes six wet ones since noon without no calves. Them cattle has been handled lately, the way they act."

"As nigh as I can figure it," his companion told him, "I've lost fifty steers off this end of my range in the last three months, and mebbe as many calves."

"Here's tracks," the sheriff called a few minutes later. He leaned low in the saddle, scanning the faint hoofprints. "Same horse has made them that I seen fifteen miles back this morning. Cross-gaited and shod behind."

"I was expecting 'em," the cowman said

dryly. "You'll run across plenty more signs of that pony if you keep your eyes open around here."

"Jess Lambert rides a pacing buckskin," Welch muttered, "and shod behind. I mind the last time I seen him in town."

"And nobody else in this here country." Harding pulled up and looked him in the face. "Now what business would bring him on this part of my range?"

While he was speaking a big buzzard flopped slowly out of a dry gulch off to their right; as it was mounting skyward another followed. The two men rode toward the edge of the gully. The sheriff's eyes went to the earth again.

"Jess has been here," he announced quietly. "He done turned off right where we did."

"Look," Harding bade him. A third buzzard rose lazily from the carcass of a cow to which he was pointing. They dismounted and found the body still limp; a bullet hole was in the forehead. A calf bleated in the brush near by.

"I can show you half a dozen others like her within five miles," Harding announced grimly, "but their calves was gone when I found 'em."

"Somebody might of come along and scared this feller away before he drove the calf off," Welch said speculatively.

They climbed back up the bank and examined the telltale footprints of the cross-gaited horse, then circled searching for other tracks. Where a rock outcropping jutted from the gully's brink they came to a stand. Up to this moment the clump of bushes which grew about the sandstone had hidden from their eyes the thing which halted them.

It was the body of Lon Woodruff. The two-gunner lay on his face and his lifeless fingers were still clutching the butt of one of his big revolvers.

"There," said Wes Harding, "lays the man that scared Jess Lambert off."

The sheriff made no answer. When he had studied the position of the body he went in silence to the bed of the ravine. He scanned the loose earth where the slain cow lay.

"Woodruff done fired two cartridges from that six-shooter," he told Harding when he returned. The cowman grunted.

"Rotten shooting. I told you none of them two-gunned was worth a damn when

it come to fighting. He ought to of killed Jess easy at that distance."

Welch stood there studying the speaker's face for some moments. Then his lips went tight.

"Ride over to the L I," said he, "and tell 'em. I'll strike out and trail him. You fellers can pick up my tracks and foller me."

But after the other had departed he remained here for nearly a half hour reading what signs the dry bank of the arroyo held for him.

"I sure wish I could lay my hands on him," he confided to his pony when he swung into the saddle.

But wishing was as far as he got that day. When the party from the L I ranch house overtook him twenty miles to the southward at the dugout which Jess Lambert and Ed Maley had built right under the escarpments of the Llano Estacado the sheriff was alone. The place showed plenty of evidences of its occupants' hasty departure. Other than that it yielded them no information. The fugitives had managed to cover up their trail.

The days went by. No one mourned for the dead man; the breed to which he belonged was never popular among the cowboys. As for the slayer, men said that he had left the country; and when they said it many voiced profane gratification at his escape. According to their way of looking at it there were worse sins than stealing cows or killing two-gunned; and anyway—so ran their argument—nobody liked the L I since MacBroom had taken hold.

It did not seem that Sheriff Jim Welch shared the general belief in the fugitive's departure, for he rode often from the county seat and was absent, sometimes for two or three-day intervals, during more than one of which the cowboys of the L I or the Two Bar saw him traveling across their ranges. But if he found anything to reward him for his searching he kept it to himself.

There was another nonconformist on the question of Jess Lambert's flight. Wes Harding's youngest daughter had her own manner of arriving at conclusions, which may or may not have been strictly logical. Jess might have stolen her father's cattle and still gained her forgiveness; certainly he could have slain a man fairly without going beyond the pale of her pardon. But if he

had ridden away from the country and had not taken the risk of having a farewell word with her, he was not worthy of her scorn. She could not bring herself to think of him that way. So she told herself that he had not gone.

She had no one in whom she could confide, save her pony. She stood beside him every afternoon when she had ridden him across country to the bend of Plum Creek where the two old buffalo trails came down the bluff, and he looked as intently up the trail as she did, waiting for the burly young horseman to appear around the turn of the pathway.

"He'll come next time," she always told the broncho before she mounted for the long ride home.

Being a daughter of the Panhandle, whose mothers had learned to wait for their menfolks in sterner days when death was always lurking somewhere about, she took it quietly. She shed no tears. Until one hot afternoon when she entered the shady wild-plum thicket and saw a scrap of paper impaled on a twig which overhung the path.

"Come early mornings," she read. Then her joy, combined with the realization that he must have been awaiting her more than once here made her press her face against the pony's warm neck; and the sleek coat was roughened by her tears when she lifted her head again.

So she was there the next day before the last shreds of pink had left the eastern sky; and when she saw the pony's ears go forward, just as they used to do, she pressed her hands to her breast, waiting for the first sight of her sweetheart. He came around the bend of the trail riding the pacing buckskin and she could see how the lines of his big young face had grown tighter, how the blue eyes held a harder brightness than they used to hold. Having been reared in a land where it was not uncommon for men to shed the blood of their fellow men she understood the meaning of that hardness; and, when he suddenly turned at some slight sound of the wind behind him, she was not surprised. Such things were part of life; one had to take them.

"Ain't been hardly a day," he told her, "but somebody's riding this end of the range. They never get this far till along toward noon, though. So I come early mornings and I'd see your pony's fresh tracks from the day before."

The sun swung higher while he held her in his arms. They found enough to talk of now and in their silences there was no bashful awkwardness. But neither of them said a word of the thing which had driven him forth to hide from other men like some wild animal. If he did not care to mention it she did not care to question him; her faith remained untroubled. He spoke of his partner.

"I told him he'd better light out long ago; but he wouldn't quit me. I think a heap of Ed for that," he said. "This holing up out on the Llano ain't no fun for him. And me—I couldn't go till I had seen you, honey. Now I'll ride away. No use staying here. The L I owns the country and I'd never stand a show. I have got to go; but some day I am coming back for you." His big face broadened with a smile. "I aim to quit poker and such trifling foolishness. I'll start in ag'in and I'll save my money. Can you wait?"

"I'll wait," she told him.

Her eyes went to the sun and she uttered a faint cry of dismay. It had climbed more than halfway to mid horizon.

"Go now," she bade him; and when they had kissed she watched him ride away. Her lips were tight but they relaxed and became very soft again as he turned in the saddle for a last look at the bend of the trail. So he saw her, with her sunbonnet pushed back and the light on her hair, waving her farewell to him; and then the plum thickets came between them.

The trail wound in and out along the creek bottom for a full mile; he did not see the bushes or the little vistas between them leading to the low bluffs; and when it departed from the stream's course into a tributary arroyo where the shrubbery had vanished his eyes still held that vision of a little form in pink, with the upraised hand and the sunshine streaming on her hair. He did not note the sudden twitching of the buckskin's ears and when he looked up it was into the muzzle of her father's rifle.

"Hands up!"

Wes Harding's eyes were the color of steel. There came to Jess Lambert the realization that he could not draw his own weapon, had he the opportunity; his hands were futile against this man. He raised them above his head.

"How come you done found me?" he asked quietly.

"Cross-gaited hosses ain't so damn thick in this part of the country," the cowman answered curtly. "We cut your trail a few miles back."

MacBroom and two of his cowboys appeared from behind a turn of the bank. Harding addressed the L I's general manager without removing his eyes from the prisoner.

"I reckon he belongs to you. What do you aim to do with him?"

"Hang him," MacBroom answered with an oath.

The cowman nodded.

"You've done lost out, Jess," he said quietly. Their eyes met; his own were narrow and deadly cold; he noted a curious, half-puzzled expression in the prisoner's big face, as if perhaps he were struggling with some problem.

"Come take his gun," Wes bade one of the cowboys. When this had been done and all had dismounted: "That there hackberry tree at the mouth of the gulch," he directed grimly.

The tree in question stood on a narrow shelf a few feet above the gully's bed. In front of it the bank dropped sheer, ten feet; a stout, gnarled limb overhung the declivity.

"Grown there on purpose for you," Harding told the L I's general manager.

MacBroom passed his tongue between his lips to moisten them. He stepped back to his pony and unfastened his rawhide reata from the saddle pommel. The corners of his mouth were twitching. He held the rope toward the cowman, who shook his head.

"Not that I give a damn, but he's your meat," said he.

The two cowboys had retired to a little distance; it was quite evident that their hearts were not in this business. Of all present, Jess Lambert seemed the least concerned. When he had climbed the bank at MacBroom's bidding he stood beside the tree and suffered his hands to be tied behind him in silence. His eyes went to Harding's for the second time.

"Slip that there honda under his left ear," Wes bade MacBroom. He became conscious of that steady gaze then. "Is there anything you got to say, Jess?"

"I—" Jess paused.

The eyes became two pin points of bright blue and the lines hardened on the big young face.

"What," he demanded, "is the use of me a-saying anything?"

MacBroom drew a deep breath and stepped back two paces along the narrow shelf of earth.

"Jump off," he ordered.

Jess Lambert turned his head and looked him in the eyes for a long moment.

"You go to hell," said he between his teeth. "You're doing this. Come, shove me off."

"He sure is game," Wes muttered to himself. From where he stood he looked up at the prisoner, whose gaze had come back to meet his own. There was no wavering in that regard, although MacBroom was already taking the first step. One of the cowboys swore. A voice came from the creek bottom.

"Just as you be."

Wes whirled; his thumb was on the hammer of his six-shooter, his finger on the trigger. He lowered the weapon with an oath. Sheriff Jim Welch rode up the trail into the gully's mouth and drew rein.

"So," he said quietly, "you've found him. I am right glad. I had begun to be afraid he'd left the country."

As he was speaking MacBroom made a sudden movement. The sheriff's ease departed and there was steel in his voice.

"If you want to jerk that gun," he announced evenly, "I am plumb willing. So go ahead right now. Or quit."

MacBroom's hand slipped from the butt of his revolver and fell beside his thigh. He lowered his head.

"Untie his hands and take that rope off his neck," Welch bade him. While it was being done Wes Harding relieved his pent-up feelings at some length.

"If there is anything you have fergot to call me," the sheriff said placidly, "try and recollect it quick; because I am in a right smart hurry. I've wasted two hours already looking for you, to come along with me." He jerked his head toward the prisoner. "All right. You belong to me, now. I want your word that you won't make any trouble."

Jess came down the bank rubbing first one big wrist and then the other, for MacBroom had wasted no tenderness when he tied those bonds.

"I'll go without no fuss," said he.

Welch barely heeded the promise; his eyes were on the cowman.

"I come by your place and found you had gone. Reckon 'twas luck took me over this way. I'd admire to have you ride with me." He turned to MacBroom. "May's well come along."

"I don't know that I'd care," MacBroom was beginning, but the other cut him short.

"Well, I do know that I'd care, an' that settles it."

"You won't be needed any longer here," he told the two punchers.

When they had departed he bade the prisoner mount the buckskin, and took possession of the confiscated revolver.

"Now, Wes, you and MacBroom line out in front. We're heading for the north side of the river. Make as good time as you can. We'll take the old crossing that the buffalo hunters used."

It was after noon when they swam their horses across the Canadian. Harding noticed with surprise that some one had been driving cattle over by this route of late. He got more food for thought when the sheriff and his companion caught up with them on the north bank, and he saw Jess Lambert wearing his six-shooter once more.

"What in the hell," he demanded, "does that mean?"

"If you'll ride back here with Jess now," Welch said, ignoring the question, "me and MacBroom will take the lead."

Subjects for conversation somehow are slow to suggest themselves when one is riding beside the man at whose hanging one has sought to officiate within the same day. And Wes Harding had those cattle tracks to occupy his mind. The valley flats were narrower here than on the stream's south side, but by the time they had reached the foot of the low bluffs he had used up all of his chewing tobacco in his ruminations. Feeling some delicacy at asking his companion for the loan of his plug, he suffered for an hour in silence.

Skirting the base of the bluffs they reached the mouth of one of the numerous gullies which opened on the flat and a man stepped out before them. Wes recognized Welch's chief deputy and there was joy in his voice as he spoke.

"Give me a chew, Bob." The man tossed him a plug and nodded to the sheriff.

"All right," said he, "you're just in time. They're working now."

"We'll leave the horses here," Welch bade them. "Don't no one make a sound."

When they had gone in silence for two miles or so the gulch made a turn, hiding all things beyond. There came to their ears the troubled lowing of cattle.

The two officers were leading. They left the ravine's dry bed and started climbing the steep side. MacBroom and Jess Lambert came after them and from his place in the rear Harding noted how the latter kept a step behind the L I's manager. But these things were occupying a minor place in his thoughts; his mind was still busy with the signs that he had been reading on the dried earth ever since the crossing of the river.

He reached the summit of the slope. Welch and his deputy were crouching at the gully's brink a hundred feet or so ahead of him.

"Don't move down there," the sheriff was calling.

The rim rock broke away before them disclosing the arroyo's head, a perfect amphitheater, drawn to a narrow mouth. This bottle neck had been barred with a rude pole fence. A haze of dust arose from the inclosure's depths, shrouding the little bunch of cattle which were huddled against the man-made barrier. A calf bleated.

It lay outstretched in the center of the natural corral. A rawhide reata ran taut from its extended forelegs to the saddle of a broncho whose rider had been caught by Welch's command in the act of backing his pony. Now he sat there looking upward at them and Wes Harding recognized Slim Cheney, part owner of the Box Bar.

The other horse was holding back on the rope which bound the calf's hind legs, but the saddle was empty. Its owner was kneeling on the ground beside the prostrate animal. A running iron lay smoking where he had dropped it in the dust.

"Bill Stone," Wes swore as realization came to him. "I always told you them two-gunned was no good, MacBroom." The L I's general manager made no answer. His face was twitching with a strange excitement.

"Another minute and that calf would be wearing the Box Bar," the deputy remarked when they had handcuffed the two prisoners. He pointed to the brand. Harding's Two Bars remained, still readable; but from the upper one there ran a fresh scar, marking one side of an uncompleted square. In the bunch at the corral's lower end they

found a dozen animals where the work had been finished. In some cases it was the L I and in others the Two Bar which had been altered.

"If you had not gone and lit out," Sheriff Jim Welch told Jess Lambert, "we could of arrested them two the afternoon when you killed Lon Woodruff."

"What good," the cowboy demanded, "would my word have been against theirs? MacBroom and the L I wanted to run me off their range; they'd spent ten thousand dollars to hang me."

"They could have spent it," Welch answered quietly, "but they'd lost out. I tracked Lon Woodruff from beside that cow he shot to where we found him, dead. Your horse's trail never come within a hundred feet of the carcass. 'Twas plain as print, how you was riding by and heard him shoot. And how he laid behind that brush to ambush you."

"Why," Wes Harding demanded, "didn't you say nothing to me that afternoon?"

The sheriff smiled.

"Because," said he, "I was in the same fix as Jess. I done needed a corroborating witness. MacBroom would have fought that case mighty hard. And the unknown' fools that owns the L I would have backed his play."

"I reckon," his deputy called over to him, "we're ready to go now."

"All right." Welch stepped beside the L I's manager. "I'll have to take that gun off'n you, MacBroom. You're under arrest. If you was half as good a business man as them stockholders seems to think, you'd have remembered that we had to settle up Lon Woodruff's estate down at the county seat. In his papers we got the evi-

dence to show that you're a silent pardner in the Box Bar brand."

"I have got off on the wrong foot in this," Wes Harding acknowledged to the sheriff, where the road turned off on the south side of the river to his ranch house, "but there's one thing don't set right with me. I'd like to know what Jess Lambert was after, riding over my range so much."

"I tell you what you do," Welch advised him. "Just take that cross-gaited pony's trail from where I first struck it that afternoon and follow it clear to the end. Mebbe you'll find out."

What with one bit of work and then another the cowman had no opportunity to follow that advice for some time. But one day he happened upon the old tracks. They led him past the scene of Lon Woodruff's death, on by the hackberry tree where Jess Lambert had come so near to his end, and down the Plum Creek bottom to a spot where he discovered many hoofprints. Here another trail met the one which the buckskin had beaten down; and, backtracking along this one, he reached his own home.

Long before this he had begun to do some thinking and he was not altogether astonished at his discovery. A good deal of water had run under the bridges since he had been a party to that attempted lynching. So when he saw the riders of those two ponies sitting on his front porch he merely grunted.

It came to him as his daughter looked up at him that she was growing very pretty.

"Where you been, daddy?" she asked him brightly.

"Looking for strays," he lied glibly. "Got any chewing tobacco, Jess? I've plumb run out."



MR. MURPHY AND THE WAITER

CHARLES F. MURPHY, stern and unbending chieftain of Tammany Hall, went into a Washington hotel one day for lunch and ordered "rare roast beef with plenty of gravy." The waiter, a misguided creature of many flourishes, bows and obeisances, brought the desired dish and while waving it in the air sloshed a lot of the gravy on the great politician's coat.

Murphy turned slowly in his chair and looked at the offender out of fiery eyes.

"Oh, say!" the waiter exclaimed, working on the gravy spots with a napkin. "Say now! That's all right, ain't it? Be a good sport now and I'll bring you plenty more gravy and it won't cost you nothing extra."



The Man in Moondance

By Edward Boltwood

Author of "A Russian Repulse," and other stories.

Dan Yates was a capable outlaw, but he faced a strong combination—a dead man and a grieving woman.

AMONG the scrub pines of a Montana ridge, a lean, sallow man of thirty dismounted from a worn-out horse. He had ridden hard all day against the north wind and he was stiff with cold. The horse, swaying on spraddled legs, hung its head nearly to the ground, as if to seek there, with its frightened and pitiful eyes, a solution of the problem of drawing breath. The man, on the contrary, gazed at the leaden sky. Then he curled his lips, dog fashion, from his teeth, and shot a vicious kick at the horse's heaving ribs.

"That's for leaving me afoot," he snarled, "just short of gettin' safe over the Canada line. It aims to snow, too! I got to take a chance. I got to lay up somewhere."

Looking to the north he saw a little shack in the drab desert of the valley below. A wisp of smoke from its squat roof struggled against the storm-charged air. The man studied the shack anxiously. He could perceive no sign of life in the broad valley, except the wisp of smoke.

With a thoughtful frown he examined a freshly made scar in the horse's flank. The wound was only skin deep. The man cut a rifle bullet from it with his pocketknife. Next, he pulled a heavy pistol from a shoulder holster beneath his coat. The gun was foul. He released the empty shells and

cleaned the pistol, tearing into strips, for that purpose, his silk handkerchief. When his sharp eyes caught the letters "D. Y." stitched on the silk he frowned again, and threw away a tobacco pouch whereon also the initials were embroidered. Finally he led the patient horse northward through the pines.

Half an hour later, however, when he descended into the valley, he was leading his horse toward the south, for he had laboriously made a long circuit on the ridge. A wagon trail ran by the shack and from it he saw a gray-haired woman splitting firewood outside the door.

At sight of him the woman dropped the ax and smoothed the front of her shabby dress. Despite her gray hair she was not old. Her good-natured face, indeed, resembled that of a dull child.

"Evenin', ma'am. Can I lay up?"

"I dunno, friend. I'm plumb alone here. Who be you, and where from?"

"Name o' Frank Sawyer," said the man suavely. "I'm from Burbank Junction." He pointed toward the north and the woman nodded. "I left the junction at sunup," he continued, "and I got lost and kep' ridin' south and south, and rode out my pony, I reckon."

"Why, so you did, and cut him, too!"

"Yes, ma'am, on some wire fence."

"Well, unsaddle him and open the door of the shed and bed down the poor feller. There's feed inside and the ditch water is all right. Where'd you say you was travelin' to?"

"South, to Moondance," answered the man, loosening a cinch strap.

The woman smiled with sympathetic interest and leaned against the woodpile.

"Moondance, hey?"

"Yes, and I never have been to that town and I lost the trail."

"Land o' love!" she exclaimed. "Say, it was lucky you wa'n't in Moondance this mornin'! A freighter pulled by here and sung out to me. He'd got wind about a phone message that came in at the Bar-V Ranch, over the west divide. The Yates gang tried to rob the Moondance bank and there was a reg'lar battle in the street. Old Aaron Yates and his gang. Heard of 'em, ain't you?"

"Seems so," assented the man, busy with an obstinate buckle.

"Well, Moondance phoned the ranch," said she, "'cause Washburn, the Bar-V boss, he's a dep'ty sheriff. The Yateses scattered a-horseback, one this way, one that. Plaguy murderers! But the freighter, he hadn't heard tell as anybody was killed out this mornin'. I'll start up our supper, Freddie."

"Frank, ma'am. Frank Sawyer."

In the small barn he found hay and a bucket. He worked rapidly, for he was famished. Nevertheless he took time to survey each side of the shack before he entered. The smell of hot pork made him almost dizzy with longing.

There was only one room but it was ceiled and rudely plastered. A cookstove glowed in the darkness and a frying pan crackled.

"I was wonderin', lady, where you keep your stock and horses."

"We just sold nigh onto every hoof," explained the woman. "That's how come my husband's away. Jim's away to town on the lone horse we got left, collectin' pay for the stock. He'll be back to-night. You set down to your supper."

"Back from where?"

"Burbank Junction," she said. "Pull up that chair, Frankie. Mrs. Jim MacKernon, that's me. I'll fix a lamp so's we can eat pretty."

Besides the pork there were potatoes and bread and preserved apricots. The man eagerly filled a cup with steaming coffee.

"Yes, Jim's comin' from Burbank Junction to-night, same as you done, and—why, shucks!" laughed Mrs. MacKernon, tilting a lamp chimney. "I disremembered how you might 'a' seen him. He's kind o' sickly, and pale complected, and a mite lame. Here hangs his picture, over the shelf. Did you happen to see him anywhere to-day, Frankie?"

She raised the lighted lamp close to a crayon portait, a cheap enlargement of a photograph. The eyes of her guest slanted curiously. He replaced the coffee cup on the table with deliberate care before he spoke.

"No, I never saw the gentleman," he said. "No, I never saw the gentleman in my life."

The keen eyes wandered, as if to escape a vision. But the vision was unescapable. He seemed to see again the dusty street of Moondance and to hear the thud of hoofs and the din of guns. He seemed to see himself, riding headlong beside his uncle, Aaron Yates. He could see a lame man, who tried to limp from his path and clutched, screaming, at his stirrup leather; could see his revolver spurt a fiery jet; could see the cripple fall dead in the dust, face upward.

Suddenly, the northern window of the shack rustled as if touched from without by stealthy, groping fingers.

"Lordy!" quavered the woman. "Snow!"

II.

The man ate with the concentration of an animal, while the rustle at the window deepened into a sullen drone, like the sound of a straining motor.

Mrs. MacKernon, who had eaten nothing, cleared away the dishes. The man stole an incredulous glance toward the shadowy picture, out of reach now of the lamplight. Drugged with warmth and food he was ready to doubt that the face on the wall was the face he had seen that morning in the dust of the Moondance street. Surely there might be two lame men in Montana whose features were alike. And how could one selling stock in Burbank Junction have been simultaneously in Moondance? He yawned defiance at the portrait. A dish clattered on the floor.

"Can't you hold onto nothin'? What makes you shake so?"

"It's the storm," she murmured. "If Jim is caught out in this—Lordy, I dunno!" and she peered at a clock that ticked on the shelf.

"It sure ain't no weather for cripples," chuckled the man.

Having lit a lantern he trudged to the barn. The wind hurled the dry snow horizontally, as if blasting it from icy cannon. In the tight little shed, however, a healthful whinney greeted him. He was satisfied that his horse would be fit for riding when riding was possible. Meantime his refuge was absolutely secure with this simpleton of a woman.

He reentered the shack in high spirits. Mrs. MacKernon was pressing her forehead against a pane of the northern window.

"I don't guess it'll last very long, this late in the spring, do you, Frankie?"

"Oh, it'll last long enough!" he said contentedly and eyed the narrow bedstead in a corner with appreciation.

"If only Jim'd come back!" she groaned. "You'll have to 'scuse me for worryin', Frankie. You see, I ain't ever mothered anybody 'cept Jim, and him a mite lame. Maybe I hadn't ought to worry so."

"Well, let up then. Look a' here, I'm good and tired. I'm goin' to have a sleep. You can set 'round and go crazy if you want to. But what's the use? There ain't a thing we can do."

"Yes there is."

"What?"

"Wish for Jim back again," said she, in a voice abruptly loud and clear. "I can bring him back again, just by wishin'. I've done it many's the time before now. You wait and see."

"That ain't sense, that's crazy," jeered the man.

He took off his boots and slept as soon as he had rolled himself in a blanket on the bed.

His first thought on waking was that the storm had ceased, for the silence was that of a summer's night. He propped himself on an elbow. A murky glare assailed his half-opened eyes. It came from two lamps and the lantern, which the woman had arranged on the table. She had moved the table to the northern window and fallen asleep in a chair beside her feeble beacon. The man clenched his fist.

"Crazy old fool! If she's let the fire out I'll sting her!"

He shuffled across the floor to replenish the stove. Midway, however, he stopped short, as if a hand had gripped his arm. He had been seized by a sudden notion that the room was strange, that something had gone from it while he slept. Or had something entered?

The latch rattled faintly. Crouching sidewise, the man drew his gun and pulled the door ajar.

A foggy moon hung in the tattered clouds. The air was stirred vaguely from the south, whispering of a thaw. The snow, damp to the man's touch, lay untrdden over the threshold and covered the adjacent ground like a vast parchment without a telltale mark. Ashamed of his alarm, he closed the door and dropped the pistol on his blanket.

"'Twa'n't nothin' but a shift of wind," he decided.

Nevertheless the room was still strange to him. He looked about it with a puzzled scowl and gazed finally at the crayon portrait. The pictured face, quivering in the glow of the lamps, seemed to be alive; its mouth, in the upflung gust of heat, trembled as if trying to break the gravelike silence of the room.

The man wrenched a shoulder of the sleeping woman.

"Jim?" she breathed.

"It ain't- Jim—it's me. Get some sense into you! Look a' here, he went to Burbank Junction, didn't he? You said he was in Burbank this mornin', didn't you? Speak up, you crazy old—you said—"

"Sure, to Burbank," she interposed.

"Not Moondance?"

"No!"

He released her shoulder, yawned, took a step toward the bed, halted, listened.

"What ails you, Frankie? You hear anything? You hear Jim singin' out, or anything? 'Cause Jim's comin' back pretty soon, right into this room. I'm wishin' and Jim'll come."

"Aw, shut up!" growled the man from his blanket. "I ain't had the whole of my sleep yet and—why, there!" An abrupt grin of relief loosened his lips. "Why, there, the clock's run down, that's all!" he exclaimed. "What I missed was the tick of the clock. Say, you old nut, wind up the clock, can't you?"

"The clock?"

"Yes, it's run down."

"I wouldn't 'a' noticed. I'm much obliged to you, Frankie."

"You're so nutty you can't notice nothin'," said he; and gave her the time from his wrist watch.

With his head snuggled in a fold of the blanket the man heard the rattle of the winding key and the cheerful ticking of the little clock. The room no longer was strange. He grinned again at the trivial cause of his panic and slumbered even more deeply than before.

He had heard the winding of the clock. He had not witnessed it; had not seen the woman, her fingers tremulous with amazement, take a pink sheet of paper from its hiding place beneath the winding key and unfold the penciled note in the lamplight on the table.

She sat at the table as tensely as a pathologist at his microscope. The pink paper might have been a bloodstain under study in a laboratory.

It was nearly dawn when she straightened herself. Her childish face had become taut and hard. With a quick movement of resolution she crumpled the paper and threw it aside, and stared craftily at the figure on the bed; and there the man's revolver seemed to beckon to her hand.

At length the morning came. A pallid sunbeam ventured through a window of the shack and caressed the forehead of the sleeper, who awoke to give it a drowsy blink of welcome. He nestled luxuriously in the blanket. Comfortable notions lazily drifted across his mind—thoughts of sunny weather, of his rested horse, of hot food before an easy ride to safety. In complete contentment he stretched his arms. A knuckle grazed the side of the stove and he sat up with a savage oath, for the stove was cold.

He lumbered to his feet. The woman was not in the room. He was alone.

"Mis' MacKernon!" he called, and jerked open the door. "You old fool, where are you?"

The sky was delicately roseate, like mother-of-pearl. A soft glow, as from luminous but invisible flowers, filled the whitened valley; and feathery tendrils of mist from the melting snow floated on the warm breeze. But the man's concern was with a single line of muddy footprints lead-

ing from the threshold of the shack to the horse shed.

"You out there, Mis' MacKernon?" he called again.

His voice broke on a shrill note of anxiety. A qualm of almost physical sickness made him reel against the door frame. If she had stolen his horse he might as well shoot himself and be done with it; a fugitive afoot in that country might as well be jailed.

He ran through the slush to the barn. It was empty. Saddle, bridle and horse were gone. Whither? His desperate eyes followed the hoof marks in the wet snow. The chocolate-colored track was plain and probative. His horse had been ridden straight to the south, toward Moondance. A spark of hope flickered in his heart.

"She can't 'a' suspicioned me," he reasoned. "If she did she'd 'a' put west to that ranch. And if she went lookin' for MacKernon she'd 'a' put north. There ain't no tracks but hers, comin' or goin'. Maybe she's just circlin' 'round, plumb crazy. Maybe I can trail her and bring her down;" and he became aware for the first time that he was unshod. "I'll get my gun and put on my boots," he concluded, "and I'll trail her."

He floundered to the shack. For a moment he stood motionless inside the door. Then, whimpering and cursing, he clawed frantically at the blankets of the bed. Gun and boots had disappeared. The woman had made pursuit impossible.

Obviously, he had been betrayed to her. But by what? By whom? He backed against the table and the somber eyes of the portrait gravely met his own. The man gripped the edges of the table as if to tear the wood.

"It was him, by God!" he muttered.

The room was chilled but he made no move to kindle a fire or even to close the door. Perched on the table, with shoulders stooped and hands dangling between his knees, he glowered expectantly through the open doorway. The sun was high before he saw that for which he waited.

Thereupon he slouched from the table and across the threshold, raising both arms above his head. But he did not look now at the half dozen horsemen on the wagon trail; he turned and looked at the picture of Jim MacKernon, and curled his thin lips, dog fashion, from his teeth.

III.

When they sighted the shack Washburn of the Bar-V addressed "Spike" Riley, who rode beside him.

"I got to stop before we scout the ridge," said Washburn, "and tell Mrs. MacKernon that Jim's dead. Wish to blazes I'd brought along mother for that job! Mother's took a great shine to Mrs. MacKernon—always wanted her for house help at the ranch."

Mr. Riley spat musingly between his horse's ears and became philosophical.

"Funny thing how different them two men was that the Yateses croaked in the street yesterday," said Spike. "They got good little Jim, and they got that blacksmith, who was a skunk, net, with the dirtiest tongue that ever—see yonder, chief! See yonder, comin' out the door!"

Their pistols clicked.

"It's Dan Yates!" rejoiced Spike. "I seen the devil once on Powder River."

"What's he looking at, behind him?" said Washburn. "Play safe, boys! He's not alone."

The riders spread into a crescent and closed in on the shack. Washburn dismounted.

"Anybody with you, inside there?"

Yates slowly nodded, with a crooked smile.

"Let him show up, then!"

"He can't," drawled Yates. "He's been dead in Moondance since yesterday. But I reckon he came back here last night, like she wished he would," and, at Washburn's gesture he thrust forward his hands for the steel cuffs.

"Who come back?" gasped Spike Riley. "What's eatin' you? Where's Mis' MacKernon?"

With his manacled hands the outlaw pointed at the hoof marks leading south.

"The man in Moondance," mumbled

Yates, "he come back and told her how to fix me. She went off at sunup, with my horse, like he told her."

"That's a lie!" stormed Riley. "And if you've hurted Mis' MacKernon there ain't a sheriff from here to Texas that can block our ropes off'n you!"

A growl of approval from the men alarmed Washburn, who had entered the room. As he turned back toward the threshold, frowning apprehensively, he picked up a crumpled scrap of pink paper from the floor.

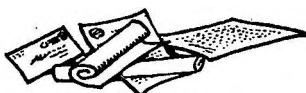
"What's happened to her?" Spike insisted. "No more of your fairy stories, Dan Yates! There ain't a sheriff from here to Texas—"

"Oh, keep your shirt on, Riley!" intervened Washburn. "Follow that horse track, a couple of you, and you'll overtake Mrs. MacKernon. She put off to Moondance this morning to help poor Jim, who was lying dead, and the blacksmith, too. Here's what started her."

The Bar-V boss read aloud the words written on the sheet of paper:

"DEAR WIFE—This is hid Where you sure find it Soon ennough, I am not going to Burbank. Am Going to Moondance to have it out with the Blacksmith for his soul talk about you that you know of. I dident tell You I was going to Moondance for fear you would know what I was going For and wory yourself. Well by the time you read this I have got him or he has Got me so good by dear wife from loveing husband J. MACKERNON."

When Washburn read the subscribed name two or three of the men ceremonially took off their hats, with some vague notion of last rites. The sheriff blew out a lamp still burning on the table. Its smoke clouded the portrait; but Dan Yates, slanting his sullen eyes, fancied he saw a look of satisfaction on the pale face.



BACK IN THE OLD HARNESS

BACK in 1851 Andrew Kech of Allentown, Pennsylvania, established a lumber business in that city. He conducted it for thirty-seven years, then retired, handing the business over to two of his sons. Both sons died, and at a sale held recently to settle the estate Mr. Kech bought back the business and after a thirty-four-year vacation again is very much on the job. He is ninety-four years old.

A Chat With You

JUST about the time this number begins to blossom out on the news stands those who are gifted psychically may hear a delicate crackling sound reverberating through city, village, hamlet and farm. It is caused by the breaking of New Year's resolutions. The average New Year's resolution starts out boldly enough. It looks strong. Indeed it appears to be made of the finest steel. After a day or so it begins, in some cases, to bend; in others, to show a sort of flaky brittleness. By the seventh day of the new year, which is the day on which this magazine is offered to the public, the average resolution is either bent somewhat out of shape, or being of the kind that will not bend has cracked completely under the strain and is of no more value as a resolution.

* * * *

THE bending, elastic resolution is a better type than the brittle one which sometimes appears stronger than the other. There is a better type than either. This is the absolutely rigid resolution that is tough at the same time, and stands the assaults of a whole twelve months without getting out of alignment and without showing the faintest sign of wear. In fact, this kind improves with age. At first it may seem a little rough and unfinished, but by the end of the year it has become polished and refined, it is gleaming and beautiful and definite, it has been hammered and polished into the lines of true efficiency. No resolution is really worth much until it has been used daily for a whole year.

WE are forging such a resolution at present. It has a rough general outline at present. It is, in its present form, an urge to make **THE POPULAR**, which is now in its twenty-first year, a better magazine than it ever has been in the past. The first thing you have noticed already. **THE POPULAR** is printed now on better paper than at any time in its history. It looks a little more like its true self. Another thing is better covers. You will notice them getting better and better as time goes on.

* * * *

THESE are only the first steps. We have, as some of our readers who have stuck to us for twenty years have told us, a rather distinguished past. On the whole we have maintained a higher standard than any fiction magazine in the country. To do better than this means a big effort, but we are making the effort and we have enlisted on our behalf the best talent that we can pick. Here are some of those who are helping us:

A. M. Chisholm has written some of the most stirring and dramatic stories of the Northwest published in recent years. His last two books, "The Country of Strong Men" and "Little Fish," will be remembered by every one who knows **THE POPULAR**. His new story, "Bill Stuart—Fighting Man," starts in the present issue. The first installment is good but is not as good as what is to follow. It grows better steadily as it goes on. If you know any one who likes a tale of real people, real fights, real life in the open, pass this installment over to them.

Chisholm knows what he is writing about. He is a rancher, a sportsman, a lover of the outdoors. His scenes and types have the stamp of reality. "Bill Stuart—Fighting Man" is the best thing he has ever done. If you have a weak heart, if you hate thrills and excitement, if you object to being violently interested in anything, keep away from it. But if you object to hokum, if you want the real thing about the people who are building a new empire in the Northwest, tie right into it. It is yours.

* * * *

THEN there is Alan Sullivan. He is also a man who knows what he is talking about. His story of the oil business in the present issue will appear as a two-dollar book, published by Appleton's, a few months from now. You have it complete. It is the most dramatic story yet published about the most dramatic man's business in existence to-day.

* * * *

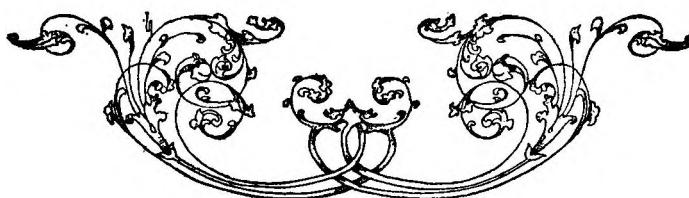
THERE is Thomas McMorrow. His tale of a lost treasure and desperate gun fights appears complete, a book-length novel in the next issue, out two weeks from this. There is Percival Wilde, whose series of card stories, each with a sharply dramatic climax, starts in the present number. There is Edison Marshall, who will follow his present great serial with one just as good or better. There is Montanye, who has the priceless gift of making people laugh and who is slated for a series that will last, we hope, most of the year. There is Holman Day with another novel of the Northwest.

There is Henry Herbert Knibbs with another great story of the Southwest—a story even better than "The Ridin' Kid from Powder River." There is Francis Lynde and W. B. M. (William Morton) Ferguson, each contributing novels of action and adventure. There are Henry C. Rowland, Ralph D. Paine, Burton Egbert Stevenson, Bertrand Sinclair—all to contribute novels and short stories as well. There is Fred Bechdolt with Western stories. Other writers of Western stories are Howard R. Marsh, Talbert Josselyn, Roy Norton, and Kenneth Gilbert. There are detective stories by Rohde, adventure stories by James Francis Dwyer and Frank Parker Stockbridge, sea stories by Oswald Wildridge, and romance at its best by H. de Vere Stacpoole. There are stories of the Southwest by J. Frank Davis, stories of the Far West by Theodore Seixas Solomons, stories of ranch life by B. M. Bower. Von Zeikursch has written for us tales of the Northern woods. Caroline Lockhart will be back again with stories of Wyoming and William MacLeod Raine will reappear.

* * * *

IF we were hammering out this resolution unassisted, we would not seem so confident. But with such an army—we have named only a few of them—we have the cards stacked in our favor. Sometimes it is the general that counts, sometimes the army. Napoleon was a great general, but there were times when hardly any one could have lost with the army that followed him.

A year from now we will look back and ask you whether we have made good or not.

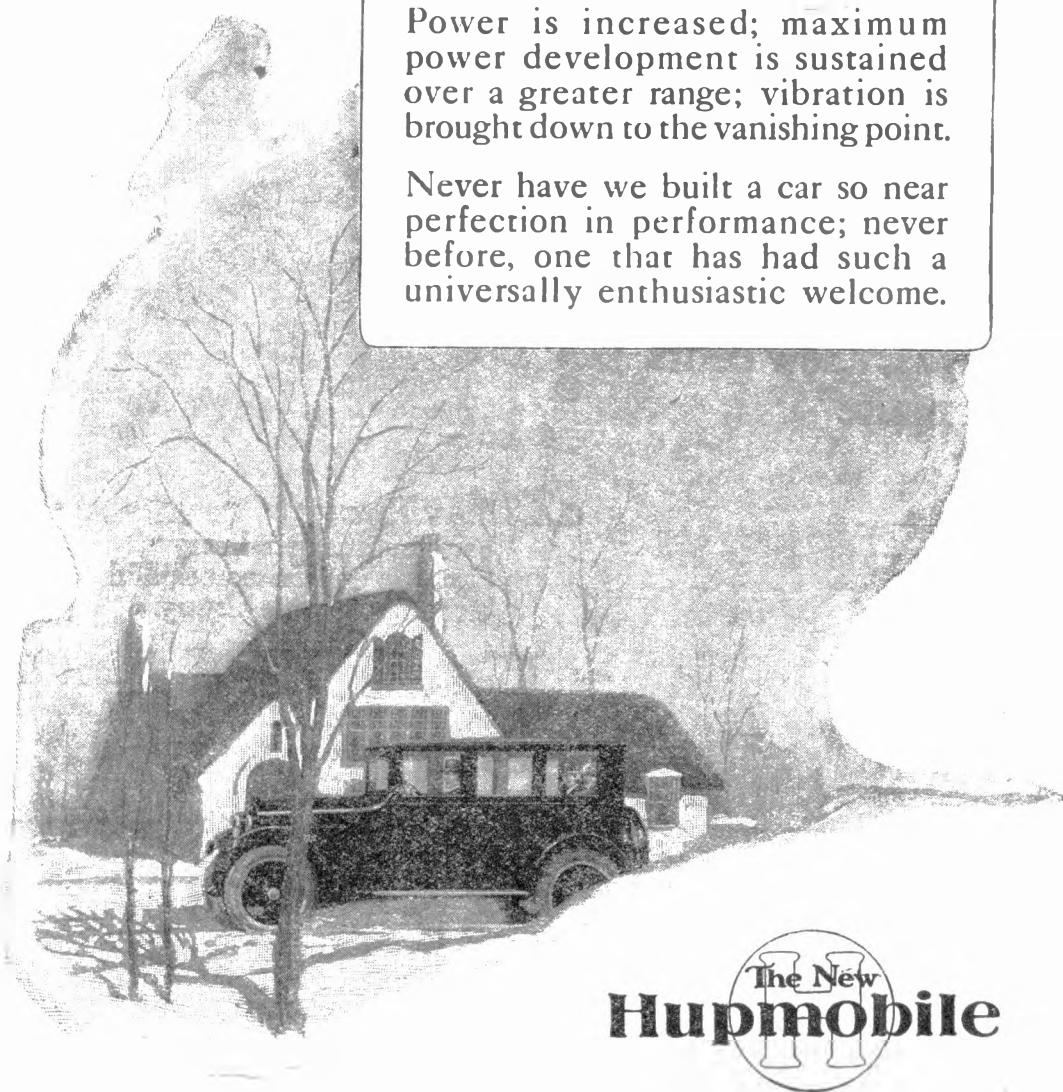


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I Challenge the World

If a man stood on the house-top and shouted to the people that he was the strongest man on earth, it would avail him nothing. Someone would make him come down and prove it. But records speak for themselves. I will gladly show anyone personal letters from the leading strong men in the world today that my course is absolutely the best and the quickest to acquire physical perfection. Come on then and make me prove it—I like it. I have the means of making you a perfect physical specimen of manhood, of making you a successful leader of men. You will be a credit to your community. I have done this for thousands of others. What I have done for them I will do for you. I don't care what your present condition is. The weaker you are, the more noticeable the results. Come on then, start the New Year right.

Send for My New 64-page Book

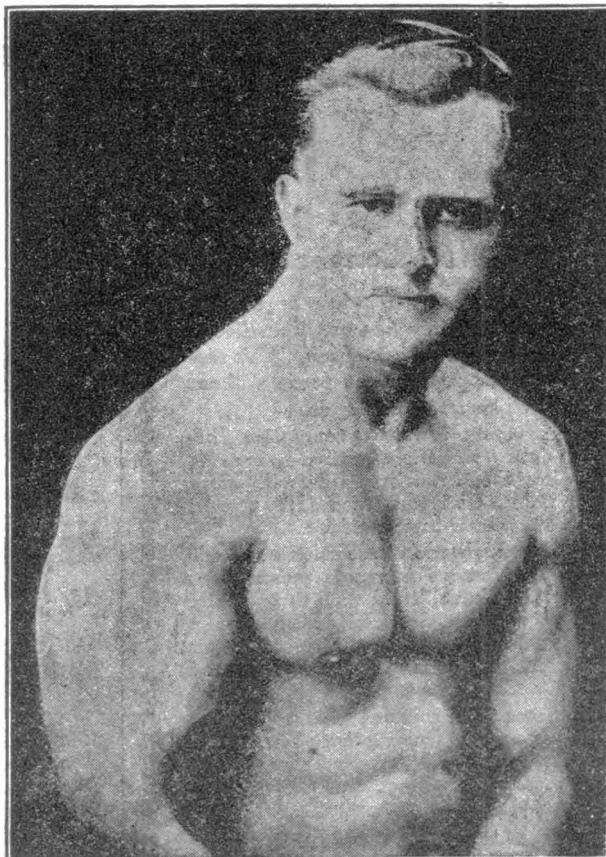
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Mary T. Goldman,

197-A Goldman Bldg., St. Paul, Minn.

Please send your patented Free Trial Outfit. X shows color of hair. Black..... dark brown..... medium brown..... auburn (dark red)..... light brown..... light auburn (light red)..... blonde.....

Name.....

Street..... City.....

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COUGH DROPS**

refresh the throat and check the cough before it starts. Made of pure cane sugar, menthol and horehound. The menthol heals—the horehound soothes

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Be the one who outwits
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Study the crowd as it hurries to and fro. Four out of five over forty years of age, and thousands younger, will pay Pyorrhœa's dreaded toll.

Don't wait for bleeding gums—Nature's warning. Check Pyorrhœa before it begins. Go to your dentist regularly and use Forhan's For the Gums at least twice daily.

At all druggists, 35c and 60c.

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SWEETEN YOUR TEETH
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DISEASES OF THE MOUTH
AND TEETH
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DENTAL PRODUCT

New Hair for You in 30 Days

-or Your Money Instantly Refunded

My amazing guarantee means just exactly what it says! I don't care how thin your hair is—I don't care if you are completely bald—if new hair fails to grow after using my method—then the test costs you absolutely **NOTHING!** The astonishing proof of what I have done for others is now yours—entirely free. Simply mail the coupon below.

By ALOIS MERKE

Founder of Famous Merke Institute, Fifth Avenue, New York

No matter how long you have been bald—no matter how many different treatments you have taken without results—I have discovered a startling new treatment for baldness which I absolutely guarantee will grow new hair in 30 days—or every penny you have paid me will be instantly—and gladly—refunded.

No one has ever dared to make such a sweeping guarantee before! But do you suppose that I could make it unless I was absolutely confident that my treatment would do all I claim? Never! I would be out of business in a week. But I KNOW what my method will do. For its remarkable value is shown by actual statistics covering thousands of cases treated—only three people in every hundred asking the return of their money!

Not One Penny's Risk!

Now I realize that you have perhaps wasted a lot of time and money on treatments which could NEVER restore your hair. Very likely you are skeptical. All right. I don't blame you. And I'll admit right here that my treatment may not help you either. For your case may be one of the three in every hundred

that is absolutely hopeless. In any case, I want you to try my treatment at my risk—and if after 30 days you are not more than delighted with the results produced—then just tell me so, and without asking a single question I'll mail you a check refunding every cent you have paid me. I

don't want a cent of your money, unless I actually grow hair on your head! You, of course, are to be the sole judge.

Actual Results

(Dozens of letters like the following are received every day by the Merke Institute)

"In the short time I have used your treatment I have gained remarkable results. Dandruff has disappeared entirely. My scalp is now all full of fine new hair. I would not part with my treatment for 10 times its cost." A. W. B.

"The top of my head is now almost covered with new hair about one-half inch long. I have been trying five years, but could never find anything to make my hair grow until your treatment." T. C.



Entirely New Method

My treatment is the result of 17 years of experience gained in treating thousands of cases of baldness. This included many long years in such famous centers of scientific research as Heidelberg, Berlin, Paris, Geneva, and Buenos Ayres. My method is entirely different from anything known or used before—no massaging—no singing—no "mange cures"—no unnecessary bother of any kind. Yet results are usually noticeable even after the very first treatments.

My treatment proves that a big percentage of baldness is caused—not by dead hair roots—but by dormant hair roots, which can now be awakened and made to grow hair again. The reason other treatments failed is because they did not penetrate to these dormant roots. To make a tree grow, you would not rub "growing fluid" on the bark. Instead you would get right to the roots. And so it is with the hair.

In all the world there is only one method I know about of penetrating direct to the roots and getting nourishment to them. And this is embodied in the treatment that I now offer you on my guarantee of satisfactory results, or no cost.

Already great numbers of men and women who only recently were bald or troubled with falling hair have, through this method, acquired healthy hair that is the admiration of all their friends. As for dandruff, this in many cases disappears so quickly that it seems almost magical. The treatment can be used in any home in which there is electricity.

Free Booklet Explains Treatment

If you will merely fill in and mail the coupon below I will gladly send you—without cost or obligation—an interesting 32-page booklet, describing my treatment in detail.

This booklet contains much helpful information on the care of hair—and in addition shows by actual photographs what my treatment is doing for thousands of others.

No matter how bald you are—no matter if you are completely bald, this booklet will prove of deepest interest to you. So mail the coupon now—and it will be sent you by return mail.

Allied Merke Institutes, Inc.

512 Fifth Avenue, Dept. 421, New York City

Allied Merke Institutes, Inc.

Dept. 421, 512 Fifth Avenue, New York City

Please send me, without cost or obligation on my part, a copy of the new booklet describing in detail the Merke Institute Home Treatment.

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With the help we will give you, you can slip right into one of these big pay—he-man jobs and never lose a day's pay! After a few weeks study, you can earn enough for installation and electric repair jobs alone to more than pay for the Course and lay a foundation for an Electrical Contracting or Repair Shop Business of your own. When the proper time comes, we will tell you the easy way to go about doing it.

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3 Rugs Free

Each small rug measures 18x36 inches. They match exactly the large rug you select. While this offer lasts, we give three of these small rugs free with each large rug; all for less than the price of one.

Triple Guarantee

There is only one guaranteed Congoleum, identified by the Gold Seal shown above on the Rug. It protects you against dissatisfaction and gives you an unconditional money-back guarantee. Behind the Gold Seal Guarantee is our own Double Bond.



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Ours is the only house in America that can make such an offer. No one else can bring you a genuine guaranteed Gold Seal Congoleum Rug, in the full 9 foot by 12 foot size, with three small rugs extra, and all for less than the regular price of the big rug alone. And on a year credit. Clip the coupon below. Write your name and address plainly. Say which pattern you want. Pin a dollar bill to it—mail at once. We will ship immediately—on a month's trial—all 4 Congoleum Rugs—in one complete neat package. No muss, no bother, no trouble to lay. If satisfactory take a year to pay.

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Congoleum Gold Seal Art Rugs are the most popular floor covering known. They are rapidly becoming the national floor covering—highly prized in good homes for any and all rooms.

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