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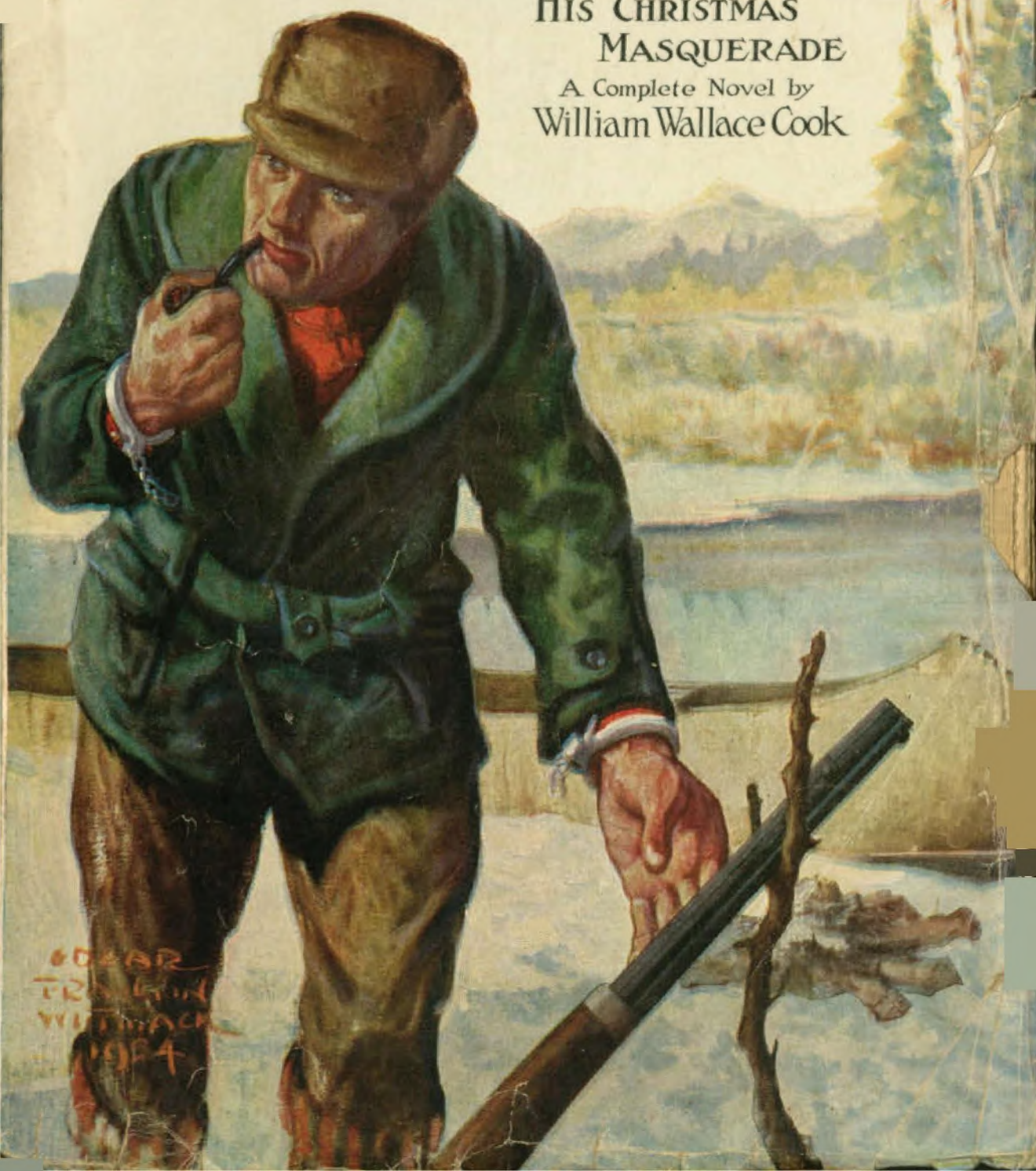
Top-Notch

Magazine

DEC. 15, 1924

HIS CHRISTMAS MASQUERADE

A Complete Novel by
William Wallace Cook



OSCAR
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WINTHROP
1924

TOP-NOTCH

TWICE -A-MONTH MAGAZINE

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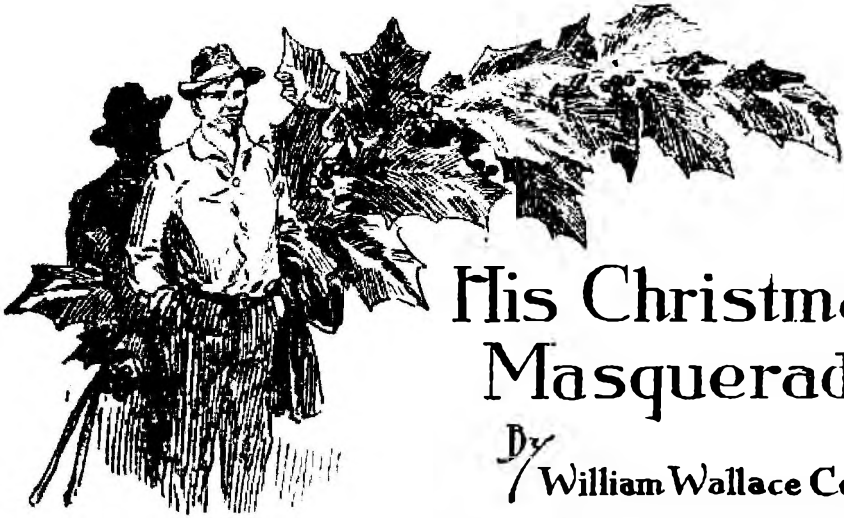
New York City

TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

VOL. LX

Published December 15, 1924

No. 4



His Christmas Masquerade ~

By
William Wallace Cook ~

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.

A SWIFT EXIT.

THERE was a shout, followed instantly by a shot, and a sudden scampering by the Christmas shoppers. The spirit of lawlessness, grim and incongruous, had seemingly dropped out of the frosty air to intrude itself upon the approaching season of peace and good will.

Electric street lights fell upon the snow, which was banked at the edge of the pavement, and were reflected in a hard, diamondlike glitter; and other electrics, back of broad plate-glass windows, shed their rays upon cotton snow sprinkled with tinsel, but in the store fronts the hard glitter was softened by the warm touch of holly wreaths, mistletoe, and diminutive Christmas trees.

Dick Summerfield, "Delaney the Dip," had been slouching in front of one of the wide, glowing windows, his old fur cap pulled down over his ears, his faded, threadbare overcoat buttoned tightly around him, and his ungloved hands thrust deep into the overcoat pockets.

Delaney the Dip had one of those nice, engaging faces that are a big asset in any profession, light-fingered or otherwise. His hair was brown, and his eyes were blue, and he might have been a patrician instead of a guttersnipe if only his clothes had been of different quality and cut.

The shout and the shot aroused Delaney as though he had been touched by a couple of live wires. As if by some unerring instinct, he leaped away from the scene of that sudden disturbance, rudely jostling and almost oversetting the department-store Santa Claus who stood at the entrance of the establishment.

The momentary panic was succeeded by a dramatic silence. A whiff of smoke fluttered upward in the still air from the point of a gun. The owner of the gun was a policeman; and as he bore down along the walk at a run, another policeman dashed across the street, floundered through the snowbank and joined him.

"You never touched him, Jerry," said the second policeman hurriedly. "He went west—I saw him. This way!"

So the two harness bulls ran west—which was a stroke of luck for Delaney the Dip, who was hustling east. Delaney did not long continue his eastward course, however. He turned at the first corner, hugged the shadows of a cross street, plunged into an alleyway, emerged on another cross street, and then by a zigzag and devious course arrived at a network of tracks in the railroad yards.

There he became a skulking shadow, hardly distinguishable from the lighter shadows that surrounded him. He paused for breath between two box cars on a siding, grew as quiet as possible, and listened sharply.

"Hanged if I know what it was all about," he told himself, in a soliloquy tinged with protest. "Somebody pulled something, and the dicks got after him, and it was up to me to duck on general principles. Great work," he added with a touch of bitterness, "for this time of year! I don't like Bloomfield; the town's cops don't seem to have any regard for the Christmas spirit, and first I know one of 'em will try to 'vag' me with the notion that my yuletide should be spent behind the bars."

A gong boomed out on the night air. It was a sound similar to that made by a patrol wagon going somewhere in a hurry, but in this instance it was merely the warning as crossing gates were about to be lowered. A big white eye gleamed along the tracks, grew dazzlingly, and a freight train came slowly through the yards.

"Westbound," muttered Delaney; "now if there's an empty in that string, and the door happens to be negotiable, I wouldn't mind following Horace Greeley's advice."

He dodged out from the cars on the siding, crossed three tracks, and dog-

trotted alongside the slow-moving freight train. Now and then he pushed at a door, if the faint light did not serve to show him that it was locked, and if he failed to make any impression on the door, he slowed his pace and let the next car come along. In this manner he tried several doors, only to meet with disappointment.

Delaney could have climbed up on the bumpers, or he could have clung to an iron ladder, or have made the top and perched on the toe path. That did not appeal to him on such a cold night, however. He wanted an inside berth, and if he couldn't find it, he would look for another freight or stay on in Bloomfield.

Luck was with him—more luck than he could possibly imagine; this he realized several days later when, looking back, he considered the events of that cold December evening.

Trotting along beside the laggard freight train he found a door that yielded to his push. He pushed harder, and the door slid back far enough to suit his purposes; then, with a stumbling jump, he laid the upper part of his body across the threshold of the door and wriggled himself completely inside of the car.

It was empty, it appeared. Delaney's bare hands groped in straw—fairly clean straw. It wasn't a cattle car, for these have slatted sides and an odor. No; this was an empty box car with a lot of clean straw in the bottom of it, and Delaney thanked his stars as he scrambled to his feet.

"West or east," he was saying to himself as he closed the sliding door, "I can't see that it makes a particle of difference. Personally, at this time of year, I'd prefer to be traveling south. All the Summerfields have been partial to summer weather, and when they had the price, they'd spend their winters in Florida, or California, or perhaps the Mediterranean littoral—but the Delaneys can't be choosers. I'll look around a bit, have a snack to eat, and then I'll make myself a comfortable bed for the night. It won't be like the Ritz-Carlton, but—well, any port in a storm."

He braced himself against the lurching wall of the box car and noted, with satisfaction, that the train was gathering

headway. Apparently, it had slowed down in the yards for the purpose of giving him a chance to get aboard. He was groping in his pocket for a piece of candle and a match when, with a suddenness that had him gaping and blinking, a penciled gleam shot out from one end of the car and struck him in the face.

"As you are, bo!" called a voice, clear and distinct above the rattle of the wheels on the rails. "I've got my gat trained on you, and I'll open the fireworks if you don't obey orders. One's company in here to-night, and two's a crowd. I don't like crowds. Open that door again and fall through it! The air for you and be quick about it."

Delaney had time to recover from his surprise. He was still blinking, but his wits were in working order. "Say, pard," he drawled, "d'you reckon y'u own this choo-choo? Let's talk it over."

CHAPTER II.

JUST ALIKE.

WHY one hobo should object to another hobo's presence in a big empty box car was a mystery for which Delaney could find only one solution: The stranger had "pulled something," the police were after him, and he was so nervous over his get-away that he failed to live up to the established conventions of the Great Order of Rolling Stones. Delaney made a quick decision; he would convince this unsociable person with the gun that, as a companion, he could be not only entertaining but absolutely dependable.

That inquiry as to the ownership of the choo-choo brought no response. The flash light still trailed its gleam out of the black pocket in the end of the car. Delaney could not get the dazzle out of his eyes; but the other man was weirdly silent and, oddly enough, made no hostile maneuver in backing up his threat.

"Nothin' nosey about me, bo," Delaney remarked; "I can travel in the same empty with a gent I ain't never seen before and not give him any cause to be sorry I'm along. When we separate, I wipes the meeting off the tablets o' memory complete. 'Delaney the Old Reliable'—that's me."

"Take off that cap!" ordered the voice from the dark.

It was a singular request, but Delaney was accommodating and removed the cap. His brown hair was somewhat long, and he needed a shave; however, these evidences of neglect were trifling, and the well-shaped head and the face with its aristocratic cast were most impressive.

The man in the dark muttered an exclamation. Apparently he was astonished about something. "Your name is Delaney?" he asked.

"For the present," said Delaney frankly. "What's a moniker more or less, between friends?"

"You have made a faux pas, as the saying is, and you boarded this rattler as the easiest way out?"

"Well ask me; I don't like to talk about some things. Every man has his past, bo, and it ought to be private."

"All right, you can stay. I'll put up the gun, but I'll keep it handily in my pocket. Don't make any wrong move, that's all. Just remember that, as the poet says, 'We're ships that pass in the night and speak each other in passing.' Make yourself comfortable."

"Much obliged, pard," said Delaney: "you won't be sorry."

He scraped away the straw, struck a match, lighted the stump of a candle, and imbedded it in its own grease on the swaying floor; then he blew on his hands, warmed them over the little, flickering flame, and at last pulled a paper parcel from his bulging overcoat pocket. Four thick ham sandwiches were revealed when the parcel was unwrapped.

Delaney sat down by his candle and began to eat. "Join me, neighbor?" he inquired hospitably, pushing two of the sandwiches to one side. "It ain't much, but then again it'll do pretty well in a pinch. Maybe, though, this thing called hunger ain't pinchin' you?"

"But it just happens that it is." The other man moved closer, steadying himself against the sway of the floor, his form silhouetting vaguely against a darker background. He sat down on the other side of the sputtering candle and reached for the two sandwiches. "I left Bloomfield in a hurry—and forgot all

about my dinner. I am certainly under obligations to you."

He ate like a gentleman, spreading a neat linen handkerchief over his knees in lieu of a napkin. Delaney stared at him in amazement.

This other man was a hobo in name only. He wore a fur-lined overcoat with a fur collar; it was new and neat and certainly expensive. His cap was of sealskin, glossy and fine; and on his left hand was a glove which he slowly removed, as if on second thought, after beginning on one of the sandwiches.

Under the overcoat was a suit of quality, tailor-made. A soft white collar, a neat four-in-hand, and a flashing scarfpin completed the amazing ensemble; but all this was not the really astonishing part of the stranger's appearance so far as Delaney was concerned.

It seemed to Delaney as though he were looking into a mirror and catching a glimpse of his own reflection, barbered and immaculate. He stared. The stranger smiled and, as though reading Delaney's thoughts, removed the sealskin cap.

"It's hitting you the same way it did me, eh?" he asked. "Fairly bowls you over, doesn't it? They say every man alive has his double somewhere. Well, Delaney, I guess you're mine. Get it all—don't miss any of the details. I call it startling. When the fact dawned on me, it took my breath. That's why I changed my mind about letting you travel in this same side-door Pullman with me."

There was the same brown hair, but carefully trimmed; the same cheek bones, but carefully razored; the same blue eyes. Delaney No. 2, the "swell," faced Delaney No. 1, the "bum."

"Great jumpin' Christopher!" whispered Delaney.

"How old are you?" asked the other.

"Twenty-eight."

"I'm twenty-nine; not much of a difference even there." The man opposite smiled in the faint, smoky candlelight. "'Let beeves and home-bred kine partake the sweets of Burn-mill meadow; the swan'——" He broke off. "But here, bo, I don't want to go over your head. You're already gasping."

Delaney smiled, too, and readily took

up the lilt from Wordsworth: "'The swans on still St. Mary's lake float double, swan and shadow.' That's what you're getting at, eh? You're the swan, and I'm the shadow; and we're floating double down this old right of way—if you can call it floating," he added, as the car lurched, the wheel flanges screeched frostily against the rails, and a momentary effort became necessary if one was to preserve his balance.

Delaney's double leaned forward. "You've seen better days," he remarked, "and that's a cinch. Down and out, are you? But even when we're down and out, we carry all the best of the past right around with us. That may be the penalty for going wrong—the unquenchable memory of what we were in contrast with the fact of what we have become.

"But let's not bother about that," the stranger went on. "These sandwiches are excellent and have just the right dash of mustard. Call me Hemphill," he finished, "Larry Hemphill. For the time being, Delaney, we're friends and brothers, substance and shadow."

"Sure thing, Hemphill," agreed Delaney; "but it's certainly remarkable, us two out of all the world meeting up like this—and Christmas only two days off."

Hemphill lowered his sandwich reflectively. "Christmas!" he muttered with a touch of bitterness. "And here am I"—he looked around and shivered—"going home for Christmas in a box car!"

"Oh, I reckon it's been done before," said Delaney lightly; "anyhow, Hemphill, you're in luck to have a home to go to. I'm 'by' on that proposition; no home, no folks, and Christmas just means the twenty-fifth of December to me. We can't double on that."

CHAPTER III.

SOMETHING UNEXPECTED.

THE car was dark; and Delaney, rolling about on his heap of straw, sought in vain for "nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep." For one thing, he couldn't get Hemphill out of his mind. Why was this man, who looked like a million dollars, cuddled up in a fur benny on another heap of straw with his head on a walrus bag for a pillow?

The easiest inference had to do with a big job and a get-away under cover. Ronanza crooks, swell operators with other people's money, might make a stumble and fall into a box car as a matter of necessity and not choice. Delaney turned that thought over in his mind and dismissed it.

No, he puzzled; it wouldn't do. Hemphill might be a nabob in crooked finance, but there was more to him than that. He was emotional, and that mention of Christmas had seemingly knocked him off his feet. He had closed up like a clam, finished one sandwich with an effort, and then, without so much as a "good night," had arranged himself for slumber. Something had come over him all at once. What was it?

The car slewed and rattled and jerked; an icy wind whistled around it, and the atmosphere inside was like that of the Polar regions; at long intervals, feet thumped the length of the toe path overhead; and at longer intervals there were stops, backings, switchings, and other maneuvers, with the empty box car at last continuing westward.

Delaney dozed, and occasionally he kicked his feet against the side of the car to start the blood circulating. He listened for snores from the other heap of straw, but heard none; and then, just as he had made up his mind that Hemphill was as hard put to it as he was to "knit up the raveled sleeve of care," there came an audible manifestation of it.

"Hang it, I can't sleep! I've got a hunch that this Christmas is going to dodge me, just like all the other Christmases for the last ten years. Delaney, you've got cold feet!"

"I ought to be wearin' galoshes, Hemphill," complained Delaney: "this box is an ice box, and my kicks is that cold there ain't a mite of feelin' in them."

"Sit on them, Delaney. Neither of us can sleep so we might as well talk."

Delaney floundered into a sitting posture, got his feet under him as well as he could, and leaned his weary back against the unsteady wall of the car. Hemphill was at last in a talkative mood, and perhaps he'd clear up this personal mystery.

"Go on, Larry," said Delaney. "Spill

whatever you've got on your chest. Old Reliable, that's me; and I'll listen like a brother."

"Do you know," proceeded Hemphill in a queer, throaty voice, "I haven't had a regular Christmas for ten years? I began missing 'em just before I turned nineteen. Left home then without saying good-by, or telling any one I was going. I thought it was a miserable home, and I couldn't stand the grind; but I've changed my mind about that, during the last ten years."

"I sneaked down to the freight yards in Terryville with an old grip containing all my worldly possessions; and I found an empty box car just about as cold as this one, and I rolled out of Terryville in it, headed east. That was ten years ago to-night. Delaney."

Delaney whistled. "So that's why you're doing it now, eh?" he queried. "Sort of sentimental notion, this going back to Terryville the same way you left it? I was wondering. With me, now, I left home some years ago with a first-class ticket and a berth in a regular Pullman and a good-sized stake in my jeans. I'm lucky now to ride in an empty and find enough straw to bed myself down. That's my little story; but you——"

"I did well in the East, but I had burned my bridges behind me," continued Hemphill. "I never wrote home, never made any effort to communicate with the old folks, and never thought of them much until Christmas time looked in the offing. But I could always see the big fire in the fireplace, the tree with its candles, the happy kids, the presents."

"As one lonely Christmas followed another, that picture struck me harder and harder," he went on. "It at last pried me loose from a sort of pride that was all darned foolishness, and now I'm on my back to Terryville for a surprise visit. I've got presents in this traveling bag for Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe and Matilda and Ben. Couldn't keep away any longer, Delaney; I just couldn't."

"It's a warmin' idea, Hemphill, mighty warmin'," enthused Delaney; "Uncle Joe will kill the fatted calf for the prodigal, and you're going to have the time of your life, you see. But this freight-car stunt of yours," he continued; "maybe it's

sentiment, as I said, but somehow that notion don't seem to ring the bell. You might wise up Old Reliable, bo."

"For a long time before Christmas," remarked Hemphill dreamily, "Aunt Hattie would be making the fruit cake and the mince pies." He paused as his remembrances became more vivid. "Nobody in this world can make fruit cake and mince pie like Aunt Hattie! The cake and pies you pick up in bake shops and restaurants are mighty poor apologies for the real things. Aunt Hattie's were the real things, believe me. I just had to go back and sample 'em once more.

"Of course, though, things at home aren't like they were," he continued. "There was a big change this last year. It was one of the queerest maneuvers of fate you can imagine that dropped that copy of the *Terryville Chronicle* in my hands. An old man who looked like Jed Hawkins dropped it in a Chicago street car. I happened to be on the same car, wondering if the man was really old Jed and wondering if he'd recognize me.

"Well, he didn't know me from Adam, and I never said a word; but when he got off the car he left that copy of the *Terryville Chronicle* in his seat. Then, of course, I knew to a certainty that he was Jed Hawkins of Terryville, and I grabbed the paper and have read it all, even the ads, a dozen times. It was my first news from home in ten years. I guess it was that paper that decided me, Delaney. I made up my mind to go back for Christmas; and, as I said, take the folks by surprise."

"Christmas acts that way on a lot of folks," philosophized Delaney. "The hunger for peace and good will seems to hit us harder about Christmas time than at any other time in the calendar. The home I left was wiped out—folks hit the long trail, house sold to strangers, nothing left. So it ain't possible for Christmas to get under my skin the same as it used to. It's right, though, for you to feel same as you do; and it kind of gives me a thrill—by proxy, if you know what I mean. Still and all, I can't quite connect with this box-car stunt of yours. If you knew me better, you'd——"

What happened then happened very

quickly and very unexpectedly. A box car, somewhere in the middle of the freight, decided to take a switch while the rest of the train was sliding along the main track. There was a crash and the rolling stock piled up.

The car in which Delaney and Hemphill were having their midnight talk tried to climb over the car ahead, found the difficulties too great, and toppled over on its side. It seemed to Delaney as though the empty box had fallen a thousand miles and smashed into kindling.

Then, for a minute or two, he went to sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

SPECTERS OF THE NIGHT.

DELANEY opened his eyes and imagined he had been having a bad dream; then, the next minute, he remembered and knew he was not the victim of a nightmare, but of a real experience.

The stars in their courses were plainly favoring him, for he could find no broken bones and no serious bruises. Pitch darkness surrounded him, and he was conscious of being crowded into a small space—twisted, doubled up, and very much cramped for room. He began to extend himself, pushing out his legs and arms with considerable vigor, delighted to find that all his limbs were in working order.

By this groping investigation he learned that he was occupying a snow-bank, excavated to fit his person and completely lined with straw. His igloo had a wooden roof, however, for he bumped his head against it when he extended himself upward. Bending his head and exerting the strength of his shoulders against the obstacle, he lifted it and slid it aside. Then he saw a daz-zlingly white landscape flooded with moonlight and felt the chill of a near-zero temperature.

He was surrounded by wreck and ruin, piled grotesquely in splintered heaps. The object he had pushed aside was one of the doors of the box car in which he had been riding so recently—the box car which now had been dissolved into its component parts.

Up ahead he could see part of the freight train and the engine, still on the

tracks; and toward the rear there was more of the rolling stock on the rails, with the lighted way car at the end. The middle cars of the string were the only ones that had suffered.

As Delaney stared about him, he heard a stifled groan. Thereupon he remembered Larry Hemphill.

"Jupiter!" Delaney muttered, scrambling in the direction from which the sound had come. "That other bird evidently didn't make out as well as I did. Hemphill!" he called. "Where are you, Hemphill?"

"Stop that yelling!" came a faint answer. "You—you'll have the freight crew down on us before you know it."

"Who cares?" asked Delaney, a little surprised, but lowering his voice nevertheless.

"I care—and that's enough," went on the faint, smothered voice. "Get this stuff off me—if you can."

It was a section of the car roof that had imprisoned Hemphill. Delaney tugged at it and managed to push it a little to one side. His companion was revealed, flattened out in the snowbank, his right hand gripping convulsively the leather handles of the walrus bag.

"Hurt any, Hemphill?" queried Delaney.

"My chest—and my leg," was the whispered reply; "I can't do much to help myself, Delaney. See if you're able to get me out of this and away from here. Hustle!"

"If you're badly hurt," suggested Delaney, "the place for you is the way car. I'll get you——"

"No!" protested Hemphill, almost fiercely. "I'll die first! Let's get back into the country; some farmhouse, a shed, or a barn—anything but the caboose. I don't want that train crew to get even a look at me!"

"There are a couple of lanterns coming this way now," said Delaney, "and another lantern is trailing down the track. Some man going back to set a warning, I suppose."

Hemphill reached up with his left hand and caught Delaney by the arm. "Get in here, out of sight!" he said sharply. "If there's any one coming, lie low and keep quiet till they've passed by."

This attitude of mind in such a crisis seemed pretty queer to Delaney, but he humored the other's whim and crawled in under the piece of car roof. The two trainmen came on, swishing through the snow and swinging their lanterns. When they reached the wreckage, they stopped.

"One of the middle loads jumped the track at the gravel siding," commented a husky voice. "and half a dozen of the boxes behind piled up on it." A biting imprecation on such luck of a winter's night was released with much heartiness. "We'll uncouple the engine," the voice went on, "and I'll ride into Morrisburg and report. The wrecking crew will have to get busy with this mess."

The feet swished onward through the snow.

"Now's our chance, Delaney," muttered Hemphill through his set teeth. "We can fade away from here and none of the trainmen will know a thing about us. See if you can get me on my feet—maybe I can hobble along if you'll hold me up."

Getting Hemphill upright was a trying job, mainly because the strength exerted caused him so much pain. He groaned again and again and would have slumped downward but for the support of Delaney's arms. In spite of the physical torture that racked him, Hemphill insisted on clinging to his walrus bag.

"I don't believe—you can travel, pard," panted Delaney. "That right leg of yours is out of commission entirely. Why in Sam Hill won't you go back to the way car? I can carry you that far."

"I've still got the gun," snapped Hemphill. "Another word about that way car and I'll convince you that I mean what I say. I'll have none of it. This is a settled country and there must be plenty of farmhouses. The nearest one can't be far; and I can crawl to it, if I have to."

"Correct," said Delaney; "I told you I was Old Reliable, and here's where I prove it. I'll tote you like we used to do Over There, because you're certainly a casualty if there ever was one. Steady, now. There's some heft to you, and I've got to take it slow and careful."

By easy stages, Delaney managed to carry his helpless burden a hundred yards through the snow, directly away from the

stalled freight, across a field, and to a wire fence. It was a torturing experience for Hemphill, but he gritted his teeth and bore it heroically.

"Look around," groaned Hemphill; "see if there's a house in sight, or any shelter of any kind."

Delaney leaned against a fence post and made a survey. "Here's a road," he reported, "and at the end of another hundred yards there's a bunch of buildings. Some farmer's place, I reckon."

"That'll do, Delaney; get me there."

Delaney pulled the wires apart and rolled Hemphill through the fence; then he got through himself, lifted his suffering friend, and struggled on along the road. Hemphill went suddenly limp, and the walrus bag dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"He's stepped out," thought Delaney; "stood all he could, and now he has fainted. I'm afraid he's worse off than I supposed. No way car, though," he added grimly; "farmhouse or nothing. Well, when he wakes up maybe I can have him comfortable. That bag can stay where it is; I'll come back after it later."

CHAPTER V.

AILED BY SKELETON KEYS.

GETTING the helpless, unconscious Hemphill to the farmhouse was a difficult proceeding, but Delaney stuck to the work with dogged determination. The hard physical effort kept him warm, and when he straightened erect after depositing his limp burden on the front veranda of the house, little rills of sweat were running into his eyes.

"That was the toughest job I've had in many a day," he muttered, stepping to the front door. "Now to get these people up and see if they'll take us in. I guess they won't turn us away; everybody is supposed to have a heart at this time of year."

The house was big and had a comfortable, homy look. The windows were coated with frost, but Delaney was able to peer through one of them and take note of something that heartened him wonderfully; there was a lamp on a table, lighted, and the flame turned low.

What time it was, Delaney did not

know. Certainly it was long after midnight, and a lighted lamp in a lonely farmhouse at that hour was most unusual. Delaney warmed with the thought that not all the household had gone to bed and that he might expect a quick answer to his bluff rap on the door.

In this, however, he was doomed to disappointment. He rapped again and again, and at last he pounded with his fists, but without result. No one came, and not a sound reached his ears from within the house.

Once more he peered through the window. This time his survey was more comprehensive, and he saw a base-burner stove glowing cheerfully and made note of the old-fashioned furniture placed primly about the room.

"It's a case of do something and do it in a hurry," he told himself. "I can't let Hemphill freeze to death out here on the porch."

He returned to his unconscious companion, groped a moment in the pockets of the fur-lined overcoat, and found the flash light. Fortunately the electric torch had not suffered in the accident, and Delaney snapped on the gleam and focused it on the keyhole of the door. There was no key in the lock.

Fishing around in his own pockets, Delaney presently brought out a ring of skeleton keys and proceeded to try them, one after another. The third key, after a little deft manipulation, did the trick. Delaney pushed back the door, gathered Hemphill up in his arms, and staggered into the warm room. There was an old haircloth sofa against one wall. Delaney laid Hemphill down on it, put a cushion under his head, and then went back and carefully closed the door.

"Well, we're here," he murmured, removing his old overcoat and cap, turning up the flame of the lamp, and spreading out his hands in the glow of the base-burner. "We're here, and I'd like it a lot better if the folks knew about it, but if you can't have things the way you want 'em, you'll have to take 'em the way you find 'em. Beats all there isn't somebody around."

Taking the lamp from the table Delaney made a reconnaissance through the house. Everything was orderly, almost

painfully neat, and he encountered paper bells and Christmas green in nearly every room—but not a living soul.

"They've gone somewhere; that's a cinch," he thought, returning to the sitting room, "and they're liable to be back any minute—that's why they left the lamp lighted. Well," he went on with a grin, "Hemp and I will be here to welcome them when they do show up."

He gave attention to his companion, removing the sealskin cap and the fur-lined overcoat; then, while he was considering stepping out for a handful of snow and rubbing Hemphill's face with it, his eyes rested on a long card, framed in sprays of evergreen and fastened to the wall. Lettered in old English, the card bore the Christmas sentiment: "God rest you, merrie gentlemen, let nothing you dismay."

"Thanks!" muttered Delaney. "Considering the circumstances, that helps."

Just at that moment, Hemphill drew a long, quivering breath and opened his eyes. "Where—where am I?" he asked.

"All snug, Larry, in that farmhouse where you wanted to be," Delaney answered. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrible, Delaney," Hemphill winced as from a sudden stab of pain. "That right leg must be fractured—it doesn't seem to belong to me."

Delaney made a hasty examination, and his heart sank. "You're right, old top," he agreed; "it's broken just above the knee. You've got to have a doctor, right off. There's a telephone in the next room, and I'll see if I can't get some one out here from the nearest town to give you proper attention."

"Just a minute, Delaney," interposed Hemphill. "Whose house is this? Where are the people who live here?"

"Don't know," Delaney answered. "Everything was ready for us when we got here, even the lamp lighted on the table there, but no one on hand to give us a glad greeting. The door was locked, and I had to tinker with it a little before I could get it open."

"Pretty natty of us, to come in like that and take possession."

"We couldn't stay outside and freeze to death, could we? I'd have some doubts regarding the ethics of our posi-

tion myself—if it wasn't so close to December twenty-fifth. That means a lot."

"Where is that bag?" asked Hemphill, starting up on his elbow and searching anxiously with his eyes.

"You dropped it back in the road," Delaney explained, "and you were about all I could handle."

"So you left it!" exclaimed Hemphill angrily. "Well, don't you do another thing till you go back and get it. I wouldn't take five thousand dollars for what's in that grip—all that stuff for Aunt Hattie, Uncle Joe, Matilda, and Ben. Say, you get that grip before somebody else happens along and picks it up. Snap around, Delaney."

It looked foolish, fussing about a walrus bag when a doctor was so badly needed; nevertheless, Delaney put on his hat and overcoat, took the flash light, and started to retrace his course toward the railroad track.

He found the bag; and on his way back to the farmhouse he paused at the rural delivery box in front of the fence. "J. Porter" was the name on the box, spelled out with the aid of the flash light.

"I can tell you now who lives here, Hemp," Delaney remarked, as he came into the house and put down the bag. "It's Mr. Porter—if we can believe what's on the mail box, out front."

"Then Mr. Porter is due for a surprise when he shows up," said Hemphill, breathing hard and evidently in considerable pain. "Put the bag up on the couch," he added; "I want to see if everything is all right inside of it. Then see if you can get a doctor—this pain is something fierce."

"I hope you ain't forgotten that I'm Old Reliable, Hemp," went on Delaney. "I wouldn't touch a thing in that grip."

"I'll know about that in a minute; you go and use the phone. I hate to do it, but there's no other way."

CHAPTER VI.

AN AUDACIOUS PLAN.

ADVENTURE and romance were choice words in the lexicon of Delaney the Dip, and for years he had made much of hazardous enterprises and had wooed extraordinary events with con-

siderable ingenuity. He was pleasantly thrilled, therefore, by the unusual circumstances of this December night. At almost every turn he was encountering the unexpected.

He used John Porter's telephone and, through the Morrisburg exchange, talked with three Morrisburg doctors. All of them had to get out of bed to answer the phone, and two of them who happened to be hard driven by professional duties found the eight-mile drive to John Porter's too much for their powers and referred him to other physicians.

The third man, Doctor Prender, finding that he had a fracture to deal with, promised to be along in an hour or an hour and a half—for ten dollars. Delaney told him to come; then he hung up and reported the result to Hemphill, dwelling a little uncertainly on the ten-dollar end of it.

"He could have had fifty if he had demanded it," was the comment of Hemphill from his couch of pain.

Delaney could imagine just how much Hemphill was suffering, and he no longer wondered that he had lost consciousness while being borne along the road to the farmhouse. Now Hemphill would have to wait an hour, or an hour and a half, before he could hope for any relief.

"I wish to thunder I could do something for you, Hemp," said Delaney.

"Well, you can," answered Hemphill through his shut teeth: "there is something you can do that will relieve my mind, and when you relieve the mind you're doing more for bodily comfort than some people can understand. The only question is, will you do what I want you to do?"

"You seem to forget that I'm Old Reliable," Delaney reminded him. "Try me."

"All right; I will. Get me a drink of water first, Delaney. I'm a little feverish, and my throat is parched."

Delaney found a full water pail in the kitchen and brought his friend a drink. After that he shook the grates of the base-burner, adjusted the drafts, and then pulled a chair close to the haircloth sofa and seated himself. "All right, Hemp," he remarked, "I'm ready to hear what you've got to say—that is, if you

feel able to say it. Maybe, though, you'd better wait until after the doctor comes and fixes you up so——"

"No!" cut in Hemphill sharply. "This is business I want out of the way before anybody gets here. If we go ahead, it's your affair and mine, strictly."

He lay back on the pillow for a moment and closed his eyes, his brow wrinkled with pain, his face drawn, his lips colorless. Then, with a fierce effort, he roused himself and went on. "I had a foreboding, Delaney, that I was to be denied this Christmas at Terryville; and it's hard for me to think of disappointing Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe. They're not expecting me, of course. I've already told you how I had planned to surprise them. If I don't go to Terryville, they'll never know that I was on my way; but, if I fail to get there, and give them what I have to give, they are certain to be disappointed."

"The only way to disappoint a person, Hemp, is to fail in living up to that person's expectations. Hanged if I can see where the disappointment comes in."

"Fall in with my plans," returned Hemphill, "and all that will no doubt be made clear to you. Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe haven't seen me, or heard from me, in ten years. I had my heart set on doing the right thing by them this Christmas. There's only one way out, and that's for you to go on to Terryville as Larry Hemphill, while I stay here or in a hospital in Morrisburg as Delaney. It—it means a lot to me; and a lot to Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe, too. Are you game for that?"

Delaney caught his breath. At last he struggled up from his chair and looked at his reflection in a mirror. After that, he studied the face of Hemphill.

"That's pretty startling, Hemp," he remarked. "Do you think I could pull it off?"

"I'm trusting you to try," was the answer; "and I'm trusting you a whole lot. Remember, the first time I ever saw you in my life was when you climbed into that box car, a few hours ago, in the Bloomfield yards. We know mighty little about each other, but if I put through the plan I've formed, it will have to be by proxy. Fate has invited the experi-

ment by sending along my double at just the time I can find the double useful.

"You haven't anything to lose," argued Hemphill; "no home, no folks, no Christmas in prospect. I'm lending you all these—for December twenty-fifth only. You'll drop in on Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe the morning of the twenty-fifth. You're on your way to the coast and just stopping over for the day. You'll give them my little gifts; you'll have the finest dinner you ever had in your life; you'll thrill with the spirit of a regular old-fashioned Christmas, and if you don't have an experience you'll long remember, I'll miss a guess.

"In the evening you will say good-by," he continued, "promise to write, promise to come again when you can stay longer, and then you'll catch the first train out of Terryville for Morrisburg. I'll still be laid up—in a Morrisburg hospital, probably. You can find out where I am by telephoning out here. Then, when we meet the next time, we'll arrange somehow to resume our identities. Do this, be square with me, and when you come back to Morrisburg and report, I'll give you five hundred dollars. As I say, you have everything to gain and mighty little to lose, as I see it. What's the word?"

Delaney got out of his chair again and walked around the table. Never before, in his wildest dreams, had adventure ever slapped him on the shoulder and offered him a chance like this. He was a reckless person, but not too reckless to consider the difficulties.

"Hemp," he said at last, "as your shadow, trailing along after a lapse of ten years, I'd probably pass for you so far as appearance goes with Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe; but if they get to talking about the past, I'm sure to come a cropper and be disgraced as a counterfeit."

"I'll tell you enough to cover some of that," returned Hemphill; "and if you have any wit and resourcefulness, you ought to be able to acquit yourself with credit. Don't prolong this conversation, Delaney," added the sufferer, convulsed with sudden pain. "It's hard for me. Say yes or no."

"Yes," said Delaney.

A grateful smile came upon the haggard face on the cushion. "Now I know

you are really my friend," breathed Hemphill. "There's a shaving kit in my bag. Get busy with it. After that's done, we'll have to exchange clothes and other personal property—no easy task, but one that is imperatively necessary. You'll have to look the part, and so will I."

Delaney was a bit dazed, but already he was beginning to have a great admiration for a man who, in spite of the tortures of a broken leg, could plan so audaciously—and show so much confidence in a stranger who had little to recommend him. Having committed himself to the adventure, however, Delaney went briskly about his preparations for stepping into the shoes of Larry Hemphill.

CHAPTER VII.

EXPLANATIONS DESIRED.

A SHAVE, followed by a good scrubbing at the kitchen sink, worked a startling change in Delaney the Dip, but the really amazing transformation came with the exchange of clothes. Hemphill, racked with pain though he was, insisted on each move with feverish impatience, planned every detail, and supervised its execution. There were moments when his strength fluttered and almost failed, but never an instant when his iron will was not driving both himself and Delaney.

The wreck had dealt very considerably with what Delaney called his companion's "glad rags." The man inside the garments had suffered severely, but the garments themselves had suffered hardly at all. Delaney looked well in dark gray, and his friend surveyed him with approval.

"You'll have a chance to get your hair trimmed before you call on Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe," Hemphill said, "and that will be the final touch. The two hundred dollars in the wallet will finance your undertaking and——"

"I'm to use the money?"

"Certainly; that's for your expenses, and the five hundred will be extra. You have my seal ring, my watch and chain, my gold cigarette case, and my pearl scarfpin—and these you are to return with the rest of the outfit when you're

through at Terryville. The automatic pistol and the flash light you can put in the bag."

"But I don't want them, Hemphill!" protested Delaney. "Prodigals don't load up with such things when they go home for Christmas."

"You'll have to take them, for I can't run the risk of having them found on me. I'm Dick Delaney. Do I look the part?"

"With a week's stubble on your face, you would. With all the money you had, Hemp, I am unable to understand why you were beating the railroad company out of a first-class fare by riding in a box car. If you——"

"There's a writing desk over in a corner there," cut in Hemphill. "Get me a plain envelope."

Delaney found the envelope. Hemphill removed two closely written sheets from a small, loose-leaf memorandum book, put them in the envelope, and sealed the flap.

"Take this, Delaney," he instructed, "and keep it carefully. If you should encounter difficulties that are too much for you, then as a last resort open it and read what's inside. But don't break the seal unless you have to; bring the envelope back to me just as it is—if you possibly can do so. Now pull up a chair beside me, and I'll impart a little general information that will be useful to you in Terryville."

An old clock on the sitting-room clock shelf had struck two; and it was striking the half hour while Hemphill talked and Delaney listened. Delaney learned just where Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe lived in Terryville; and he was informed that their last name was Jennifer, and that he, posing as Hemphill, was Larry Colburn. He was told a number of other things, equally curious and interesting, and was all primed to ask for light on other items when his conversation with Hemphill was brought to a sudden close.

The outside door opened abruptly, and a large man in a cloth cap, heavy overcoat, and felt boots stepped into the room from the veranda. At sight of the man on the sofa and the man in the chair, the newcomer dropped two suit cases he was carrying and fell back in astonishment. Two women were follow-

ing closely, and the elder of the two stifled a scream.

"What—what're you doing in here?" demanded the man who had dropped the grips.

"A thousand, thousand pardons!" said Delaney, getting to his feet. "Have I the honor of addressing Mr. John Porter?"

"My name," said the other tartly, "and this is my house. How'd you two get in here? We saw the light and found the door opened, but we thought our hired man, Hank Brackett, had got back from his sick brother's and was waiting up for us. Now——" He paused and looked around at the elder of the two women, who was clinging to the younger one and seemed almost ready to faint.

"Steady, ma!" Porter went on encouragingly. "This is pretty queer, but I guess it can be explained. Help her to a chair, Mollie. Now then," he continued sharply to Delaney, closing the door, throwing off his cap and fur gloves, and unbuttoning his overcoat, "just tell us how it comes that you broke in here and took possession."

"I am very sorry to cause you or the ladies any annoyance," said Delaney, "but there is no occasion for fear of any sort. A freight train was wrecked a little way from here, and this poor fellow," he turned to indicate Hemphill, "was hurt. I happened along, picked him up, and brought him here. The door was locked, but I managed to open it. You understand, Mr. Porter, that it was a case of dire necessity or we should never have intruded in such a high-handed manner.

"Christmas is only two days away," proceeded Delaney, smiling gently, "and I couldn't allow even a tramp to suffer undue hardships—especially at such a season of good will. I have taken the liberty of using your telephone to call a doctor from Morrisburg, and he ought to be here at any minute. No doubt I can get him to take this unfortunate tramp to some hospital in town."

The appearance of Delaney and his polished demeanor and cultured language were most reassuring. The elder of the two women revived appreciably, and both showed a quick and sympathetic interest. The man himself looked relieved.

"That's right about the freight—it's still just west of the crossing," Porter remarked. "Ma and I drove to Morrisburg to meet our girl, Mollie, who's coming home for Christmas. The westbound train was due at midnight, but it was late. As I said, when we saw the light turned up full and some one in this room, we thought Hank Brackett must have got back from his brother's."

"I'll—I'll git out jest as soon as I can, mister," put in Hemphill weakly. "I don't want to make no trouble fer you."

"Bless your heart," said Mrs. Porter, moving toward the old sofa like an angel of mercy, "you're not making us a particle of trouble. I guess, at such a season as this, the Porters don't need any strangers to teach them charity." She removed a mitten and brushed a soft hand across Hemphill's feverish brow. "What seems to be the matter?" she asked.

"His right leg is broken, Mrs. Porter," explained Delaney.

"Oh, the poor man!" cried Mrs. Porter. "Mollie, you go and fix the spare room. Pa, you better take care of the team—mustn't leave the horses out long in such a frosty night. What a blessing it is that we're able to be of help to some one in distress! We're glad this house was right here, and that you were able to make use of it."

"That's mighty fine, ma'am," whispered Hemphill, choking back a groan; "I had a hunch that this house belonged to the right kind o' people. My name's Delaney," he added, "and his"—here he pointed to Delaney—"is Hemphill, he says. I cert'nly was in luck to fall into his hands and yourn. I won't be no more bother'n I can help."

"Don't you worry about a thing," said Ma Porter cheerily. "Pa, you hurry along and see to the horses—Mollie and I can take care of all that's to be done here in the house."

CHAPTER VIII.

FOUND BY ACCIDENT.

THE mystic spell of approaching Christmas had fallen upon Christendom like a benediction. Here and there, of course, were vagrant hearts that did not respond to the gentle, uplifting influence

of the season—but they were not in households like those of John Porter. Ma and pa and Mollie seemed to welcome, as a blessing in disguise, this unexpected opportunity for proving their sympathy and kindness.

They accepted the two strangers on their own showing, and no embarrassing questions were asked. There was proof that several box cars of the local freight had been wrecked; and that a tramp had been riding in one of the wrecked cars, and had suffered a broken leg, was plausible enough. Not nearly so plausible was the presence, and the charitable activities, of the well-spoken, aristocratic-looking "Man in Gray."

It was not believable that the Man in Gray had also been riding on the freight; yet in some manner—and just how must have been a great mystery to the Porters—he had dropped into the winter's night like one of the good jinni mentioned in fairy tales. Ma and pa and Mollie accepted the situation as they found it, suppressed their curiosity, and made the injured man as comfortable as possible. It was as though their hospitality had been challenged and the spirit of Christmas had laid a charge upon them.

Delaney and Pa Porter carried Hemphill into a guest room, disrobed him, put him into a spare cotton-flannel nightgown belonging to Pa Porter, and gently deposited him on a feather bed as white and immaculate as the driven snow. The stovepipe from the base-burner passed through the room; and the pipe was equipped with a drum that made the chamber as warm as the sitting room below.

Doctor Prender arrived in due course in a one-horse cutter with jingling bells. He listened grimly to the circumstances surrounding the emergency call while thawing himself out, but what he really thought of the matter did not appear. There followed an hour's trying work with Hemphill, in which Delaney assisted; and when it was all over, and the doctor had put on his coat, Delaney took a ten-dollar bill out of the fat wallet and tucked it in the extended hand.

"I could send out the ambulance and take him to the hospital in Morrisburg,"

commented the doctor, "and ordinarily an X-ray of the fracture wouldn't be a bad thing, although it's expensive."

Delaney made a generous gesture. "I am backing the poor fellow, doctor," he said, "and whatever he needs he shall have."

"Mrs. Porter won't hear to his being moved. She says he's to stay right here, and that he'll receive every care. I'll say he's lucky to fall into such hands! It's just a simple fracture, and I have reduced it properly, so we can cut out the X-ray. I'll look after him at five dollars a visit; and I should say that five or six visits will be the extent of that."

Delaney extracted three more tens from the wallet and pushed them into the receptive hand.

Doctor Prender smiled genially. "You are certainly a Mr. Bountiful," he remarked.

"At this time of year," said Delaney with an answering smile, "we must not forget the simple humanities. Perhaps you will let me ride with you back to town, doctor?"

"Glad of your company," was the answer.

Hemphill was in a doze. The doctor, without arousing him, felt of his pulse, and nodded cheerfully.

"He'll do," he whispered. "I'll drop in to-morrow and have another look at him."

Out in the sitting room Delaney raided the wallet a third time and dropped twenty dollars by the lamp on the table. Ma Porter protested with spirit.

"Oh, but you must allow me to do what I can for the poor chap, Mrs. Porter!" Delaney insisted. "You are so good to him here that what little I can do seems so very paltry. Before long I shall hope to communicate with you further."

He got into the fur-lined overcoat, put on the sealskin cap, turned the fur collar up about his ears, pulled on his gloves, and picked up the walrus bag. Doctor Prender, all ready, grabbed his medicine case. With good-bys all around, and a further expression of his gratitude, Delaney followed the doctor out into the snowy night. At the hitching post in front, a warm blanket was peeled from

the impatient horse, the animal was untied, and the two travelers snuggled themselves away under a fur robe in the cutter.

"Giddap, Prince!" called the doctor, and they were off for town.

It was after four o'clock, and Ma and Pa Porter had experienced a particularly wearying night; Mollie, too, perhaps, but she was young and had not found the experience so wearing.

"I can't understand this, ma," Mollie was saying, back in the sitting room. "Did you ever see a tramp that looked like this one? His clothes are in character, but his face is too fine, too—too cultured for the part. And how much Mr. Delaney resembles Mr. Hemphill! Didn't you notice? You might almost think they were twin brothers!"

"Bosh!" muttered Pa Porter, yawning prodigiously. "We've taken on a load, all right—giving up the best we've got to a tramp with a broken leg."

"Pa!" cried his wife, protesting. "If we didn't measure up to our responsibilities, it would have been charged against us. This is a blessed chance to show our Christian worth. A stranger, pa, and we took him in!"

"That's all right, ma, if somehow we're not taken in ourselves. What's that, Mollie?"

The daughter had reached down beside the old sofa and picked up a folded scrap of paper. "It's a—a newspaper clipping," the girl said. "Some one must have dropped it."

"No matter; you can keep it, Mollie, and give it up if it's called for. It's bedtime; and, by Jerry, I'm almost asleep on my feet."

Mollie, back in her old room, did some hard thinking. That Man in Gray, now: How had he happened to be so handily by when the injured tramp needed him? Eight miles from Morrisburg, and no conveyance of any kind suggested by circumstances or even hinted at! The supposed tramp had arrived by freight train, but this man who had given first aid how had he arrived? And the two, rescuer and rescued, bore such a striking physical resemblance to each other. Oh, it was strange, exceedingly strange!

Before turning out her light, Mollie,

late as it was, read the carefully trimmed newspaper clipping. Her eyes widened as she read, and something akin to romance gleamed in their hazel depths. "I wonder," she breathed, "I wonder——"

What had aroused her wonder was not made manifest. There might be mysteries surrounding the tramp in the spare room, but it was not the part of Christian folk to question a stranger's character in time of need. She looked at the holly wreath hanging in her frosty chamber window, and something about it disarmed suspicion and quieted wonder. She smiled, lowered the wick in the lamp, blew down the chimney, lay back on her pillow, and went comfortably to sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

REAL OR COUNTERFEIT?

AT ten o'clock on the morning of the twenty-fourth of December, Amos Prouty, the sheriff, and Nick Langley, his deputy, drove up to Porter's farmhouse and into Porter's yard. The official two-seated sleigh drawn by a spanking team of bays brought the representatives of the law. Prouty gave the reins to Langley, piled out, and passed the time of day with John Porter.

"Doc Prender says you took in a couple here last night, John," remarked the sheriff. "One of 'em caught an early westbound train from Morrisburg before Prender reported, but I understand that t'other un was left here with a broken leg. Nick and I drove out to give that guy the once-over."

Porter's jaw dropped. "You don't think," he began, "you don't suspect——"

"Trouble with the law is, whenever anything has been pulled off a sheriff has got to suspect everybody hopin' maybe he'll land on the guilty party. Show me this tramp, John."

"He's asleep, Amos, and I hate to disturb him."

"Lemme look at him, then; lemme look at his clothes. If I think he's all right, we won't wake him up, but there's somethin' queer about the way he got to your place. I got to probe around."

Prouty was ushered into the house, up the stairs to the spare bedroom, and stood

for a full minute looking down on the sleeping Hemphill. The sheriff withdrew reflectively. "Bring out his clothes," he whispered to Porter, in the hall.

There was nothing in the old threadbare clothes to identify the injured man or to bolster up any suspicions which the sheriff may have had.

"Clothes says tramp, but that face of his somehow don't jibe with 'em," mused the sheriff. "Not a thing in the pockets but an old pipe, half a sack of oh-be-joyful, half a dozen loose matches, and a loose-leaf memorandum book without any writin' in it. Travelin' light, he was. Not a cent, not a copper cent. What name did he give, John?"

"Delaney," answered the farmer: "and the man who went away with the doctor was called Hemphill."

"Names is easy come by. Wasn't there anything else?"

"Well, Mollie found a newspaper clipping on the sittin'-room floor. It was dropped by some one, but none of my folks know anything about it."

"Let's see it."

Prouty sat down in the sitting room and gave his attention to the clipping.

"Testing the Christmas Spirit," the clipping was headed. "Queer Wager Between Two Prominent Members of the Athelstan Club." Then followed the article:

"The author who is widely known by his pen name of 'Norton Bayne,' had one of his pet theories vigorously challenged by another prominent man known as the 'Colonel.' The clash of opinions occurred last week in the card room of the exclusive Athelstan Club on the North Side.

"The Christmas spirit," asserted Bayne, 'is a real, honest-to-goodness sentiment.'

"'Tush!' jeered the Colonel. 'Christmas is a convention—a beautiful convention, I grant you, Bayne, but it has become merely an excuse for raiding the pocketbook and helping the merchants over what would otherwise be an extremely dull season. The spirit of Christmas originally was fine, but it has degenerated into giving away the things you want yourself and getting a few fool things you don't want and can't use. I guess I know, because I've gone through

the mill once a year regularly ever since I can remember.

"Norton Bayne pushed out his fighting jaw. 'Look here, Colonel,' he protested. 'It can't be possible that you think there is no such thing as good will centering around December twenty-fifth. You are bluffing with that word, "convention." The spirit of Christmas is not a mercenary thing, but is a warm and heartening and lovable thing. It's been with us always, and it will always be with us.'

"'Huh!' grunted the Colonel. 'When you're my age, you'll know better. Get married and raise a family, Bayne, and then you'll find out.'

"'I'll bet,' declared the enthusiastic Bayne, 'that any stranger, dropping into an alien community around about Christmas time, could prove that your contention is as fantastic as it is false. The stranger would find himself among friends—solely because of the influence of the Christmas spirit.'

"'How much will you bet?' asked the Colonel, who is locally famous because of his sporting blood.

"'Five hundred dollars,' said Bayne; 'the stakes to be turned over to our Christmas committee and spent for charity before the wager is decided. The committee needs the money right now, and the question as to which of us wins or loses the best can be decided any old time.'

"'That suits me,' returned the Colonel, 'but let's get the thing straight. What are you going to prove, Bayne, and how are you going to prove it?'

"'I shall prove,' went on the writer, 'that when the average person hails you with "Merry Christmas," he means it—that it comes from his heart, and that he is not parroting a traditional commonplace without rhyme or reason. I shall prove, Colonel, that Christmas cheer and kindness is genuine with ninety-nine per cent of the people and that you won't find one Old Scrooge among fifty strangers, chosen at random.'

"'And you'll prove it—how?'

"'Why, by adventuring among people I do not know in a part of the country with which I am not familiar. I shall act suspiciously—and be given the benefit of the doubt; I shall trust crooks—con-

men, flimflammers, porch climbers, and yeggs—and not have one of them betray my confidence; and I shall be invited to a Christmas dinner by people who do not know me, and I shall eat turkey and plum pudding en famille and as the honored guest of strangers. Christmas sentiment, which you claim has become so mercenary, will do the trick.'

"The Colonel sat back in his chair and roared in derisive mirth. 'Done!' he said, reaching for his check book and fountain pen. 'But,' he added, pausing, 'if you're going to circulate among crooks in the effort to win this wager, I want you to tote a gun and not take any risky chances. Personally, I'm glad to let the Christmas committee spend the money before I win it.'

"Several days have passed since this conversation took place in the cardroom of the Athelstan Club, and Norton Bayne has disappeared mysteriously from the haunts that know him best. James Kennedy, his secretary, hasn't an idea what has become of him. That he is championing the Christmas spirit and adventuring far to prove it is the real thing and no counterfeit, there is not the least doubt in Kennedy's mind.

"'Mr. Bayne,' to quote Kennedy, 'has done things like this before. If he gets stalled while writing a story, as the best of 'em will, now and then, he impersonates his own hero, jumps into the plot, and seeks adventures by flood and field. Once he returned from an excursion of that kind with a black eye and his clothes in tatters; and there was another time when he called me in a hurry to a hospital and dictated a most remarkable climax while he was flat on his back in the emergency ward. It had been a hard struggle to see whether he'd get the climax or the climax would get him. However, I'm not expecting any close calls or tight squeaks to come out of this Christmas enterprise. His faith in the Christmas spirit is sublime; and, personally, I fully subscribe to his sentiments and am not doing any worrying.'

"All of which is as it may be; and it is just possible that some one who reads this will have a chance to invite a perfect stranger to share the family dinner on Christmas Day—and, by doing so, will

help Norton Bayne prove a cause and win a wager. So watch your step."

"Well, by thunder!" remarked Amos Prouty, the sheriff, rubbing his chin. "That feller in your spare room ain't so slick as he thinks he is, John." He laughed softly. "This here newspaper story is a regular give-away, ain't it? I wonder if you're thinkin' the same as I am?" he asked, probing Porter with his eyes.

"Of course I am, Amos," was the answer, "but my girl Mollie thought of it first. It's all perfectly plain to me."

"Same here." The sheriff got up, laid the newspaper clipping on the table, and began buttoning his overcoat. "The feller I want, I guess, is the one that rode to town with Doc Prender and caught the westbound early this mornin'. He's a mystery, all right. Where'd he come from, and how'd he get here? Do you know?"

John Porter shook his head. "He didn't say a word. Amos, and we didn't ask him."

"Prender asked him, but he closed up like a clam; and that's why Prender began to get suspicious and at last took the matter up with me."

"What has he done?"

"Plenty, but I can't talk about it. I hope that man upstairs will feel well enough to enjoy Ma Porter's Christmas dinner to-morrow."

"That's what we're all hoping, Amos."

The sheriff left the house, settled himself in the official sleigh, took the reins from his deputy, and drove off.

"I'd certainly hate to be an officer of the law," thought John Porter, "and have to run down a lawbreaker the day before Christmas. Amos is a friendly-turn man, too, and would a lot rather wish a suspect a Merry Christmas than put a pair of handcuffs on him. Oh, well, it's a surprisin' old world!"

CHAPTER X.

SHADOW OF THE PAST.

THERE had been a light fall of snow in Terryville on the night of December twenty-fourth, and that, added to the snow already on the ground, made the white blanket pretty thick. All over the

Jennifer neighborhood, early snow shovels could be heard as they scraped the front porches and walks.

The snow clouds had passed by morning, however, and the sun was dazzlingly bright. While his wife and daughter were getting breakfast ready, Joe Jennifer joined the shovel brigade.

Jennifer was sixty years old, but he looked every day of seventy. He had aged ten years in the past month, and the fingers of recent calamity had pinched and wrinkled his face. His form had been straight and vigorous, but now it was weakly bowed. Handling the snow shovel was an effort, and his thin blood was chilling in a way that surprised him.

"Merry Christmas, Joe!" called the next-door neighbor across the picket fence.

Jennifer straightened and waved a mit-tened hand. "Same to you, Than!" he piped, and tried to put some heart into the words, but the failure was pathetic.

The neighbor stared a minute, shook his head forebodingly, and went on with his shoveling.

Cheery greetings reached Jennifer from the neighbor on the other side and from neighbors across the street. He answered them all, struggling hard to show his bright side and not to allow his own dismal feelings to wet-blanket the neighborhood cheer. But what is a man to do when fate has tagged him with disaster and dazed him with a blow between the eyes?

The door of the Jennifer house opened, and Matilda, the daughter, showed herself in the opening.

"Come on in, dad!" she called. "You've done enough. Breakfast is on the table."

Jennifer trudged back the length of the front walk, stood the snow shovel against the house wall by the front door, removed his yarn cap and mittens and muffler, and joined Aunt Hattie and Matilda in the dining room. There were three packages at Jennifer's plate, three at Aunt Hattie's, and three at Matilda's.

"Now, Hattie," expostulated Jennifer, "we all agreed there wasn't to be any presents this Christmas and——"

Aunt Hattie fluttered over to him and stemmed the protest with a kiss and a

reassuring hand pat on his shoulder. "Land sakes!" she exclaimed. "Let Christmas go by without remembering you the same as I have for going on forty years? It just couldn't be done, Joe Jennifer! It was your own proposition, about neither giving nor taking this Christmas, and look how you lived up to it! You're an old fraud, that's what. I've got a present from you, and so has Tilda; and we both know what you sent to Ben and his family. We're not in the poorhouse yet, Joe, so stop pulling a long face. There's something besides money in this world, I guess."

"I suppose you're right, Hattie," returned Jennifer, dropping into his chair, "but a nest egg is mighty important after a man has turned sixty—and I've gone and smashed ours."

"Forget it, dad!" said Matilda. "Forget it for to-day, anyhow. I should think you might."

One of Jennifer's packages contained a fine briar pipe and a pound of his favorite smoking tobacco. These were from his married son. Aunt Hattie's gift was a pair of gold cuff links; and Matilda's was a seal-leather pocketbook.

Jennifer laughed. "What'll I put in the pocketbook, Tilda?" he asked humorously. "And if I ever have a shirt fit for those cuff links, Hattie, it'll be when somebody gives me a magic lamp that all I've got to do is to rub and get what I want. It's mighty nice of you two to remember me this way, considering our finances; and I'll bet that pipe and tobacco came hard for Ben, hard pushed as he is."

"Now you hush about hard times, Joe," said Aunt Hattie; "you'll have plenty of fine shirts to go with those cuff links. If I hadn't felt sure of it, I wouldn't have bought 'em for you. Earned the money myself, too, by doing some sewing for Mrs. Paisley."

"And there'll be plenty of money to go in the wallet, dad," declared Matilda. "I'm as sure of that as I am that I'm sitting here, this minute. You had to go and get me a vanity case, didn't you?" she asked fondly, her father's gift in her hands. "I'd scold you for being extravagant if this case wasn't exactly what I wanted. And that set of tortoise-shell

combs for mom—I'll say that my dad has got taste, if anybody wants to know. Let's eat and enjoy ourselves, folks. Happiness is a state of mind, you know, and we can use our imagination and enjoy ourselves even if we have been hard hit financially."

There was a vacant chair at the Jennifers' table; and for ten years, at every meal, that vacant chair had been in the same old place.

Jennifer fixed his moody eyes on the empty chair. "We might as well begin looking things square in the face, Hattie," he said. "I asked you, as a favor, to begin this Christmas without going to all the bother to fix a place at table that's never used and never will be used."

"One of these days it will be used, Joe," returned Aunt Hattie quietly. "I couldn't begin forgetting Larry—on Christmas Day, of all days."

"Now don't get moody," put in Matilda; "forget the hard knocks, the has-beens and the might-have-beens. Dad's got his pipe and a month's supply of prime smoking tobacco, mom's got her tortoise-shell combs, and I've got my vanity case. And we've got something else," she added joyously; "dad just mentioned it—the magic lamp."

"Where, for land's sake?" asked Jennifer.

Matilda stood up and reached across the table to put her hands on a brass lamp with a gay shade, swinging from the ceiling. "Larry gave that lamp to mom the last Christmas he was here," went on Matilda, "and I'll bet it's full of magic." She picked up her napkin. "I'm going to rub it," she said, "and I want each of you to think and think hard about what you want most. Get the idea?"

"Do be sensible, Tilda," begged Aunt Hattie.

"Fiddlesticks!" grunted Uncle Joe.

"Ready!" persisted Matilda, steadying the lamp with her left hand and rubbing it hard with her right. "Make your wish, folks. The good jinni of the Jennifers is waiting to—"

Right at that moment the doorbell rang, and there followed a tense, dramatic silence. The bell rang again. Startled, Jennifer looked at his wife and met her

own wild eyes. Matilda dropped the napkin and hurried to the front door.

"Callers, that's all," remarked Jennifer; "don't get excited, Hattie. We——"

There came a wild clamor from the front hall, dominated by the shrill, wondering voice of Matilda: "Oh, Larry! Larry!"

Jennifer was astounded. Aunt Hattie got out of her chair and made her way unsteadily toward the front of the house.

"Well," muttered Jennifer, "if that don't beat all!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRODIGAL'S UNDERSTUDY.

PLAYING the rôle of Hemphill, Delaney reached Terryville on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth. He rode in an old motor bus to the Morton House, registered as "L. Hemphill, Chicago," sent the walrus bag up to his room, and paid a visit to the hotel barber shop. Inasmuch as Terryville knew Hemphill as Larry Colburn, Delaney's use of the assumed name guarded the surprise planned for the Jennifers on the following day.

Ten years make a lot of difference in every man. Delaney, however, encountered two or three strangers who probed him with looks that suggested half recognition; but Christmas Eve was at hand, and the two or three who may have thought they recognized Colburn had other and more personal matters to claim their attention.

The spirit of Christmas is the same everywhere and manifests itself with equal fervor in the small town as in the metropolis. There were eleventh-hour shoppers in Main Street, Terryville, just as there were in Fifth Avenue, New York; there were the same good-natured crowds; the same buying in the five-and-ten-cent stores by the poor as in the most expensive shops by the rich; the same indecision and knitting of brows over what to buy and give; and the same desire to please others and make merry that distinguishes all Christendom on its Big Day.

Delaney responded to the prevailing happiness as he aimlessly wandered here and there. His borrowed plumes un-

doubtedly inspired a vast amount of respect in all the strangers with whom he came in contact, but something told him that he would still have received the kindly consideration of the season had he been clad in the worn and threadbare garments left with Hemphill.

There was only one discordant note in Delaney's heart-warming experiences. This small rift in the general happiness manifested itself in the evening, while he was lounging in an armchair in the lobby of the hotel. Two men, sitting close to him, were talking, and their voices reached his ear.

"It's a hard Christmas for poor old Joe Jennifer, Bill," said one. "He and I have been sort of on the outs for a long time, and when I ran on to him to-day in Cragin's jewelry store he looked so down in the mouth that I had to speak to him—for the first time in two years. The poor old duffer was buying some Christmas trinkets and digging up silver and pennies to pay for them."

"Jennifer is playing in tough luck, Abe," remarked the other man. "I told him he'd better let that smooth schemer alone, but he thought the fellow was straight goods and got trimmed. Five thousand dollars, the savings of a lifetime and every cent Joe had, gone to pot. They say this grafter came to Joe with a letter of introduction from Larry Colburn, Joe's nephew."

"You remember Colburn, I guess, Abe," he went on. "Colburn left Terryville years ago, about as wild a young blade as they make 'em. If he'd been Jennifer's own son, instead of his nephew, Uncle Joe and Aunt Hattie couldn't have thought more of him. Colburn's a scallawag and helped beat his own uncle out of all the money the uncle had. No wonder this Christmas is a hard one for the Jennifers."

Delaney was troubled. Hemphill hadn't told him anything about that. Out in front of the hotel, a quartette was singing Christmas carols, and into the lobby came a girl in a poke bonnet with a tambourine. Delaney got 'out of his chair, tossed a five-dollar bill into the tambourine, and went to his room.

"So I'm that sort of a guy, am I?" he muttered dejectedly. "For half a cent

I'd cut this whole business and never show my face at Jennifer's."

He reached into the walrus bag for the copy of the old Terryville *Chronicle* he had found there and had read on the train. It was the paper Hemphill had picked up in the city street car and contained a fairly clear account of Joe Jennifer's undoing—but not a word about the letter of introduction from Colburn.

Jennifer had been trapped by an oil swindle. He had been promised big returns for his five thousand dollars, and no doubt Colburn's letter had decided him to take a chance. Now Jennifer knew, and everybody knew, that he had been bunkoed.

And here was Delaney, posing as that miserable, misguided nephew!

"He ought to have broken his neck instead of his leg," grunted Delaney; "but I'll go through with this. There ought to be thrills and a Christmas dinner in the adventure; and the more I hear about the Jennifers, the more I want to meet them. But you're a bad egg, Hemphill, and you kept it to yourself."

So it chanced that Delaney's Christmas Eve was a rather gloomy one. He dreamed that night about Aunt Hattie's mince pies and fruit cake; and he awoke in the morning to wonder if, considering the Jennifer's reduced circumstances, there would really be any mince pie and fruit cake at the Jennifers' Christmas dinner.

He arose early, determined to put in a full day at the Jennifers' and to do his little best to make their Christmas a happy one, if it was humanly possible. He had plenty of Hemphill's two hundred dollars left, and if necessary he would finance the festivities with every cent of it. The only obstacle to success was the possibility that he might not pass muster as Larry Colburn. Delaney winced as he considered that.

"If they discover that I'm an impostor," he thought, as he got into the fur-lined overcoat and picked up the seal-skin cap and the walrus bag, "that would be as hard a run of luck as if they really took me for Colburn and slammed the door in my face. Any way you look at it, I'm in line for all kinds of excitement. Well, we'll see."

He paid his bill; and the smiling hotel clerk gave him a "Merry Christmas" with his change. It was only two blocks to one hundred and ten Sycamore Street and the white frame house with the hard maples in the yard—as Hemphill had carefully described the old home. So Delaney walked.

People he did not know, people he had never seen before and would never see again, tendered him happy greetings as he proceeded on his way. Under such an attack of good cheer, his troubled forebodings were put to rout, and his mood of high adventure became more pleasantly reckless and alluring.

He halted at the Jennifers' gate and swept his eyes over the surroundings. The place met the Hemphill specifications, and the number, "110," was nailed in black letters to one of the porch posts. He braced himself, strode the length of the front walk, mounted the steps, and pressed the button of the doorbell. There followed a wait, and then a dark-haired, very prepossessing young woman opened the door, stared at him, and gave vent to a wild cry of "Oh, Larry, Larry!"

What happened next, Delaney had not foreseen and was not prepared for. The young woman threw her arms about his neck, kissed him rapturously, and clung to him in a perfect abandonment of happiness.

"You wretch!" Delaney said to himself in self-accusation; but aloud and joyfully he cried: "Merry Christmas, Matilda! How is this for a surprise?"

"I—I just rubbed the lamp, Larry, and wished you'd come; and—and here you are! Dad! Mom!" shrieked Matilda. "Hurry! Oh, do look who's here!"

What! Slam the door in the face of a scapegrace nephew? Delaney didn't know the Jennifers; he was only just beginning to get acquainted with them.

CHAPTER XII.

SURPRISE PACKAGES.

FOR the next fifteen minutes Delaney found himself the center of a flow of emotions that twisted his heartstrings. His identity was not questioned; he was taken on his own showing, and Aunt Hat-

tie. Uncle Joe, and Cousin Matilda hovered about him with a joy that revealed itself in happy smiles, hushed voices, and moist eyes.

Delaney, the pretender, hated himself for the part he was playing; and he hated Hemphill for being the man he ought not to have been. Hemphill, Delaney theorized, had been coming home after an absence and a silence of ten years to play an assumed rôle himself. If Delaney had it right, Hemphill had planned for this Christmas to fool his uncle, his aunt, and his cousins with the idea that he was honest and prosperous; and what plausible excuse he had for the ten silent years, Heaven alone knew—certainly Delaney didn't.

The pretender considered these things, there in the front parlor of the Jennifer home, and noted how his pretenses had opened the floodgates of happiness for the three Jennifers. To declare himself an impostor, as his conscience suggested, would have turned all that gladness into sorrow and dismay.

It would have gone deeper than that. Delaney would have had to explain, as a cover for his own actions, how he had met Hemphill and had connived at this deception with him. The inferences the Jennifers would draw from that recital would be the inferences Delaney had drawn—that Colburn, using an alias and riding in a box car, had spent his ten years in going from bad to worse as a black sheep.

Delaney decided that no such revelations could be made. The Jennifers had suffered misfortune, and this stray bit of happiness that had so deviously wandered their way must not be wrecked by a startling disclosure. He would spend the day with them, carry off his part as best he could, and then tell Hemphill a few things when he left Terryville and got back to Morrisburg.

"Here's your place, Larry," said Aunt Hattie, indicating the empty chair at the breakfast table; "we've kept it for you ever since—ever since you went away. Have you had breakfast?"

"Aunt Hattie, this is wonderful!" exclaimed Delaney, seating himself in the chair. "No; I haven't had breakfast; I was in such a hurry to get here, this

morning, that I didn't think about it. Where's Ben?" he inquired.

"Ben's married, Larry," Uncle Joe told him; "five years ago that happened. He's on a farm, six miles out."

"Good old Ben!" enthused Delaney. "Doing well?"

"You're from the city, Larry," put in Matilda. "and I guess you don't know what farmers have been up against, these last few years. The hard luck is just beginning to break for them, but it will take a couple of years of good times before Ben is on his feet again. Ben and his family will be here for Christmas dinner—and my, but he'll be surprised when he sees you!"

"Dear me!" fluttered Aunt Hattie. "Won't he just? You and Ben, Larry, were always like David and Jonathan—more like brothers than cousins."

"Remember," put in Matilda, "how you pulled Ben out of the mill race when he was going down for the third time?"

"Seems like it was only yesterday," dissembled Delaney, hitting his first snag.

"And there's Mabel," went on Matilda mischievously; "she's never married, Larry, and she has always said you'd come back. She still has that picture of you."

This was another snag, and somehow it caused a sinking sensation.

"Well, well!" murmured Delaney.

"I'll call Mabel on the phone and tell her you're here," said Matilda, starting to get up from the table.

"Not right now, Tilda," begged Delaney; "let's wait for a while. Of course I'm awfully anxious to see Mabel, but I want to get acquainted with the rest of you first." He laughed softly and wiped the gathering moisture from his brows. "What—what's all this?" he continued, his eyes on the broken packages beside the other plates.

"Presents, Larry," explained Matilda. "Have you forgotten how we always used to do? It's a shame we didn't know you were coming so we could have——"

"The best present I could possibly have," cut in Delaney, "is just the sight of all of you, once more. Just a minute!"

He got up from the table, went into the other room, and rummaged in the walrus bag. When he returned, he

brought four small packages, all in Christmas wrappings with Christmas seals and properly marked.

"There's yours, Uncle Joe," he said, and handed over a flat, oblong packet that looked very much as though it might be another pocketbook, or a necktie in a box. "And here's Aunt Hattie's and Matilda's," Delaney proceeded. "Ben's you can put aside for him and give him when he comes. I hope," he added brightly, "that you'll all be pleased."

"Bless your dear heart, Larry," murmured Aunt Harriet, "but how did you know we were all here? Ten years is a long, long time."

"Well, I just had a hunch," replied Delaney. He wished he had known what was in the packages, but Hemphill had not revealed that important point.

Mollie had her package open first, and a cry of delight escaped her lips: "A watch! A wrist watch! Oh-h-h, Larry!"

Delaney noted with satisfaction that it was a wrist watch of the most expensive kind. "I—I was pretty sure you'd like it," he said vaguely.

Aunt Hattie's present was a gold mesh bag, with five twenty-dollar gold pieces coyly cuddled away inside. Aunt Hattie dropped the bag and the gold pieces and walked around the table to kiss Delaney on the cheek. "I ought to scold you for being so extravagant, Larry," she told him softly. "Are you sure you can afford being so generous?"

Delaney tossed his hands. "You can't begin to guess what I'm worth!" he remarked indefinitely. "What's the matter, Uncle Joe?" he inquired.

Jennifer was sitting like a man in a trance. In his hand was a bundle of bank notes, inclosed with a band marked "\$5,000."

Delaney was almost as dazed as Jennifer.

"Hattie! Tilda!" gasped Jennifer. "Look what our Larry has done for me! Five thousand dollars! Boy, I can't take this from you."

"Larry! Oh, Larry!" cried Matilda.

Aunt Hattie wiped her eyes. "That's just what Joe lost in the oil swindle, Larry," she murmured brokenly. "You must have heard of that, some way, and are trying to make it up to him. Dear

boy, are you really able to do so much for us?"

"I'm not able to do any less, Aunt Hattie," returned Delaney. And then, deep down in his heart, he checked off part of his score against Hemphill. "Now," he went on, "if we're all feeling happy, suppose we eat?"

CHAPTER XIII.

IN DEEP WATERS.

DELANEY was beginning to doubt Hemphill's complicity in the scheme whereby his uncle had been fleeced out of the five thousand dollars. Even if Hemphill had been guilty of such a despicable act, he had retrieved himself. Delaney could now pose as Hemphill's understudy with less wear and tear on his conscience. He could talk and talk well, and during the breakfast he fairly exceeded himself in an effort to inspire the Jennifers with good cheer.

Aunt Hattie and Matilda responded happily to Delaney's efforts, and Uncle Joe tried to do so, but not with much success. It was evident that something troubled him. From time to time he would pick up the packet of bank notes beside his plate, examine it carefully, and thumb over the bills in a perplexed way.

"It's good money, Uncle Joe," said Delaney with a laugh, as they all pushed back from the table. "You haven't got the idea that it's counterfeit, have you?"

"Of course not, Larry," returned Jennifer; "I know it's good money, because these are the very same bills I drew out of the bank to give to Trelawney."

"Who is Trelawney?"

"The oil promoter, the man who came to me with your letter."

Delaney was getting into deep water, and his grip on the few straws of fact that were keeping him afloat seemed to be loosening.

"I know this is the same money I gave Trelawney," continued Jennifer, "because it is exactly like the original packet. Then, on the paper band, there is the name of The First National Bank of Terryville, stamped with a rubber stamp. And some of the bills look very familiar."

Delaney sat back and smiled. "Naturally," he said, in a way that might have

meant anything. "Have you that letter Trelawney gave you? I'd like to see it."

They all adjourned to the front parlor, where Jennifer poked around in the pigeonholes of an old desk and at last found the letter. It was written on the stationery of a Chicago hotel—type-written, all save the signature: "Larry." The bearer, Mr. Trelawney, was introduced to Jennifer as a man of integrity with a proposition of great merit. The writer hoped Uncle Joe might have something to invest, for a few thousand given to Trelawney would return a fortune. "Love to all of you," the letter closed.

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Delaney.

"Then you didn't write it, Larry?" asked Jennifer, a light of hope flickering in his eyes. "After I knew I had been bunkoed, I began to think the letter was a forgery. And it was, wasn't it, Larry? Aunt Hattie and Matilda both said it didn't sound a bit like you."

"Why," cried Delaney, "this man Trelawney is a scoundrel! How could I have recommended him?"

"How in the world, Larry," put in Matilda, "did you get dad's money away from him?"

"That's a pretty long story," Delaney answered, his wits wrestling with the problem—and they never had met such a problem before. What sort of a story was he to tell? "I was hoping——"

Just what he was hoping, or pretending to be hoping, did not appear. The doorbell rang, and Delaney thanked his stars for a short reprieve. Another moment and he ceased to thank his stars, for the reprieve was in the nature of a near-calamity.

"Why, Mabel!" cried the voice of Matilda from the hall. "I'll bet you can't guess who's here!"

"I'll bet I can!" exclaimed another voice, musical and clear in spite of its repressed excitement. "I saw him passing our house on his way down the street. Do you think I wouldn't recognize him, Tilda, even after ten years? I waited as long as I could, and then I just had to run over."

Jennifer's face lighted up, and Aunt Hattie smiled affectionately. Delaney tried to smile and look happy, but mentally he was berating Hemphill for not

having breathed so much as a whisper about Mabel.

There was a scurry in the hall, some laughter, and the two girls came into the parlor.

"Well, Mabel!" exclaimed Delaney, starting to his feet. "So you recognized me when I came past your house? Didn't think you'd be up so early."

"On Christmas morning? Larry!"

There was some constraint as they shook hands—perfectly natural in both cases. Mabel was a blonde, vivacious and charming. Delaney was too upset for details, having reached a point where general impressions were about all he could take care of.

"You see," he remarked, "I had to come back, intended it for a little surprise."

"Aunt Hattie and Uncle Joe waited a long time for the surprise, Larry," countered Mabel, knitting her fair brows just a trifle, unbuttoning her coat, and removing a jaunty stocking cap. "I'll say you were a long time about it. Why was that?"

"It's—it's a long story," fenced Delaney.

"Well," put in Aunt Hattie, "the dear boy is here, and the story can wait. We're all so happy we just can't express our feelings, Mabel. Show Mabel what he brought us, Tilda."

The girls went on to the dining room; and then, like a blow in the face, came the remembrance to Delaney that Hemphill had failed to put a gift for Mabel into the walrus bag. Why that oversight, if the girl meant as much to him as he plainly meant to her? Here was something else to be explained.

"Larry," whispered Aunt Hattie, "she's just one of the dearest girls!"

"Believe me!" agreed Delaney. "She hasn't changed much, has she? Doesn't seem a day older."

The two girls returned from the dining room, and Mabel began buttoning up her cloak and pulling on her stocking cap.

"All I came over for was just to make sure," she said, "and I'll have to go right back. I don't want to take Larry away from you, but I'd like to have him walk back to our gate with me."

So Delaney got into his own coat and

cap and left the house with Mabel. He had a feeling that the outside air might be refreshing and perhaps help to inspire the inventions which were becoming increasingly necessary. Mabel's first words, when they were clear of the house, fairly took the ground out from under him.

"This is Christmas Day," she remarked, "and I can't bear to call the police. You seem able to fool the Jennifers, but you can't fool me. Who are you? And why are you masquerading as Larry Colburn? The least I can do, I suppose, is to give you a chance to explain. But don't you think it's a little—heartless? Oh, yes; it is, even with all that money and the other presents." Her voice choked. "I do wish," she finished helplessly, "that I knew what to do!"

CHAPTER XIV.

MAKING A PROMISE.

MANY things were said of Delaney the Dip. "At his worst, Delaney the Dip was a hoodlum," it had been said, "a sneak thief with second-story work as his specialty, but so gifted in wiles and wit that if he had not been a porch climber he could easily have gone to the head of the class as a mollbuzzer." Nevertheless, "On his brighter side, he had lofty moments when strange, exemplary impulses stirred him to high aims and noble endeavors; moments when, by a short step, he passed completely out of his hoodlum character and became a Chesterfield in deportment and a Galahad in action." In short, Delaney the Dip had a "split personality, and rarely indeed did one identity intrude upon the other." Furthermore, he was "always cool in emergencies."

The time had come when Chesterfield Galahad Delaney had to reach across the invisible barriers of his double identity and borrow his mollbuzzer talents from Delaney the Dip. The issue had been forced upon him by the astonishing shrewdness of the bright young woman in the stocking cap.

"What makes you think, Miss Mabel," he asked, "that I am not really Larry Colburn?"

He was on one side of the gate in front of Mabel's home, and she was on the

other side. How often, ran Delaney's thoughts, had this girl and Hemphill lingered at that same gate on the long summer evenings, under the stars of more than ten years ago? Now there was snow and a chill in the air, but it was a sunny Christmas morning, and if human hearts held dark suspicions, they were also influenced to be kindly.

"On a Christmas Eve, long ago," replied Mabel, "I was lighting the candles of a Christmas tree—in there." She made a gesture toward the house at her back. "Larry was helping me. An overturned candle set fire to my dress, and Larry smothered the blaze and prevented a serious accident; but he burned the back of his right hand, and ever after he carried the scar. Now, sir, that right hand of yours has no trace of a scar."

"You are right," agreed Delaney; "I am not Larry Colburn; but I am here as his understudy because he asked me to come. He wanted to make the Jennifers happy on this Christmas Day, and he made me his proxy Santa Claus. The money and other presents were sent by Colburn."

"Why did he send?" demanded the girl breathlessly. "Why didn't he come himself?"

"I am going to tell you," he went on, his eyes meeting the girl's steadily. "You and Larry, I know, must have been very good friends in the old days; and if I can convince you that what I am doing is because he wished it and requested it, I believe you are loyal enough to Colburn to help me continue the mild deception. It's only for the day," he added; "this evening I shall leave Terryville, report to Colburn, and just as soon as he can, he will come on in person."

"I'm waiting," said the girl.

Briefly he told her of his meeting with Colburn, otherwise Hemphill, in the box car; of the accident; of the events at John Porter's farmhouse; and of the strange request of Hemphill that had brought a stranger to the Jennifers' as Colburn's understudy. Delaney was in one of his "lofty" moods, borrowing his plausibility as a persuader from his other personality.

Of course it was his strange resemblance to Colburn that had made the

masquerade possible; but the masquerade was not designed to be heartless—quite the contrary. So far, Delaney had acquitted himself, as he believed, with credit. None of the Jennifers had noticed the absence of the scar on the right hand; in their great happiness, that small but important detail had escaped them. Now that Miss Mabel knew all, Delaney finished, he would leave Terryville at once and not go back to the Jennifers, if that was her wish: or he would stay out the day, just as Hemphill had asked him to do. What was her will?

Here was a story to match the adventures of the famous Haroun al Raschid, but apparently it did not find the girl incredulous. Her cheeks were pink, not wholly from the touch of the frosty air; and her eyes were wide and bright and held only a slight trace of skepticism.

"But who are you?" she asked after a moment's pause.

"I?" He laughed. "Oh, I'm Delaney, 'Delaney the Shadow.' 'The swans on still St. Mary's lake float double, swan and shadow.' Hemphill is the—er—the swan."

"But why is Larry calling himself Hemphill and not Colburn?"

Delaney tossed his hands. "Ask him that when he comes," he answered; "I don't know."

"Where and how did he recover that five thousand dollars taken from Mr. Jennifer?"

"I wish I knew, for I've got to make some sort of an explanation. Possibly I may be able to leave that for Colburn to explain, when he comes. I can't tell about that, Miss Mabel. Right now I'm merely drifting, and my knowledge of Larry Colburn is terribly insufficient. I don't even know much about his reasons for leaving home, ten years ago."

"He just disappeared," said Mabel, a catch in her voice, "vanished completely on a night a little before Christmas. He didn't tell anybody, not even me. He was dissatisfied, I know that. Terryville sort of cramped his ambitions, and he was anxious to get ahead and do big things. I can forgive him for everything but his failure to write. Have you any idea, Mr. Delaney, why he kept silence for all these years?"

Delaney shook his head sympathetically.

"Stealing a ride on a freight train!" murmured the girl. "And using a false name! I'm afraid that all is not well with Larry Colburn."

"You might give him the benefit of the doubt," returned Delaney. "I did."

The girl bowed her head and ran her gloved hand back and forth across the gate. "He—he looked prosperous?" she asked, lifting her eyes slowly.

"Very."

She shivered; and Delaney knew exactly what she was thinking.

"On this day of all days," Mabel went on, "we must be charitable. You're a stranger, but it can't be possible that you mean any harm to the Jennifers."

"Harm? Uncle Joe's five thousand dollars has been returned to him; and Larry Colburn, all of them think, has at last broken his ten years' silence. When I leave, they'll never know I wasn't Larry Colburn—if you'll have it that way; and when the real Larry Colburn comes, he will be fully informed of everything that I have done here and can carry on just as though it had really been himself, and not a substitute, who had brought happiness to the Jennifers on this Christmas Day. I shall be very circumspect in my behavior, Miss Mabel."

"That's a promise?" she asked.

"It is—on my honor."

"Very well," she breathed; "put in your day at the Jennifers', but please remember that I'm watching you."

Delaney had won his point. Mabel walked away from the gate and into the house, and Delaney turned and went whistling cheerily back to Uncle Joe, Aunt Hattie, and Matilda.

"There's a girl in a million," Delaney was thinking. "Perhaps Hemphill's present to her is a solitaire ring; and that, of course, he would have to bestow personally."

CHAPTER XV.

WAITING FOR HIM.

ALTHOUGH for the Jennifers that Christmas had dawned on their poverty and misfortune, that fact had not seemed to hamper Aunt Hattie and Matilda in making ready the Christmas din-

ner. For days the preparations had been going forward; and while no doubt there must have been many shifts and changes with a view to economy, yet all the family traditions so far as the dinner was concerned seemed to have been fully preserved.

The kitchen was a busy place, its steamy air redolent of the good things boiling on the big range and baking in the oven. A part of Ben's contribution to the feast was a twelve-pound turkey. Delaney, led into the kitchen by Matilda, had a glimpse of the noble bird, while Aunt Hattie, with a big spoon, was doing the basting. He was given, also, a glimpse of the mince pies and fruit cake, whose praises Hemphill had sung so yearningly.

"Isn't it like old times, Larry?" Matilda asked.

"Seems as though I had only left the house and walked around the block," he told her enthusiastically.

"Listen!" whispered Matilda, lifting a warning finger.

Out in the kitchen, half a dozen steps from the big pantry, Aunt Hattie was singing as she worked.

"It's been days since mom sang like that, Larry," went on Matilda: "I don't think she has put so much heart into 'Maxwelton's bræs are bonny' for the last ten years as she's doing this morning. Come on up to your room, cousin; that will do more to make you think you had just stepped out and walked around the block. Everything just as you left it—almost."

They climbed the stairs, and Matilda left him alone in the room that had once been Hemphill's. The chintz at the windows was crisp and spotless, but it was faded and had not been replaced. The rag carpet, the walnut four-poster, the old walnut bureau and washstand, the cane rocker, pictures on the walls—some of them framed, some of them cut from newspapers and fastened with tacks—were the sort of pictures that appealed to a boy whose ambitions were gathering force and direction.

On a small easel on the bureau was a picture of Mabel, inscribed "Devotedly yours, M." Over the corner of the square frame of the bureau mirror, half a dozen

neckties were looped; and on top of the bureau lay a penciled note. It read:

DEAR AUNT AND UNCLE: When you see this, I'll be gone. Nothing in Terryville for a live one. I've tried to stick it out, but something just won't let me. You have been father and mother to me ever since I was six, and I hate to leave like this, but I haven't the nerve to see you and say good-by. If I tried that, I'd probably give up and hang on here. I'm going to make something out of myself; and when I come back, I hope I'll be in a position to show how I appreciate your kindness for so many years to a poor orphan nephew. Tell Matilda and good old Ben good-by for me. And please don't worry. LARRY.

There was a yellow splotch on the note just as though the determined Larry had spilled a tear on it.

"No matter what he's done since," thought Delaney, "he had good stuff in him ten years ago."

On the washstand beside the blue bowl and pitcher was a small bottle of arnica. The resourcefulness of Delaney the Dip availed itself of the discovery; and with a match and a little arnica, a faint scar was contrived on the back of the right hand.

"I'm going it blind," thought Delaney, as he studied the results of his effort. "What sort of a scar was it, and where was it? Wish I'd given more attention to that right hand of Hemphill's. This will have to do. Ben, when he comes, is apt to make this assumed rôle of mine a hard one."

While he was still moving around the room, studying the pictures on the walls, sleigh bells jingled to a halt in front of the Jennifer home. A door opened swiftly, and a voice—Matilda's voice—rang excitedly in the frosty air.

"Ooh-hoo, Ben! I bet you can't guess who's here! Hurry and put up the horse, and then come on in and get the surprise of your life! Merry Christmas, Dorothy! And to you, too, Jackie—bless your little heart! Hustle yourself, Ben!"

Delaney breathed on the window and cleared a bit of frost from the glass. A horse and cutter were in front, and a young woman—evidently Ben's wife—was climbing out of the robes and blankets. A little fellow of four or five, in furry cap, coat, and leggings was being caught up by Matilda and carried into

the house. A broad-shouldered young man in a big ulster was standing erect in the cutter.

"What is it, sis?" he asked. "What's the big idea?"

"You can't imagine, buddy! Put that horse in the barn just as quick as you can and then come in and find out for yourself."

The door closed. Ben drove on into the drive and back toward the barn.

"So that's Ben," thought Delaney, "the fellow I pulled out of the mill race when he was going down for the third time. He looks pretty husky, and I certainly hope he'll continue to play Jonathan to my David."

By the time Ben got in from the barn and had husked himself of his winter wraps, Delaney took his way downstairs. Big and brawny, Ben stood in the dining room. He had just opened the package containing Hemphill's gift—a pocketbook with some crisp bank notes inside. Aunt Hattie, Uncle Joe, and Matilda were showing their own gifts, and Mrs. Ben and young Jack were looking and listening as though spellbound.

At sight of Delaney, Ben dropped the pocketbook and the money and leaped toward him. "Larry, you old maverick!" he whooped, grabbing Delaney about the shoulders and almost crushing him in a wild embrace. "Say, this is the biggest Christmas yet! Mom was certainly right when she kept hanging on to that empty chair. 'He'll come,' she always said, 'because didn't he say he would?' But you were a long time doing it, Larry."

He pushed Delaney off and studied him at arms' length. "Some change in you, old top," Ben went on, "but not so much as you'd think, considering the length of time that's slipped by. Darn it, why didn't you ever write? How could we know you were alive or dead? You just turned up missing, and then not a word for ten long years."

"It's a long story, Ben," replied Delaney, "and we'll have to let it hang fire for a while. So you're married, eh? That's fine—but I wish I'd known."

"You might have known if you had tried to keep track of us Terryville folks." Ben turned to Mrs. Ben. "Dot," he cried, "I want you to meet this cousin-

brother of mine, the bird you've heard so much about! Call him Larry—don't be formal with the old bird. Better kiss him, too, just to show him how you really feel."

That is exactly what Mrs. Ben did, blushing rosily and happily.

"And here," continued Ben, grabbing Jack and pushing him into Delaney's arms, "is Jack Lawrence Jennifer, the son of his dad and a credit to the family. He's named Lawrence after you, so there's no reason why he shouldn't be a credit to the best family on earth!"

As high exemplar for a namesake, it was possible that Colburn, alias Hemphill, might leave something to be desired. Out of Ben's trifle of light talk, there reached an icy hand to grip the heart of Richard Galahad Delaney.

CHAPTER XVI.

HANDS OF THE LAW.

THAT Christmas reunion of the Jennifer family was the happiest one in many years. The big, outstanding feature of the day was Larry Colburn's return, or his supposed return, wonderfully prosperous and displaying a magnanimity beyond the wildest dreams. Uncle Joe, now and then, was detected lapsing into a mood of troubled reflection, for the mystery of the five thousand dollars recurred to him again and again with bothersome insistence, and he was eagerly waiting for the long story with which Delaney had promised to make clear a somewhat unsettling situation.

Delaney's wits were at work on the story, but there were so many details to be properly and plausibly covered that his inventive ingenuity found it a real job. So he played for time; but, while he succeeded in postponing explanations, circumstances allowed him but little leisure for the free use of his imagination.

Jack attached himself to Delaney with a childish determination to monopolize most of his time; and when he wasn't playing with Jack, there were neighbors dropping in to shake hands with the long-lost Larry and to give him the usual glad and seasonable greetings.

The news of the missing nephew's return had traveled fast and far, and one

of the callers was a representative of the *Terryville Chronicle*. This reporter wanted the complete story of the last ten years, but Delaney begged off.

"You see," he explained, "I haven't time for that. I am only in Terryville for the day, and must leave on the seven ten train, this evening. But I'll be back for a longer stay in a month or two, and then I'll give you the whole yarn."

All in all, Delaney found the forenoon pretty trying. Old friends he had never seen before slapped him on the back and called him "Larry," and they naturally expected that he would call them by their first names. He had to use tact in avoiding numerous pitfalls and emerged from half a dozen interviews with considerable success. It was a relief to him when the last of the callers bid him good-by and Matilda announced that dinner was ready.

Certainly it was a most wonderful dinner, and no highly paid chef in an exclusive hotel in the metropolis could have prepared a better one. Delaney did full justice to the meal, and all through the menu from the soup to the mince pie and pudding he made himself the life of the party. There was not a doubt among the Jennifers that he was otherwise than he pretended to be, and this heartened him to do his best in spreading the Christmas cheer.

It was only when they had all pushed back from the table that Uncle Joe exploded the bomb which Delaney had been expecting for several hours. "And now, Larry, this is the right time for the story. I can't begin to tell you how curious I am about that five thousand dollars. How in the world were you able to get it back for me?"

Further dodging was out of the question. Delaney had to explain now, and he had no explanation ready. He swept his eyes around the table and noted the eager anticipation in the happy faces. What was he to say?

He was tempted to take the dilemma by both horns and reveal himself as an impostor. In that manner he would be following the course of least resistance and salvaging his conscience out of the wreck of Hemphill's schemes. By such a proceeding, however, he would not have

been giving Hemphill the benefit of the doubt—as he had told Mabel he intended to do.

Delaney was equal to the emergency of inventing the story offhand; and, deciding that this was the better plan, he set his imagination at work. "Well, folks," he began, poising for his leap in the dark, "when I left here just before Christmas, ten years ago——"

His inventive machinery was working well. Mentally he noted the points he was to cover and was squaring away for as pretty a piece of fiction as he could devise when—the doorbell rang.

"Shucks!" grunted Ben, disappointedly. "More old friends, I'll bet. I should think they could leave us alone for a while."

Matilda made her way into the hall and opened the front door. A deep voice drifted through the parlor and back into the dining room.

"Hello, Matilda! Is Larry Colburn here?" the voice asked.

"Why, yes, Mr. Farnham." There was a queer note in Matilda's reply. "Did—did you want to see him?"

"Well, yes; sorry if I intrude, Matilda, but I've got to see him."

"Larry!" called Matilda. "Here's Mr. Farnham, our chief of police, come to see you. Come right in, Mr. Farnham."

"Say!" muttered Ben. "I can't understand this. Farnham came to Terryville after you left, Larry. I can't imagine what he's got up his sleeve."

Neither could Delaney, as he arose from his chair and made his way into the parlor. Delaney knew very well, however, that a crisis was at hand.

The chief of police was a large man with a sandy mustache. He opened his overcoat and the coat beneath, revealing the badge pinned to his vest. Also he took off his hat and his gloves, and he slapped his hands together to start the blood to circulating as he peered strangely at the young man before him.

"This is my cousin, Larry Colburn, Mr. Farnham," murmured Matilda.

"You admit it, young fellow?" asked the chief of police.

"Why not, Mr. Farnham?" returned Delaney cheerfully.

Farnham pulled a long face. "I hate

like Sam Hill to put a crimp in Christmas festivities like I've got to do, and I hope you'll excuse me, Jennifer. An officer of the law, though, has got to do his duty on Christmas just the same as on every other day.

"Colburn," he went on sharply, "there was a holdup in a place called Bloomfield, night before last, and a man called Dickson was robbed at the point of a gun of five thousand dollars in cash. The hold-up was a man called Hemphill—Larry Hemphill. I got word from the police of Morrisburg to look up this Hemphill here in Terryville. You registered at the hotel here last night as Larry Hemphill. Is that right?"

"Absolutely correct," returned Delaney, trying to look both innocent and reassuring.

"Then I guess you'll have to come along with me," said the chief of police. "I'm blamed sorry, as I said, but there's nothing else for me to do, if you admit you are Hemphill."

Aunt Hattie dropped gasping into a chair, Uncle Joe staggered back against the wall; Mrs. Ben picked up Jack and clasped him in her arms, and Ben pushed forward aggressively. Delaney put out a restraining hand and rested it on Ben's arm.

"Don't be alarmed, Aunt Hattie," Delaney requested; "Uncle Joe, everything can be explained. My bag is up in my room, and if you'll excuse me a minute until I get it, I'll set Mr. Farnham right about this business."

"All right; get the bag," said the chief of police; "but I'll have to go with you."

"Come along," returned Delaney, and started for the stairs.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNUSUAL REQUEST.

A SUDDEN misery in which love battled with suspicion had risen in Aunt Hattie's eyes; and it had stabbed Delaney to the heart. He had one thing to fall back upon if he was to continue fighting Hemphill's Christmas battle for him, and that was the letter which was to be opened only in case of the greatest emergency. This was such a case, Delaney persuaded himself, hence his desire

to get the letter out of the walrus bag and arm himself with the information it contained.

With the wary Farnham close at his heels, Delaney climbed the stairs to the room. He opened the bag in silence, took out the letter, and read it. His face cleared.

"Mr. Farnham," he said, "do you believe in that old saying that 'the better the day, the better the deed?'"

"Speaking generally," was the cautious response, "I guess that's an easy and profitable sentiment to live up to. But I'm the chief of police, and my deeds have to uphold the law, no matter what day it is. You get that, don't you?"

"I do, of course. I'm going to ask you to read this statement. Mr. Farnham; and then, just because this is Christmas Day, I am going to ask you to accept it as the truth, tell Aunt Hattie, Uncle Joe, and the rest downstairs that there has been a mistake, and that Dickson, and not Larry Colburn, is the man you want. After that, I am asking you to wish everybody a 'Merry Christmas,' leave this house, and allow me, on the strength of that written statement alone, to leave Terryville on the seven ten train this evening."

"What're you trying to put over on me?" snapped Farnham.

"Nothing. If Dickson isn't proved a scoundrel inside of two months, then Larry Colburn will call on you and let the law work its will with him. I am asking you, on this Christmas Day, to show a magnanimous spirit and to trust a man who, in addition to being a perfect stranger, happens temporarily to be under a cloud of suspicion."

The chief of police stared. "Believe me, you've got a nerve!" he muttered.

"There's Aunt Hattie, and Uncle Joe, and Matilda, and Ben, and his family," Delaney went on; "and then there's the nephew whom they love as a son and a brother——"

"The nephew," cut in Farnham derisively, "who ducked out of Terryville between two days, ten years ago, and never thought enough of the Jennifers to come back to 'em or to write 'em so much as a line. No; I'll take that back. He did write a letter to his Uncle Joe. Work-

ing in cahoots with a con man, he wrote a letter of introduction that enabled the flimflammer to trim his uncle out of five thousand dollars. It won't do you any good to ask me to trust a low-down crook like that."

Delaney smiled in a tolerant way. "Don't take things for granted and jump at conclusions, Mr. Farnham," he continued earnestly. "After ten long years, the urge of the Christmas spirit starts the wandering nephew back to Terryville. He gathers up a few little presents for the folks at home; and among the gifts is a bundle of bank notes amounting to five thousand dollars which——"

"I heard that, too, but I didn't believe it," the chief again interrupted. "Is it a fact?" he demanded. "Did you really hand Jennifer five thousand dollars?"

"I did, really; what's more, I handed him the same five thousand dollars that he drew out of the bank and gave to the flimflammer, Trelawney."

The chief of police frowned and pulled at his sandy mustache. "This Christmas idea sort of got under your skin, eh?" he queried. "Had a change of heart when you got to thinking about that five thousand dollars?"

"Not at all; you see, that letter of introduction was forged by Trelawney."

Farnham was skeptical. "How do I know?" he demanded.

"Because I'm telling you, Mr. Farnham," replied Delaney, "and you are taking my word for it. Here are the main facts in the matter—read them."

He passed over the two small sheets of paper that had been inclosed in the sealed envelope. The chief of police read the closely written sheets slowly. It was evident that the officer was deeply impressed.

"You're asking me to swallow all that, hook, line, and sinker," Farnham remarked, "and, on the strength of it, to tell the folks downstairs that my call here this afternoon was a mistake, and then I'm to clear out and leave you free to take the seven ten out of town this evening? And you are asking me to juggle with my duty simply because this is the day when charity and good will ought to be in evidence?"

Delaney nodded. "I am asking that

more on account of the folks downstairs than I am for myself, Mr. Farnham," he declared. "Up to the time you arrived, the Jennifers had been enjoying a most wonderful Christmas. Why not yield a point and make their happiness complete?"

The chief of police took a thoughtful turn up and down the room, once more pulling at his mustache. At last he faced Delaney again. "I don't believe, Colburn, that any officer of the law ever had a thing like that batted up to him before," he observed, "but I've decided to fall for this unusual proposition of yours. There are a couple of conditions, though. I've got to satisfy myself first that Joe Jennifer has the five thousand dollars and that it's the same money he turned over to Trelawney; after that, and just as quick as I can get to the telegraph office, I'm going to wire Bloomfield about this man, Dickson.

"If what I hear from Bloomfield matches up with that written statement of yours," Farnham went on, "you can climb aboard the seven ten this evening and go where you please; but if I get a wire from the Bloomfield chief of police to the effect that Dickson is O. K., then the only traveling you'll do will be in the direction of the Terryville hoosegow. How does that set with you?"

"Fine!" exclaimed Delaney, all smiles. He put out his hand. "Shake, Mr. Farnham," he requested; "shake with a badly misunderstood man who is now in a fair way to have his troubles properly righted."

They shook hands, and then once more returned to the stricken Jennifers in the front parlor.

"Uncle Joe," said Delaney, "Mr. Farnham wants to see that packet of bank notes."

Jennifer produced the packet at once, and the chief of police examined it critically.

"These are the bills that you turned over to Trelawney, are they, Joe?" Farnham inquired.

"I could take my oath to that, Hank," returned Jennifer.

"Folks," went on Farnham, "I want to apologize for breaking in on you like this. I've made a mistake. Larry Colburn

seems to be all right. It's a queer layout, and I'll leave him to tell you about it. I'm wishing you all a Merry Christmas," he added, and started for the door.

Ben showed him out; and when Ben returned from the hall, the shadow had passed from the Jennifer household, and Aunt Hattie was clinging to Delaney and almost in tears because of her relief and happiness.

"Now, Larry!" cried Uncle Joe. "You can go on with your story."

Delaney was ready. He had facts to deal with now, and there was no demand for the inventive powers of his own imagination.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW IT HAPPENED.

THE funny part of this story," began Delaney, "is this: The police are absolutely correct when they say that Larry Colburn held up this fellow Dickson and took the five thousand dollars away from him at the point of a gun."

They were all seated in the front parlor—Aunt Hattie on one side of Delaney and Uncle Joe on the other.

Aunt Hattie reached out her hand and rested it on Delaney's arm. "'Funny?'" she echoed, in a tone of gentle reproof. "Larry, I can't think of such a proceeding as that being at all funny."

Delaney patted the hand on his arm. "Maybe not, Aunt Hattie," he remarked, "but I think Uncle Joe and Ben will see the funny side of it before I'm done. You all know what a rascal Trelawney is. When I first became acquainted with him"—and here Delaney began talking for Colburn—"I had no idea he was the smooth schemer he turned out to be. As a crook, one of the cleverest things he does is posing as an honest man.

"So I'll start off by admitting I was taken in by Trelawney; and I shall have to acknowledge that he learned through me of the five thousand dollars Uncle Joe had for so many years to his account in the Terryville bank. Trelawney made up his mind that he would get that money. He asked me for a letter of introduction to Uncle Joe, and that was the first thing that aroused my suspicions, and I refused to give him the letter.

"Later on, I met a friend of Trelawney's, and through him I learned that Trelawney had gone to Terryville to do a little grafting with a bogus oil well. I paid little attention to this until, one day, I picked up a copy of the *Terryville Chronicle* in a Chicago street car. You'd probably call that remarkable, wouldn't you? Well, fate proceeds in a remarkable way, now and then, to get results.

"A man on that street car looked like Jed Hawkins," he went on. "I saw him and wondered if he was really the Jed Hawkins I had known in the old home town. Hawkins, though, didn't recognize me, so I naturally concluded that he couldn't be Hawkins; but when he got up and left, I picked up a paper he had dropped and found it to be a copy of the *Chronicle*. Then, of course, there was no doubt in my mind."

"Jed has a married daughter in Chicago," put in Uncle Joe, "and he makes it a point to visit his daughter and son-in-law at least once a year. He's terribly nearsighted, Larry, and that was probably the reason he failed to recognize you."

"It was providential, I guess, that the paper dropped into my hands," continued Delaney, "for it contained an account of the whole transaction in which Uncle Joe was swindled out of his five thousand dollars by Trelawney. That hit me pretty hard, and I decided that I would do everything in my power to get that money back. I knew that Trelawney's home port was Bloomfield, so I started at once for that town.

"Trelawney wasn't known by that name in Bloomfield. He posed as an honest man in his home town, and everybody there knew him as Dickson. I haven't an idea how many aliases the fellow uses in his grafting operations, but the name he used in Terryville was only one of them. He has a wife and family, but they don't know the first thing about the way he makes his living. All they know is that he travels and that when he comes back from one of his trips, he always brings money with him. They think it's honest money, I suppose. Probably Trelawney needed some money for Christmas presents and thought he'd get it from Uncle Joe.

"Trelawney hadn't returned from Terryville when I reached Bloomfield, so I settled down to wait for him. I watched all the trains, sure that my man would show up sooner or later. Then——"

"Why didn't you go straight to the police, Larry?" interrupted Aunt Hattie.

"I didn't dare do that, Aunt Hattie," Delaney told her. "You see, if I had taken the police into my confidence, Trelawney might have discovered it and kept away from Bloomfield. As it was, he came in on a Pullman as Mr. Homer Dickson, got into a taxi, and was driven to his home. I trailed him, called on him, and had a talk with him in a neat little library where the interview was strictly private.

"I demanded the five thousand dollars right off the bat. Trelawney tried to bluff me by saying he didn't know what I was talking about. Then I threatened to expose him to the whole town as a wolf in sheep's clothing. He laughed at the threat. Then, seeing no other way, I pulled a gun and told Trelawney I'd kill him if he didn't give up. That settled it; and the funny part of the situation was the way Trelawney got scared and showed his yellow streak.

"He handed over the five thousand dollars just as Uncle Joe had drawn the money from the Terryville bank and given it to him—and right there was his big mistake," he went on. "If he had taken the paper band off the packet, identifying the money wouldn't have been such an easy job. I backed out of the room and out of the house. Uncle Joe's five thousand dollars snuggled away in my pocket.

"It was evening, and only two days before Christmas," he continued. "I had made up my mind that I would spend Christmas with you folks here in Terryville, and already I had bought a few little gifts for Aunt Hattie, Matilda and Ben; and the money, if I recovered it, was to be my present for Uncle Joe. So, you see, I was all set to play the part of Santa Claus.

"After leaving Dickson's house, I hurried back to the hotel where I had been staying, paid my bill, took my grip, and left. As I passed through the hotel en-

trance, a policeman brushed by me, hurrying into the lobby. I knew pretty well what had happened: Dickson had called police headquarters, reported that he had been robbed, and had given a description of the robber.

"At that moment," Delaney went on, "Bloomfield was being combed by the forces of law and order in an effort to find the man who had walked into the home of 'honest' Mr. Dickson and robbed him at the point of a gun. I lost myself in the crowds of Christmas shoppers, went into a department store, and wrapped Uncle Joe's money in a Christmas package; then I dropped the package into my walrus bag—and looked up to see a policeman elbowing through the crowded aisle in my direction.

"I ducked, got clear of the store, and away down the street. A shot was fired after me, but it went wide; and presently I darted into an alley and, after a time, reached the railroad yards and got into an empty freight car that was moving west—west toward Terryville."

Delaney paused. He had been reciting facts, the facts penciled on two small sheets of paper, and merely filling in here and there to give the recital the stamp of a narrative. His hearers sat tense and spellbound.

A long sigh fluttered from Aunt Hattie's lips. "Oh, Larry," she breathed, "to think of you putting yourself in such a false position! Why didn't you go straight to the police and tell them all about it?"

"They would have detained me in Bloomfield as a witness against Dickson if I had done that," said Delaney, "and I had my heart set on getting here for Christmas. I used the name of Hemphill—you now understand why—and registered under that name at the hotel, last night.

"You see, I didn't want to come here to the house until Christmas morning. The arm of the law is pretty long, and it reached out from Bloomfield and gave us all a bad turn in the person of Farnham, your chief of police. But I have explained the matter to him, and he has told you how he feels about it. Now suppose we forget all this rough stuff and remember only that this is Christmas!"

CHAPTER XIX.

FACING THE LAST HURDLE.

DELANEY was in a pleasant frame of mind. He had enjoyed a most wonderful dinner; he had turned aside a disaster that threatened the Christmas cheer of the Jennifers, and there had been revealed to him certain facts regarding Hemphill and the five thousand dollars that warmed his heart and filled him with satisfaction.

He could not doubt the information contained in those two penciled pages from Hemphill's notebook. The writing had been done in that bleak box car in the glow of the flash light, while the freight train rattled and slewed through the frosty night and while Delaney dozed on his pile of straw. With numbed fingers, Hemphill had written:

I am putting this down for the information of Uncle Joe and Aunt Hattie in the event that Dickson, alias Trelawney, lands on me and interrupts my journey home for Christmas. I have a foreboding that some trouble is just around the corner; and if it flags me, and I have to give up my plans for a Christmas in Terryville, I shall try to send on the five thousand dollars to Uncle Joe by a hobo who happens to be riding in this same car with me. I have a hunch that this hobo is dependable; and if he takes the money on for me, I will also intrust him with this explanation—which he can use if an emergency arises that seems to warrant it.

Then followed a most concise statement of events grouped about the raid and the recovery of Joe Jennifer's money. Very briefly, but clearly, Hemphill made out his case. Those who did not know Trelawney as well as he did might have disapproved of his methods. Delaney, however, had no fault to find; in truth, his romantic temperament took secret delight in his proxy posing as the man with the gun, righting a wrong, and beating a grafter at his own game.

There was but one more hurdle to be taken, and that would test the legal ethics of Hemphill's high-handed proceeding. Farnham, the Terryville chief of police, was communicating by telegraph with the Bloomfield chief of police. If that interchange of messages resulted in giving Dickson a clean bill, then Hemphill's little house of cards would tumble about

Delaney's ears. Delaney, however, had faith in Hemphill and did not look for any complications in the matter of leaving by the seven ten train. Still, of course, there was a chance that unforeseen trouble would develop.

Whether Uncle Joe and Ben saw anything humorous in the holdup of Trelawney—and there was something decidedly funny about that to Delaney—did not appear. Father and son were grateful and admired and commended the nephew's enterprise, but there was probably too much tragedy involved in the fate of the five thousand dollars for them to discover any comedy in the way the money had been recovered.

"Well, I've got back the money I fooled away, anyhow," remarked Jennifer. "It means a lot to me, Larry, and I owe it all to you. I'll admit I was bothered a good deal, but your explanation makes everything straight and clear. Now, as you say, let's forget about it."

"Tell us what you've been doing with yourself all these years," he went on. "You left Terryville with not much more than the clothes you stood in, and you come back with wrist watches, gold pieces, and crisp bank notes as gifts for your friends. You must be mighty prosperous, Larry, and I'll bet the yarn will have us all gasping."

Here was another obstacle. With the recovery of the money accounted for, Delaney could have manufactured a tale that would have spread Aladdin and his wonderful lamp over the preceding ten years; but the fiction might have made hard sledding for Colburn when he arrived in person to pick up events in Terryville where Delaney was dropping them.

"Suppose we postpone that story until I come back in about a couple of months, Uncle Joe?" Delaney hedged. "What I'd like to do now is to forget the past and live in the present. If the seven ten is on time, my visit here is going to be all too short."

"Must you leave this evening, Larry?" asked Aunt Hattie, terribly disappointed.

"I've got business, very important business, Aunt Hattie," said Delaney, "and I must be about it bright and early tomorrow."

"But he'll be back, mom," put in Matilda consolingly; "and you'll make a good long visit when you do come next time, won't you, Larry?"

"That's what I'm promising myself," Delaney told her smilingly.

"I suppose," said Ben mischievously, "that Mabel Rodney is promising herself the same thing. Eh, Larry?"

Delaney looked a bit confused. "Mabel and I understand each other, I guess," he told Ben.

After that, with Delaney's hardest work all behind him, the hours passed on golden wings. Delaney learned exactly what Christmas meant in a home like the Jennifers', when misfortune gives way to happiness and the spirit of the season is allowed full swing.

There was supper at six. Aunt Hattie insisted on it, although after such a dinner as she had given them it was impossible that any one should be hungry. At six thirty Ben hitched his horse to the cutter, announcing his intention to drive Larry to the train before he and his wife and young Jack started for home. When Delaney came down from Colburn's room with the walrus bag, Aunt Hattie was waiting with a mince pie and a generous piece of fruit cake.

"I want you to take these with you, Larry," she said. "Maybe they will remind you to hurry back—for more."

Good-bys were said, and they were hard for a pretender with a conscience. Delaney had put in a Christmas Day that would live long in his memory, but it was almost with a feeling of relief that he found himself beside Ben in the cutter and speeding off across the snow toward the railroad station.

"Seem's queer you don't want to stop at Rodneys' place for a last word with Mabel," Ben remarked. "No change there, is there, Larry?"

"Absolutely no change," said Delaney; "but"—here he fell back on the platitude he had used before—"Mabel and I understand each other."

The seven ten was running on schedule, in spite of the snow and the Christmas traffic. As Delaney stepped from the cutter to the station platform, he discovered Farnham, the chief of police, moving in his direction.

For a space of half a minute, Delaney had visions of wreck and ruin for all the pleasant associations of the day. Was Farnham going to drop a hand on his shoulder and place him under arrest? Why was he there, anyway, if something hadn't gone wrong?

The chief of police did drop a hand on Delaney's shoulder, but he laughed genially as he did so. "Read that, Colburn," he said, and pushed a telegram into Delaney's limp hand.

Delaney opened the yellow slip and, under the glow of the station electric, read the following:

BLOOMFIELD, December 25th.

HENRY FARNHAM, CHIEF OF POLICE, TERRYVILLE: Dickson, otherwise Trelawney, disappeared; Federal officers after him for conspiracy and using the mails to defraud. No cause for action against Colburn, otherwise Hemphill. Disregard previous instructions.

GARDNER, CHIEF OF POLICE, BLOOMFIELD.

"What did I tell you, chief?" asked Delaney. He read the message to Ben. "Give the news to Uncle Joe, Ben," he said; "that ought to please him."

The train thundered in, and Delaney shook hands with Ben and gave the walrus bag to a grinning Pullman porter; then the train thundered away, with a young man reclining limply in one corner of a seat in the sleeper.

"I've had a great day," he muttered, "but I wouldn't go through with it again for a million!"

CHAPTER XX.

WORTH THE TROUBLE.

THE Hermitage was an apartment house, very expensive and hence very exclusive. It was not a retreat for hermits, but for bachelors. At twelve o'clock, noon, December twenty-sixth, an A. D. T. messenger had delivered a telegram to William Judkins, Apartment 10, the Hermitage. It read:

Dinner for three at seven. Pie for desert, bringing it myself. SUMMERFIELD.

Even the "pie for desert, bringing it myself" did not surprise Judkins. After several years in the service of Richard Summerfield, he had learned to obey orders and not to be surprised at anything.

At six thirty in the afternoon, James

Kennedy, Summerfield's secretary, arrived at Apartment 10; and at six forty-five, Colonel Vance dropped in. These were Summerfield's guests, and both had been invited to the dinner by telegraph.

It was six fifty when Summerfield opened the door with his latchkey and presented himself to the colonel and Kennedy.

"Good heavens!" gasped the colonel, amazed. "You look like a hobo, Summerfield. Why the masquerade?"

"Double motive, colonel," answered Summerfield. "Running down a climax in character and proving the Christmas spirit is real and not counterfeit." He handed a carefully wrapped parcel to Judkins. "Keep that right-side up, William," he admonished; "it's the pie. And draw me a hot bath and lay out my evening clothes. Twenty-five minutes, gentlemen, and I'll be with you," he added to the colonel and Kennedy, leaving the room and shedding his worn cap and overcoat as he went.

"Any luck, Dick?" called Kennedy.

"I got it," came the answer, "and it's a humdinger, Jimmy!"

At six fifty, Summerfield had returned to his rooms garbed like a hobo; but at seven fifteen, when he sat down to dinner with the colonel and Kennedy, he was in his dinner clothes, completely transformed and immaculate.

"You've been vagabonding around, this cold weather," queried the colonel, "just to win a fool bet?"

"Incidentally," said Summerfield; "but, mainly, I was Delaney the Dip, doing tramp stuff in an effort to round out the elusive climax of a story." He lighted a cigarette and glowed at his secretary through the smoke. "Believe me, Jimmy," he exclaimed, "it was the best ever! But never again—not in just that way."

"Tell us about it," begged the colonel, overcome with curiosity.

"Over the coffee," returned Summerfield, "with the pie for inspiration. By the way, William," he added, "toast that pie before you serve it. I'm going to give you two hard-boiled epicures the treat of your lives," he finished, to his guests.

It was a good dinner, most of it ordered up from the café below, but amplified by Judkins with extra touches in the

apartment kitchenette. The result was brilliant—for a bachelor establishment; but after one of Aunt Hattie's Christmas dinners no meal could ever again be much more than ordinary to Summerfield.

In due course the diners worked their way through the menu to pie, to Aunt Hattie's mince pie, and at the first mouthful the colonel's expression grew ecstatic, and he rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Never have had anything like this since I was a boy!" he declared. "Ambrosia, Summerfield, and fit for the gods! Where'd you get it?"

"I'm nearly ready to tell you about that," said Summerfield. "Just enjoy the pie, colonel, and wait for the coffee and cigars."

Ten minutes later, he began by asking his secretary to read from the manuscript pages describing "Delaney the Dip." Kennedy went into a neighboring room, where Summerfield dictated all the Norton Bayne yarns, and returned with a sheaf of written pages.

"At his worst," read Kennedy, "'Delaney the Dip was a hoodlum, a sneak thief with second-story work as his specialty, but so gifted in wiles and wit that if he had not been a porch climber he could easily have gone to the head of the class as a mollbuzzer. On his brighter side he had lofty moments when strange, exemplary impulses stirred him to high aims and noble endeavors; moments when, by a short step, he passed completely out of his hoodlum character and became a Chesterfield in deportment and a Galahad in action. He——'"

"That's enough, Jimmy," cut in Summerfield; "and that, colonel," he went on, "is the character I was impersonating while I hunted a climax that would prove worthy of him. You and Jimmy are to judge whether I have succeeded and whether I have won our wager, with your name or mine going down on the lists of the club's Christmas committee as the donor of one thousand dollars for charity. Let's go!"

Thereupon he plunged into the recital of his adventures. Nothing worthy of note had happened while he made his way to Bloomfield, but the plot began to take shape when the shout and the shot threw Bloomfield's Christmas shoppers

into panic. The railroad yards, the freight train, the empty box car that wasn't so empty, after all; the man in the fur-lined overcoat, with the flash light and the gat and the little bag of tricks in a walrus grip—he told about them all.

Then he told them of the sandwich lunch by candlelight; the uncanny resemblance of one stranger to another; the friendly approach; the accident; the appropriated farmhouse, deserted by the owner and with an oil lamp burning at midnight; the telephoning for a doctor; Hemphill's surprising proposition that he and Delaney step into each other's shoes.

After that, he outlined the execution of the scheme; the arrival of pa, and ma, and Mollie; the Christmas spirit that animated them; the arrival of the doctor; and Summerfield's leaving with the doctor to catch a train for Terryville—all of the story was narrated with telling effect.

The colonel listened agape, absorbed, but incredulous. "Fantastic!" he exclaimed. "It couldn't happen, Summerfield. You had a dream in that box car, and that's what you are telling us."

"Dream stuff is overdone," said Summerfield, "and won't go in fiction any more."

"Great, Dick!" murmured Kennedy. "I can just see Delaney hopping to it. You got to Terryville as Larry Colburn, alias Larry Hemphill. How did you make out there?"

Summerfield proceeded to tell them, carefully springing his surprises. He led up to his big scenes with Mabel and the chief of police with all the art that had given Norton Bayne a vogue and popularity, and he had the colonel catching his breath, and the secretary slapping his hands and whispering "Bravo!"

As a relief to the excitement, Summerfield dropped in a quiet but enthusiastic description of the Christmas dinner; then he went on with the sealed envelope and played the big card that had to do with his wager—the Christmas spirit animating a chief of police in dealing with a suspected offender against the law.

"Some more of the dream!" grunted the colonel. "How did Aunt Hattie, Uncle Joe, and the rest take it? If you spoiled their Christmas for them——"

Summerfield relieved the colonel's mind regarding that and followed on to the point where he received the telegram from the chief of police just prior to boarding the seven ten train. He showed the telegram, just as he had already exhibited the two penciled sheets from Hemphill's notebook.

The colonel drew a long breath. "Then you went back to Hemphill—I mean, Colburn, at John Porter's, eight miles from Morrisburg!" he said. "What happened there?"

"Hemphill had been having the time of his life at John Porter's," continued Summerfield; "everybody in the house was waiting on him, couldn't do enough for him. The broken leg was coming along finely, and Hemphill had enjoyed a Christmas second only to the one he would have had at Aunt Hattie's and Uncle Joe's—the one I enjoyed as his proxy."

"Must have been a fool, that Hemphill," commented the colonel. "He thought you were a tramp, just an ordinary cold-weather hobo, and yet he trusted you with a satchel full of money. That alone is a hard strain on the imagination. But this Hemphill trusted you further than that, for he let you go on to his uncle's, pretending to be him, and shouldering the responsibility for everything you might do there. That isn't human nature, at all, Summerfield."

"Not ordinarily, perhaps; but at Christmas time, when——"

"No; nor at Christmas time, either. Hemphill was really a crook, wasn't he?"

Summerfield straightened his face. "What I tell you now, colonel, is in strict confidence," he replied. "Hemphill wasn't really a crook, although as he told me he skated on pretty thin ice so far as the law was concerned. He had fallen in with a crowd given to dubious schemes, but schemes that were all just within the law; and that's how he had first met Dickson, the man who called himself Trelawney. And Hemphill had this."

Summerfield produced a newspaper clipping and laid it on the table. "That, as you will see, colonel," he resumed, "is a newspaper account of our little transaction at the club, fairly accurate.

Hemphill had clipped it from the paper, and he had seen a picture of me somewhere and made note of the remarkable physical resemblance we bore each other. It was his idea to make some questionable use of my methods, and of his resemblance to me, with perhaps possible profit to himself. He hadn't got to that yet, but when I dawned on him in the blaze of the flash light, there in that old box car, he believed that he recognized me as the popular fictionist on a hunt for material."

"And that," cried the colonel, "accounts for his willingness to trust you!"

"He sent you on as Hemphill, Dick," said Kennedy, "hoping you'd be able to deliver the five thousand dollars to Uncle Joe before Dickson landed on you."

"He admitted it, Jimmy," Summerfield went on; "and he admitted it with regret and sorrow. Christmas at John Porter's has made a changed man of Colburn. He declares that it's 'the straight and narrow' for him, from now on. As soon as he can travel, he's going to Terryville, fur-lined overcoat, sealskin cap, gray clothes, walrus bag, and all; he's going there to take up life just as I left it for him, and to show himself worthy of the love of all those good people—and especially of Mabel Rodney."

"And that, I think," added Summerfield, "is the biggest proof I can offer, colonel, that this Christmas spirit can really get to a man with a character transformation that is so wonderful as to be well-nigh incredible." He paused. "But what do you say, now? Am I, or you, the donor of that thousand dollars our Christmas committee expended in charity?"

"You win, Summerfield," returned the colonel promptly. "You got your five hundred from Hemphill, I suppose?"

"No," said Summerfield; "I waived that. You wouldn't expect me to take the money from a crook—even a reformed rook—would you?"

"Hardly. You said something about fruit cake. I wouldn't mind sampling it; and if it's as good as the pie——"

"I left that with Hemphill," cut in Summerfield, "but I held out the pie as desert for this little dinner of ours. Now

if you'll excuse me, colonel, and if you're not too tired, Jimmy, I'll just dictate that climax in the story of 'Delaney Redivivus,' or whatever we called it. You see" he explained, "I want to get it off my chest while all the facts are so vividly in my mind."

"It ought to be a hot climax!" exclaimed Kennedy, getting up from the table.

The colonel also got up and pushed himself into the overcoat. Judkins was holding for him. "I'm going over to the club, Summerfield," he observed, "and tell all this to the boys." He paused as he pulled on his gloves. "Of course," he said reassuringly, "your name will stand out plain enough, but I'll disguise Larry Colburn's, otherwise Hemphill's."

"That's all right," agreed Summerfield. "We'll each do the same, not only with Colburn, but with all the Jennifers. Names, as I guess I've proved to you, are only things to conjure with, anyway. Night, colonel!"

Did you like this story, or did you not? If you liked it, please let us know why in a letter, briefly worded. If you did not like it, let us know that and why. And while you are about it, comment on any other story in this number, or give us your opinion of the number as a whole. The editors will appreciate any letter you may send.

Passed Again

JOHNSON went to a cigar store for some cigarettes. After paying for them, he said to the man behind the counter: "By the way, you gave me a bad quarter in my change yesterday."

"Impossible," said the proprietor. "I have never taken or given a bad quarter during all the years I have been in the business."

"You certainly gave me a bad quarter," said Johnson.

"My dear sir," said the man, "with twenty years' experience of handling money, I can tell at once by the touch of a coin whether it is good or bad. Instinct, my man. At any rate, I suppose you managed to get rid of it?"

"Oh, yes," said Johnson. "I have just given it to you for the cigarettes!"

Swaps — All Sorts —



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

STARTING SOMETHING.

LOOKING at her dainty white gold wrist watch for the millionth time, Maisie reflected that she might have known there was a catch in this somewhere. It was all too good to be true. Just a week before, by a lucky fluke she had got her job back, her very own job as stenographer for George Dorsey, attorney at law. From her viewpoint it was a position vastly to be desired and preferable to that of prime minister to any king. On top of that, as a reward for having been of great assistance to one of George's clients, she was the proud possessor of this perfectly lovely watch.

It was a real watch with real works, with the name of the best watchmakers across its tiny face, and its frame gleamed with sapphires. As if those two things weren't all a person could expect, the first day she was back at work for George she had asked, politely, for a small advance.

She had explained that she had not tried to collect the money due her from her former employer, who had been so unceremoniously deserted when she came to the client's—and George's—rescue. George, feeling that it was the least he could do, had stopped in at the cafeteria on his way to the courthouse and politely collected her money for her. It was all

running too smoothly. At any minute she expected to step into a deep hole and wake up, find all this was a dream.

So it was no shock to Maisie at all, this notice that George placed upon her desk that afternoon. Something was bound to happen. The mere fact that the building which housed their tiny establishment had been sold to the city for municipal uses and that they would have to find other offices was nothing but a trifle. Why, the town was a mass of office buildings! There was nothing in that for George to get worried over. They had until the first of November, didn't they? This was nothing but the last of September. George would find an office.

George didn't, however. The main reason George didn't find a new office, and it was a very good reason, was that the second day after that notice arrived, George fell ill. He did not have a dignified, serious illness which could send him to the hospital and gather in callers with flowers—he had the mumps.

Aside from the inconvenience of his illness, there was the idiocy of it. Maisie fumed a bit when his landlady telephoned the office; one person who had no business getting mumps, in Maisie's opinion, was a young attorney who was just beginning to build up a practice and a reputation, especially a young attorney who had to move out of his office.

The process of elimination was rapid. With George removed, who was there to find an office? One Maisie Sinclair—née St. Clair, as she described it—the change having been made to shield George's tender sensibilities.

Very well, Maisie had to find an office for George; and, reason added, as long as one had to get a new office, why not get a decent one and refurbish while one was at it—and surprise George!

Of course she would have to search for an office at lunch time, or morning and evening, but there was nothing to prevent her reading the papers during working hours. Despite a disastrous experience, Maisie was still a firm believer in advertising.

Somebody might be advertising an office for rent, somebody else might have even less clients than George and want to sell their office furniture; the mere matter of the money with which to purchase the grandeur her mind's eye saw, Maisie brushed aside impatiently. Money—what was money? It was merely smooth pavement over which to advance. If the pavement ended, where did one walk? One took to the gravel, or a dirt road. Gravel and dirt road had no terrors for Maisie.

In searching for the Wanted Column, Maisie's eye stumbled over a column hitherto unknown to her. It was headed: "Swaps of All Sorts." Maisie had a saxophone. She had been too busy to practice on it; maybe there was some one in the world who craved that instrument. Sure enough—there was!

"Well, ain't that like hot water in the bathroom after eight o'clock!" she said to herself happily. "Posilutely a fool for luck. Here's a bird that wants a saxophone and has got a typewriter to trade for it. Right there's a bird that needs a typewriter and will trade a barber chair to get one. Now there oughtta be somebody wantin' a barber chair——"

An idea was percolating; now it burst into melodious bubbling. To Maisie had come a great light. George would be unable to work for a month; there wouldn't be any real business going on at the office. Time would hang heavy. Maisie wanted to furnish an office. Why not answer all these advertisements, accept

and maneuver all these trades, keep occupied, and incidentally trade around until she got what she wanted out of it?

It would be a great lark, fill up time, and it might be profitable. With a beaming countenance Maisie turned back to the ad of the musically ambitious person and informed him, via the telephone, that she had his vastly desired saxophone. It would be lovely if he were to call at the office for it the following day.

That deal having been satisfactorily adjusted, with a typewriter as a basis for her operations, Maisie started systematically at the top of the Swap Column and communicated, either by telephone or letter, with every person advertising that day, and there were three columns of them. The next day things would begin to happen.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN THINGS HAPPENED.

THINGS did happen, beginning early.

The typewriter was a better one than the battered wreck Maisie had been thumping, so she promptly attached it, and in its place set George's old one. By nine o'clock unto the typewriter had been added a set of books on salesmanship, for which Maisie had traded two unmatched chairs in George's office and two dollars in cash.

By ten o'clock Maisie owned the barber chair, but her treasury had been depleted by seven dollars more. She began to think. If she were going into this on a businesslike basis, to make any profit, she had to take in money to boot, not pay it out. She hatched another idea.

She decided to ask every one from now on to leave their wares to be sold or exchanged, paying nothing until disposal of the object. When she had some spare time, she answered the Swap Column for that day. Business was good; and by five o'clock that night there were quite a lot of things lying around the office—two burned-leather pillows, a cornet, a derby hat and a bag of golf sticks lay in the barber chair; a wardrobe trunk stood by the door, topped by a radio set.

A bridge lamp with a lovely silken shade hovered over a rusty vacuum cleaner, and four grain sacks full of chicken feed leaned against an over-

stuffed rocker. People certainly wanted to get rid of funny things. So far no one had been anxious to get rid of good-looking office furniture, but this was only the second day. Anyway, if she did get any, she had no place to put it. She would have to find that office.

That really was almost too easy. In the best-looking building on Broadway, Maisie walked nonchalantly into the rental bureau and was met with a smile. Yes; they had a lovely suite on the ninth floor. They would be glad to show the suite to her. They did.

Maisie thought it ideal. There was a long, narrow, central reception lobby that had three connecting doors on each of its long sides. Those doors, they explained kindly, were into the private rooms. Yes; there were six private rooms. An attorney with much practice would need the entire suite, wouldn't he? He'd want one room for his brief clerk, one for private secretary, his own office, his library—oh, yes; certainly!

"Oh, I'm quite sure this would be just what G—Mr. Dorsey is lookin' for," gurgled Maisie. "We're so darn cramped where we are now. Why, I even have to have my desk in the main waiting room!" she said loftily. "An' I'm his personal secretary. Isn't that disgustin'?"

"An' them other two rooms would be swell for the other two young lawyers Mr. Dorsey is thinkin' of takin' in as—as—junior associates!" Maisie went on glibly, wrapped in the part she was playing. "An' the rent? Not that it matters, o' course, but——"

"Two seventy-five," said the blasé person, whose hair was slick with vaseline.

"A day?" asked Maisie, startled. That was a funny way to rent.

The personage laughed pleasantly at her wit. "Or two hundred and fifty on a year's lease," he said casually.

Two hundred and fifty! Maisie had thought he meant two dollars and seventy-five cents. Two seventy-five! Two hundred and seventy-five dollars a month, and George was paying thirty dollars where they were.

She gulped, turned her gleaming amber eyes upon the personage, said nonchalantly, "Quite reas'nable, I'm suah!" and

turned toward the door. "Mr. Dorsey is in conf'rence and can't be disturbed until noon to-morrow, so if I'd wish to rent this suite, th' afternoon would be all right, wouldn't it?"

"Dorsey?" queried the personage. "Attorney?"

"Oh, yes; one of the vurry best." Maisie assured him. "He ain't ever lost a case in his life!"

She tapped a scarlet sandal on the floor. She tapped it to fox-trot time, and the blasé personage was a devotee. He tapped his patent-leather oxford and grinned a wee bit.

"Oh, that'll be soon enough," he assented. "I notice you dance!"

"I shake a wicked hoof," Maisie remarked. "Dancin' is one thing I ain't never had to take lessons for. If I c'd spell like I can fox trot, I'd be teachin' in the public school." She waggled her earrings.

"Do you ever step down to the Cinderella Roof?" queried the near youth.

Maisie had the barbed-wire gate closed, however. Should she let this young sheik find out that George Dorsey had only a single office, with a partition to make two rooms of it, that she had no more chance to rent that suite of offices than she had to be general in the army?

"My chaperon's in Europe right now," she told the personage, "an' they never let me out nights unassorted! Laugh that off!" She chuckled and fled toward the hall. "When I come back, you can discuss it further," she called to him. "If I see you to-morrow!"

Down in the elevator she went and to the street. "When I come back!" She gasped as another thought struck her. Why not? The rent was two fifty—it came easy now—a month on a year's lease, for six offices besides the lobby. One office would do for George; the five empty ones might be—— Could it be possible that there were five young lawyers in the city of Los Angeles who might want offices in the exclusive Mackinaw Building, but who couldn't afford a suite?

If there were, how could she find them? When lawyers wanted offices, where did they advertise? She had the answer: Ask a lawyer. Better still—ask two lawyers. Into the telephone booth in a drug store.

Start at the A's in the list. Being after five Maisie had to call eleven lawyers before she found two in. Their answers were identical: Law offices wanted or to rent were generally advertised in the *Legal Record*. Note: Subscribe for the *Legal Record*.

"Xcuse me," said Maisie to the second lawyer, "but is the Mackinaw Building a pretty good building for a lawyer?"

"Well, my opinion would be that the Mackinaw Building would be desirable for any one. 'If I were looking for an office, I should look there, at least," said the voice. "Who did you say this was?"

"Oh, this is Miss Sinclair," she bumbled back gayly. "You wasn't thinking of moving, was you?"

"No; I'm not even thinking of it, but I might hear of some one who wants an office," said the voice. Its owner was racking his brain trying to remember who in tunket Miss Sinclair was and where he met her and how well he should be expected to know her. "You might give me your telephone number, and I could direct any one to you," he fished.

He caught the fish. Or rather, Maisie caught one. She had a perfectly strange lawyer trying to find her some tenants for this office.

Another ideal! Another telephone call. She inserted an ad of her own in the *Legal Record* and ordered the paper delivered to the office from then on; contentedly she went and ate a meager supper, not at a cafeteria. She supped at a lunch counter. It was a good day's work.

CHAPTER III.

SUCH A LOT TO DO.

THERE was no day's work after that which wasn't. Maisie became the temporary owner of the most amazing collection of oddities the world has held—far funnier than Noah's Ark. "I've got Noah backed off the boards!" she said with a giggle. It was a good thing George had the mumps; saved him from the apoplexy he would have had if he had looked in at the office.

Thirty lawyers, young and otherwise, answered Maisie's ad in the *Legal Record*. From that number Maisie chose five; four of them recent graduates of the local

university, who had incomes enough to warrant offices while they awaited clients; the fifth was an elderly man, well versed in law and practice. Each of these five had been maintaining offices of his own, paying the salaries of stenographers, also; each of them was glad to get into the exclusive Mackinaw Building for the prestige of the name and at the same or less expense than that to which they were accustomed.

"Why, yes; with stenographic service it's terrible cheap," Maisie assured each one singly. "We'll be havin' a girl just to tend office an' do your work, an' I'll take charge. Pretty soon I'll be practicin' law myself, I expect," she added modestly. "But a hundred dollars for what you're gettin' is a snap."

"There's one catch in it," she moaned to herself, later. "I can't collect any rent till they move, an' I can't let 'em move in till we're in and have got a good girl to work for them, an'——"

That day George was able to telephone to his office. To Maisie's assurance that everything was "goin' fine" at the office and she'd filed the papers he left to be filed and done all the copying and there would be a new client when he came back, a friend of his—Mr. Tevis—he listened easily; but at mention of hunting an office he reverted to the old George.

"I'll attend to that matter by mail or telephone," he said testily. "Please don't concern yourself, Miss Sinclair. I may even take desk space somewhere for a while." That hit Maisie between the eyes! "I'll be out in a few days," he finished.

"Desk space!" Not if Maisie knew her stuff he wouldn't. She closed the office and tore down to Main Street, into an establishment where three golden emblems hung above the door, and out a moment later, saddened and at the same time jubilant. She went straight back to the Mackinaw Building. It so happened that the splendid suite still remained empty.

"Lucky for you," said the agent of the building, not the mere shining assistant this time. "If every one wasn't so busy right now, catching up with their work after their summer vacations, this place would have been snapped up."

"Well, G—Mr. Dorsey is—away on his, right now," said she with a catch in her breath. "That's why I haven't come back sooner. And until he writes me, I won't be able to pay the rent. But would fifty dollars hold it and let me get the office—force—moved in until he gets here?" She had to think fast.

"Why, I guess so. You want to take it by the month or the year?"

"Dear snakes, the year, most assuredly!" said Maisie, fluttering. "Mr. Dorsey is so rushed he wouldn't be able to think o' movin' again in a year's time. He's got five other lawyers assistin' him," she went on grandly. "We got more than a mere office to move!"

"Oh, certainly; the deposit will be all right," said the agent, impressed. "Will you sign the lease or have Mr. Dorsey do it?"

"Oh, I'll sign it!" she gasped. "He leaves all the—most important things to me. I'm the head and shoulders of his business, you understand. Lots of the time he only calls over the phone to speak about business."

M. Sinclair, she signed firmly on the dotted line, took her receipt for fifty dollars, looked at her watch to see how much time she had spent—and remembered. She sighed, shook herself a little; she'd get her wrist watch back right after they moved and she had collected those rents. Now to clear out the rest of those Swaps.

One day was busier than the rest. Telephone calls to the other tenants of the magnificent suite took up a lot of time. Would they move on Saturday afternoon? They would. Maisie ordered the telephone transferred to the new offices; almost fainted in surprise when they came, Friday, to do it. Usually one waited a month. Perhaps the up-and-up amber eyes had something to do with that; the young man who took the telephone order liked amber eyes and scarlet sandals. He, too, mentioned the Cinderella Roof.

Maisie took stock—what had to be got rid of and what had to be moved. She must remember to drop in at the sign painters that night—two errands there. This moving was great fun. Wouldn't George be excited and pleased? The

Swaps were duly studied, in order to dispose of the rest of this stuff. Everything must go by Monday.

Then, on Saturday morning, George tried to telephone his office. Because the telephone was in the Mackinaw Building and no one was there as yet, George got no reply, which worried him. While he did not feel like going downtown, had not intended to go back to the office until Monday, he went.

CHAPTER IV.

SURPRISED, AS USUAL.

WHEN he saw the door to his office, George's state of mind started to wobble. The door was decorated by a large pasteboard, its edges fastened to the glass with stickers. In crooked and heavily leaning letters that board announced to the world that this was the lair of M. Sinclair, Swaps. Swaps! What on earth! George unlocked the door and saw—everything on earth.

Even as Maisie, he had a wild reminder of the Ark. He went in, edging his way gingerly between the stuff piled on the floor and the stacked furniture, and sank into the chair by the stenographer's desk. What was all this about?

Articles of feminine clothing lay in heaps across chairs; kitchen utensils dwelt amicably with automobile tires; carpenter's tools were embraced by a Paisley shawl. Mute evidence of her perfidy surrounded George, but Maisie was gone. Not only was she gone now, but she was gone forever. No favor on earth, be it large or small, could square a trick like this.

Because he was ill, unable to come to his office, she had dragged into it the discard of the world, made it a den of—Swappers. Monday—for she evidently did not intend to be back that day, Saturday—he would have her clear out this place and leave him his office again in peace.

The fact that next week he might not have an office did not mean anything. He didn't care. The mumps had hurt; he wasn't feeling well yet; any old desk in any old office with any old lawyer would do him. No more Maisie, though! George got to his feet and staggered out.

This was lucky for Maisie, for George, and for every one. Maisie, resplendent in a new Marcel wave obtained during her noon hour and in one of the creations she had taken in exchange for phonograph records—a gown that was a web of heliotrope and silver—came dashing into the office about ten minutes after George's departure. Busy days of the past became memories of stagnant and idle hue.

This was the Busy Day of All Time! From one o'clock on, her customers were to arrive to take away the things they had vastly desired in place of other things which they had consigned to her care. From one until three, Maisie checked off lists and hollered joyfully.

"Yes, Miss Starke; I got the beaver-collared coat you wanted for them carpenter's tools," she said to one visitor.

"Right here, Mr. Brown! I got you two darn good tires for that old set of harness," she told the next caller.

"I hope you fit them three dresses, Missis Horning," she remarked to the third. "I picked 'em myself, an' I will say I got the best outta a lot a couple o' hundred. Oh, yes; I got rid o' your old ice box. I was real lucky on it."

Men, women, boys, and girls came, received the thing they had hoped for, sometimes battered, sometimes surprisingly better than they had expected, but it was the thing they wanted. And they were rid of something they did not want.

"Well, Mr. Midge, I sure hopes you get a swell trip outta that flivver," Maisie said to another caller. "It looked like a pretty good one to me. He rode me around a coupla blocks in it."

"Well, I'm the bird that can fix it," said Midge. "Miss Sinclair, you don't know what it means to me, your tradin' off my shoe-shine stand for that flivver!"

"Well, properly speakin', I didn't." Maisie grinned. "Of course I traded your shine stand to a fellow for a fruit stand; an' I traded the fruit stand for a little bit of a grocery store; an' I traded the little grocery store off for this here flivver. You might say you traded a shine stand for a flivver—not me." She did not mention that there had been something "to boot."

"Well, I don't care how you got it, it's what I wanted," Midge declared.

"I'd been tryin' to sell that stand for a long time. It's wonderful how you come and asked me if I'd sell it or trade it."

"Oh, a fella had just told me he wanted one, and you was the first shiner I saw after that. Well, g'-by! Ain't this the gay life, though?"

By four o'clock, the office was empty. At four fifteen, the expressman came to move George's office. At four thirty, Maisie headed for the Mackinaw Building, supervising the moving in of the office furniture of her five tenants as well as the shining, almost new furniture she had got for George out of the swap business. George had said he would be back at the office the first of the week. She could hardly wait.

Neither could George. Monday morning, bright and early, he made his way downtown, feeling better, girded for the fray. Surely there was no defense for this latest crime of that Sinclair person. The halls were pretty dark, the door locked. It wasn't nine o'clock yet. He inserted his key, threw open the door, stopped aghast.

An empty room confronted him. No chair, no desk, no stick of furniture; he strode to the entrance of his own dark cubicle. It was empty, stripped of furniture.

CHAPTER V.

A SIGHT UNBELIEVABLE.

WEAKLY, George leaned against the wall. What could it mean? Maisie St. Clair—he gave her her full name, slurring nothing, even though he hated that name and all it implied, including the tight-rope walker who had been Maisie's father—had done some wild things, some ignorant things, some almost unbelievable things, as balanced against some wonderfully loyal, helpful things.

She had broken every rule man could make for the businesslike running of an office, but until this moment no thought as to her honesty had ever entered George's head. Not that he thought her honest. It hadn't occurred to him to think her honest, because her very honesty was so intrinsically a part of her that one left that out when thinking about her.

His furniture, however, had vanished. Naturally he thought it was stolen.

Maisie was gone. He had no office at all. The files of his precious clients—few as they were—where were his files? He peered into his own room again—nothing!

George really hated to report this to the police; then the thought came to him that Maisie St. Clair might not know anything about it. She had committed one terrible crime, gone into the swap business thinking he would never know the uses to which she was putting his sacred office, but she might not be at the bottom of this.

Perhaps some office-building thief had stripped the place. Perhaps Maisie would come to work at nine o'clock as astonished as he was. George sat down on the floor and waited until nine. Nine fifteen arrived, so did nine thirty. No Maisie appeared, however. Well, there was nothing left to do but report it to the police. He went out of the door. From force of habit he pushed the button to put out the light as he left.

The light had not been turned on, but now it was; and in its sudden radiance George noticed a cloth banner, printed in gay red-and-black letters, a banner about fifteen feet long, stretched along the side wall of the hall, above his door. He stood off and read it, it being the sort of thing that hangs across the streets—on a larger scale, of course—during election and celebration times. Dumfounded, he read:

GEORGE DORSEY, ATTORNEY AT LAW, HAS REMOVED HIS OFFICES TO SUITE 900-1-2-3-4-5-6, MACKINAW BUILDING.

It had been hard for Maisie to stop there. She had on her copy "Old and New Clients Drop In," but the printer had pointed the error of her ways, to her vast regret. Nobody would let her do anything to get George before the public. Oh, well, at least she could hang that sign up. No one could stop that.

Maisie had felt, after much cogitation, that the sign would be the most wonderful surprise of all for George. Consequently she intended to let him go to the old rooms and read it, then find his way to his new home—a lovely plan. Just like a pardon from the pen it would be for George; he wouldn't have to hunt a place to park his desk.

The mate to that sign, he saw in the

lower lobby of the old building, over the entrance door, on the inside. Rage seized George then. Reaching up, he grasped the lower edge of the thing and jerked it from its place and stamped out and down Broadway. Mackinaw Building! Was this a hallucination? Was he really uptown, or was he at home, delirious? Why, the Mackinaw Building was one of the finest buildings on Broadway! The rents there ran into real money. He felt himself going crazy.

He was not too crazy to recognize the Mackinaw Building entrance when he came to it, however, or to say "Nine" to the elevator operator. Or to tiptoe as he got out and stopped before a resplendent door with the magic words "George Dorsey, Attorney at Law" upon its shining patterned glass. It just wasn't possible. Something was awfully wrong. He looked foolishly at the door and in a silly sort of way the looks of that sign in his old building came back: "Suite 900-1-2-3-4-5-6."

Maisie had left nothing off. She had wanted the world to know that George Dorsey, attorney at law, had six full rooms and a lobby. To George, however, there was only one door, and he feared to open it. At last—knowing that only in this way could the mystery be solved—he put his hand to the artistic glass-and-bronze knob. It turned silently.

George Dorsey peeped through the slit—and found the huge lobby untenanted. He opened the door a wee bit farther and peeped some more.

On the floor was a tasteful carpet of gray—obtained in exchange for a phonograph and a set of records. At the farther end, their backs to the great windows and side by side, stood two very good typewriter desks—one of them swapped for a lawn mower, a wheelbarrow, and three sets of dishes; the other in exchange for an order on a grocery store for a goodly amount. A brand-new machine was on one desk—bought, on time, by Maisie—the first fruit of her trading graced the other. Along one wall was a neat settee—a baby carriage had been the price of that. Six shining doors opened from this room. Each door bore a name in neat black letters: Mr. Gill; Mr. Anderson; Mr. Abbott; Mr. Wing;

Mr. Norris; Mr. Dorsey. George sighed. He wasn't dreaming up to this point.

Should he or should he not go in? At last he sidled in. No one was in sight. That, of course, was because the girl Maisie had hired to do stenographic work for the tenants could not come until Tuesday. No one really expected to work on Monday anyway; they were celebrating their moves, singly and together.

George noticed the neat, substantial chairs which dotted the length of the lobby. One wall, between doors, was covered with sectional bookcases and a valuable nucleus to a law library showed there—Maisie had answered an ad to take care of it for a retired lawyer.

CHAPTER VI.

TOO BUSY FOR IT.

A DOOR opened suddenly, one of the six, and George sat down next to the door which was marked "Mr. Gill," trying to look as if he were waiting for the mythical Gill, and Gill knew it. After one glance, the man—a nice, pleasant, kindly looking elderly man—went over and knocked on the sixth door, the one whose office was on the corner, the best office of all; the one whose door was marked "Mr. Dorsey."

A voice said: "Come in!"

The elderly man went in. He thought he closed the door, but he didn't. Maisie didn't seem to notice it either. George could hear her voice. So, Miss Snclair was responsible for all this!

Somehow, George felt guilty at being ready to fire her for once and for all, but he could not overlook a liberty like this. That crazy girl must have taken this office in his name, made him responsible for more expense than he could possibly bear. No doubt the elderly man owned the suite, and Maisie had sublet from him.

This just couldn't be done. George decided to fire her and move again. His thoughts came back to a stone wall. He sidled out of his chair and into the chair near the Mr. Dorsey door. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but his name caught his attention.

"Is there really such a person as Dorsey?" the elderly man was asking.

"I'll say there is!" replied Maisie. "Whadda you think I'm trying to hand you?"

"Well, you know, my dear—don't take any offense—I'm an old man, and I admire you immensely for what you've done, but it seemed to me that a man capable of practicing law would have attended to a move like this himself and not merely given his secretary orders over a telephone."

"I'll tell you, if you'll swear not to give me away," said Maisie in a sudden burst of confidence. "You're a regular bird, and you're old enough not to josh George about it. It's this way. George is a smart-enough bird, an' he's got a good head, but there's one thing that holds him back. He ain't got any confidence—in himself or me or anybody else. He's always figurin' that something's gonna fall flat about everything."

"Now, between you an' I," she went on, "George's got brains, but he ain't never gonna get no chance to use 'em, tucked away up in the north end of the business district with his office lost between a massage parlor an' a carbon-paper joint. There was other lawyers in that building, but they had the front rooms an' a front of several other kinds. George was hid back in a dark corner, an' you know they ain't never found that lighthouses is any good built back in a hollow. Ain't that the wrong connection, though?"

"Young lady, I fear you have— Well, the advertising mind. At any rate, I'm lost in admiration. Go on."

George's ears burned furiously, but he was waiting for the rest now. How dared she discuss him?

"So when that building got the razz," Maisie continued, "I decided that George had got to have a front window of his own, kinda dress up the window, after a manner o' speakin', an' let the cockeyed world know what kinda goods they got for sale inside. That's all. I got a glim cast over this place—an' I took it."

"You—you really mean," gasped her caller, "that your employer, a young lawyer just starting to practice, doesn't know you have taken these offices?"

"You got the meat of it right off the ice," answered Maisie crisply. "You see,

none o' you birds woulda come here and made the grade by yourselves, an' you're darn tootin' glad to get in this way, with a swell front an' all, an' I can furnish it to you, an' we're all havin' a good time."

"Aren't you afraid of what he'll say when he gets back from his vacation—about the expense, and all that?" The old man seemed tickled about it.

George gnashed his teeth.

"Expense—my grandmother's mittens!" Maisie laughed. "Y' know—I gotta bargain in this joint, and after you birds pay your rent, this office ain't costin' me nothin'. Besides, George won't have nothin' to say about it. I'm the fancy little bird that signed the lease. You're rentin' from me. As to vacation—listen! This is a secret. George ain't takin' nothin' like that. He's home with the mumps!"

"Well, young lady, I have to hand it to you," her tenant said, chuckling.

"That ain't the half of it!" Maisie continued. "Outa that swap business I started, I got all new furniture for George. I started out with nothin' but a saxophone an' about twenty hard iron men. My watch went in hock, an' I darn near got arrested for runnin' a second-hand store without a license, but I kidded 'em out of it, an' I come out ahead. I got every bit o' this furniture free and clear out o' the mess. We get this office free, an' I made money to boot. All George is gonna be out any month from now on is my salary——"

George had heard enough. He slipped quietly toward the door and crept down the stairs one flight, where he could think.

That amazing young lunatic had moved him from a cheap back office into one of the finest in the city, had sublet to such advantage so that he was to have no expense at all—George didn't know that even the other stenographer's salary was included in the profit—had traded to such advantage that his office was well furnished, from somewhere she had got hold of that working library in plain sight—his head rocked with it all. What was he to do?

He had come down with the express intention of freeing himself once and for all from this slangy, spectacular, cheerfully ignorant hoyden who had so bra-

zenly betrayed him by starting a sort of free-for-all junk shop in his office—and now!

It hadn't been his office. She had seen a glimmering vision and had followed it unafraid; she had risked her precious wrist watch—her well-deserved reward—to help him; she was doing all this—for him. Even her mistakes had been made in trying to be helpful!

George groaned. How was he to stand it? How could he bear with her flyaway bobbed hair with its gaudy combs set with gems; her sleeveless dresses, gay and cheap? Her scarlet sandals and her habit of dancing even while she sat at her desk; her insouciant grin and her bland disregard for the king's English—and there was always the fear of what she might do next!

He started back up the one flight of steps to the ninth floor. Above him, a door opened. He heard voices. One was oily, the other flippant.

"Thanks a carload!" Miss Snclair was howling cheerfully. "It's terribly sweet of you, but I ain't got time to fling a wicked heel this week anywheres. My boss'll be back from his vacation trip to Honolulu, an' I'll have to be goin' over the dozens o' new cases that are crowdin' in since he went. If you find a busier dame than I am, you gotta travel."

The door slammed. Some one—the blasé youth from the office of the building, if George had known it—took the elevator. George squared his shoulders and walked up the steps. He was going up—to be surprised and pleased.

Another story of Maisie's adventures will appear in an early issue.

Getting Even

JONES: "How do you like your new apartment?"

Jenks: "All right, except that the man downstairs is learning to play the cornet."

"You ought to get a trombone."

"I did; that's why he got the cornet!"

Seldom Found

WHAT is your ideal man?"

"One who is clever enough to make money and foolish enough to spend it!"



His One Ewe Lamb~

By
(Hapsburg Liebe~

(COMPLETE IN THIS
ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

CHANGED SURPRISINGLY.

THE eastbound train blew for Little Smoky Summit. "Buck" Ashford straightened his new, slim, black tie over the front of his new, blue shirt and hitched his new, clay-colored corduroy trousers upward a trifle. He gave a new set to his broad-rimmed felt hat and saw that the laces in his high boots were properly tied. There was a screech of brakes, and the train came to a jarring halt.

The conductor sprang nimbly to the cinders and helped down from the high step a bewildering vision of feminine prettiness in blue and white. An obsequious porter of ebony hue followed with four stuffed suit cases and an alligator-skin bag. Buck Ashford gasped. A few months before, Bess Lane had left the Little Smoky Mountain country in a percale dress and a three-year-old hat, coarse shoes, and home-knit brown stockings with white rings in them. She had been carrying an antiquated patent-leather valise.

Perhaps it wasn't Bess, after all. Buck walked toward her. It was Bess, and he stopped and stared at her. The train moved onward.

She approached him smilingly. "Buck!" she cried. "Ain't—aren't you going to speak to me? And where's daddy—father? Didn't he come to meet me?"

Buck Ashford was a healthy young man, and Heaven had blessed him with a

sense of humor. He took off his broad hat and slapped his knee with it and roared with laughter.

Bess Lane had bobbed her dark-bronze hair, the finest head of hair in the Smokies. There was a little rouge on her cheeks and a little more on her lips. Her eyebrows had been plucked to beautiful curves, and her nails were pointed. She wore a beauty spot, and there was powder even on her neck. Her summer's visit to a cousin who lived in Knoxville certainly had worked a transformation.

"Sure! I'm goin' to speak to you," said Ashford, sobering, taking her hand and squeezing it until she winced. "I pe'suaded yore daddy to let me come to meet you. My hosses is skittish o' trains, Bess, and I left 'em a ways out the road: 'Sputter's' there holdin' 'em fo' me."

"Very kind of you," the girl said as coolly as though she had not been engaged to him for ten years—since, as a matter of fact, he was thirteen and she eleven. "I'm ready to go when you are."

Ashford rolled a cigarette and proffered it to her. "Have one with me?" he asked, watching her closely.

"Why, Buck, you—you mean old thing!" Bess exploded. "Do you think I would smoke? If you ain't going to carry these bags for me, I'll carry 'em myself!"

He picked them up and led the way toward the buckboard. The girl followed in an angry silence.

Halfway to the vehicle, Buck Ashford turned and faced Bess Lane. "I'm afeared, Bess," he drawled, "yore daddy won't like it. You had the finest head o' hair I ever saw. He's old-fashioneder'n me, Bess."

"Elizabeth," she corrected stiffly.

Without the flicker of an eyelash, Ashford amended: "I'm afeared, Elizabeth, yore daddy won't like it. You had the finest head o' hair I ever saw. He's old-fashioneder'n me, Elizabeth. Do you cuss well?"

"Buck!" cried old Jephthah Lane's lone, pet daughter. Her eyes blazing, she caught up a stone and drew back her arm.

"Oh, boy!" Buck jubilated. "It's the same Bess! Hit me, honey; please, hit me with that rock!"

She dropped the stone and covered her face with her hands. Her fine shoulders shook a little.

Ashford put down her baggage, slipped an arm around her, and half whispered: "I didn't mean it, honey. Why, I'd give you my life. Sputter'll be wantin' to see you, honey. Neither him nor me has hardly slept fo' a week, thinkin' about you comin' home. Fo'give me and le's go."

Bess tried to smile. Buck gathered up the bags, and they hastened on toward the buckboard, in which Sputter Lane sat grinning. Sputter was barefooted, freckled, tow-headed, and twelve years old. He hailed his sister with delight.

"I like it purty good," the boy said as they turned into the river road, "but pap'll shore raise hell. He's allus a-braggin' about yore hair, sis."

Bess caught her breath.

Ashford winked at the pair of bays and suggested mildly: "Maybe you'd better rub off that little black speck on your cheek and the paint."

"I will not!" spiritedly declared Bess.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE CLOSED GATE.

THE Ashfords and the Lanes were numbered among the aristocrats of the Southern mountains. They lived in big, two-story, hewn-log houses, with orchards of apple trees, fertile fields, and green

meadows around them, and went in much for good horses. Notwithstanding their illiteracy and the uncouthness of their daily lives, there had always been something fine about them.

An hour's fast driving brought those in the buckboard to the weather-beaten split-paling gate before Bess Lane's home. Jephthah Lane, a tall, gaunt, bearded man of sixty, had the reputation of being extremely hot-headed. It was also said that he never talked unless he had something to say. He and his wife and their five stalwart sons hastened toward the gate to meet the returning girl, the apple of their eyes.

Old Lane was in advance. He threw the gate open and then stopped stock-still in the gateway as Bess sprang lightly to the ground. Something steely in his eyes froze her cry of gladness. He had seen that fully four fifths of her beautiful hair was gone. He had seen also the beauty spot, the rouge, the powder, and the fine clothing.

The silence seemed thick enough to cut with a knife. It was broken by "Bad Jim," the black sheep of the Lane family.

"Offer her a chaw o' tobacker, pap," he growled.

Again the silence was thick.

"Cousin—Cousin Patty had hers bobbed," Bess said, at last. "Nearly everybody in Knoxville had theirs bobbed and roodges. A—hairdresser in Knoxville offered me two hundred dollars for my hair. It ain't never in the way any more, and I—I ain't had a single headache since mine was cut off, and Cousin Patty ain't, either."

For the matter of that, she hadn't had half a dozen headaches in her life, but it seemed a fair argument.

Jephthah Lane spoke then. His voice was almost sepulchral. He addressed Ashford. "I expected Bess home, Buck. The little Bess that used to foller me around in the fields, barefooted, and ride the hosses to water and ax me a thousand questions every day and set on my knee and sing little songs to me when I was tired—my one little ewe lamb—"

He broke off abruptly. He had to break off or choke, and he was a Lane. The girl's eyes filled up with tears and ran over. A great wave of anger shook

her father's gaunt frame. He took one deliberate step backward; deliberately, and with sinister significance, he closed the gate between them. One short gesture from his horny hand sent his wife and their five sons to the vine-covered porch. Jephthah Lane was king there.

Then he said very bitterly to the sober-faced Ashford: "Buck, it was you that brung this short haired, painted woman here. Now be good enough to take her away."

Bess winked the tears hastily from her eyes and stiffened herself. In a voice that was quite level, she said to her father: "Maybe you'll find that I'm a Lane, too."

"Please tell yore daddy, Buck," old Jephthah said over her head, "that I reckon I won't go a-fishin' with him to-morrow." With that, he turned toward the porch, walking very straight.

Bess stared for a moment at the closed gate, then faced about slowly and looked at Buck Ashford.

The boy, Sputter, was standing up in the buckboard. His jaw muscles were tight, and his freckles seemed very brown against the ashen-white of his skin. He, too, was a Lane. "Git in, sis," said he. "We're a-goin' home with Buck."

Ashford mustered a smile for the girl. "Le's hurry," he urged, "or we'll be late fo' supper."

Bess climbed to the seat beside the sweetheart of most of her life. He clucked at the bays, and they were off down the road toward the Ashford home. A mile passed, and they came to the river. The Ashfords lived on the other side. The horses stopped in midstream to drink.

"I told you," soberly observed the boy, "that pap'd raise hell. How long air you a-goin' to let us stay at yore house, Buck?"

"As long as the's one lone board left on the roof, Sputter," Ashford answered, without even turning his head.

Because he wished to save Bess the bother of refusing him, the young hillman decided that he wouldn't ask her again to marry him. He thought she wouldn't want him now. He was rough and uncouth, he knew, and he feared that she had drawn herself to a higher plane

than he could ever hope to reach. Then, there was a chance that she had met somebody else, during the summer at her Cousin Patty's.

The horses had stopped at the Ashford gate before Buck realized it. He passed the reins to the boy. "Wait a minute," he said, and leaped to the ground and bolted for the house.

He found his father and his mother, his three sisters, and his one brother, at the supper table. Old Tom Ashford sensed immediately that something was wrong, and he went to his feet. He was a bearded giant, and the reputation he had for being a man of few words equaled that of old Jephthah Lane.

"Tell it, Buck," he ordered.

The son explained hastily the regrettable thing that had just come to pass. His three sisters at once left the table and ran to welcome Bess Lane—and to see her bobbed hair.

"Jep was wrong, pap," Buck went on. "You must go over there to-night and try to patch it up, and I'll go with you. You can do more with Jep than any o' the rest of us. Mother, honey, ef you'll fix a place at the table fo' Bess and me and Sputter—'Little Tom,' I wisht you'd please stable and feed the hosses fo' me."

Little Tom Ashford, named for his father, was as big a man as his brother Buck, and he went out at once.

Bess Lane and the boy Sputter came in with the Ashford girls, all of them baggage laden, a few minutes later. If Buck's sisters did not both envy and admire the Lane girl's shorn tresses, there was a remarkable amount of latent histrionic talent in their make-up. Mrs. Ashford hugged and kissed Sputter and his sister. Old Tom shook his head at the sight of Bess. He didn't approve of the so-called new-woman idea, but he was fair enough to believe that it was strictly a woman's own business.

CHAPTER III.

FIGHTING TALK.

AN hour afterward, Buck and his silent father caught out horses and saddled them, mounted, and rode toward the home of the Lanes. A full moon shone brightly, and the trees along the roadsides

stood out with almost photographic distinctness. There was the soft murmur of the near-by river, the weird cry of an owl, the far-off baying of a hound at the eternal mystery of the moon.

The pair of horsemen noted that the house was in darkness, as though in mourning, when they had drawn up before the Lane gate. The elder Ashford hallooed softly, and the voice of old Jephthah came somewhat strainedly from behind the grapevines of the porch, inviting the visitors to alight and come in.

"Not now, I reckon," drawled Tom Ashford. "Jep, ef ye don't mind, I'd like to see ye fo' a minute."

Jephthah Lane walked down to the gate, rested his forearms on it, and looked inquiringly up to the bearded face of Buck Ashford's father. Lane's countenance was bitter. "Well?" he asked.

"Jep," old Ashford began in a low tone, "you was a little hasty wi' pore Bess. She's mighty onhappy, and so air you. I reckon yore wife air tore up about it, too. I want ye to come over to my house and make up wi' the gyurl and then let her stay there on a visit fo' as long as she will."

Idly he rapped a low tattoo on the nearest gatepost with his riding whip. For what seemed a long time, Jephthah Lane did not speak. The younger of the two horsemen watched his sweetheart's father closely, and he saw the lean, bearded face become even harder.

"I've knowed folks," at last growled Lane, his lips and his voice quivering, "who made a good livin' jest a-mindin' their own knittin' and not a-pokin' their noses into other people's doin's!"

Tom Ashford, too, was of a fire-and-tow breed. He had not guessed that the heart of Jephthah Lane was breaking within him under the stress of a terrific battle between penitence and foolish pride. He bent over in his saddle. "Jep," he demanded hotly, "air you a-aimin' that nose talk at me?"

Lane was utterly beside himself. The moonlit world turned blood-red before his eyes. With a movement so quick that neither of the two Ashfords saw it, he snatched old Tom's riding whip from his hand and struck him across the face with it.

"Keerful, pap!" Buck warned.

His father had already sent an iron-hard fist crashing into Lane's throat. Lane staggered backward, stumbled, and fell, his head striking a stone that was imbedded at the side of the guttered path—and there he lay, face upward, white and still. The younger Ashford slipped from his saddle. He opened the gate quickly and knelt at the supine figure. Ashford the elder sat his horse like a man dazed.

"Jep," moaned Buck miserably, "I'm mighty sorry!"

The five strapping brothers of Bess and one of her uncles swooped down upon him from the darkness of the vine-hung porch. Bad Jim Lane pushed Buck roughly aside.

Old Abner Lane dropped to his knees and put an ear to his brother's chest a moment, then he jumped to his feet excitedly. "Jep air dead!" he cried.

Bad Jim swore aloud and raced toward the house for his rifle. Buck Ashford sprang through the open gateway and swung himself into the saddle. He struck his father's mount with his hat, and the two horses were off like twin streaks on the moonlit road. Tom Ashford still was like a man dazed.

"It's bad, pap," said Buck, as they reached the river. "You didn't mean to do it, I'd take oath, but——"

He didn't know how to finish it. The older hillman made no reply whatever; his face was like gray marble. The son pushed both horses across the stream at a reckless gait.

Tom Ashford had not spoken when they dismounted and turned their horses into the barn lot.

At a side gate that led to the front yard, Buck whispered: "Le's not go inside right now." He felt that he couldn't face Bess with the sorry news just then.

The two sat down together on the front-porch steps, in the moonlight. The moonlight was sad now. The cry of an owl was like a dirge.

At last Buck put a hand on his silent father's shoulder. "Pap," he half-whispered, "I'll stick to you."

Down on the river road, a horse's iron-shod hoof struck a stone. Buck Ashford jerked his head around and listened. The

sound was repeated. A Lane, Bad Jim, no doubt, was coming to claim an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life, according to the old code of the hills. A feud was at the burning, a feud between Bess' people and his own, and Buck shuddered because he knew very well what it would mean.

The older man, too, had heard that ringing of hoof against stone. Suddenly he turned to his son. "Go into the house, Buck," he said.

"You go in with me, pap——"

"Go into the house, Buck!" repeated Tom Ashford.

"You—you mean," the son stammered, thinking that he saw light, "you'll let 'em shoot at you and collect their fool debt and——"

His father's voice was like steel. "Go into the house, Buck!"

Never in his life, until now, had young Ashford disobeyed his sire. He glanced toward the slightly open front doorway, through which a narrow shaft of yellow lamplight fell at a long angle on the porch floor. The laughter of his younger sister came like the tinkle of a silver bell. Then he heard Bess laugh a little, and he was instinctively thankful to whatever gods there were. Back in the dining room, Little Tom was thrumming idly on a cat-hide banjo.

Buck and his father went to their feet as a dry weed snapped somewhere in the vicinity of one of the cedars in the yard. Immediately there was the quick flash of gunpowder, the keen thunder of a rifle—and Tom Ashford crumpled, with a pale smile, into the arms of his son.

Another horse's hoof rang against a stone on the river road.

Through the night came the strident voice of old Abner Lane.

"Don't shoot any more, Bad," he called. "Yore pap air done come to! I listened to his chest wi' my deaf ear!"

CHAPTER IV.

CAUGHT NAPPING.

WITH his mother and his sisters and Little Tom, Sputter, and Bess Lane crowding around him, Buck carried the limp form of his father into the house, and then he rode like the wind toward

Little Smoky Summit for the old hill doctor.

The remainder of the night seemed an eternity in length, but dawn came at last. Buck Ashford sat at his father's bedroom window, his eyes absent-mindedly on the night's last dim star. In the shadows back of him sat Bess Lane and his mother. The boy, Sputter, lay half asleep on the floor. The doctor sat on the edge of the walnut four-poster bed and watched the rise and fall of the wounded man's chest; he had got the bullet. Old Tom had been shot dangerously near the heart.

"How is he?" Buck suddenly asked softly.

"A-sleepin' now," hoarsely whispered the doctor. "Ef nothin' happens, he mought git well."

The barefoot boy sat up on the floor, yawned, and remembered. Just then Molly Ashford appeared at the slightly open door and beckoned to Bess Lane. Bess rose and stole from the room, and her brother crept silently after her.

Out on the front porch, Molly whispered: "Honey, somethin'll haf to be done quick, or our menfolks'll be a-fightin' almost afore sunup! Little Tom has already got sixteen men o' our kin out at the barn with rifles. I hate to ask you to go to yore daddy, honey, but I don't know anything else to do. I've begged Little Tom not to go on with it, but he won't listen. The chanst is slim, I know, but what else is th' to do?"

Bess went a trifle pale. She, too, was aware of the tragic, desperate toll collected always by mountain feuds: and this one, between her people and Buck's—it was insufferable, even to think of it. She swallowed her Lane pride and kissed Molly Ashford.

"I'll try," Bess promised.

When she started for the gate, Sputter followed her like a dog. Perhaps Little Tom wouldn't allow her to take a horse, but the doctor's animal stood hitched to a near-by fence. She climbed into the saddle, took Sputter up behind her, and rode rapidly homeward.

"I told you," the boy muttered, "pap'd raise hell."

Because she did not wish her father to see her riding like a man, she dismounted

and tied the horse's rein to a tree a hundred yards from the house. Sputter slipped to the ground and went with her along the dusty road.

Bess stopped before the weather-beaten gate. It was closed, and that fact struck her somehow like a blow—the gate was still closed. Then she saw that her father, a bandage around his head and a rifle across his knee, sat on the porch steps. Her five stalwart brothers and twelve of their kinsmen lounged here and there on the porch, all of them grimly silent. Each had a rifle in his hands, or within easy reach.

The girl was about to lift the wooden latch of the gate. Jephthah Lane riveted his gaze upon her, and she dropped her hand. Her mother, seeming much worn, appeared in the front doorway.

"Will you come here to the gate, mother?" called Bess.

The men eyed her hard, but said nothing. Mrs. Lane hastened down to her daughter.

"Is there any way to stop it, mother?" Bess asked.

"It all 'pends on Buck's people," said Mrs. Lane. "Our menfolks is only a-waitin'. They won't begin the fight, fo' beca' they think they're ahead as it is. Little Tom Ashford sent word last night fo' the Lanes to make out their last wills and testaments and ketch up with their prayin'. Try to handle Little Tom through Buck, honey, and fo' the Lord's sake, hurry!"

Bess and Sputter turned quickly away. Mrs. Lane called after her boy, but he gave her no heed. Two more minutes saw him and his sister astride the doctor's horse and flying along the river road.

When they reached the home of the stricken Ashford chief, the rising sun was burning a hole through the fringe of pines on the eastern mountain's crest.

Molly Ashford, tearful and anxious, met Bess at the steps. "Our men is a-fixin' to start!" she said gaspingly.

Bess ran into the house and was soon beckoning half frantically to Buck from his father's bedroom doorway. Buck rose and hastened to her. She told him of the impending battle as she led him toward the barn.

Under a gnarled apple tree, Little Tom

Ashford stood with a rifle in the crook of his arm. Facing him, also with rifles in their possession, were sixteen strapping hillmen.

"What do you-all think you're a-goin' to do, anyhow?" sharply demanded Buck Ashford. "Make pore white trash out o' yoreselves, or what?"

"I thought," Little Tom clipped, with a sour glance at Bess Lane, "you was yore daddy's son!"

"That's exactly the thing!" Buck declared quickly. "I am his son. And, bein' that, I won't see you-all disgrace his name."

"With pap a-layin' in the house there, a-dyin' from a Lane's bullet, you got the nerve to talk that a way! Why, Buck, you——"

An amazing, bewildering interruption came then. From half a dozen surrounding points, a dozen strange masculine voices ordered grimly and very nearly in unison:

"Drop your guns!"

Buck Ashford wheeled and found himself facing the muzzle of an army-type revolver in the hands of the county's high sheriff. With him, armed as well as he was, or better, he had a very determined-looking posse. The Ashford clan was not made up of cowards by any means, but every man of it knew the sheer futility of fighting the law, especially when the law had as distinct an advantage as it had now.

Seventeen rifles fell to the ground without a word. Then Little Tom, his face white under its sunburn, turned his fierce eyes toward Bess Lane.

"You—you she-Judas!" he blared.

Buck clapped a hand hard on his irate brother's shoulder. "Unless I change my mind, and I sure don't think now that I will," said he, "I'll thrash you fo' that, some time."

Sheriff Ramsay Arnett interrupted Little Tom, when he said: "It wasn't the girl that called me out here. It was a man and a good man at that. I'm going to take every one of you to Johnsboro with me, and you'll have to give peace bonds or go to jail. Are you ready?"

They were as ready as they would ever be. Arnett and his posse started them.

weaponless, toward the road. Buck Ashford drew back.

The sheriff beckoned with a forefinger. "You're one of them; come on."

Bess Lane interposed: "But he was tryin' to stop 'em! He was tryin' to make peace when you got here. His daddy's layin' in the house, mighty bad off an'——"

"Come on," Arnett cut in, "you're an Ashford!"

Buck reluctantly permitted himself to be herded along with his kinsmen. Bess wept a little as she watched them go. The law was wrong. Then she went into the house.

CHAPTER V.

AGAINST GREAT ODDS.

IN the Ashford home, old Tom was not sleeping. When Bess tiptoed unsteadily into his bedroom, he was calling deliriously for Buck.

The girl knelt at the bedside, and tried to soothe him. "It'll be all right," she crooned. "Buck has gone—gone to town after some fine medicine fo' you."

"What d'ye mean, fine medicine?" the old doctor demanded. He didn't understand, and he flatly refused to see the girl's tragic wink. "I got plenty o' medicine. He's a-worryin', pore Tom. He wants Buck. Go and git him. Bring him here. Tom's life hangs by a thread, and worry mought turn the balance the wrong way. Bring Buck here!"

Bess left the room. She felt worn, tired, flighty. She was strong, finely strong, but she wasn't accustomed to the gnawing strain of anxiety and grief, coupled with the unusual loss of sleep.

Sputter appeared before her like a freckled jack-in-a-box, and her haggard face caused the boy to ask questions. The girl didn't answer, however. Her mind was completely filled with the doctor's words:

"He wants Buck. Go and git him! Bring Buck here!"

She caught the wondering boy by an arm and hurried him from the house and to the rifles that lay under the gnarled old apple tree at the barn. There she quickly took up an old brass-bound repeater.

"You get one, too!" she ordered.

Willingly Sputter obeyed. He knew the use of firearms, and so did his sister.

Swiftly and unobserved, Bess led the way across the orchard, across a gray cornfield, through a patch of woodland. Sputter asked no questions. Perhaps he didn't have breath to spare, for the girl was running like a frightened doe. Through another gray cornfield and into another woodland she led him.

When at last Bess halted, they were on the laurel-covered top of a high cliff that overhung the road to Little Smoky Summit. The girl was panting hard now, and her face was white except for splotches of vivid crimson on her cheeks. Then her head swam badly, and she caught a laurel branch to steady herself.

"Peep out, Sputter," she whispered jerkily, "and see if anybody's comin'."

Sputter knelt and parted the laurels. "I see a crowd o' men!" he said amazedly. He had not witnessed the quiet, wholesale capture of the Ashford clan.

"It's them," said Bess, going unsteadily to her knees beside her brother. "It's the sheriff. He's takin' Buck to jail, and we've got to make him send Buck back. We mustn't sure-enough shoot, honey, but we must let on that we will. Keep—keep hid, Sputter; they mustn't see anything but our guns, and they'll think—maybe—that you're a man. Oh, if I could ha' seen all this trouble—I wouldn't bobbed my hair!"

"I told you," whispered Sputter, "that pap'd raise——"

"Don't, honey, please!" she interrupted weakly.

Her head was swimming again. Her heart pounded. She closed her eyes for a moment. Perhaps it was the height that made her so dizzy, she thought vaguely.

The sheriff and his posse had come to Little Smoky Summit on a train, and they, as well as the Ashford clan, were on foot. When the party was almost under the cliff, Bess Lane cocked her rifle for the ominous clicking noise it would make—the boy beside her following suit promptly—and called down:

"Stop!"

They stopped. All eyes were turned toward the top of the cliff. They saw

the pair of frowning steel muzzles. Then a deputy who was rash and impulsive rather than courageous jerked up his revolver and fired. At that second, Bess was seized with another attack of dizziness and fell over the edge of the cliff.

Of them all, it was only Buck Ashford that darted forward like a bolt from the blue to catch her. He braced himself as her hurtling body struck him. Her momentum carried her to the stony ground, but his arms broke the force of her fall and saved her, beyond doubt, from a mangled death. Buck knelt with her head on his breast and saw a red mark that a stone had made across her temple, a mark that Ramsay Arnett thought was the path of his deputy's bullet. The girl was unconscious.

"I'm a-takin' her back home," said Buck, white-faced, rising with her in his arms, "and the's no man a-goin' to stop me."

Sputter Lane was now sitting on the brink of the cliff, his bare legs hanging over, and the rifle in his hands was ready. "Go ahead, Buck!" he called angrily. "Jest let 'em try to stop ye!"

Buck started with his burden, and no hand was raised against him.

Arnett and his posse went on toward Little Smoky Summit with the Ashford clan. Sputter, carrying two rifles, caught up with Buck Ashford in the road a few minutes later.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE GOLDEN MOONLIGHT.

THE young hillman carried the still insensible girl straight into his father's bedroom and to the doctor and put her down gently on an old-fashioned lounge. While they were reviving Bess, Buck bent over his father.

Old Tom looked up into his son's face and smiled. "I feel better," he mumbled.

When Bess Lane opened her eyes again, there was delirium in them. Her face was flushed, and her pulse was rapid.

"I'm afeared o' brain fever," whispered the old healer of the hills. "I reckon she mought ha' been sawt o' tuckered out aforehand."

They moved her into the old four-

poster bed in the "company" bedroom and sent for Jephthah Lane and his wife. Mrs. Lane came, but her iron-hearted husband wouldn't. The day wore on. Bess grew worse, more and more fevered and delirious, while Tom Ashford began to improve. Sputter, the boy, sat on the floor at the foot of his sister's bed and cried.

Night fell sadly. There was the soft murmur of the near-by river and the dirgelike cry of an owl, while somewhere on the mountain above, a hound bayed mournfully at the eternal mystery of the moon.

Since his father was resting easily, Buck Ashford hardly left Bess Lane's bedside. Silent figures of women half filled the company bedroom. Somebody kindled a little fire in the yawning stone fireplace, for the autumn night was chill.

Bess stirred on her pillows, fumbled at the bandage around her temples, opened her eyes wide, and stared as though into space. Buck leaned toward her, and just back of him was the doctor.

"What is it, honey?" Buck asked softly.

"Daddy wouldn't come," she said, as though to something she saw out in space. "He wouldn't come."

"I'll hog-tie him and bring him," muttered young Ashford.

"No," said the wise old doctor. "He'll come."

Jephthah Lane, pacing the floors of his dark house, was a man in torment. It was a torment he had fashioned for himself, and he was too stubborn to walk out of it. His sons would have gone to the Ashford home, if he would have gone with them, but he wouldn't.

The voice of Bad Jim rang in the blackness: "Pap, ef she dies without you a-goin' to see her, you'll have one son, anyhow, that'll die a-despisin' the ground ye walk on."

"Shet yore mouth!" growled old Lane.

Eleven o'clock came; twelve, one, two o'clock came. The moon was high and brighter than new gold. As silent as the grave now was the Ashford home. Buck still sat beside the fever-racked girl, who mumbled fitfully in her delirious slumber. The doctor dozed in his chair, and Mrs. Lane drooped in hers.

Suddenly Bess murmured with odd conviction: "Daddy's comin' to see me. He's comin'," she kept repeating. "He's comin' now."

Buck Ashford never understood it. She sat up in bed, apparently as strong as ever, and put a hand to the bandage about her temples as though to adjust it slightly. Buck went to his feet. On her face was a glow that kept him from speaking to her. Then she crept out of her bed in her white nightdress, and still he somehow couldn't speak.

When she started toward the door, groping, the lamp's light notwithstanding, he somehow couldn't touch her. Spirit she seemed, rather than woman. He followed her silently to the front porch.

On the steps, in the golden moonlight, Buck Ashford saw the crumpled, gaunt figure of an old man.

"Daddy," Bess Lane breathed strangely, "I knowed you was comin'. And the gate is open, ain't it?"

Old Jephthah went, tottering, to his feet. He stiffened himself as her arms went tremulously around his neck. Then he caught her up as though his strength were that of a young man and carried her into the house, and Buck Ashford showed him the way.

Soon she sank into a restful sleep—the Bess that used to follow her father in the fields, barefooted, and ride the horses to water and ask him a thousand questions every day, and sit on his knee and sing little songs to him when he was tired—his one little ewe lamb.

At sunset two days later, Bess was well on her way to recovery. She sat up in bed with pillows at her back, with Buck in a chair beside her, and asked questions. There was nobody else in the room, except for the barefoot Sputter; and he, his pockets and his stomach filled with green apples, a half-eaten green apple in his hand, slept a troubled sleep in Ashford's lap.

"It was the doctor that phoned for the law," explained Buck. "It was also him that got Little Tom and our kin turned loose. Our daddies has shook hands nine times, and they're now layin' plans fo' a big fishin' trip or somethin'. And—every girl on Little Smoky has gone on a strike

and bobbed her hair; even my sisters has!"

Bess laughed. "Then she said seriously: 'Ten years is a long time to be engaged, Buck. What'll we do about it?'"

"What—whatever you say," Buck floundered. He still feared he wasn't good enough for her.

The girl blushed beautifully. "If you leave it to me, we'll be married to-morrow."

He reached for her, and she reached for him. It disturbed the boy on Ashford's lap, and the boy muttered in his apple-torn slumber:

"I told you that pap'd raise hell."

How did this story strike you? A few words about it, if you will be good enough to write them and send them to the editor. We ask you to say, without reserve, just what you think of it. And in the same letter, please give us your opinion of TOP-NOTCH in general.

Just Like a Man

TWO men with the same name were members of a certain club. One day a letter addressed to one of them was left at the club. The wrong man opened it first. It was a bill from a tailor.

He knew the missive did not belong to him, so he put it back in the letter rack.

The next night both men happened to come to the club at the same time. Both went to the letter rack, the man for whom the letter was intended reaching it first.

He read the epistle very carefully. Then he tore it into bits, which he tossed carelessly into a wastepaper basket.

"Poor little girl!" he said. "How she loves me!"

How'll You Have It?

"I'll have duckling—without green peas," said the customer, who did not know the ways of the little restaurant.

"Very sorry, sir," remarked the waiter. "you can't have it without green peas. We have no green peas this evening, only spinach and string beans. Will you have it without spinach or without string beans, sir?"



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

THE MAIN IDEA.



WITH the soul of an artist Chief Boatswain's Mate Nolan had the outward appearance of a hucko mate. His hands and his face were scarred from fistic encounters with his fellow men, his jaw heavy and his gaze direct. He was one of the few men in the United States navy who had served his sea apprenticeship in the days of wooden ships and iron men. At times he was given to saying: "And now we have iron ships and wooden men."

In a couple of years Nolan would retire, and he expected to devote the remainder of his life to painting. He planned to paint men, not ships or marine views. His subjects were to be men in the act of winning. He knew just what he would put into the face of each—that something that shows the winner giving his all to win. For years Nolan had studied "that something." Repeatedly he had photographed it.

An apprentice seaman winning a boxing match had it, so did the twelve men in the ship's racing cutter when they won the cup; the half back of the ship's football team had "that something" when he bucked his way through the flagship's team and won the fleet championship. Nolan would put "that something" into oils for the youth of the land to see and profit. Repeatedly he had photographed

men in action. He even had a picture of the "Old Man," winning a golf match. The skipper was squaring off to sink a fifteen-foot put and "that something" was written all over his face.

As Nolan studied a column of figures, thoughts of men and oil paintings were submerged. The stern lines on his face had softened, and occasionally a smile flitted across his battered features. "The boys came through in great shape," he mused, "but if I had a thousand dollars more I could do a number of things I planned on. These Christmas trees aboard ship are great affairs, but sometimes I'd like to go a bit further and do——"

He did not finish the sentence, but to his mind, the vivid mind of the artist, came a vision of homes from which some of the poor little chaps came. "I'll have to make the best of what I've got!" he said to himself.

The purring of a ship's motor boat reminded Nolan of an engagement. There had been considerable mystery about the engagement. The skipper had notified Nolan that Mrs. Brice Delaney desired an interview with the chief boatswain's mate; and Mrs. Delaney was one of the Four Hundred. Nolan knew her features fairly well, thanks to occasional pictures in the society section of the Sunday newspapers.

Mrs. Delaney golfed, danced, rode a black horse, and drove a wicked-looking runabout. As Nolan neither danced,

golfed, nor rode a black horse, and as Mrs. Delaney did not box, row, nor go in for track meets, the boatswain's mate was puzzled.

"We haven't a blamed thing in common," he muttered, "unless it is painting, and mighty few people know me as an artist. I'm usually swinging a towel or working on some fellow's muscles. Here she is now!"

An orderly knocked on the door, and with a hurried dab at his thin, gray hair, Nolan said: "Come in!"

"Mr. Nolan?" The visitor was about thirty-five and attractive.

"Yes'm! Have a seat. Kind of cramped quarters aboard ship!"

"But very neat and snug," she remarked with a quick glance around. "Oh, do you paint?" She looked at several carefully covered oil paintings.

"Yes'm, after a fashion!" Somewhat red of face, Nolan hesitantly displayed his work.

She was silent for a time. "Men!" she said at length. "But such men. Such character and determination. I'm not a critic, Mr. Nolan, but I know when a picture strikes a responsive chord as these do."

"Pictures are not painted for critics," he said; "at least, mine are not. They're painted for people who don't understand art, but who find themselves stirred. That's the test." He covered the paintings almost reverently, and the harshness of his battered face was softened.

"I came for business and we talk of art!" she said suddenly. "We are raising a Christmas Fund ashore. We have given a play that netted satisfactory returns, there is a formal dance scheduled, and now we plan to give a boxing contest. I am told a person answering to the name of 'Rough-house' Rockett is coming to the Coast. He is one of the contenders for the championship, and perhaps he will donate his services."

A grim smile flitted across Nolan's face. "Count the navy boys to donate their services, but Rockett is out for the money. They wanted him for the Milk Fund show in New York, but his price was too high. Christmas and a baby without milk is nothing in his young life. Still, he'd be a great card and——"

"And—what?" She sensed something of interest in his words.

"I'd like to kill two birds with one stone," he said thoughtfully. "I'd like to help you with your fund, and we will. The boys will be tickled to death, and I'd like to see Rockett beaten. There's a man in the navy I believe could do it, but he won't fight!"

"A navy man who won't fight! Why, I never heard of such a thing!" Mrs. Delaney was shocked, and properly so, for her maiden name was Kitty Finnigan, and she was proud of it.

"The poor fish is in love," explained Nolan, "and when a fellow is in love, he'll do anything for the girl in the case. He'll cut out smoking, cussing, and even change the cut of his hair. This fellow quit boxing because the girl said it was disgusting and brutal. As this girl is a riot in looks, I didn't blame Jim Joyce much, but the girl had never seen a fight, and that wasn't fair to Jim nor the game."

"Perhaps I know her!"

"You probably do," Nolan returned. "She's a tennis player, and her name is June Stone!"

"June Stone!" said Mrs. Delaney. "Of course I know her. June's a brick in most things; you go ahead with your program and leave June to me. If Jim Joyce wants to meet this Rockett person, and you think he is capable of preventing the rocket from soaring higher, then by all means a slip of a girl should not interfere. For sweet charity almost anything is permissible. The armory has been donated and so have the tickets and other incidentals. Of course, you understand, the navy boys are to have their share of the proceeds for their own charities."

"Thanks, but the main idea is that charity is charity. We are mainly interested in raising funds, then seeing that it reaches the right spot. I'll wire Rockett for his terms! After that, I'll dig up an opponent."

"You match Mr. Joyce and none other."

"I'll do my best," Nolan promised. "In the meantime, you work on Miss June. She's the boss of brother Joyce at present."

CHAPTER II.

SOME STRATEGY.

WITHIN twenty minutes after Mrs. Delaney's departure, Nolan was on his way ashore. Beneath his arm he carried a number of photographs, and his face was wreathed in smiles. Fortune had not only smiled, but had roared with laughter. Twice he read over a telegram delivered almost as Mrs. Delaney was going over the ship's side.

"Leave Rockett's rat-faced manager to scent a dollar a thousand miles away," Nolan reflected. "He's got wind of the fact society is going to stage a swat-fest for charity, and he figures Rough-house is the biggest object of charity in the land. H'm! Got to watch my step or the best we'll get is the worst of it."

The telegram, which was really a night letter, read:

NOLAN, U. S. S. *Saratoga*: Press reports state society and navy stage boxing contests. Wire terms. If satisfactory will enter Rockett against any man satisfactory to us. Bill Rockett as next world's champion in press notices of event. JOE JOHNS.

"Full of lies as usual," commented Nolan to himself. "The press reports have said nothing about it as yet. He got his information from some local fight manager who is friendly to him. Another thing, man and terms must be satisfactory or they don't play. He wants the lion's share and a set-up for his man to knock-out. Wants me to advertise Rockett as the next world's champion. Well, if he is, I'm the next admiral of the Swiss navy. Somebody once made a crack that I'd make a fortune as manager of some good boxer," he went on, "because I'm clever. Hah! That's good. Well, anyway, I'm going to find out how clever I am. I'm going to stack up against Joe Johns, and if I can beat him at his own game and still play square myself, I might consider being a manager after the navy retires me."

Joyce was at the landing when Nolan stepped from the launch.

"You're always in training, Jim," said Nolan, "but get ready for a real scrap, I'm going to match you against Rough-house Rockett!" Nolan saw the younger

man's eyes sparkle at the prospect, then the light died.

"No, Nolan; I told the girl I was through, except what boxing I did to keep me physically fit. A promise is a promise—"

"Until released, my boy, which is something I'm so sure of accomplishing."

"I've tried to make her see the light and failed, so you can't hope to—"

"I'm banking on her being a good sport," cut in Nolan, "because she engages in play herself. Don't be interrupting your betters, my boy, but get aboard ship and leave that pretty sweetheart to somebody who understands women."

"You?" Joyce snorted. "An old bachelor like you know women? Huh! That's good!"

"No; not me, but Mrs. Delaney, she of the good looks and the Four Hundred. What Mrs. Delaney starts, she finishes, and she agreed to take care of Miss June if I'd go ahead, and so I'm going. I'm bound for the newspaper offices right now. All this is for sweet charity, and there'll be publicity by the square foot."

The chief was off, leaving Joyce to his thoughts. At first, he contemplated telephoning the girl, but he decided against it. Perhaps Mrs. Delaney could bring about the change in mind. She was a clever, intelligent woman.

Nolan paused at the telegraph office and sent the following telegram to Joe Johns:

Fleet-society bouts charity except five thousand dollars split among winners. Possibly preliminary men will waive purse, leaving thirty-five hundred for winner, fifteen hundred for loser, main event. Men available, Martin Jones, "Spark Plug" Bogan, Jim Joyce, "Gunner" Davidson, "Radio" Egan.

NOLAN.

From the standpoint of cleverness, that telegram was worthy of an old-time manager. It left plenty of room for the haggling over terms so dear to the heart of some fight managers. Nolan had a hunch that while five thousand dollars was hardly worth pausing for, much less thirty-five hundred, Johns would not pass it up, but would come back with a counterproposition that Rockett take all.

For this reason he had purposely omitted the fleet champion's name. Nolan

believed that Jim Joyce could beat the fleet champion any day in the week. The fleet champion believed it also, which made it unanimous. Having scattered seed on fertile soil he made his way to the office of the morning paper and entered the sporting editor's sanctum. Mrs. Delaney was already there, and the magic of her name had brought the society editor and the sporting editor into the same room.

"Ah, here's Mr. Nolan now!" said Mrs. Delaney. "We were just talking about you. Have you a picture of Jim Joyce?"

"Yes; but first have you squared things with Miss June?" queried Nolan, who did not propose to go too far until that angle had been settled. He supposed it had been arranged by now.

Mrs. Delaney dazzled the group with a smile. "There will be no trouble there, I assure you. I know June thoroughly. Why, before I am through she will be in a ringside seat cheering. Toodle le-ooo!" She left the office.

"That's how she gets over every obstacle," commented the sport editor. "She just considers it as good as done. Well, if some of these birds who are kicking about their luck would just follow her example, they would probably have better luck."

"Which isn't luck at all," remarked Nolan. "Well, here's a picture of Joyce." The chief tossed the photograph carefully before the editor, but his manner was that of one eager to receive praise. He was proud of that picture.

The editor had bales of photographs of fighters in the conventional pose. He paused in the middle of a yawn. "Who took it?" he asked. "That hits me right between the eyes!"

"I took fight pictures for ten years before I got the one I wanted! That's it! I didn't intend to spring it, but on account of this being charity, I've changed my mind."

"Look at the expression in the man's eyes, the tenseness of his muscles—pantherlike! You got it just as he delivered the knock-out punch, his opponent is out, and—— Say, I won't waste such a work of art on pink paper, that goes with the high-brow Sunday stuff on hard-finished paper in brown tones. That's art!" de-

clared the sport editor. "If a painter could only get that—but he can't."

Nolan knew better. He left the office with a light heart. He was enjoying this.

CHAPTER III.

UP TO HIM.

A NUMBER of things happened and failed to happen during the remainder of the week. Rockett's manager did not reply to the telegram. Nolan was not particularly surprised. That was old stuff, and he refused to be tricked into making a better offer.

Jim Joyce's training was progressing nicely, and he was making things difficult for his sparring partners. On Sunday it clouded up, and on Monday the storm broke when Nolan's best bet entered with a frown on his face.

"I'm not blaming you, Nolan," said Joyce, "but I'm counting on you to get me out of this."

"Out of what?" Nolan glanced up and noticed that Joyce was toying dejectedly with a diamond ring. "The deuce, Jim! Did she give it back to you?"

"Yes! Said Mrs. Delaney had been to her, but she refused to consider it until the charity angle was presented, then she asked to consider. We balled things up; we should have got her consent first, but I couldn't leave the ship on account of target practice. I supposed you——"

"Then we'll call it off!" Nolan cut in. "I'll substitute some one else. There has been no agreement signed."

Joyce shook his head. "It has gone too far now, Nolan." He became grim. "Her attitude has been unfair, yet if she felt that way about boxing, I was willing to give it up. Marriage is a matter of give and take, so is an engagement. She would have done as much for me. Trouble is, Mrs. Delaney was too sure of herself. I'm going ahead with my plans. Perhaps if June could see a bout just once, it would change her ideas."

Nolan reached for his hat. "Where does she live?" he asked.

"Don't ride over her roughshod. You won't win that way!"

"I don't know a blamed thing about women, but she's walked all over my favorite sport, and I'm going to tramp on

hers a bit. She's something of an interstate tennis champion, I believe?"

"But, Nolan——"

Nolan had already left the room and was hurrying to catch a motor launch. He indulged in the luxury of a taxicab for the rather long ride to Miss Stone's Lake Washington home. It was early in the morning, but he was counting on a girl who played tennis being up at that hour. She was. Also, she was somewhat cooler than the morning when he made known his business.

"Yes," she said slowly; "there is one way this can be arranged. Mr. Joyce can keep his promise."

"I recommended that," remarked Nolan, "but he says it has gone too far. He's right. We are wrong in this respect. We should have come to you instead of leaving it to the usually clever Mrs. Delaney, but Joyce can't be expected to give up the man's game of boxing for the parlor sport of tennis."

The slur upon her favorite sport had been deliberate. He saw the color deepen in her cheek at the reflection upon the game. He meant that she should be angered.

"Mr. Nolan," she asked coldly, "did you ever play tennis?"

Just the trace of a smile flickered across his face. She had fallen into his trap, and she sensed it before the trap was sprung.

"No, Miss Stone; I've never played tennis!"

"Then you don't know what you are talking about. It is a fast and hard game!"

"So I have heard. Did you ever witness a boxing match?" He had made his point, but he did not force her to reply. His tone became gentle as he added: "My method was harsh; it went against the grain to adopt it, but have you been fair? Before one condemns any sport, should they not first witness a contest or two?"

"You are right," she replied frankly. "I should have at least attended a contest or two. But that won't change my opinion. Look at this, and it's of Jim, too!" She thrust before him the picture section of the Sunday paper with its numerous photographs in tones of rich brown. "Look at the beastly expression

in his face! It is fairly bloodthirsty! Look at the tenseness of his muscles—they remind one of a panther about to bring down some helpless thing. I was wavering until I saw this picture. Now—— I could never marry a man with that terrible something in his eyes."

"You are a sportswoman; be fair; attend the bouts, as many of your friends will." Nolan studied the picture with her words ringing in his mind. "It is the background that you object to, Miss Stone, and not the man. The game is not as pretty as tennis, but men love it. There must be sport for all kinds of people. Some like cards, and others like physical combat. It is the same; cards, tennis, or boxing—one or more humans pit their brains and skill against others."

He left her and got into the taxi. "I must do something for her own good," Nolan said to himself. "She's trying to be fair, but some time, somewhere, she's witnessed a one-sided, brutal fight. It has left its stamp. It's up to me to wipe it out. Rockett, Joyce, and the others are unimportant. It's that something!"

CHAPTER IV.

CAUSE FOR WONDER.

IT so happened that Rockett was important, for his manager was awaiting Nolan aboard the cruiser. Joe Johns greeted him with a crafty smile. Nolan did not want to be annoyed just then. He had spent most of the day looking through the sporting editor's morgue, and now he wanted to paint, but Johns was not to be denied.

"You're taking a lot for granted in publishing around that Rockett and Joyce are to meet," said the manager. "No contract signed; no agreement on the split. I don't know if we even want to meet Joyce. Who is he?"

"I knew you'd side-step the fleet champion, so I dug up a man who can make a good showing at least. That's the man we offer."

"About the purse. Thirty-five hundred isn't enough."

"This is for charity!"

"Not for us, it isn't. It's business. A boxer doesn't last forever. We've got to get ours while we can. We want five thousand, and that's dirt cheap because

we're the drawing card." Johns leaned closer.

"We can fill the armory with sailors if we have to," said Nolan. "If the winner of the main event is entitled to thirty-five hundred, then the loser is entitled to fifteen hundred."

"Five thousand is our figure: take it or leave it!"

"And you'd hold out for more, only you know that's the limit allowed. We've got to have some money left for charity. There'll be a roar if it gets out that Rough-house Rockett gets five thousand and Joyce nothing. It takes two to make a battle."

"Sure!" Johns' eyes narrowed. "If it'll make the crowd feel any better, put it down winner takes all. Then all Joyce has to do is to win!"

"Apple sauce!" snorted Nolan. He argued the point, but not too heatedly.

Ultimately he was persuaded, and when the contract was signed and the forfeits posted, he indulged in a quiet chuckle and locked his door. For a long time he looked at a bare square of canvas, then he began to paint.

Hour after hour slipped by, but the silence was unbroken, then he spoke, as if the words were the conclusions of several hours' thought. "If she sees Jim Joyce win, it may win her and it may disgust her. If he does win, I hope his back is toward her at the big moment. If he loses—— I wonder how she would regard a loser? I wonder!"

CHAPTER V.

THE LOSING WINNER.

TWO days previous to the contests, the newspapers reported that every seat was sold, from the expensive boxes to standing room in the gallery. Johns paced the narrow confines of his room and talked to Rockett, who was sprawled out on the bed.

"What a gate! What a gate!" the manager exclaimed. "I believe we could have cut in deeper if we'd held out."

"I don't like that winner-take-all stuff!" growled Rockett. "Are you sure there ain't a catch somewhere?"

"I looked up this bird Joyce. He's a sparring partner for the fleet champ. If

he was good, he'd beat the fleet champ, wouldn't he? And in one round you knocked out a man who knocked out the fleet champ. That settles it."

"Betting any?"

"You tell 'em! Went over to the navy yard and made a few wise cracks that stirred the boys up. A sailor is a fool. He thinks his ship or his shipmate is the best in the world. That was one reason I headed for this scrap—the bets. We're covering every cent of navy money we can get, and there's plenty. I'm wise, see? I know how to handle sailors. Make 'em mad; they see red and will bet on anything."

"And if something should happen? Suppose I run into a fast one by accident?"

"That can happen, but if I see any signs of things going against us, I'll be in the ring yelling foul at the top of my lungs. Don't worry! They won't chalk up a knock-out against you this trip. When you start, get your man and get him fast. We've never fought for less money, but we've more jack at stake than ever before. It'll be a tough Christmas for the navy." There was more of it, as Johns paced up and down the room, and his words and manner were filled with supreme confidence and self-approval.

It was when the pair made their way through the packed thousands to the ring that another bit of news reached Johns. He turned swiftly to Rockett.

"It's a cinch, Rough-house! Joyce has had a fight with his girl, and that's on his mind."

Rockett nodded. He understood the handicap of a burdened mind during the struggle. Worry has often turned the tide of battle. In the ring he glanced about. "Some class," he muttered. "Soup and fish all around. My! There's a darb of a baby out in the fourth row!"

She was studying him as she would study something unusual. The grin of conceit left Rockett's face as she turned her gaze upon his opponent. He saw her expression soften and understood.

"His girl, eh?" said Rockett to himself. "Came to see him slaughtered!" He looked across at Joyce and laughed. The referee called the men from their

corners for instructions. Nolan was a minute late. He had crowded the faultlessly dressed men and women together a bit and made room for a burly sailor just behind Rockett's corner.

"Sorry to crowd you," the sailor was saying, "but Nolan is crazy like a fox. You'll get the big idea later."

A thousand voices called encouragement and advice as the gong sounded, and more thousands cheered. Society became acquainted with navy loyalty and navy rooting that night. Joyce bounded from his corner and met Rockett as he was settling himself for the first blow. The fight was on.

The rounds slipped by, one by one, and at the end of each, Joyce's eyes sought a cold face in the fourth row. His glances were brief, yet searching. In the hollow of his gloved hand, he carried his future happiness. He did not know just what to do. He was carrying the burden of it each minute of fighting, each precious second of rest between rounds.

"Snap out of it!" It was Nolan's sharp command at the end of the round. "He's getting you! Get him! Forget the girl and remember your ship and shipmates for a round. The world loves a winner, and June is a part of the world."

"Clang!"

Perhaps Rockett sensed a new plan of battle. It was a different Joyce who faced him. The sailors came to their feet and roared approval and advice. The fight was won a thousand times each second—verbally. The crack of Rockett's glove as it found something solid came distinctly.

The navy man crumpled.

Johns thrust his head between the ropes. "In your corner, Rockett! In your corner! The fight's over!" He was crazy with excitement—the bets amounted to thousands, for the sailors had seen red when they bet. His taunting remarks had aroused them.

"Seven! Eight!"

For some strange reason Nolan glanced sharply at the girl between counts. He never had done that before. Sympathy was written across her face. She was leaning forward, lips parted in concern. The navy was imploring its own to rise.

"Dang me!" Nolan muttered. "He's

lost the fight, but that girl'll stick. Lost, but won!"

"Ten!" The word was drowned in the roar as Joyce struggled to his feet. He was still out, but the instinct to struggle on, the instinct that has carried the race from caves to palaces, dominated. He faced his own corner awkwardly, and the expression on Rockett's face was not good to see as he tore in to finish it. Joyce half fell into a clinch. His brain cleared; the storm was weathered.

"Not this round," Nolan whispered, "but the next. Take it easy this round. Let Rockett do the work!"

Rockett came from his corner furiously. His work must be finished in this round. He found an opponent who was boxing defensively for the first time. Joyce brought into play all of his swift footwork, his body was always moving away when the blows fell. Rockett missed repeatedly, and somebody laughed. Then the gong sounded.

"The last round!" A thousand voices repeated the phrase.

Joyce leaped from his corner and met Rockett as he was coming out after the brief rest. The fury of the attack, with a dash of recklessness that surprised Rockett, brought the mighty gathering to its feet. A furious minute followed with the navy man carrying the fight. Even Rockett's famed guard gave way, and he tottered.

The navy man was on his toes; the muscles of his legs were tense like a tiger that is ready to spring, and "that something" Nolan had caught in pictures was on his face. It was the half back crashing to a touchdown, the boat's crew crossing the line, the tennis player smashing the ball. Joyce's blow flashed, and no guard intervened. Rockett shook from the impact; his defense dropped, but came up.

His manager's face was white and drawn. Johns had not expected this last round rally. Rockett was losing, but Johns could avert the disgrace of a knock-out by leaping into the ring and bringing disqualification. The trick had been worked more than once.

He thrust his head and shoulders between the ropes. "Foul!" he bawled. "Foul!"

Powerful arms, uniformed arms, encircled him and dragged him back. He was sitting on a very ample lap and a chair was creaking a protest over the double burden.

"Quit squirming, you rat!" ordered the sailor. "You can't get loose. I'm the champion wrestler of the fleet. Nolan put me here to look after you. Watch the finish. There goes Rockett. He's soaring down, instead of up, though."

The girl in the fourth row had watched Joyce as he struggled for victory in the final round. She had seen the light leap suddenly into his eyes, the muscles of his body tense in the supreme effort. Then Rockett collapsed. It sickened her. While thousands of eyes watched the ring as the referee counted, Nolan observed the girl. He saw her quietly leave, saw her face, and knew that her heart was breaking.

"Joyce won," Nolan muttered, "but he's lost the dearest thing in the world unless——"

The count was over, and the cheers for the victor were ringing in Joyce's ears. He had won over one of the best men in the nation, but his heart was empty. Nolan's hand fell on his shoulder gently, and in the touch he knew the old chief understood.

"Remember," Nolan whispered, "the navy teaches its own never to give up the ship."

CHAPTER VI.

IN EVERY PICTURE.

IN the small compartment that served him as an office and studio—when others were not around—Nolan struggled beneath a shower of silver and paper. And more was coming!

"The boys!" he whispered. "Bless 'em! They're not only splitting their winnings with the kids, but they're going stronger. They'll have to lighten this old cruiser or she'll sink beneath the weight of kids, eats, and presents. There'll be a present for each; all the eats a small stomach can hold, and a basket of Christmas dinner for every one to take home. But I'm going to need help. We got to have some women aboard to look after those that start bawling from any one of a million things a kid can find to cry

about. And one of those women is going to be Miss June Stone. I'll put it up to her in a way she can't avoid."

Occupation is the best solace for a broken or even a cracked heart. Mrs. Delaney, taking a hint from Nolan, was keeping the girl busy with charity work ashore. Aboard ship, Joyce was extremely busy. There was decorating to be done, the trees to be brought from near-by forests, and countless details to settle, for the navy runs its annual Christmas trees as it runs parades, maneuvers, and battles.

It was on Christmas that old Nolan invariably experienced a touch of the blues. In the faces of the happy children, he found the touch of home life he had missed. Power boats were towing bulky sailing launches crammed with eager children. Scores of sailors were standing by to see that nothing happened to their small charges. The delighted tide swept up the gangway and flooded the cruiser.

Santa Claus was on the job, his eyes twinkling merrily, except in offguard moments when he searched among the adults. To himself he whispered: "She didn't come."

Then the children claimed him. With his assistants, he passed out the presents. The scene was one of color, of delight. The small boy was everywhere, and alert seamen chased him down from the rigging in droves lest he break his adventurous neck. The little girls were full of exclamations as they hugged dolls to ragged cloaks.

Then came the Christmas dinner.

It was then that Nolan slipped ashore and hurried out to a Lake Washington home. The girl was there, ready to talk to him. He spoke first.

"You are coming out to the ship, not because I want you to, but because your heart bids you come." For a hard-boiled bos'n's mate, he was filled with sentiment that day.

She shook her head. "I was fair; I attended the contest, but when victory was close I saw the light of murder leap into his eyes; he wanted to kill his opponent, strike him down. Jim was like an animal, with the muscles of his legs standing out tense, ready to spring. Then he stood, a victor, his opponent vanquished.

and the mob yelling. Can you imagine any girl reconciling such a scene with home life and children?"

"You are coming with me, Miss June," Nolan said grimly. "Each Christmas my heart is lonely, all because of a youthful misunderstanding. Youth is willful. Old age understands, but then it is too late. Come with me; you won't have to meet Jim unless you want to. The ship is large."

She told herself she did not care to come, but she followed him nevertheless. They boarded the ship unnoticed, and Nolan conducted her to his compartment. A row of draped pictures had been placed against the wall. He unpinned a handkerchief, and a slit in each drape disclosed a pair of human eyes.

"Study them!" he directed. "Just eyes!"

In one picture the eyes were blue, but the expression was the same as in the others.

"There it is," she said slowly, "the thing I detest, and you put it into pictures!"

He removed the drapery, and an exclamation escaped her. It was a painting of a boxer; there was the same light in his eyes, the tenseness in his muscles. The boxer was making the supreme effort to win.

"You are an artist; you have it all there!" she said quietly. "And I hate it!"

The painting with the blue eyes came next. "The same tenseness of muscles

in the limbs you'll notice," he said, as he lifted the drapery slightly.

The limbs were covered with white shoes and stockings, neither foot touched the ground. It had been painted from a photograph lent by the sport editor.

"Yes," she said.

Nolan jerked the cloth clear, and she saw herself on the canvas. It was a picture of June Stone making the supreme effort to win the inter-State championship. He said nothing until she glanced toward him, then he pulled aside the covering of the next picture, and she saw the boat's crew.

"The same expression is in every picture," remarked Nolan, "but the background is different. Your eyes and Jim's contain the light of approaching victory, the supreme effort. Your limbs and the muscles are tense with it, and——"

She smiled, and because she was a sportswoman, when she was defeated, she admitted it. "And thank you, Mr. Nolan!"

"You said something about reconciling that with children," he went on. "Well, you can't fool a kid, and they're brutally frank in their likes and dislikes. Look out there. Santa Claus has shed his garb, and the kids are sprawling over him—and speaking of eyes! Look at the light in Jim's as he plays with that little girl. I'd like to get that on canvas."

"Why don't you try?"

"Maybe I will—some day!"

June Stone understood. She went to Jim Joyce, a smile on her face.

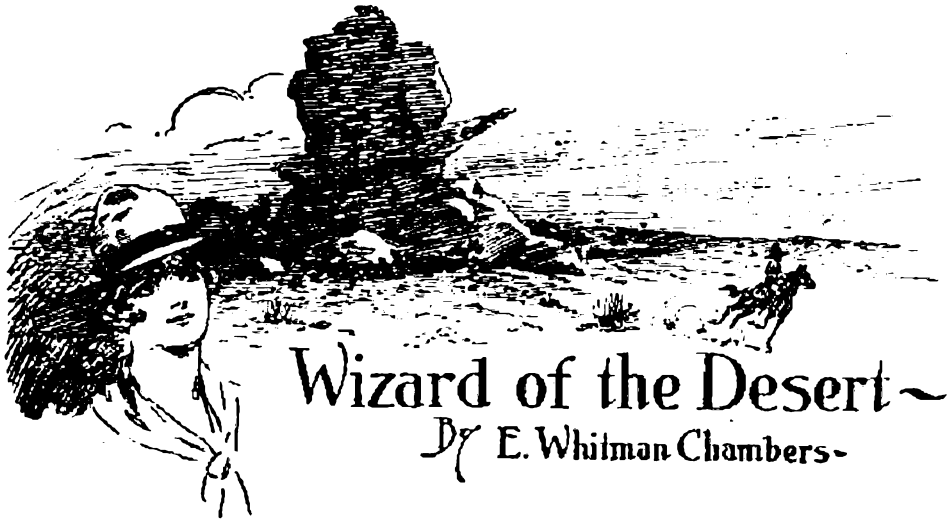


MY GIFT TO YOU

By Laura Simmons

THOSE jolly, cheery words I never spoke,
The pleasant things I always meant to do,
The letters planned—alas, but never penned!—
I mail them all—my Christmas gift to you.

Oh, very heavy is the pack, I fear!
Yet courage comes to me this blessed day;
So please accept one whole neglectful year
Of kindly things my heart would do and say!



Wizard of the Desert~

By E. Whitman Chambers-

IN a flivver, Sheriff "Hackmatack" Evers and his deputy, "Dutch Charley," pursued two crooks, Jim Beyers and Pete Cronan, for several days. The criminals kept in the lead, and at last, near Ship Rock, a jagged pinnacle in the Navajo Desert in New Mexico, the flivver broke down.

Immediately afterward, Evers and his deputy were caught in a sandstorm. They were separated, and the storm overpowered the sheriff. He came back to consciousness, some time later, to find that a girl, Mona Boynton, was ministering to him. Dutch Charley had found him during the storm, picked him up, and the two had been aided by the girl and her companion, Colé Bennett, a young man who lived near by and traded with the Indians.

Being temporarily unable to continue after the crooks, Evers and his deputy were taken to a small settlement, which Mona's father, an invalid, had financed. Boynton also owned an enormous amount of oil shale. Having invented a process of getting the oil from the shale, he planned to benefit his fellow men by selling gasoline to them cheaply. He hoped, in time, to make the big oil companies reduce their price permanently.

Evers was enthusiastic about the plan. Later that night, he and the Dutchman were aroused by a revolver shot. They found that Martinez, a Mexican foreman, and two of his pals had been accused of cheating in a card game by Jack Symes, one of Boynton's trusted employees. From the description of Martinez's friends, the sheriff decided they were the crooks he had been chasing. Determined to arrest them before they could escape, he drew his revolver and opened the door of Martinez's room. A blanket was thrown over his head by some one who had been awaiting his entrance, and then the sheriff was knocked to the floor.

CHAPTER VII.

AN OFFER ACCEPTED.

SPRAWLED upon the floor in Martinez's room, Sheriff "Hackmatack" Evers battled with the blanket. He scrambled to his feet, only to be tripped by it. When he got free, he discovered that there was no light in the room and that the door opening on the larger room in the bunk house had been closed. Jim Beyers and Pete Cronan had escaped.

White with anger and chagrin, Evers threw open the door and dashed into the other room and out of the bunk house. On the threshold, he paused. Two figures lay prone on the ground, one on top of the other. Above them both was "Dutch Charley," his huge fists playing an indiscriminate tattoo against the ribs of his captives. Hovering at a respectful distance, his black eyes wide with incredulity, was Martinez.

"Der poys run right into my arms, py chiminy!" The Dutchman grinned at Hackmatack. "So I sit dem down and gespank dem." He laughed heartily, his fists still moving up and down with clock-like regularity.

"Good boy, Dutch," the sheriff approved. "I almost let 'em git away from me." He turned suddenly to the Mexican. "On yer way, you! Ain't the little lady told you to clear out? Now git go-in', before I drill a hole through you."

The Mexican stood his ground stolidly. "I want my pay."

"You don't deserve no pay," Evers roared, "after the stuff you pulled with them two crooks! Now git goin' 'fore I drill yuh!"

Martinez, apparently, had no intention of going. Mona was about to step forward and settle the controversy by paying the man when she caught the swift movement of Hackmatack's gun. There was a deafening explosion, and then she saw the Mexican gazing stupidly down at the heel of his boot, doubtlessly wondering for the moment what had clipped the edge of it. Suddenly the man turned and ran off into the darkness.

"I will come back and settle for thees," they heard him call from the gloom.

"I hope you try to come back!" Evers shouted with a grin, and turned to Mona. "Have you got some place we can put these two hombres for the night? Me an' Dutch are all-fired tired, an' we hate to have to sit up an' watch 'em."

"You can put them in the powder house," the girl answered wearily. "It's built of stone and has an iron door. They couldn't possibly get out unless they blow themselves out, and that wouldn't be healthy. Mr. Symes, here, will show you where it is. Jack, this is Sheriff Evers and his deputy. They have come all the way from California on the trail of these two men."

Symes shook hands with the sheriff warmly. Dutch Charley, however, was too busy thrumming the sides of his prisoners to acknowledge the introduction, even if he had heard it.

"All right, Dutch," the sheriff said at last. "Call off them two hams o' yours, an' let's lock these birds up. I'm all fer goin' to sleep."

The sheriff turned to Symes on the way back from the powder house, after seeing the two men safely locked up.

"The little girl's havin' a right hard time of it, ain't she?" he asked thoughtfully.

"A lot harder than anybody knows," Symes returned. "She's up against a mighty big proposition here. The other oil companies haven't started anything against us yet—at least, nothing that I know of. There's been lots o' these oil-

shale projects started, but most of 'em haven't amounted to much. I guess the big companies are used to 'em by now. But soon as we get things goin' and get to selling gasoline at about fifteen cents a gallon, retail, in Denver, then yuh want to watch out. There's shore goin' to be a sight o' trouble hereabouts."

"But do you think you c'n sell it fer that?" Evers put in.

"I know we can! I've been working with Mr. Boynton for over three years now. Oil refinin' is my game. I worked for the Universal for more'n fourteen years, yuh know. And as soon as Boynton showed me his layout, I knew it could be done. I installed the refining plant myself, with Indian labor. Boynton and myself are the only white men in the world who know the inside of those retorts you see there on the hill. And the Indians don't know enough about such things to give away any secrets. Besides, they're mighty loyal to Miss Mona. Never saw 'em take to a white woman like they've taken to her."

Hackmatack ran a hand through his thinning gray hair. "Funny about them two crooks comin' straight to this place, ain't it?" he mused. "Friends of that greaser's, ain't they? H'm! If anybody should ask me, I'd say that Martinez feller wasn't here for no legitimate purpose. Looks to me like he sent for them fellers to get in some dirty work. How do you size it up, Symes?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Can't nowise tell, Evers. It shore looks funny. They come straight here after pullin' a job in California, eh?"

"Straight as these crooked roads'd bring 'em."

"Yes; it shore looks peculiar, sheriff," Symes agreed. "But there's so many blamed peculiar things in this game that a feller gets so's he don't notice 'em. Gets used to 'em, as the sayin' is. Goin' to start back with them two fellers tomorrow?"

Evers nodded. "Jest as soon as I get my flivver fixed up. It's out there in the middle of the desert by that Ship Rock now."

"Be a right hard job takin' 'em back in a car, won't it?"

"I guess we can do it. Two Oregon

boots and a pair o' handcuffs ought to keep 'em from strayin' from the flivver."

"Wish yuh could stay here an' sit in on this little game," Symes remarked.

"So do I," Evers returned. "Well, see you in the mornin', Symes. Good night!"

"Good night, sheriff!"

Hackmatack and his plodding deputy walked wearily back to the house. Inside, they were surprised to find Mona half dozing in a chair in the living room. They tried to slip past her and go to their room, but the girl roused and called to them.

"Won't you sit down, please? I'd like to talk to you a minute or two."

Hackmatack thoughtfully regarded the careworn face, the tired eyes, so ineffably sad, the weary droop of the shoulders. "Don't you think you ought to be getting some sleep, Miss Boynton?" he asked gently. "You look just about fagged out."

She smiled at his kindly commiseration. "I am, Mr. Hackmatack," she answered softly. "But I want to talk to you just a moment. You and Mr. Dutch Charley sit down, won't you, please?"

The sheriff and his deputy complied with her request in silence.

"Do you like hunting criminals, Mr. Evers?" the girl asked.

"Oh, it's a good enough kind of a job. I ain't nowise crazy about it, though."

"Would you like to go back to mining?"

"Don't tempt me, Miss Boynton." Evers grinned. "I got two prisoners out in your powder house that I got to take back to California."

"But if the authorities in California want them very bad, they could send some one else for them," Mona returned quickly. "Wouldn't you like to take Martinez's position as quarry foreman?"

Hackmatack scratched his head thoughtfully. He recalled the terrific heat of the desert at midday; the blinding, relentless power of the sandstorm; the dearth of water and vegetation in all that wide expanse of New Mexican sand and rock and mountain. He recalled, too, the forest-clad slopes of the Sierras; the old Carson River, foaming and turbulent; his friends that he had left in Perryville on a morning that seemed so

long ago; the little Copper Princess Mine, waiting for him to come back and open up its ledge of high-grade.

Then the old sheriff looked at the patiently weary form of the slender girl in front of him; the sad eyes, the tired, drooping lids, the slender hands, the brown-gold hair, the tender lips. His mind went back to a day so many years before when he had last seen those same eyes and lips and hands. Yes; they were the same, he mused, must be the same. He could not be mistaken. His eyes closed wearily for a moment, and the old man strove valiantly to banish memories that were not pleasant. When they opened, the girl rose eagerly to her feet.

"You're going to stay!" she exclaimed, her blue eyes lighting.

"Yes, I reckon I got to stay."

"And Dutch Charley? Hell stay, too?" Mona asked eagerly.

The sheriff turned a grinning countenance on his old friend and slapped him over the shoulder with a gnarled paw. "How 'bout it, Dutch?"

"Me, I guess I stay, too, py chiminy!" The big Dutchman beamed happily.

CHAPTER VIII.

PASSED ON THE ROAD

IN his trading post in the shadow of towering Ship Rock, Cole Bennett awoke at daybreak the next morning and climbed wearily from his bed. Ten hours of sleep had failed to rest him. He felt fully as tired as he had on going to bed the night before. During the last month or so, each night, it seemed, had been a monotonous repetition of the night before; restless tossing, nightmarish dreams, unrelaxed slumber. The days, save for the few occasions when he saw Mona Boynton, were equally as dull, as monotonous, as devoid of life and of the incentive for living.

That morning as Bennett dressed himself, he wondered vaguely, as he had wondered so many times before, why he continued the struggle. It would be so easy to give up. Was it Mona who kept him fighting; who inspired him to meet the issue and face it; who urged him onward in his struggle against the white plague on that great battleground of the

Navajo Desert? No word had ever passed between them on the matter; it was a subject that had never been opened. Bennett realized, however, as he likewise realized his great love for Mona, that it was the example offered by her own brave struggle that inspired him to play the game.

Realizing these things, he strove to banish them from his mind. Mona never could be more than a true friend, and he, Cole Bennett, never could be more than an Indian trader, fighting the great battle of the desert waste lands. The long, eventless years, the insufferable heat, the gnawing hunger for companionship—this was his heritage.

Depressed in spirit, almost hopelessly downcast, Bennett went out into the kitchen. There he found Leeto, his Indian servant, preparing breakfast.

"Just coffee and toast this morning, Leeto," Bennett said wearily.

The young Indian looked at him steadily. There was little that escaped the keen black eyes of Leeto. Educated at the Indian school in the little town of Shiprock, he was bright, intelligent, observant, and, above all, utterly faithful to the trader.

"Last night again you did not sleep well," Leeto remarked calmly.

Bennett smiled wryly. "Not so very well, Leeto."

The Indian shook his head. "Bad medicine. I shall cook two eggs for you. And unless you eat them, I shall tell the doctor." The Indian turned grimly back to the stove.

Bennett sat down at the table. Through the window he could see the sun just topping the mountains to the eastward. There were no clouds; the sky was very blue; the sun was a burnished copper disk suspended in the heavens. This would be another scorching day, he mused. Would it never rain? He had asked the question every day for the last month. Each day had seemed hotter than the one before, each rising sun more unbearable, each setting sun more welcome.

Leeto noiselessly crossed the room and brazenly placed two boiled eggs before the trader.

Bennett resignedly broke the shells and

began to eat his breakfast. "We're going to town to-day, Leeto," he remarked.

"Good!" the Indian grunted.

"I don't know whether it's so good or not," Bennett returned. "It's a hot, dusty, disagreeable ride."

"It will do you good," Leeto remarked evenly. "You will be so tired to-night that you will sleep. And the ride will help to take your mind off of—of things."

Bennett looked up at the expressionless features of his servant. "What kind of things, Leeto?" he asked with a smile.

"The shale plant. And Miss Mona Boynton. You are worrying about them," the Indian replied.

Bennett glanced down quickly. He said nothing during the rest of the meal. As he was rising from the table after his second cup of coffee, the trader heard hoofbeats coming down the road from the direction of Boynton's plant. He hurried to the window, hoping against hope that one of the riders was Mona. He saw four men, riding two abreast.

"H'm!" he mused. "The sheriff and his deputy. Wonder if he got his quarry."

Bennett walked out into the patio formed by the U-shaped trading post. He was greeted by a rousing hail from Hackmatack.

"Got 'em!" the old man roared. As he drew closer and dismounted, he continued: "Found 'em up at the shale plant. They come all the way out here from California to see a Mex by the name of Martinez. We captured 'em in the bunk house last night."

"Too bad you didn't capture Martinez, too," Bennett said, enjoying the old sheriff's enthusiasm. "I've always had a hunch he was crooked."

"Don't worry," Hackmatack put in hastily. "Martinez is on the run. And I got his job."

"Good! I'm mighty glad to hear it, sheriff." The trader shook hands heartily with Evers. "If they had a few more white men on that job, they'd put it over."

"We'll do it anyway," Hackmatack asserted.

Bennett smiled. "You've come to be a shale enthusiast yourself, haven't you?"

"You bet I have," Evers replied. He turned to Dutch Charley. "You kin get

down, Dutch. Have yer prisoners dismount, too, an' be sure you keep yer eye on 'em. We ain't taking no chances of lettin' 'em make a get-away after we come this fer after 'em." To Bennett, he said: "Miss Boynton told me you was goin' down to Gallup to-day. She said as how you might take me an' my two prisoners with you."

"Be glad to have you come along," the trader told him. "We were just getting ready to start."

The ride through the desert to Gallup was a long, hot, dusty nightmare to the sheriff. Dutch Charley had been sent back to the plant, and Evers rode in the tonneau of the little flivver with his two prisoners. The Indian drove, Bennett sitting beside him. Due to the roughness of the road, conversation between the trader and Hackmatack was almost impossible. The old sheriff's prisoners maintained silence. Several times he tried to draw them out in regard to their mission into the wilderness of New Mexico. Every time they refused to answer his questions. Hackmatack at last gave up trying and settled miserably into the corner of his seat.

Six or eight miles from the trading post they came upon a solitary figure struggling along through the ankle-deep sand of the road. The man stopped and turned as they drew near and then stepped to one side and continued his journey. It was Martinez. Nothing was said until they had passed the Mexican.

Then Bennett turned in his seat and smiled at the sheriff. "That's one load off my mind," the trader remarked. "I only hope he keeps going until he's in the next State."

Evers grinned and nodded confidently. "I don't reckon he'll be back at the plant very soon. I think my deputy put the fear o' the Dutch into him when he man-handled these two little playmates o' mine. He's a right powerful man, old Dutch Charley is."

It was after ten when they pulled into Gallup and drew up before the county jail. Hackmatack got out with his two prisoners.

"I got quite a little business to 'tend to here," he told Bennett. "Matter of extradition papers and telegraphing back

to Alpine an' all that sort o' thing. Suppose I meet you later."

"All right. At noon, say. In front of the post office."

"Fine! I'll be there."

Bennett drove at once to the Stockman's Bank Building, where Doctor Horace Thornley had his offices.

"Anything you want to tell the doctor, Leeto?" Bennett asked his Indian servant.

Leeto grinned widely and shook his dark head. "No, sir. You have been a pretty good patient."

Bennett's keen eyes warmed in a smile. "I'm glad you think so, Leeto. You may wait for me."

CHAPTER IX.

THE THING TO DO.

ALMOST at once, Bennett was interviewed by the physician. Doctor Horace Thornley was a fine figure of a man, well above the average height, powerfully built. His hair was gray, his eyes brown and friendly, his features fine and deeply tanned. He greeted Bennett warmly; but there was a suggestion of a frown on his brow as he regarded the young trader.

"Haven't been sleeping well, have you, Cole?"

"No; I can't say that I have, doc."

"Hop on the scales there a moment," the doctor instructed. "We'll see what they have to say."

Bennett dispiritedly stepped onto the platform, and Thornley adjusted the balance.

"H'm, you've gone down four pounds in the last two weeks," the doctor said. "That won't do. You've got to put on weight, instead of take it off, if you ever want to leave this country. What have you been worrying about?"

Bennett dropped wearily into a chair. "Oh, the same old thing, doc."

"Boynton's folly, eh?" Thornley smiled.

The trader nodded. "Boynton's folly," he replied thoughtfully. "I've almost come to look at it as you and the rest of the people around here do. It's folly, all right, doc. But not in the way you think it is."

The doctor pursed his lips skeptically, shaking his fine gray head. "It just can't

be done, Cole. Too many people have tried it before. Gasoline can be made from shale, all right. I'm not denying that. But a shale refinery can never compete with an oil well. At least, not when there are as many wells as there are now. Boynton is a dreamer; he's impractical. His process may seem all right to him, but I'd bet my last dollar he won't be able to sell his gas for less than fifty cents a gallon and make a profit."

"If I had the cash, I'd take you up on that, doc."

Thorney laughed good-naturedly. "I wouldn't take your money, Cole. The whole scheme is utter folly. Even admitted that he can manufacture his gas and undersell the big companies, his pitifully small stream wouldn't be a raindrop in the ocean."

"He doesn't expect it to be more than that," Bennett returned. "But he does expect that it will force the Universal and the other big companies to reduce their price. That's his whole purpose."

"Bucking the corporations, eh?"

"Yes."

"It's apt to be mighty dangerous, Cole."

"I know it. That's why I haven't slept much lately."

The doctor eyed him keenly. "Worried about the girl, eh?" Thornley asked.

The trader nodded silently.

"I can't see where any harm could come to her."

"But don't you see, doc?" Bennett put in hastily, his thin, sensitive face deadly serious. "She's the executive, the manager, the guiding genius of the whole enterprise. Boynton, as you know, is helpless. Without Mona, the whole thing would go to the devil. With her, I'm certain that the old man will make things mighty hot for the Universal. And don't think for a minute the officials of that company don't know how things stand up there. A reduction of a few cents in the price of gas means millions to them."

"Boynton's folly! Call it that if you want to," he went on. "But that old man is on the right track, and if things go along as they should, he'll reduce the price of gas several cents. And he'll make money while he's doing it."

"And you think the Universal may at-

tempt something against the girl?" Thornley queried.

"If they're as crooked as they're painted—and there's not a doubt in my mind but what they are—they'll stop at nothing. A human life doesn't mean anything to them. Hundreds of men are killed every year in accidents in their oil fields. What does it mean to the companies? Nothing. But a million dollars means a lot."

"I don't understand you, Cole," Thornley interposed. "How can that man's little dribble of gas cut any ice when you toss it into the huge stream that runs the automobiles of this entire country? Even if he gave it away, I don't see how it would affect the price a fraction of a cent."

"But can't you see the point, man?" Bennett argued enthusiastically. "It will stir up the people. It will cause investigations. Picture gas selling at fourteen or fifteen cents a gallon in the city of Denver and thirty or forty cents a gallon in New York. People are bound to wonder. And when the common people begin to wonder and begin to think, it means trouble for the corporations. Oil stocks, like almost every other kind of stocks, are tremendously inflated at the present time. According to Boynton, they are fifty per cent water. I don't doubt it in the least. The oil companies are selling gasoline at a price that pays interest on twice the capital they have invested. The people slumber on and don't know the difference. But stir them up, and something is going to happen."

"Remember here a few years ago when the governor of one of our Middle Western States—you know the one I mean—announced that the people were being mulcted by the oil companies?" Bennett continued. "Do you remember how he bought gas at wholesale from independent refineries and undersold the big companies? Remember the stir it caused all over the country? Remember the editorial comments in every paper in the United States?"

"And what happened? The people were stirred up; congressional investigations were started; the oil companies were criticized by the whole country. Within a single week the price of gas

dropped from one to five cents in nearly every State in the union. The oil companies announced that overproduction was the cause of the price drop. But overproduction had nothing to do with it. That governor's little trick did it. He caused the common people to wonder why he could compete with the big oil companies and undersell them. Of course, it was nothing more than a grandstand play on the part of that governor. He was reflected a month later and promptly sat back and rested on his laurels. The public forgot the episode, and the price of gas went back to its former level.

"That's what this governor did," he went on. "And it is what Boynton will do. Only Boynton is not a politician. He is not pushing this project for the purpose of making a grandstand play for reflection. When he succeeds in forcing down the price of gas, he won't rest on his laurels. He'll continue production; he'll enlarge his plant; he'll supply a greater number of consumers. And the price of gas will stay down permanently."

"And he'll get the credit and that little girl of his will have done the work," Doctor Thornley put in.

"Don't judge him too harshly," the trader said hastily. "He's not in the game for any credit that may be accorded him. He's in it solely for the good he hopes to do the people of the United States."

"I see. He's one of these philanthropists you read about in the Sunday supplements," the doctor commented, mildly sarcastic. "But Boynton's folly hasn't got a great deal to do with your case. You and I, Cole, are interested primarily in getting those germs out of your system and making a well man of you again. Up until a month or two ago, you were hitting on all six. If you'd kept on at that rate, you would have been able to sell your trading post and get out of this God-forsaken country, as you erroneously call it, inside of a year or so. As things are going now, you'll be lucky if you don't cash in your checks in less than that time."

"What do you advise?" the trader inquired.

"You know as well as I do, Cole. Rest, relaxation, absolute freedom from worry. Keep Mona Boynton off your mind. From what I've seen of her, I'd say she was a capable young woman, well able to take care of herself. She'll pull through this thing all right."

"I hope so," Bennett sighed.

"She will. And just remember this, Cole." The doctor looked his patient squarely in the eye. "Your only hope of fulfilling your dreams lies in forgetting them for a year or two. Think you can do that?"

"No; I know I can't," Bennett replied truthfully.

"You've got to, Cole. And if you're half the man I think you are, you'll come pretty near, doing it."

"I'll do my best, doc!" The trader smiled. "Now I won't take any more of your time. Good-by."

"Good-by and good luck, tad. And forget those dreams!"

CHAPTER X.

REACHING AN UNDERSTANDING.

CAREFULLY and methodically Hackmatack Evers went about his business in Gallup. A brief talk with the good-natured old sheriff of that town assured him that his prisoners would be held in the county jail until the arrival of the California authorities.

"When yuh come right down to cases," the sheriff told Hackmatack, "yuh didn't have no more right to arrest them two birds than the King o' Siam. But I ain't th' feller to argue about that. Glad you saved me th' trouble. I'm used to New Mexican roads—driven over 'em all my life—but that road to Ship Rock is shore a goat-getter. I don't think two o' the best murderers in California could tempt me to go up there. Any action when you made the pinch?"

"Not much." Evers grinned. "They almost got away, but my deputy knocked the two of 'em for a goal." Hackmatack accepted a proffered cigar and made himself at home. "I was wonderin' if you couldn't fix up them extradition papers fer me, when the time comes. I got to get back up there to Ship Rock."

The old sheriff looked at his visitor

suspiciously. "What you goin' to do up in that neck o' the woods?"

"Goin' to have charge of the quarryin' fer that shale plant," Evers answered proudly.

The sheriff laughed heartily. "Ain't puttin' any money into it, are yuh?"

"Nary a cent. Ain't been asked to."

"That's good. Us folks around here don't take much stock in that shale business. 'Boynton's folly,' we call it. Some folks call him the 'Wizard of the Desert,' account of his looks."

Evers was not disposed to argue. His chief concern was to get rid of his prisoners in the quickest possible time and get back to the plant. "May be folly, all right. But a hundred and fifty dollars a month and board is good pay in these times. Better than I did at sheriffin'. So I couldn't very well turn down the offer."

"Well, I wish you luck, Evers. An' I'll take care o' them prisoners fer yuh. You notify the authorities in California to get extradition papers an' to send a man for the crooks. I'll take care o' th' rest of it."

"Thanks, sheriff. So long."

"So long, Evers." With a deep chuckle, the old sheriff of Gallup turned back to his desk.

Hackmatack went at once to the telegraph office and sent a wire to the board of supervisors of Alpine County, California. It read:

Pete Cronan and Jim Boyers held in Gallup, New Mexico. Cannot find money they stole, which must have been used up on trip. Arrange extradition and send deputy for prisoners. Dutch Charley and myself resign herewith. Regards to the boys and tell them this here country beats California.

EVERS.

Hackmatack laughed softly to himself as he wrote the last sentence. Some excuse had to be given for his resignation. It was a ten to one shot that nobody in Perryville had ever been in New Mexico and really knew what a hot, dusty country some parts of it really were.

Hackmatack then went to the post office. Here he begged a small piece of paper and some string. Regretfully, he unpinned his sheriff's star, gazed at it sadly for a moment, and then resolutely trapped it up and addressed it to the board of supervisors of Alpine County.

His next errand carried him to a garage, where he ordered the man in charge to send some one out to repair his flivver and deliver it to him at the shale plant. The garage man looked at him dubiously at the mention of shale.

"Well?" the sheriff inquired aggressively. This time he felt inclined to argue. There had been only one sheriff who could take charge of his prisoners. There were a dozen garages that could repair his car. "Why the fishy eye?" Hackmatack asked belligerently.

The man shrugged. "It's customary to leave a deposit on jobs like that."

"Oh, it is, is it? Well, my car's good enough deposit for anybody. Take it or leave it. You'll git yer money when you bring me the car."

The man shrugged his shoulders again, evidently somewhat amused by the other's vehemence. "We'll take the job."

"That's shore nice of you," Evers remarked sarcastically, and hurried out of the garage.

He had already decided that none of these New Mexican hombres were going to put anything over on him. "They're a no-account, good-fer-nothin' bunch," Hackmatack told himself, "outside o' this feller Bennett and the little gal an' her old man. The rest o' them ain't worth a hill o' beans, or they wouldn't be livin' in this dratted place. Wish they'd let the Injuns keep their old New Mexico. No place for a white man, anyway."

All of which was somewhat surprising in view of Hackmatack's very recent resignation and his decision to abide for the time being in that same "dratted place." The old man glanced at his watch. It was just twelve o'clock. Hurrying back to the post office, he found Bennett and Leeto awaiting him.

"All through with your business, sheriff?" the trader asked with a smile, as he led the way toward a restaurant.

"Yeh; I'm through," Hackmatack replied. "But I don't guess you better call me sheriff no more." There was a catch in his voice. "I sent back my star to Alpine a few minutes ago."

"Through sheriffing for a while, are you?"

Hackmatack nodded. "Yeh. I decided I was needed worse here."

Bennett looked away. "It shouldn't have been hard to find some one to take charge of that quarry," he said very quietly.

"But it might have been blamed hard to find some one to keep their eye on that little gal," Hackmatack affirmed.

Nothing more was said on the subject at that time, but both men felt that they had been drawn together by a common bond of love and friendship. This was true despite the fact that there was some thirty years' difference in their ages.

Immediately after lunch they left for the trading post, Bennett having visited Doctor Thornley and attended to the purchasing of some supplies while Hackmatack was negotiating with the sheriff. Leeto drove as usual, and the trader sat in the tonneau with his passenger. Conversation was less difficult than it had been on the journey to town, and Evers asked the question that had been on his lips for some time.

"Do you like this here country, Bennett?"

The trader smiled somewhat grimly. "No," he replied; "I can't say I do, Evers. It's not a country that many people like. A great deal has been written about it, and according to the story books it's the most wonderful country in the world. But I doubt if the writers of those books have ever seen it at its worst. I wonder if they've lived through the sandstorms, the cloud-bursts, the terrific heat of midsummer, the sand that drifts into your home and gets in your eyes and ears and your food. It's a beautiful country at times, to be sure, but it's a terrible country to live in."

"Been here long?"

"Two years."

"Two years!"

The trader nodded, flushing slightly. Like all persons with his malady, he was sensitive. Probably it was the sudden reddening of his cheeks that told Hackmatack the truth. The old man realized that he had been on the verge of making an unpardonable blunder. Keen observer though he was when on the trail of man or game, there were many things his faded eyes failed to note. Hackmatack's sympathy, while apparent, was not altogether obvious.

"Well, I hope yer business don't keep you here much longer," he murmured.

The silence that ensued was brief; Evers was never long silent when in the company of his friends.

"Hear they figger on startin' refinin' in three or four days," he remarked.

"So I understand." A slight frown corrugated the trader's high forehead; Leeto had seen and worried about that frown much of late. "And in a way, I'm sorry," Bennett added.

"Afraid o' trouble?"

"Frankly, I am."

"Ain't much use crossin' bridges before you come to 'em," the old man commented.

"I know that, but you're apt to come to the first bridge in three or four days."

"Yuh think that there Universal might be aimin' to cause trouble?" Hackmatack queried with apparent eagerness.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Maybe so, maybe so," Evers mused.

"What do you think they'll do first?"

"That's a pretty hard question, Evers. There're so many ways they could interfere. They may attempt to put Boynton out of business by subtle means; that is, by clever advertising and by using methods that are more or less open and above-board; at least, some corporations would consider them that. And they may attempt actual violence, sabotage."

Hackmatack did not know the meaning of that last word, but it sounded interesting; it portended action of some sort. Action was one thing of which Evers never had his fill. "You think they may try some rough stuff, eh?" he asked anxiously.

"It's quite likely. The Universal has put dozens of little oil companies out of business. The methods they used in accomplishing their purpose have never been made public, naturally. But I'd be willing to gamble quite a stake that they weren't within the law. And they'll pull the same dirty tricks again, here."

"Do yuh think they may try any of their rough stuff with the little gal?" Evers asked indignantly.

The trader's dark eyes looked out across the rolling sand dunes that stretched, white and grim and desolate, to the far eastern horizon. "That's the

principal thing I've been worrying about," he replied softly. "As for the success or failure of the enterprise, I'm not greatly interested. I'd rather see the Universal get a complete monopoly and be compelled to pay five dollars a gallon for my gas than to see anything happen to Mona."

"You an' me together, son," Hackmatack agreed feelingly. His lips opened. He was on the verge of telling a startling thing, of revealing a secret that had been locked in his breast for many years. He evidently thought better of it, however, for he lapsed into silence for a time.

CHAPTER XI.

A MAN OF IMPORTANCE.

ALTHOUGH disagreeable, due to the dust and the heat and the poor condition of the road, the ride back to the trading post was intensely interesting to Hackmatack, now that he had some one to talk to and did not have to drive. Never in California had he seen mountains so far away, so clear-cut against the sky, so blue. They seemed to have but two dimensions, as though they were painted in a single color on the huge canvas of sand and sky.

Hackmatack saw horses, a few scrawny cattle, some sheep, plodding single file across the desert from time to time. Their heads were down; they were very thin; existence in that barren waste was evidently hard.

"Where they headin'?" he asked at last.

"Toward some water hole," the trader answered. "There are a number of them scattered about over the desert."

They passed several stone cottages, quite modern in design and workmanship. They might have been bungalows in a Los Angeles subdivision. All of them were unoccupied.

Bennett answered Hackmatack's unspoken question: "Built by the Indians. Some of them are very habitable."

"Why don't they live in 'em?" Evers asked.

The trader smiled. "You can't get a Navajo out of his hogan. They build these houses for themselves. But they live in them only for a few weeks. Then

they move back to their hogans. Can't seem to get them out of their blamed Dutch ovens."

The trader pointed to one of the Indian habitations some distance back from the road, and Hackmatack realized that his description was apt. The structure resembled an Eskimo igloo, save that it was built of mud and stones.

"Hub!" Evers grunted. "Even the Injuns around here are crazy with the heat. Build themselves houses an' then live in a prairie-dog hutch! Hub! It ain't natural!"

"If you knew the Navajos, you'd say it was very natural," Bennett returned smilingly. "They're a primitive people. Their wants are very simple. And they are quite superstitious and hard to handle. At that, I understand they are the only self-supporting Indian tribe in the United States. It is quite likely you will have trouble with them in the quarry."

It was nearly six o'clock when they arrived at the trading post.

"You'll stop for dinner, of course?" Bennett invited.

Hackmatack shook his head vigorously. "Sorry, but I got to git back to the plant. We start blockin' out shale in the mornin', an' I want to git squared around."

The trader caught the eagerness in Evers' voice and did not press the invitation. Hackmatack rode up to the plant in a purple sunset haze that dazzled him. The whole universe was drenched with it, the sky, the rough-hewn mountains in the distance, the towering Ship Rock, the sand and sagebrush and cactus that lined the road. Even the very air was so suffused with the purple radiance that it appeared tangible, something that could be grasped with the hand.

Evers sighed. "Reckon it ain't such a bad place after all, this here New Mexico," he muttered to his horse. "It's right purty, fer a fact."

Silver-pointed stars studded a sky that was still blue as Hackmatack rode up the trail to the bench on which the plant was situated. Mona hurried out as he dismounted before the bunk house.

"You're going to eat with us. The men have had dinner already," she told him. "We've been waiting for you. One of the boys will take care of your horse.

The cook has made some apple dumplings. I know you'll like them."

Her warm-hearted hospitality, her cheery voice, her vibrant form as she stood before him in the gathering darkness thrilled Hackmatack. He recalled, with a frowning brow and half-closed eyes, the fears Bennett had mentioned that afternoon. At that moment he was worried and, he admitted ruefully to himself, just a little bit jealous of Cole Bennett.

"Did you settle up all your business and get rid of your prisoners?" Mona asked, as she led the way toward the house.

"Yes, ma'am," Evers answered quickly, as if her words had broken into his thoughts. "Everything all right here?" His voice was plainly anxious.

Mona laughed heartily. Hackmatack reflected with mounting adoration that it was the first really pleasant hearty laugh that he had heard in a long time.

"Of course," Mona answered. Playfully she added: "I'd almost think from the interest you've taken in the plant that you had known dad and me for years."

"It shore seems that a way sometimes," Evers answered grimly. There was more truth in his words than the girl realized.

After dinner that evening Hackmatack again absorbed oil-shale facts and conjectures, plans and dreams, for an accurately measured half hour. Then Mona smilingly bade him good night.

Despite his weariness after the long, tiresome ride, Hackmatack's step was springy as he made his way across the clearing to his room in the bunk house. His eyes were alight with enthusiasm, his heart glowing. He found Dutch Charley in the big room, engrossed in a game of pinocle with Jack Symes and another one of the workmen.

"Evenin', folks!" Hackmatack smiled.

The crew greeted him with a wave of the hand, a nod, a boisterous word. Hackmatack knew that he was one of them, that they had accepted him, and he gloried in the fact that he was to be a cog in this great and epoch-making machine. He had always wanted to be somebody, to fill a real part in the world, to shape the destinies of men. There had

been times when he had believed that the sheriff of Alpine County, California, was a personage of some importance; and many of those times had been after his election to the office. Now he knew that Sheriff Evers had been nobody, compared to James Evers, quarry foreman for the Navajo Oil Co.

Hackmatack Evers dreamed great dreams that night.

CHAPTER XII.

BRIMMING WITH ENTHUSIASM.

WITH a crew of twenty Indians, Evers started the work of blocking out shale the following day. First, however, he was taken over the entire plant by Mona.

"Those are the retorts," she told him, pointing out eight huge brick structures arranged in a row on a slight slope of the hill.

Above the retorts was a long, narrow ore bin, with eight chutes, one opposite each of the brick structures. Mona pointed to a wide, metal belt which ran under one of the chutes, through the adjacent retort, then down the hill a short distance and doubled back beneath itself. A similar belt ran from each chute to the adjoining retort.

"Those belts carry the shale from the bin, where your men will dump it, through the retorts and then deposit it on the side of the hill, where it will roll down out of the way," Mona explained.

Evers nodded. "What supplies the power for 'em?"

"Each retort is an independent unit. Each one has its own boiler, which supplies steam for the engine that runs its belt."

The structure of the retorts, even on the outside, was very complicated, and although Mona went over the details with him, Hackmatack understood but little. He emerged from a complicated mass of pipes, valves, steam leads, oil leads, gasoline leads, by-product leads, with only the hazy understanding that in some unexplainable manner the process of separating the oil from the shale, and the gasoline from the oil, was accomplished.

The quarry end of the enterprise was

much more plain to Evers. He was shown the huge deposit of oil shale which composed the mesa overshadowing the plant. The deposit was very thick and black, obviously saturated with oil. Under Martinez's direction, a very creditable double track had been built from the huge shale bin up to the beginning of the deposit.

At each end of the track was a loop, where the ore cars doubled back. There were twenty cars, each connected by a short length of cable in such a manner that the loaded cars running down the hill to the bin would pull the empty ones back up to the quarry. The equipment was new and of the best. Obviously no money had been spared in the purchase and installation of it.

Evers rounded up his Indians, his drills and powder and fuse, his picks and shovels, and started the work in high spirits.

Mona, walking slowly down the hill to her home opposite the bunk house, was far from exuberant. More work and greater responsibilities devolved upon her with each passing day. It was not the work that bothered her. She was young, full of vitality and energy; she gloried in working until she was almost ready to drop, in going to bed at night so tired that she was asleep the moment her head touched the pillow.

Her responsibilities, however, weighed upon her heavily. There were so many of them, so many chances for things to go wrong, so many places where her immature judgment might result in disaster and failure. Her father's condition had become worse as the time for starting actual operations approached. The occasions on which she had dared consult him had become fewer and fewer. Save for the invaluable help of Jack Symes, who had charge of the refinery, she was alone in a huge world of problems, petty and grave, which threatened to overwhelm her.

On the steps of the house she paused a moment and gazed out across the desert, which stretched at her feet in a colossal panorama of sand and rocks. In the distance towered the jagged spire that was Ship Rock. Below it, so distant from her that she could make out only a tiny dark blur in the landscape, was Cole

Bennett's trading post. Cole Bennett! Her lips formed the words. Her sad blue eyes became pensive. With a slow shake of her fine head, Mona turned to go into the house.

Just as she grasped the doorknob, she caught sight of a dust cloud some miles out on the desert in the direction of Ship Rock. She knew that it marked the path of an automobile heading toward the plant. She wondered if it might not be Cole. Although there were a dozen problems that should have claimed her attention, she sat down on the steps to await the arrival of the car.

When it drew closer, she realized that it was not Cole. She knew that neither he nor Leeto ever drove a machine in such a wildly reckless fashion. No person she had ever known handled a car like that save Courtney Young. Although somewhat disappointed, Mona awaited his coming with anticipation. Courtney was always so eager, so bubbling with enthusiasm, so intensely dynamic, that he seemed to give her new heart to face her manifold problems and difficulties.

Young drew up in a great cloud of dust and brought his car to a protesting stop in front of the house. "Greetings, Mona!" he cried heartily, leaping from the machine.

Courtney Young was an old friend of the Boynton's and, although independently wealthy, had taken the position of sales manager for the oil company at a modest salary. Three months before he had established an office in Denver and was making all arrangements for the distribution of the gasoline to be manufactured at the shale plant. An effort was to be made at first to supply only the city of Denver, the terminus of the pipe line being at Cortez, in the southwestern part of Colorado.

Young had instilled in his small organization all his own restless energy which, for the first time in twenty-seven years, was finding an outlet in a constructive enterprise, instead of in polo, golf, or tennis. Although only of average weight and height, his physique was splendid. His hips were narrow, his shoulders square; lithe of movement, every muscle coordinating perfectly, he seemed at all times the highly trained athlete. His

manner was boyishly eager, dynamic, aggressive.

"I'm glad you came, Court." Mona smiled as they shook hands. "I've been dying for some firsthand news of the outside world. Anything startling in Denver?"

"Not a thing," Courtney returned lightly. His blue eyes appraised her calmly, took in the slender, wistful face, the sad eyes, the faintly suggested lines of worry on the broad forehead. "Say, you've been working too hard, Mona. You look like somebody had shoved you through the well-known knot hole. Too much responsibility on your shoulders, isn't there?"

"I seem to be getting away with it all right," Mona smiled.

"That's just the point. You're not getting away with it. You'll kill yourself if you don't slow down."

"I'll have a chance to rest as soon as we start work," she said. "Maybe I'll take a week off and run up to Denver as soon as things are going smoothly."

He clasped her hand eagerly. "Say, that'll be fine! Mother is going to California in about three weeks, and I'll persuade her to stop off in Denver. You can come up, and we can have some real fun. Take in all the shows, play a few sets of tennis, a round or two of golf. Say, but couldn't we have a good time? You'll be sure and come, won't you?"

Mona smiled at his enthusiasm. "I'll try, Court. I know I'd enjoy every minute of it." Her eyes clouded. "It's been so long since I've done anything but work," she added dreamily.

"It's a rotten shame the way you have to stay out here in the desert doing the work of six men!" Young cried with the frankness of a friendship of years' standing. "I feel like throwing the whole game up and making you marry me and go home."

"No; you won't throw up the game, Court, because you're too good a sport," Mona returned smilingly. "And you won't make me marry you because," she laughed unsteadily, "it takes two to make that kind of a bargain."

"I'd make you awfully happy, Mona," Courtney pursued softly.

"I know you would, Court. But we've

got bigger and greater things to think about now. Some time in the future we——"

"You promise?" Courtney asked eagerly.

"No, Courtney. I can't promise now."

"Some time?"

"Maybe," she replied playfully. "Now let's go in and see dad."

Courtney made a wry face. "And talk about oil shale!" he muttered, as he followed her into the house.

CHAPTER XIII.

SWEET AND PRETTY!

ONCE inside of the house, Young was again the youthful enthusiast, full of ideas and plans, eager to plunge into the great enterprise that was about to be launched.

"How are things going, Courtney?" Boynton asked, as they clasped hands. The invalid's emaciated face was suffused with boyish eagerness, his sunken gray eyes were bright—Courtney Young's enthusiasm was contagious.

"Couldn't be better, Mr. Boynton! I've bought the trucks for us, got our storage tanks finished, and we're all ready to start selling gas."

"And the filling stations?" Boynton inquired anxiously.

"Signed up thirty-two garages and stations in Denver. They'll all buy gas from us exclusively, if we can deliver it to their tanks at thirteen cents. They'll retail it at fifteen. Most of them think I'm crazy when I tell them about it. They all say it can't be done. But we'll show 'em, eh, Mr. Boynton?"

"We'll show them," the invalid agreed. "What's the retail price in Denver now?"

"Twenty-six. Been twenty-six for over four months, with no sign of a drop. And Navajo gas will retail at fifteen. Think of it, man! We're almost cutting their price in half."

"You think they may try to meet our cut?" Boynton asked.

"Not a hope! They couldn't do it. They'd lose thousands. Imagine it! They'd have to drop the price eleven cents. Don't worry. They won't try that."

"If they did, we could make a cut,

too," the old inventor put in. "We could cut our wholesale price several cents and still get by for a long time."

"We won't have to," Young returned. "Inside of three days after we start selling gas, the attendants of every Universal filling station in Denver will have nothing to do but cut the lawn and rake the gravel. And the thirty-two garages and independent stations that have agreed to buy from us will be doing the biggest business in gasoline since their establishment. I can see lines of autos, blocks long, waiting to buy gas from those stations. Just give the great American public a chance to save a few cents, and they'll go miles out of their way and wait for hours. Every American is a bargain hunter by instinct. And the men are worse than the women. You just watch our smoke when we get under way, Mr. Boynton!"

The invalid's white face was wreathed in smiles; his breathing was faster; his eyes were alight. "I wish I could be there when we start selling," he said softly.

"So do I," Young said. "It'll sure be a kick. Of course, nobody believes now that we'll be able to do it. I was talking to a Universal man yesterday, one of the executives in their Denver office. He'd heard about Navajo gas and asked me about it. When I told him we were going to deliver it in Denver for thirteen cents, he just held his sides and laughed. He told me it couldn't be done. Of course, I didn't argue with him. That's not my game right now. But I'm going to look him up after we get under way and do a little laughing on my own hook."

"Have you any idea how the Universal will take it?" Boynton asked, after a moment.

"They'll fight, of course," the younger man replied. "They wouldn't be the Universal if they didn't. And the three other companies that are in the Denver territory will fight with them. But the Universal is the largest, and they'll take the lead in whatever they try to do. Of course, I haven't the least idea how they'll fight us. Just as you suggested, they may try to meet our price for a time, although I doubt it. It won't get

them anywhere. They're not going to sell gas at that big a loss for very long.

"In lieu of meeting our price, it's hard telling what they'll try," Young continued. "Maybe rough stuff here at the plant. Maybe they'll try to cause trouble with my truck drivers. Maybe they'll resort to more subtle means. They might try an advertising campaign. Oh, there's a hundred and one things they may do! But we'll sell gas just the same, and we'll eventually drive them out of the State of Colorado."

"Right now, of course, we can't do anything outside of Denver," he went on. "We can't afford to buy any more trucks to haul the stuff, or to establish any more offices in the other cities. But just give us a year or so, and we'll have 'em on their knees, begging us to tell them how to make gas out of shale cheaply. Then we'll be in a position to dictate terms. And you yourself can fix the price of gas all over the country."

Young wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Why, the thing's so blamed big I don't dare think about it! I'd go crazy if I did. I've had more darned sport in the three months since I've been tied up with you than I've had all the rest of my life put together. I used to think that polo was a he-man's sport. But the oil game has it screaming for help."

The old man nodded slowly; his smile was sad. "I wish I were out of this chair," he breathed.

Young threw a sympathetic arm over his shoulder. "You'll be out of it before long," he said airily. "The excitement of playing this game will make a new man out of you. See if it doesn't!"

Boynton shook his head patiently. He knew, and Mona knew, that he would never again leave that chair. At this point, Mona intervened.

"No more shale for the rest of the day, Court," she said with a smile. "Dad has had his daily dozen, and the subject is taboo from now on. And lunch is ready and waiting for us. You can run in the bathroom, if you care to get rid of some of your accumulation of dust."

Courtney Young jumped to his feet. "Be right back!" he cried. "Don't wait."

"Did you ever see any one with so

much energy?" Boynton inquired, as he watched Young dash out of the room.

"Never," Mona agreed. There was a far-away look in her eyes.

"I suppose he drove all the way from Denver?"

"Yes; and made a lot better time than if he'd come on the train. He probably drove all night last night."

"And yet he's as fresh as a daisy to-day," Boynton said admiringly. "I never knew a finer young man or one with more spirit."

Boynton looked into his daughter's eyes. Mona carefully avoided his gaze as she walked to his chair and started to wheel him into the dining room.

The ensuing half hour was the most pleasant Mona had spent in a long time. The conversation was spirited, although the girl had difficulty in keeping it from verging onto the forbidden subject. She felt herself uplifted, her cares forgotten, under the influence of Courtney Young's dynamic personality. Her father felt it, too, and the faint glow that came into his cheeks was the first Mona had seen in them for months. The girl at last rose from the table regretfully. There was work to be done, responsibilities to be shouldered.

"You'll stay all night with us, won't you, Court?" she asked.

"No, Mona," Young replied quickly. "Couldn't think of it. I've got to get back to Denver to-morrow."

"To-morrow! You can't possibly make it."

"Can't I?" He laughed. "If you were a man, we'd lay a little bet on that."

"But do you mean to say you came all this distance just for an hour or so?" Mona asked incredulously.

"Surely! Why not? I wanted to tell you how I was getting along and to find out how you were making out here. I could hardly spare the time, but the trip was worth it." He lowered his voice and smiled good-naturedly. "I've spent more than an hour with you, Mona."

Then he turned from her and shook hands with Boynton. "Good luck, Mr. Boynton! And don't worry about the distribution. We're sitting sweet and pretty, and if we don't knock the old Universal into a cocked hat, I'll take the

oath of allegiance to the Navajos and come down here and spend the rest of my life in a hogan! Good-by, sir."

"Good-by, son. And thanks." The old invalid settled into his chair, resigned to the many weary days that were to come before Young came again to the shale plant on the Navajo Desert.

Mona walked to the car with Young. "I'm sorry you couldn't stay longer, Court. It's a shame."

"I'll say it is!" Young beamed. "But it was worth the trip just for the hour I spent here. You'll come to Denver for that week, won't you, Mona?" His eyes were smiling, but there was a pleading note in his voice that he could not hide.

"I'll try, Court," Mona said, and gave him her hand.

"And don't work too hard, little girl." Young shook hands quickly, as though he were afraid to linger, and jumped agilely into his big roadster.

The motor thundered. Young released the brake, waved his hand, and the big car roared away down the hill.

Mona stood gazing after it. "Good—old—sport," she murmured.

The sound of the exhaust died away. Only a speeding dust cloud marked the path of the racing car. Mona watched it for several minutes, saw it grow smaller and smaller and at last merge into the desert. She sighed audibly; her shoulders drooped a little, and her slender face relaxed into its habitual look of pensive sadness. Her gaze lingered for a moment on the tall spire of Ship Rock, rearing high above the level reaches of the plain. She knew that just below it was a low, rambling adobe building, where Cole Bennett—

She caught her thoughts up abruptly, sighed wearily again, and turned back to the house. There was so much to be done, so very much to be done. And there was so little zest in the doing.

CHAPTER XIV.

TURNING WHEELS.

ON the morning of the third day following Courtney Young's hurried visit, the Navajo Oil Company's shale plant began operations. It was a great occasion for the little group of men and

the lone woman who had made possible the fulfillment of the dream of the great inventor. No visitors were present, with the single exception of Cole Bennett, who had driven over from his trading post at Ship Rock that morning.

Excitement ran high. Although every person at the plant had been up before daybreak and had labored harder that morning than at any other time since the work had started, it was something in the nature of a holiday, a festive occasion. Even Hackmatack Evers' Indian quarry workers caught the spirit of the day and presented themselves for work in their brightest colors.

Mona was everywhere, attending to a thousand and one last-minute minor details. Jack Symes, breathless, flushed, eager, went over the mechanism, the pipes and valves and burners, of each of his retorts, inside and out. His manner was that of a trainer grooming his thoroughbred on the morning of a great horse race. His eyes were alight; the touch of his grimed hand was a caress; his heart and soul were wrapped up in those huge brick monuments to Boynton's genius.

Mona's weariness and heartache were gone, lost amid the excited anticipation that gripped her. The culmination of months of painstaking labor was at hand. Small wonder that she was singularly exhilarated, that her heart beat fast, that the cares which were past and which were to come were forgotten. She was supremely and confidently happy.

There was not a person at the plant who did not feel certain that the process would prove practical. They had too much faith in the genius of the thin, white-haired inventor, who had risked his fortune on the success of the enterprise. Nearly every one, even Bennett, had seen the model he had constructed, had seen the tiny stream of shale poured into the little retort, had seen the trickle of gasoline which came out.

At eight o'clock there was a portentous pause in the activities about the plant. Mona and Bennett stood near the first retort, beside Boynton's chair. Although the girl was apprehensive of the effect on her father, she could not refuse to allow him to have a part in this day of days.

At last Symes ran up to them. He

was so covered with oil and grease as to be hardly recognizable. "We're all ready, sir!" he panted. "There's steam up in the boiler to run the belt. We can start soon's you give the word."

Boynton raised an unsteady hand and waved to Hackmatack Evers, at the edge of the quarry, three hundred yards away. Those at the retort heard old Hackmatack's mighty shout as he released the brake on the first car of shale. It started slowly down the inclined track toward the big bin. Other cars, empty, started up to the quarry. The watchers heard a dull rumble as the first car was automatically dumped, swung around the curve, and started back up the incline. Ever's Indians were working furiously, goaded on by the old man's roaring commands.

Boynton himself threw open the throttle that started the first belt in motion, carrying the shale into the retort. Symes turned the burners up to their full capacity. The smell of burning oil came to them; black smoke obscured the sun. They heard the dull roar of the furnace, Symes' muffled orders to his men, the rattle of the ore cars, the hiss of steam valves, the shouts of Hackmatack and Dutch Charley.

Symes reported again. "The gas has started, sir. She's shootin' pretty."

"Good!" Boynton's voice was steady and strong. "You can light off the other retorts as soon as you get around to it."

The old man turned in his chair and looked up into Mona's eyes, saw that they were moist. "You're crying, child!"

She bent down and kissed him tenderly. "Just happy, daddy," she murmured. "It's been such a struggle for us all. And now—now we're going to reap our reward." She straightened up, brushed the tendrils of hair from her forehead with a nervous little gesture of her slender hand. "We'll go back to the house now, daddy. Cole is going to stay to lunch with us."

With the welcome roar of activity ringing in her ears, Mona wheeled her father back to the house. When Boynton was resting in his room, Mona returned to the living room and Cole Bennett. She dropped into a chair beside the young trader.

"Isn't it wonderful, Cole?" Mona enthused. "After all these weary months of preparation, we are making gas at last."

Her happiness was shared by Bennett. His thin face warmed to her words; his dark eyes grew eager as he gazed into her flashing blue ones. "It is wonderful and inspiring," he agreed. "There were times when I thought you'd never make the grade. There were so many things to be done and so few who could be trusted to do them. You've accomplished a miracle, Mona."

The girl smiled joyfully at his praise. "There were others who did as much as I. Jack Symes, for instance. He's worked twelve and fifteen hours a day every day for the last month. And the men who worked with him on the re-torts, the men who installed the belts and the shale bin, and the Indians. They've all been so loyal and worked so hard, Cole. Why, I just love every one of them. And our outside man, Courtney Young, has just done wonders. One could hardly believe he'd never worked a day in his life until he went to work for us. I think he's the most enthusiastic one of us all. You've never met him, have you, Cole?"

"Yes; he stopped at the post on his way out, several days ago. He was having trouble with his car and asked me to give him a hand. Seems like a mighty fine chap."

Mona regarded him intently. "He is. One of the finest and the cleanest and the noblest I ever knew. I think a great deal of Courtney. He lived next door to us in the East for nearly fifteen years. We went to school together and played together almost as far back as I can remember. His mother became very close to me after I lost mine."

Bennett betrayed not the slightest flicker of emotion at the girl's praise of Courtney Young; and Mona wondered vaguely if it were because he was such an excellent master of himself. The young trader baffled her at times. He was so calm in her presence, so unruffled, so completely emotionless, almost cold. She wondered if he were really unimpressionable, or if, as she half suspected, he had deliberately closed his heart to

love and friendship and the deeper emotions that would bind him to persons outside of his little world of desert and rock and Indians. Mona felt almost certain that he was intentionally emotionless, and her own heart went out to him in his loneliness.

"Have you and your father been alone long?" Bennett asked quietly.

"Since I was twelve years old," Mona told him.

"Your mother must have been very beautiful."

Mona blushed naively at the simple directness of his compliment. "She was," she said very softly. "And she was very kind and good. I wish she were alive to enjoy our success with us."

"Are you sure that you will be successful?" Bennett asked seriously.

"Why, yes. Aren't you?"

"I would be positive of it, if it were not for the fact that you are setting out to compete with one of the largest corporations in the United States. And if rumor has it right, it is not only the largest corporation, but the most unscrupulous."

"But what can they do to us, Cole?" the girl asked. "They may undersell us, of course. But I don't believe they can afford to do that. They could do it all right if they tried to reduce the price in Denver only. But if they cut the price of gasoline almost in half in that city, the rest of the United States will rise up in wrath and demand that it be cut everywhere. If the Universal doesn't do it, then there is sure to be trouble in the way of investigations. And that is what most of the big oil companies fear more than anything else. There are too many hidden facts about their organizations and their business methods that they want to remain hidden. That is our whole purpose in a nutshell—to cause those investigations and to force down the price of gas all over the United States. If we can break even on the sale of our own gas, my father will be contented."

"But do you think the Universal will give up the fight and reduce their prices without a struggle?"

"No; of course they'll fight," Mona replied.

"And don't you realize that they may

carry the fight right out here, that they may resort to all kinds of underhand tactics?"

"I'm not afraid of them," Mona declared.

"But I am,"

"Are you, Cole?" the girl asked softly.

"Yes; I am. And I want you to promise me that you will be very careful, that you'll take no chances," Bennett said earnestly. "You will, won't you, Mona?"

"I give you my word, Cole," she answered. She wanted to say more, to tell him how happy it made her to know that he was concerned about her safety, but she dared not. It was his place to take the initiative, not hers.

CHAPTER XV.

ORDERS IGNORED.

THE ringing of the telephone on the desk across the room interrupted the conversation between Mona and Bennett. Mona ran eagerly to answer it, knowing that it was from Cortez.

"Hello!" she called, and recognized the voice of Bill Mason, who had charge of the storage tanks in Cortez.

"The gas just reached here!" he told her excitedly. "Number One tank is filling up, and everything's shootin' pretty."

"That's fine, Mason!" Mona said. "Watch everything carefully and keep an armed man on duty at the tanks at all times."

"Don't you worry, Miss Boynton," Mason returned quickly. "The Universal won't find it healthy to monkey around here. I've given my men orders to shoot first and ask questions afterward. Anybody that tampers with the fence around our tanks is sure to get drilled."

Mona hesitated doubtfully. She was certain that she didn't want Mason to shoot any one. Still, maybe Cole Bennett was right. The Universal might try to fire the tanks, commit some depredation.

"All right, Mason," she said. "I'll leave everything in your hands. We're only going to run until five to-day and then close down for adjustments. If anything happens in the meantime, I'll let you know, so you won't be alarmed if the gas stops coming down."

"That's fine, Miss Boynton. When do you figger to start running three shifts?"

"Symes hopes to start to-morrow morning. Something may come up that he can't do it. But if we don't, I'll call you."

"All right. Good-by."

Mona hung up the receiver and turned back to Bennett. "You don't know how happy it makes me, Cole, to realize how loyal all the men are to us. Mason, who has charge of the tanks and the shipping end of it at Cortez, for instance. He's guarding the tanks there day and night."

"I'm glad to hear it. That would be an excellent place for them to strike."

She smiled gayly. "That's admitting, my dear Mr. Bennett, that they will indeed 'strike,' as you call it."

The trader did not return her smile. "They will, Mona. I am certain of it."

"And you're sure you are not a bit of a pessimist, Cole?"

"Possibly I am. I sincerely hope so."

"So do I. Now let's run outside and see how things are going. I'm so enthused that I can hardly keep away from the plant."

They walked outside into the broiling sun. Mona, at least, did not seem to notice the heat as she skipped gayly toward the big retorts. The clash and roar and hiss of the activity was a symphony to her ears. She was completely carried away by the emotions induced by the turmoil. She forgot everything in her exuberance over the fact that the plant was at last in operation, that it seemed to be a success, that it was turning out the gasoline.

Noon found Mona and Bennett roaming about among the retorts, the shale bins, the by-product tanks, the quarry. As the Indian cook came up to them and announced that lunch was ready, they were talking to Jack Symes. The man's overalls dropped oil; his face and hands and arms were blackened with soot; his eyebrows and hair were singed from too close proximity to the burners. He was jubilant, nevertheless.

"She's perfect, Miss Mona," Symes said proudly. "Absolutely perfect! Better'n I ever dreamed it was goin' to be. Say, but won't we give that Universal crowd a run for their money? Them

corporation guys'll be sore enough to do murder." His grimy face suddenly became deadly earnest. "And I wouldn't put it beyond 'em for a minute, either, Miss Mona. They'd kill the whole bunch of us off an' wreck the plant if they thought they could get away with it. I know! I used to work for 'em! Believe me, it's up to us to watch things mighty close."

Was every one prophesying disaster? Mona asked herself the question as she walked back to the house with Bennett. It certainly seemed that way. She wondered if trouble really was in the offing. Surely the Universal would not go outside the law to combat them. Despite her assurance, her spirit was somewhat downcast, and she did not enjoy her lunch greatly.

"I'll have to be going back to the post now," Bennett announced, as they rose from the table.

"I'm sorry you have to go, Cole. I thought possibly you could spend the day with us."

He smiled wearily. "Business, you know, Mona. I have two Indians coming in this afternoon with a big batch of rugs, and I'll have to be there to take care of them."

Mona walked out to his car with him, and they shook hands somewhat perfunctorily. Both the girl and the trader felt constrained, as if each had many things to say and yet neither dared to speak.

"You'll come again soon, won't you, Cole?" Mona asked softly.

"I'll try, Mona. Take care of yourself and don't work too hard. Good-by."

"Good-by, Cole."

The trader drove slowly down the grade and out onto the desert. Although he had completely ignored Doctor Thornley's advice in regard to Mona, he felt better than he had for many days. No one, he realized, could resist the charm of Mona's enthusiasm and light-heartedness. He felt singularly exhilarated, and his features formed into a smile as he thought of her, as he went over each precious moment he had spent with her, each word that had passed between them.

Then his gaze turned out across the desert, centered on the tall spire that

rose above his home. Ship Rock! Symbol of heat and sand and lonesomeness! Embodiment of unhappiness and unrest! Monument to desires never to be fulfilled!

Cole Bennett wondered how long he would be able to endure the desolate solitude of the Navajo Desert.

CHAPTER XVI.

READY FOR BATTLE.

THE two weeks that followed were busy, happy weeks for Mona. The gasoline was pouring down to Cortez in a steady stream. Almost daily, telegrams from Courtney Young told her that he was selling every drop they were turning out. The other products, the kerosene and fuel oil and lubricating oil, were sold a month in advance. The plant itself was running smoothly, twenty-four hours a day. The huge retorts roared from dawn to dark and from dark to dawn. The cars of shale running down from the quarry were never motionless. The myriad sounds of the desert's new industry rang unceasingly across the sandy waste.

Two weeks after the first day's run, Mona entered the living room and found her father bending over his desk, absorbed in column after column of figures. He had been working over them since early that morning, and the girl was worried.

He straightened up at the sound of her footsteps and the bright smile that suffused his white face was reassuring. "I've worked it out at last," he said with a smile. "We're getting too much for our gas. We can deliver it at the railroad for eight and two-tenths cents a gallon. Courtney can sell it at twelve and pay the expenses of his end of the game, the freight and delivery and all that. And that will reduce the retail price from fifteen to fourteen."

"But the Universal is charging twenty-six," Mona put in.

"So much the better. The bigger difference there is in the prices, the less likely they are to attempt to meet ours. And that's what we want. Give us another two weeks and we'll begin to get results."

"Suppose they start in to undersell us,"

Mona suggested. "Have we the resources to keep running at a loss?"

"Plenty," Boynton affirmed confidently.

"I just received another letter from Courtney," Mona said, after a moment. Although she made no move to show him the letter, she drew some newspaper clippings from the pocket of her sweater. "He sent some interesting clippings from the Denver papers. Like to read them, daddy?"

Boynton nodded eagerly and took one of the slips of paper from her hand. He read the item aloud. It ran:

"With the Navajo Oil Co. selling gasoline in Denver for fifteen cents a gallon, no move has been made as yet by the other companies to meet the phenomenal price cut. The Universal Oil Co. and three other large companies in the Denver district are still asking twenty-six cents a gallon for their product, with few takers.

"Those filling stations and garages handling Navajo gasoline report that they are swamped with business and are unable to get enough of the product to supply the greatly increased demand. The other oil stations, on the contrary, report that their business has fallen off to practically nothing.

"Executives of the Universal Oil Co. and of the other companies hit by the entrance of the Navajo into the Denver market were in session again to-day. It is understood that they are formulating plans to combat the rival corporation, although no announcement was forthcoming from their headquarters.

"Courtney Young, sales manager for the Navajo Company, announced to-day that his organization would continue to sell gasoline at fifteen cents per gallon. The big shale plant in northern New Mexico, just across the Colorado line, is producing at capacity, he declared, and construction will be started on additional units within a short time. Young predicted that within six months shale gasoline will be used exclusively throughout the State.

"And in the meantime, motorists of Denver are waiting in line to buy gasoline at the unheard-of price of fifteen cents a gallon."

There were other clippings, half a dozen of them, all in the same vein. One editorial went so far as to declare that the Universal, in keeping with its usual methods, would undersell the Navajo and put the new company out of business. Boynton chuckled when he read it.

"They may be right, so far as underselling us is concerned." He smiled up

at Mona. "But they won't put us out of business."

"I hope not, daddy," the girl answered warmly.

Two days later Mona received a visitor. He was young, good-looking, businesslike.

"I'd like to see Mr. Boynton," he told her pleasantly.

"Mr. Boynton is not well. The doctor won't allow him to see any one. Possibly I can help you. I am his daughter. I am managing the plant for him."

The man looked at her incredulously. "Do you mean to say you are handling this immense project?"

Mona smiled. "I am, and I have been handling it since its inception. My father is an invalid."

He looked at her carefully, admiration shining in his eyes.

"You must be a wonder, then," he decided.

"No; just a hard-working young woman who wishes at times that there was no such thing as gasoline."

"You've certainly got a job on your hands," he remarked. "And I suppose that any business I have to transact will have to be done with you?"

"It will."

The young man sighed. It was quite plain that he would much rather have found a man in charge of the Navajo shale plant. "My name is Sprague," he introduced himself at last, handing her his card. "And I represent the Universal Oil Co."

By no sign did Mona display the sudden chill that went through her. This young man was from the enormous corporation, the powerful, ruthless organization against which she had been warned. She had to match wits with this clever young business man, guard against his brilliant shrewdness, fight a business battle on the instant. Coolly, calmly, Mona faced Sprague, ready for the first shot to be fired.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and out January 1st. It began in the December 1st issue. Back numbers may be obtained from news dealers or the publishers.



Doubling for Santa -

By W.D. Hoffman -

(A NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

A BIG-HEARTED MAN.



LOOKS like it would be the biggest snow we ever had up here," mused Billy Wickup, peering out of the cabin door at the silent sifting flakes blanketing the hillside in the dusk of evening. "When the snow hides the edges of old Glory Hole, it's gettin' deep. I kinda hates to see it, in a way; them wild jacks and hosses in the hills will have moughty hard feedin'."

He closed the door, poked a slim pipeful into his corncob—his tobacco was getting low—and began to prepare supper. Gazing ruefully at his depleted larder, he poured his last can of pork and beans into the pan to heat it.

The cabin door swung open. "Well, I declare! I never see a snow like this sence I come to Rainbow!"

Cheery-red cheeks and glistening eyes shone in the glare of Billy Wickup's oil lamp. Billy recognized the Widow Galoway.

"Why, hello, Mis' Galoway!" he greeted her. "What you doin' way up here on a night like this?"

"Jus' come up to look in an' say hello! How be you, Billy? Wondered if mebbe you might hev the rheumatiz!"

She laughed merrily, knowing that Billy Wickup had never seen a sick day. Although just turned sixty, Billy was a

rare specimen, toughened by a life in the hills.

"Now, Mis' Galoway," returned Billy reproachfully, "you know I ain't old 'nuf to have rheumatiz. I ain't been down to Rainbow, which is true. I wanted to put in all my time in that tunnel——"

"Sho!" She threw up her hands. "Billy Wickup, what chance you got in this rock against diamond drills that's busy most everywhere—till this snow come along, and the narrer gauge shut down! Hard on lots of families, down below," she added, gesturing toward the gulch. "Looks like a mighty hard Christmas, Billy. Why, even them trams are tied up at the Latimer, and the mine's idle till the railroad kin haul ore again."

"I was thinkin' 'bout them pore families——"

"Certingly you was, Billy; it wouldn't be you if you didn't think about the folks that has nigh to nothin'. And them same will miss you this year, too, Billy; that they will. They'll miss their big community tree like all-git-out, and more'n that, Billy, they'll miss Billy Wickup, their Santa Claus! It was a bad day, Billy, when you went busted, far as the folks in Rainbow is concerned."

Billy gestured in modest impatience. "Of course," he said sadly, "it's too bad I was sech a wuthless good fer nothin' to squander my gold, Mis' Galoway. It's been, le' me see, fifteen years now sence I never missed givin' a tree in Rainbow."

"It certingly is a pity," agreed the kind-hearted woman, "that Billy Wickup can't play Santy Claus in Rainbow this year. If the comp'ny had a grain of sense, it would give that tree, anyway, Billy, for the good of the camp. That's what they'd do!" The widow nodded her head vigorously, stepped to the door, and lifted in a basket.

"I ain't give up hope, altogether, yit," asserted Billy. "I'm goin' down to-morrow and see if Tom Latimer won't give me a loan so's I kin give the Chris'mus tree——"

"Little good it'll do!" chimed in the widow, bristling. "Tom Latimer! The likes of that rascal ain't givin' a loan to a—a hard-lucker like you, Billy Wickup. And look at all that scamp owes you, Billy! I never seen the like in all my days!"

"Here you be," she rattled on, "roostin' up here in a cold cabin, tryin' to peck a hole in rhyolite——"

"Drillin' oxydized brown rock now, Mis' Galoway," put in Billy.

"Peckin' a hole in rhyolite for a livin', and you, Billy Wickup, the man that made this camp! You, the discoverer of the Glory Hole! Why, if it wasn't for Billy Wickup, what'd this Rainbow camp be? A blisterin' rock in summer with no poperlation but terantalers, lizards, horny toads, and scorpions, and in winter a worse hole still, with nothin' but starvin' jackasses and wild hosses in the deep snow." She panted, waved her arms.

"And Thomas F. Latimer," she went on, "president of the First National Bank of Rainbow, owner of Latimer, Consolidated, what'd he be, but for his old pardner, Billy Wickup? It was your brains, Billy, that he ris' on: your knowledge of mineral that tuk out ten millions in gold in this camp, Billy, your——"

He raised a hand to restrain her. "It don't do no good to keep rehashin' that all up, Miss Galoway," he said firmly. "I was a wuthless scamp, weak on licker—wasn't fitten to be the big man in this camp, Mis' Galoway, and I ain't holdin' it agin' Tom Latimer jes because he was successful——"

"Successful!" She snorted. "Successful! If skinnin' his old pardner out'n the last cent, inch by inch, is bein' suc-

cessful, then he certingly is it, Billy Wickup! He's got a mansion on the hill, he has, and servants, autimobeels, and a hull army of lick-spiddles, while you, the man that made him, is up here without nigh enough to eat in the house. It makes me b'il——" She choked, puffed, and tried to catch her breath.

"I was wuthless," declared Billy, shaking his head. "Never could stand prosperity. It went to my head, Mis' Galoway, and as fer Tom takin' my interest in the mineral, he mought as well have it as some un else. I was allus a fool and extravergant."

"And allus had a heart as big as Elephant Tooth, down to Oatman! That was your failin', Billy Wickup. You was too gen'rous, and——"

"I ain't listenin', Mis' Galoway. I think I kin count on Tom Latimer lettin' me have a couple thousan' fer this tree."

"You hear what I say, Billy Wickup. That air Tom Latimer ain't the kind to give you a loan."

"I'm countin' on Tom," said Billy with conviction, nodding his head. "Mis' Galoway, what you got in that basket, I'm axin'?"

"Jus' a few vittals that I had to spare at the boardin' house——"

"You ortn't to do that! I kin git along——"

"Git along!" Widow Galoway's eyes roved over the empty shelf. "It's a scandal, Billy Wickup, the way the discoverer of this here camp pinches hisself and starves, when them that rolls in wealth got it off'n your brains." She was at the door; the soft flaky white crystals drifted in from the shrouded hillside.

"You ortn'ta rob yourself of provisions," Billy objected, taking up his hat. "I'll go with you, Mis' Galoway, down the hill."

"You needn't go toddlin' along in this snow."

Billy trudged beside her nevertheless.

"I got to go down to he'p take care of Bob Arnold's boy to-night," the widow went on. "Pneumony."

"Too bad," said Billy. "I recollect that little shaver last Chris'mus. Gave him a train of cars off'n the tree."

"Rainbow'll certingly miss your tree this year, Billy."

They had passed under the ice-laden cables of the Latimer and reached the door of the Widow Galoway's boarding house. After an exchange of good nights, Billy Wickup strode back to his cabin, where he promptly prepared the biggest meal in weeks.

"That air Widdar Galoway is plum' high-grade," he murmured. "It's a pity—she could be livin' in the Latimer mansion if she'd say the word. Tom is wearin' his heart out to marry her."

CHAPTER II.

NOT WORTH TWO BITS.

THE following day, Tom Latimer, uncouth, unlettered, slovenly in spite of his wealth and the diamonds on his thick red fingers, sat scowling into the leaping flames of his big tiled fireplace in his fifty-thousand-dollar home on the Rainbow hills. He had yielded at last that day to his spinster sister and had gone to see a doctor. His blood pressure was terrific, Doctor Stanton had said, and there was a heart murmur, too.

The diagnosis had for a moment sobered Latimer, then it had roused him to sullen anger. Tom had big plans to work out for Latimer Consolidated. The doctor's insistence on a six months' rest exasperated him. Tom was paying the price for overfeeding on rich foods during the past ten years.

So that, as he stared into the fireplace, wondering just how to circumvent the doctor's orders, Latimer was in no mood to receive visitors, least of all his old partner, Billy Wickup, down-and-outer. He had come to hate Billy Wickup, for one may forgive a person who wrongs him, but one seldom forgives a person whom he has wronged.

"Howdy, Tom!" said Wickup, with old-time geniality, extending his horny hand. "Thought I'd drap around when you wasn't busy, like at the bank."

Tom Latimer frowned. "I'm busy enough. Make it brief."

"That's jes what I aim to do. How's your health gettin' along, Tom?"

"Bum!" snapped Latimer. "If I'd been a soak like you, up all hours of the night lappin' lickar, I reckon I'd be a better man to-day."

"I'm downright sorry, Tom. I guess I'm kind of a mule—kin stand anythin'. Mebbe you ain't tuk enough vacations, Tom, like I'm allus doin'. That's partly why I'm broke, I reckon."

The mine magnate scowled. He had suspected Billy Wickup was coming with a hard-luck story.

"Gettin' down to business, Tom, you know Rainbow has allus had a Christmas tree?"

"A lot of tomfoolery," grunted Latimer.

"They's plenty folks that's been made right happy once a year with the tree," persisted Billy. "This'll be the fust year in fifteen that I ain't able to put up a couple thousan' fer the kids and grown-ups that needs he'p——"

"You wouldn't be broke, if you hadn't throwed your money away on such monkey business," broke in Latimer.

"I reckon not, but somehow I couldn't he'p givin' the tree when Chrismus rolled round. When I see snow on the ground up in these mountains, I allus thinks of them that's needy, like when I was a boy. It's mighty hard, Tom, on them waitin' till the Latimer opens up."

"They're a lot of improvident trash. Why don't they save their money? They know there's a brief lay-off every winter."

"It's real hard, with kids and doctors' bills, pneumony and all, not countin' high prices," put in Billy. "Now, what I figures is that community tree is wuth dollars and cents to Latimer Consolidated, helpin' folks to tide over, keeping labor here, Tom."

"Labor's easy to git."

"Now, don't misconstrue me, Tom; I ain't astin' Latimer Consolidated to put up the money. My idee is the loan oi, say, two thousan', Tom, so's I could git up the tree."

"Loan you two thousand?" flared Latimer. "And you flat busted! How'd you ever pay back two hundred, much less two thousand? Ain't the Widdar Galoway even totin' grub to you to keep you from starvin'?"

Billy Wickup hung his head. "That's a fact, I reckon, Tom," he answered meekly. "But I've got a good prospect, I have, Tom, up near the peak, and I calculate I'd sure pay you back."

"You've come to the wrong man." The

mine owner rose to terminate the interview. "I wouldn't advance two bits on that basalt-cliff prospect."

For once Billy Wickup was tempted to hurl the reminder that he had discovered the Glory Hole, the mine that had made the great Latimer Consolidated. It was all right for Tom to take his old partner's stock by trickery; it was all right for Latimer to call him an old soak. It got under Billy's hide, however, when Latimer counted his mining judgment not worth two bits.

Billy Wickup, with an effort, controlled his temper. "I hope your health gets along better," he said, as he rose to leave. "Anyway, Tom, for the sake of them that's needy, I trusts you will think it over. If you won't trust me, mayhap you'll let the comp'ny give the tree." With that, he walked out into the night.

Next morning Billy Wickup trudged down from his shack in the deep snow to the Widow Galoway's boarding house. "You know, Mis' Galoway," he began, "it ain't no secret that Tom Latimer is mighty fond of you——"

"That rascal! Don't you start any doin's on about Tom Latimer in my hearin', Billy Wickup!" she said truculently. "If that big lout ever opens his mouth to me——"

"Now, Mis' Galoway, don't you go gettin' offended that a way. I was jes thinkin' 'bout that Christmas tree. I tried to borrow from Tom, and he wouldn't listen. Now, what I was ponderin', Mis' Galoway, was that if you tuk up the matter with him, he'd be likely to listen, and mebbe he would give that tree his own self, for the comp'ny!"

She cocked her head to one side, impressed. The result was that, after considerable pouting and berating the mining magnate, Widow Galoway, for the sake of the camp, decided to see Tom Latimer immediately.

CHAPTER III.

GETTING READY.

TIME was getting short. "There's a great deal of work in this tree business," muttered Tom Latimer, as he sat back in his office chair. "Fifty needy families. Let's see, that'd run up to——"

He leaned forward and began to figure. Two thousand dollars, the amount that Billy Wickup had always spent—a figure that had appeared wanton extravagance—now seemed inadequate. "Hang it all!" he muttered, and wrote out his personal check for five thousand dollars and sent it across the street to the company store for the Latimer Christmas Tree Fund, the stuff to be taken out later when the lists were compiled.

"We'll make it the biggest tree Rainbow ever had," Latimer meditated. "But, confound it, I got to have he'p compilin' them lists of families and kids."

Mrs. Galoway's boarding house had one of the few telephones in Rainbow. Tom Latimer was soon talking to her over the wire.

"I've put a five-thousand-dollar check to the credit of the biggest Christmas tree that Rainbow ever had," he informed her. "But I'm up in the air about the lists of presents. Won't you come over and give me a lift?"

"Land sakes!" cried Widow Galoway. "Five thousand dollars! Tom Latimer, I didn't think you had it in ya! That'll be the best thing you ever done and a blessin' to them that's needy. But you don't want me to he'p. You want Billy Wickup. Every year Billy makes up that list; he knows every family personally, knows jus' how they stand, and——"

"This tree ain't goin' to be Billy Wickup's tree, but the Latimer Consolidated's," cut in the mining magnate. "And I don't want that old soak buttin' in on it. We'll make up our lists, alone, Mis' Galoway!"

The widow argued, but she found Tom Latimer firm. Between the lines she read his determination to play Santa Claus himself and to reap the glory. She grinned at the thought. For the sake of the camp, she agreed to help with the names.

It was more than a man-sized job, as Latimer began to realize next morning after examining the long column of names to be represented on that Christmas tree. Unknown to Latimer, Mrs. Galoway had gone to Billy Wickup forthwith, and the two had worked late into the night making up the roster of the families, what each needed most, the number of chil-

dren down in the gulch, and all other details. Alongside the names, Billy Wickup had scribbled notations of most urgent articles, clothing, foodstuffs, payment of doctor's bills, store debts, arrears in rent, et cetera.

"Can't you come down this afternoon and he'p me to buy those things?" Latimer asked the widow, over the telephone.

"My lands, no! My boarders has to be looked after, Tom Latimer, and no end of work. But there's Billy Wickup—I kin send him along a-scootin'—"

"Never mind!" broke in Latimer. "I'll tend to it."

He did, to his everlasting amazement at the work involved. He was forced to call in his Carlisle Indian School secretary to write orders and letters to go into sealed envelopes; to specify provisions, from flour, meat, and canned goods to butter, eggs, and milk—children needed eggs and milk, and Tom Latimer with that five thousand was going to give them a real Christmas. The Indian girl spent hours typing tags alone. All this work was nothing, compared to the job of selecting toys.

No wonder Billy Wickup had spent weeks previous to each Christmas working to get that tree ready. That was one season, anyway, when Billy never drank a drop, even before prohibition—he couldn't take chances.

"Twenty trains, with tracks!" gasped Mapes, clerk in the store. "We've only got six in stock. We'll have to send to Kelsey—"

"Send, then!" growled Tom Latimer. "And send quick. I gotta have this junk up here by to-night."

"Very well," assented the clerk. "Where do you want these other toys sent?"

"Send 'em up to my home, some time this afternoon."

So it was done; and then Tom Latimer's grief began in earnest. When he arrived home, he found the toys piled on the open veranda. Latimer promptly ordered the servants to carry them right into the house and to stack them up on rugs, couch, chairs, library table, mantel, and window seats.

"Now clear out, and don't look in here till I call!" grumbled the magnate,

and the housemaid and butler beat a hasty retreat.

After half an hour's futile work, he called in the servants to help him. They got things tangled worse than ever, and he sent them flying.

Again Tom Latimer called for help from Mrs. Galoway. "I'm swamped!" he yelled. "It will take me a week to git this junk sorted and the tags put on, not to mention tyin' them in fancy bundles with ribbons and tinsel."

"My lands! I'll send Billy Wickup right over—"

Latimer snapped up the receiver viciously. "She's avoidin' me!" he wailed, for the first time wondering seriously whether the widow had called to see him at the bank out of interest in him personally, or merely because of her desire to help the needy.

"For two shares of phony minin' stock I'd chuck the hull thing!" he groaned. "But I can't back out now, I reckon—the hull camp knows I'm goin' to be Santy Claus."

He set to work again. He bent until his back ached, pulling, sorting, tying, wrapping, segregating into piles, tagging the plagued toys. After two hours, groaning at the cramp in his large girth from stooping, he flopped down on his back, glancing at the clock. It was now ten o'clock, and he wasn't one fourth through. The doctor had said he must be in bed promptly at ten every night—or almost anything might happen to that faulty heart of his.

Latimer rose, stumbling over one of the toy trains. Lifting his foot, he kicked at it viciously, swearing heartily. Suddenly he remembered that the doctor had warned him against outbursts of temper. He slumped down into a chair, after scraping a heap of toys to the floor. He was "all in"—never could stand the strain of playing Santa Claus on the morrow.

This would not do; those toys must be made ready. He knew Widow Galoway worked late at her arduous boarding-house duties. He telephoned her again.

"Mis' Galoway," he pleaded, "I'm plum busted up over this junk. My heart's give out. If they's goin' to be any tree in Rainbow, you'll have to come over."

"My lands! I can't go over to a bachelor's house this time o' night, Tom Latimer!"

"Bring that wuthless Billy Wickup 'long with you, then. He's got to act as Santy Claus anyhow. My heart—won't stand the strain, Mis' Galoway."

He heard her joyful voice over the wire at his decision to include Billy Wickup, and a stab reached his heart that hurt him worse than the funny little disorders that the doctor had found.

Tom Latimer dropped back in the chair, breathing hard. He was a blamed fool to have anything to do with these Christmas tree monkeyshines; they were out of his line. Now look what a mess he had made of it—Billy Wickup would be Santa Claus, anyway—with all that five thousand dollars' worth of presents to give out! Latimer gritted his teeth.

CHAPTER IV.

A VERY SIMPLE SCHEME.

WITHIN a half hour the doorbell rang, and Latimer let in the two snow-whitened figures who had crossed the gulch to the mansion on the hill.

"Well, well!" Billy Wickup chuckled. "Look at all the Chrismus presents! Tom, I knowed you'd do it! I got the tree already set up in the plaza. Good old Tom Latimer ain't the kind as would let these folks go by without their tree!"

Latimer motioned him aside impatiently. "Fix 'em up! You'll have to play Santy Claus; I can't," he muttered. "Mis' Galoway, could I speak with you a minute?" He led the way into the next room, taking her shawl with unusual solicitude.

"Mis' Galoway," he began abruptly. "I've been wantin' to ask a question for a long time."

Her bright eyes were on him, her cheeks aglow with the frosty air.

Tom Latimer sighed and coughed nervously as her steady gaze met his wavering eye. He braced himself against the big polished table. "I'd like for you to marry me, Mis' Galoway," he said, and wished he had been struck dumb.

The widow did not laugh in his face, which was something. Her eyes were serious and her expression sympathetic.

"I'm sorry, Tom Latimer, that I can't do that," she answered quietly.

"I'm rich, as you know, Mis' Galoway. I reckon I'm rated many times a millionaire, with Latimer Consolidated, and the bank——"

"I know," she interrupted. "But Billy Wickup and me has fixed our weddin' date for the day after Christmas. We was goin' to be married Christmas, but figured we couldn't spare the time—with this work on hand—and all."

Tom Latimer supported himself with an effort, and his frame grew rigid. "Not—that—beggar!"

Her eyes flashed. "He ain't a beggar; he's the man that made this camp, Tom Latimer! I'd rather have Billy even in debt than any man in the world with millions!" She gradually controlled her temper, for the sake of the work in hand. "But now let's git down to business—and fix these Christmas things!"

"You—go in there—with him. Go as far as you like. I wash my hands of the hull matter. You excuse me; I got to turn in—doctor's orders."

Without stopping to see how Billy Wickup was getting along, Tom Latimer dragged himself up the stairs. He did not go to bed. He sat on the edge of the mattress, glaring into space.

"Confound the doctor, anyway!" he groaned. "I'd ought to go down and kick that pup, Billy Wickup, out into the snow!"

He knew, however, that he was no match for the straight, ruddy Billy, whose muscles were tempered by contact with hard rock, while the millionaire had been softening on a swivel chair.

"Santy Claus—I'd make a pretty Santy Claus, now, wouldn't I?" Latimer asked himself, aloud. "I ought to be cuffed into to-morrow for considerin' such a fool thing. It's kid play, for such idiots as Billy Wickup. Serves me right!" His flaccid face grew hard. "And her goin' to marry that old bum!" A venomous gleam came into his eyes. "And them two havin' a reg'lar picnic on my five thousand. We'll see 'bout that!"

For some time he was silent, while the tide of jealous hate mounted; never had Tom Latimer, an excellent hater, felt a hate such as he now held for Billy

Wickup—a triple hate; first, from the fact that he had cheated Billy and therefore must hate him to justify himself; second, Billy had crossed him—successfully—him, the master of Rainbow, who had always bludgeoned every antagonist into submission; third, Thomas F. Latimer, president of the First National Bank and owner of Latimer Consolidated, had been turned down by a widow woman of meager means in favor of a man who didn't have a cent.

"I'll spoil his Santy Claus monkey-shines to-morrer night if it's the last thing I do!" grumbled Latimer, and set his brain to work on some plan of revenge. He hit upon it more quickly than he had expected.

The most effective way to hurt Billy Wickup would be to smash the whole Christmas tree performance into a cocked hat.

"I'll wait till he gets everything loaded for givin' out the junk, and then I'll burn up the blamed tree!" decided Tom Latimer. "The loss of that five thousand will be wuth the show."

How to go about this was a matter requiring some thought. Tom Latimer, however, was a practical mining man, and it did not take him long to plan a simple clockwork mechanism attached to a box of powder. He would put it on the tree, camouflaged with an ornament. When the clock reached the proper hour—eight o'clock on Christmas Eve, with all the beggars assembled for their hand-outs—the clockwork would ignite the powder, and the flaming mass would fall over the entire tree. There would be enough powder to burn up the whole business—and Tom Latimer would be at home, safe in his library, before the fire-place. What would happen to the assembled children never occurred to him.

After reaching that decision, Tom Latimer chuckled and undressed for bed. It was some time before he could fall asleep, for the tide of jealousy was high within him, but at last he drowsed off.

In the morning when Latimer came down, he found all the toys had vanished. Billy Wickup and the widow had stayed up most of the night, getting them ready, and had packed them down the gulch to the boarding house, across the plaza

from where the big white fir had been set up.

CHAPTER V.

BENEATH THE STAR.

IT was Christmas Eve. Latimer had been down to the plaza at dusk, six o'clock, when Billy Wickup was busy putting the finishing touches to the tree. Even Latimer saw it was a beautiful tree, for the five-thousand-dollar check had bought many gewgaws of splendor besides the purely utility presents for the needy. Billy Wickup had labored all day long, trimming the tree, after a night in which he had not had a wink of sleep.

Latimer had spent several hours in the morning in the workshop of his home, rigging up the machine that was to destroy the tree. He had taken it down to the plaza. Then, while Wickup went to snatch a bite to eat and don his Santa Claus suit, Latimer climbed the ladder, carrying under his arm a gorgeous streamer of scintillating bulbs and a huge star of Bethlehem. They were intended as a cover-up for his fire mechanism.

He hooked on the big, glistening, red-and-green bulbs, attached the star of Bethlehem to the very tip of the tree, replacing a smaller star, and tied on the square box, with the lid on the bottom. When the clock hand got around to eight, the powder would be ignited, the lid would drop, and the tree would be sprayed with living flame.

People had already begun to gather. At the time set, Billy Wickup would appear in his Santa Claus costume, as he had done for years, and hand out the presents.

Tom Latimer went home. He plunked himself down in one of the big fireside chairs and settled himself to enjoy the evening. The mantel clock showed it to be six fifteen. There were almost two hours yet before the fireworks in the gulch. He rose and walked to the long-paneled window. Snow was still falling; would it never stop? He snapped off the light in the room, to give him a clearer view outside. Save for an occasional light, Rainbow was in darkness, but in the very center of the black frame of night there shone the Rainbow Christ-

mas tree in a blaze of glory, covered by a myriad of lights, glowing with glistening balls, chains, tinsel, and shining toys. The soft snow falling about the tree mellowed it with its silvery crystals.

Latimer visualized what would happen when the clock hand reached the hour of eight; when Billy Wickup would waddle forth to hand out the gifts. There would be a wild scene down there, a veritable panic.

Latimer turned from the scene. Without snapping on the light, he dropped into the big chair again and faced the firelight. The picture of that beautiful tree remained in his mind's eye. Sentimental nonsense, that tree! For years back, he had seen that Billy Wickup tree in the gulch on Christmas Eve. The old fool must have squandered a good-sized fortune that way. If properly invested, the money Billy Wickup had thus spent would have been enough to keep him the remainder of his days in comfort. Now, Wickup was living in a shack up on the hillside.

Fools and their substance were soon parted. So Tom Latimer thought, and when, far back in his head, rose the dim thought that he had cheated Wickup out of his share of Latimer Consolidated, he thought of something more pleasant.

That tree stuck in his mind, however, and his thoughts reverted to it. What a fool he had been to allow Widow Galoway to inveigle him into having anything to do with the confounded tree! The idea of Tom Latimer fussing around with those toys and all, worrying and working his fool head off! A mining magnate monkeying with toy trains, with tracks!

A stab of pain struck him in the heart; he jerked himself upright, twisted about, to see if it would come again. It did not. That was the first time he had felt a pain like that. It must have been caused by the exertion and excitement of the last few days; perhaps the climb up the ladder on that tree a half hour before had brought it on.

He laughed uneasily, thought of what the doctor had said. The doctor had warned him that if he didn't take a long vacation, he wouldn't last the year out. The doctor was a fool.

Of course, Latimer realized that he wasn't the man he used to be. Still, Thomas F. Latimer was too big a man to be playing invalid. He had never been sick. He had always been strong, fought his way, got what he wanted—the more opposition, the better he liked it.

Hang Widow Galoway anyhow! She was the first one who had ever denied him what he had set his heart on. A boarding-house keeper! He was a millionaire. The woman must be crazy—crazy as a loon, to pick out old Billy Wickup when she could have lived as mistress of the Latimer millions.

He shook himself again to see if that pain would return. That pain! Billy Wickup probably didn't have to worry about a weak heart, anyway. In spite of his poverty, Billy was a better man than he was. Widow Galoway had picked him. She had some sense, after all. If she had taken Latimer, he might not last the year out.

He fidgeted in the chair, rose again, and looked out into the night, gaze centered on that beautiful tree. This was Christmas Eve. It might be his last Christmas Eve on earth.

He walked back again and slumped down in the chair, watching the flickering flames. All was still about the house; he had let the servants go out for the evening, to see the tree. It was a funny thing how foolish some grown-ups were about gewgaws like that. It was bad enough for kids to be silly about it. He had been that way when a little shaver, but he had long been a grown man. Yes; he knew that when he was a kid he would have danced about with joy at one of those ridiculous trains, with a track. They didn't have things like that when he was a boy. He remembered when he got his first horn and drum. That was when he believed in Santa Claus.

There was a gentle stab at his heart again. Let it stab! It couldn't do any more than kill him. He was no baby, to get sentimental and run to cover just because his health was getting poor.

What was it he had been thinking about? That first horn and drum! Yes; he had a Christmas tree, once, too. He remembered how his father and mother used to sneak downstairs nights to fool

him, making him think it was Santa Claus. That didn't seem so long ago; looking back, it seemed like yesterday. His old dad had been dead now thirty years and his mother twenty-one years.

Well, such was the way of life. He'd soon be joining them. There'd be a funeral for Thomas F. Latimer; he'd be put into an expensive coffin and buried out there on the hillside. It would go hard with Rainbow and Latimer Consolidated and the First National Bank. Still, Dutton was able to run the bank, and Brown was doing a fair job at the mine. If he died, they'd probably be able to wiggle along.

Well, in his time he had done a lot—built up the whole town of Rainbow. That would be his monument. Folks that hated him would have to admit he was the man that made the camp.

That is, he was the brains of the camp. Billy Wickup, by a stroke of luck, blundered onto the Glory Hole. If it hadn't been for Tom Latimer, however, Billy Wickup would never have created a great camp there. Billy was a waster, a spender. If Billy died, the camp wouldn't miss him much.

One of these days Billy would die, too, and the Widow Galoway. Some of those kids down there in the gulch would be running things in Rainbow then.

Those kids! Yes; they'd be running things. It was a wise provision of nature that kids should be growing up to take the places of the old-timers. If it wasn't for that, the world would come to an end for everybody and everything.

Through the night air, Latimer heard the distant cheers of the youngsters. It was getting near the time for Billy Wickup to appear in that Santa Claus suit. Time was going mighty fast; it was seven thirty now. Yes; those kids were cheering in the hope of hurrying Santa Claus along.

He rose and went to the window again. There was no question about that tree being a beauty. But when the cap hit that powder—

Something turned over inside Tom Latimer; something that made him sick, that stabbed his heart in a different way from the stabs of the last hour.

"You're a pitiful excuse of a man, to be

pickin' on the kids, Tom Latimer!" he said aloud, staring out into the brilliant cone in the plaza. He went back to the chair and slouched down. "I reckon I'll have a lot to answer for, if I pass in my checks in the next year," he murmured. "Pickin' on kids."

No; it wasn't the kids he was picking on; it was Billy Wickup. Billy Wickup! Come to think of it, Billy hadn't ever harmed him, until he had taken Widow Galoway. It was the widow who did that—not Billy. If Tom Latimer should die in the next year, he'd have a lot to answer for concerning Billy Wickup, also. Even if Billy was a spender, that was no excuse for stealing from him.

Latimer hurried over to the window once more and gazed with fascinated eyes toward the community Christmas tree.

CHAPTER VI.

IN AWED WONDER.

IT was ten minutes to eight. Eager faces, clapping hands, laughing voices, children with sparkling eyes were in the plaza. Also there were the serious, but happy, expectant faces of men and women; some pinched with hunger, drawn by worry, shivering slightly, and hugging themselves with folded arms in the glow of Rainbow's tree. These things Billy Wickup saw between admiring, rapturous glances at the blaze of glory that reached far into the dark sky overhead on the lighted Christmas tree.

"Mis' Galoway, ain't it wonderful!" gasped Billy Wickup, from his box back of the tree, where he stood waiting in his Santa Claus suit, long white beard flowing, his ruddy face aglow, and his wrinkled eyes sparkling. "Rainbow ain't ever had a tree like this, thanks to good old Tom Latimer!"

"And chiefly thanks to Billy Wickup," interposed Widow Galoway. "But I ain't denyin' the credit due to Tom Latimer for the money he put up for this tree."

That tree was indeed a dream, enough to make one dizzy to gaze on its scintillating beauty, its myriads of colored lights, its falling snow, rivaling the artificial crystals that had been sprinkled on the fir branches. The soft flakes filtered down and settled on tissue flowers, swans,

sailboats, metal-foil ornaments, colored-glass balls, tinkling bells, reflectors, waxed angels, spun glass, air-ships, fancy candy boxes, kinkled tin foil, tinsel wreaths, paper stockings, clusters of grapes, ornamented boxes of nuts, oranges, candies, topped by the star of Bethlehem—just over the fire machine placed there by Tom Latimer.

The hand of the clock in the powder box neared the hour mark.

Handclapping and cheers from the children expressed their feverish excitement as the hour of eight grew near. Billy Wickup was always prompt, right on the minute. Women gazed at the large heaps of flour, bacon, butter, eggs, beans, canned goods, and other provisions at the foot of the tree; they feasted their eyes on flat cardboard boxes that they knew contained clothing, suits and dresses, sweaters, stockings, mufflers—everything that one might need in the wintertime. Never before had any of Billy Wickup's trees, liberal as they had been—never had they been like this.

"Five minutes yet," said Billy to Widow Galoway, "and before the givin' starts, I'm goin' out there to make a speech in behalf of Tom Latimer—fust time I ever made a speech at any of the Chrismus trees."

There was a hush. Santa Claus appeared, bowed, and spoke in the voice of Billy Wickup, briefly, pointedly, telling all the people there that Rainbow had to thank Tom Latimer for coaxing Santa Claus to bring this Christmas tree, the biggest and richest that the camp had ever seen. The program would start promptly in two minutes more.

Two minutes more! Such an outburst of cheers and applause Rainbow had never heard before. In two minutes, Santa Claus Billy Wickup would step to the elevated platform, under a yellow light, and start to read out the names, girls and boys first, and hand out trains, dolls, drums, wheelbarrows, sleds, fire engines, trucks, Teddy bears, stoves, dishes, and everything! The kids would get theirs first, and their fathers and mothers would have to wait.

It was one minute to eight. Out of the darkness back of the glittering tree came the figure of Santa Claus. He

moved swiftly and tugged at some heavy weight. It was a ladder. Running to the front of the tree, his long beard flowing, his fuzz-trimmed coat flying, he hoisted the tall ladder to the very tip of the tree, and while the massed hundreds gazed on in wonder, he climbed up that ladder like a monkey. Santa was starting from the top this time!

The crowd gasped.

"He's takin' down the star of Bethlehem!" some one shouted.

It was true. Santa Claus had lifted the big glittering star, had put in its place a large red bell. He turned to descend. People gazing up into the tip of that great tree heard a hissing sound, saw a flash, and the feet of Santa Claus suddenly struck out against the slim pole of the tree, from the ladder. A blazing ball of fire cut an arc through the dark sky.

Santa Claus was falling, in flames. He was going down clear of the tree and the crowd, however; he had tipped the ladder. Costumed man and burning frame swayed out in a semicircle, over the very heads of the crowd, and down into a ten-foot embankment of soft snow heaped on the hillside.

Utter silence had given way to the screams of women and children and the shouts of men. In the middle of the confusion, like a miracle, appeared the figure of Santa Claus right under the tree, even as the crowd surged to the snow embankment to dig him out.

This Santa Claus, closely followed by Widow Galoway, hurried forward with the crowd to that snow hillock. They dragged Tom Latimer from the soft white mass.

Parts of Latimer's costume and his hands were burned; the snow had extinguished the flames. Billy Wickup, Santa Claus No. 2, leaned over questioningly.

"Forgive me—Billy!" gasped Tom Latimer. "You—go right—'long with your Christmas tree program—give out the presents!"

Widow Galoway stepped beside him, took his arm. "I'll tend to him, Billy," she insisted. "You go right on with the program." With the help of a pair of supporting male arms, she took the mining magnate home.

"Mis' Galoway," murmured Tom Latimer, when they had got him into the house, "I got a lie on my conscience—that part in that note 'bout me savin' things all these years for Billy. But don't ever tell him. The gift—is final." With that, Tom Latimer died, more from the strain on his heart than from the burns from his infernal machine.

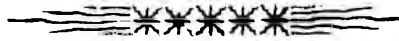
Meanwhile Billy Wickup gave out the presents to the awed crowd, who did not yet know just what had happened. Wickup worked swiftly so that he could go back to the mansion to inquire about Tom. When he had cleaned the presents from the tree and reached the very

tip, he saw an envelope floating out from the big red bell. He tore it open. It read:

Know, men, by all these presents, that I, Tom Latimer, have bin holdin' all of the stock and interest of Billy Wickup in guardianship, and hereby turn same over to him as a weddin' present on this Christmas Eve. The key here inclosed is to the deposit box in my bank that contains one half stock in the Latimer Consolidated and the First National Bank of Rainbow, henceforth the propiety of Billy Wickup, without qualifications or conditions.

(Signed) THOMAS F. LATIMER.

Billy Wickup staggered up the hillside to the Latimer mansion to protest, but he found he had arrived too late.



CABIN OF MINE

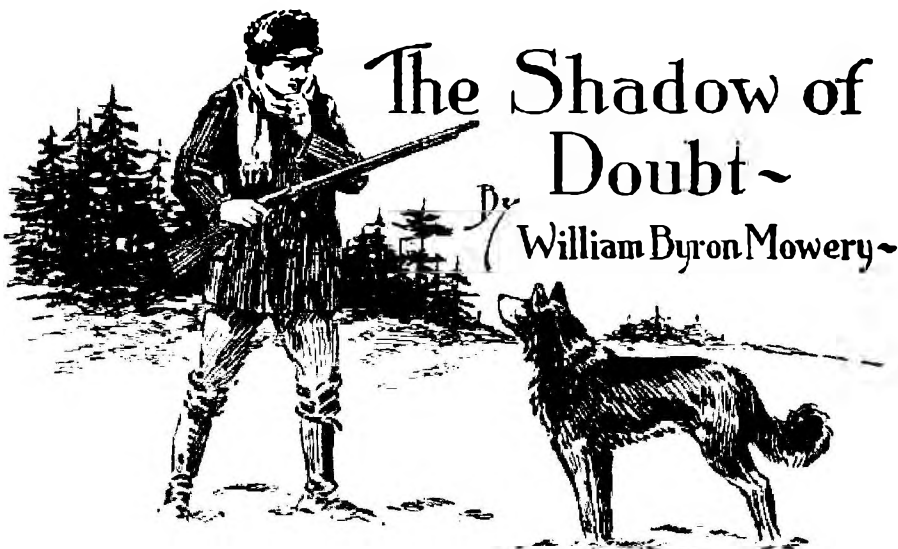
By Ronald Barrett Kirk

CABIN of mine in the mountain,
 Where the wind whispers low in your eaves,
 And the sun rises close to caress you
 Through ribbons of gold that it weaves;
 By the pathway that leads to your doorstep
 And flowers that grow close to your wall,
 I would I were free and might answer
 Your magic, low, lingering call.

I would come to your shadow and listen,
 And dream with you, cabin of mine,
 And whisper low words that the night wind
 Would bear to the flower and the pine.
 In my dreams I would come and lean closer
 And smoke my old brier at your door—
 You would know then, old cabin, and greet me,
 And call me your sweetheart once more.

I know that the flowers would grow sweeter,
 I know that the rain would be low.
 And the wind would blow soft, and remember
 Her lover of ages ago.
 Ah, cabin of mine in the mountain,
 How I long to creep close to your fire—
 With the rain dropping soft on your rafters
 And the smoke rising up from my brier!

So remember our love will not vanish,
 And our dreams shall be fair as before,
 When, living or dead, you will find me
 In æons to come, at your door—
 Just smoking my blackened old brier—
 The pipe that we relished the most—
 Just dreaming old dreams in the firelight,
 An old cabin there—and a ghost!



WHAT'S t' matter, b'y?" asked old Jasperson, but Barr Mathis did not answer. Mathis dropped wearily on a chopping block in front of the old man's cabin and stared through his spread fingers across the apple-green waters.

Four miles away, the Laurentian ledges of the main Labrador coast loomed purple in the low, slanting sun. A score of close-set reefs were strung from the three sister islands to the mainland. Kittiwakes and shrill-winged guillemots flattered homeward to their rookeries along the high coast bluffs. King eiders and puffins and clownish cormorants dropped down to their nests among the mosses and shrubberies of Jasperson Island. Small bergs, blue-white and mushroom-shaped, nodded gravely to each other in the heaving ground swell; and big broken fields of slob, sporting a pod or two of hair-seals with their white-coat young, slid past through the straits or jammed in the narrow reef passages.

"What's t' matter, b'y?" the weathered old islander repeated. "It's trouble beyond ordinar', from your dour look. Have you had ill luck with th' foxes, b'y?"

"I have had," Mathis answered in the Labrador burr. "But it's not for th' ill luck alone that I rowed across from my island to see you. It's more than th' loss

of th' four best blacks I had. It's more than th' loss of all of 'em would mean to me."

Old Jasperson sat down on a mossed granite swell and stroked his beard. "You've lost your four best blacks, b'y? Did they die on you, or disappear, or what?"

"I'll tell you th' all of it, dad; for it's your judgment I came after—your judgment touching John Buckney."

Jasperson looked puzzled at the mention of the erstwhile partner with whom Barr Mathis had trapped for years in the Labrador height-of-land country and along the bleak coast.

"This morning," Mathis said huskily, "th' pen where I keep my four dog foxes was empty. They have broke out before; but always I found 'em again easy and quick enough, or Old-Timer here nosed 'em out for me. I've stoppered all th' rock holes; and there's no hiding places. But I hunted th' island four times over, searching ever' shrub and stone where a mouse even could stick, without finding a track or a hair of th' blacks. They're not on th' island; they're gone."

"Old-Timer couldn't have rid you of 'em, maybe?" Jasperson suggested, looking at the big white-and-black husky.

"Old-Timer? He plays with 'em! They can bite his ears with their sharp

little teeth till they break th' skin, without him snapping at 'em."

Old Jasperson nodded. "I'm as sure as you are that Old-Timer wouldn't touch one. Speak ahead, b'y."

"They're gone!" Mathis repeated. "And how did they go? It's three hundred yards at tide-out to that nearest big reef. In four years I've never seen a fox try to swim an inch or wet a foot in these waters. They would starve first; you know that."

The old islander agreed. "And they're gone," he said, half to himself. "They were stolen."

"They went last night," Mathis continued, "during th' four hours of darkness. Somebody took 'em—somebody who knew what pen they were in; knew th' lay of things and could work fast; knew Old-Timer so well that he wouldn't bark."

"There's no liveyere but you and me and Buckney within forty miles of these islands," Jasperson commented. "And you suspicioned your once-time partner?"

"I didn't!" Mathis answered quickly. "It was furthest from my mind to suspicion John Buckney. He knew, of course, about th' pen of choice blacks; he knew my island like his own; he knew Old-Timer. But for ten years, Buckney and I tailed out our fur path together, dad, and split fortune and failure between us. Then we got th' notion of raising good foxes and came here with a pair apiece. I thought I knew John Buckney from cowlick to shoepack, inside and out, body and soul. I thought I knew him! Not in a thousand years would I have suspicioned him on my own accord."

"But you do now?"

Mathis hesitated. His answer was reluctant; the words were wrung from him. "I do. He himself made me believe he—he—stole 'em. He rowed over to see me this noon, just when I had finished searching th' island. I told him about my four blacks disappearing, and my suspicions that some dastard stole 'em. What I said hit him hard. He couldn't sit still; he didn't act like John Buckney. He had something on his mind—something dark and heavy. If it had been anything he could have told me, he

would up and said what was wrong. But he left in such a hurry that he forgot his jacket.

"I remember four days ago," Mathis went on, "when I came past his island with a seal I shot, he was cutting withes—th' kind you make live cages out of. He tried to hide from me what he was doing; I saw that plain. Th' next day he asked me if I expected th' blacks, which I didn't need any more for breeding and planned to sell, would bring seven hundred and fifty apiece at St. Johns. He said some other things which I didn't mark then; but now I see he was considering hard about th' blacks. What was his reason? I've got it here."

From his pocket, Mathis drew a crumpled sheet. Old Jasperson looked at it aslant, but passed it back with a shake of his head.

"It's from Ethel McLeon," Mathis explained. "You've heard him a dozen times talking about her. I didn't know it dropped out of his jacket. I took it for a paper of mine and read it before I thought."

"She's frank with him; I can't blame her for being," he continued. "She says four years has been a long time to wait, 'specially with no prospects of his betterment ahead. Buckney's had no luck with his foxes; he's got a scant two thousand dollars' worth of scrawny patches in his pen. She reminds him that they've been trying to scrape up five thousand dollars to buy a cod schooner, so they can settle in comfort at St. Johns. She's found iust th' schooner they want—a chance that won't come again; and asks him to try to find th' three thousand dollars extra, or—"

"She doesn't say or—what, but it's easy to see she's tired of waiting lonely, with him so far off that he can't come more than once a year."

Old Jasperson's face clouded as Mathis finished. "I come to your same conclusions, b'y," the old islander said sorrowfully. "I see how you fought back your suspicions of him, spite of th' proof, till th' letter made you certain. Th' shadow of guilt hangs over your partner. It's a sad, unfort'nate case about Ethel; but a thousand times sadder for a man like John Buckney to sink to a wharf-wolf

level. That's th' pity of it. I see what's hurting you worst, b'y; your faith's torn down; you're thinking there's no truth nor honesty in any person alive, and that th' earth is th' devil's own scampering ground."

After several minutes, Mathis rose slowly to his feet. "I would have loaned him th' money I got from th' blacks, if he had asked. I'd given him th' money, given him ever' last dollar I've made. He was my partner. But now, when I make sure he's guilty beyond th' shadow of doubt, I'm going to treat him as I would any thief. It's justice. I'll see it done to John Buckney, or anybody, or anything!"

Old Jasperson got up and followed the younger man to the landing. "But first, find out beyond th' shadow of doubt, b'y. You've not been hasty in your suspicions; you were forced to 'em, if that's what you came to ask me about. And you're right about doing justice, too. It'll take courage in you, that justice will."

II.

IT was eleven o'clock, and dark of the long June day had settled when Barr Mathis ate a bite and lay down on his bunk. Worn out and worried, he slept heavily through the brief night, but was up with the sun at half past three to get his morning work done before rowing across, on his mission of justice, to Buckney's island.

Mathis had finished the feeding and was walking along the backbone of the little islet toward his cabin. A chortling jay and several ravens drew his eyes toward a juniper thicket halfway up the slope. He stepped down and parted the bushes, started back in astonishment and dismay.

One of his year-old foxes, always breaking out of its pen, a pretty cross with black-tipped ears and tail and long silvering hairs that put luster and price in his red-tinted coat, lay dead—torn and mangled—within the thicket.

Very coolly and deliberately Mathis knelt down to hunt for signs. Plainly the young fox had put up a death fight against a larger and heavier animal. Tracks showed vaguely on the white

moss; yet Mathis made out big pads and claws twice the size of the fox's.

His face paling, he circled the thicket. In a spot bare of moss, where the earth was soft and fresh, he found a dog track, with one telltale claw missing.

Old-Timer rose from a sunny place behind the cabin and came to meet his master's low whistle. Though a pure Labrador husky in outward looks, yet his keen brain and keener scent and savage fighting courage came from a Canadian wolfhound sire. More than once, caressing the sharp-tipped ears and cold, wolfish muzzle, Mathis had marveled that Old-Timer could be so docile with the foxes, so faithful to his trust and training, with all that mad blood coursing through him.

Now the man stooped down to examine the dog. He swore a slow oath under his breath. Old-Timer showed unmistakable evidence of his guilt. He had been fighting, and there was nothing on the islet for him to fight, save the foxes it was his duty to guard. Crimson spots, not from a wound of his own, tinted the gray of his throat and matted the short fur of his muzzle. His left ear had a slit at the tip; one front leg was slightly gashed. He was a little stiff and slow in unlimbering himself. The fox must have put up a desperate fight against his four-times-larger enemy.

Mathis looked but once at the dog; one glance was all too much. Old-Timer raised his forepaws to his master's jacket and looked at him from warm brown eyes that were innocent as the eyes of a night-traitor collie just in from slaughtering a dozen lambs. The man put him down, without the usual pat, strode into the cabin, lifted his rifle from its canvas case, and went out. A grim resolute purpose was written on his face.

"Come!" he ordered.

III.

MATHIS and his dog walked a hundred yards out along the ridge. The morning sun had dried away the slight dew. The island crest was covered with pink-and-blue flower bells of life everlasting; and the shrubs and tough little man-high trees, feeling the urge of twenty hours sunshine a day, had blossomed in

white and red and deepest crimson, where a few short weeks before they had been buried under drifts of snow. The brown hermit thrush gave his solemn benison to all things. So elusive they were but flashes of brown and dashes of chirping melody, song sparrows, creepers, and warblers were busy with their nesting in the denser thickets. With an eye turned to a hovering black gyrfalcon, a covey of horned larks balanced on flower stems and sang.

Along the land-wash, a dozen kinds of ducks quarreled noisily or fished in the tide waves—golden-eyed, hooded mergansers, buffheads, shovelers, pintails, the proud harlequin duck, and the ubiquitous mallard. The red phalarope cock jumped stiff-legged a dozen feet into the air, or took his turn aiding the female with the hatching. A black-winged albatross, skimming swiftly along at wave-height, leaped clear over the small island at one exultant bound.

Mathis' eyes were fixed straight ahead, seeing nothing under the soft yellow sun, hearing nothing of the morning bird symphony, though usually he was keenly alive to the peculiar, quick-flowering beauty of the Labrador summer on his islet—a beauty that sufficed him in lieu of neighborliness with men.

He walked slowly, for a grim job was just ahead, a job he could in no wise shirk, however much he shrank from it. Old-Timer had played the traitor, had broken trust, wantonly had killed. In justice, he must be shot with less mercy than to a slinker wolf, for the slinker avowed no friendship to man. Old-Timer must be shot just as John Buckney must be given his just deserts for sinking to a wharf-wolf level.

As a fat little pup, Old-Timer had been a gift from Buckney when the partnership ended. Mathis had trained him to watch after the foxes, to trail well, to wind seal over the hummocky ice. Always the dog worked with rare, abiding zeal and he was a clever help at outwitting the pranks of the wily foxes. Mathis could leave the island and know his animals were safe with Old-Timer keeping them where they belonged.

An excited yelp and a joyous spring—often a bit upsetting because of the dog's

one hundred and ten pounds—greeted him always at the landing. The day before, Mathis would have scoffed at the notion of Old-Timer's treacherously killing a fox, just as he would have struck any one in the face who had hinted that John Buckney might be a dastard and a thief.

The resemblance between the cases of his dog and of his partner was strikingly close. At every point, the situations were exactly alike. Both had been his friends for years, both proved traitors overnight; both were going to get what they deserved.

It seemed a sardonic trick of fate that he should have discovered the untrustworthiness of the two within so short a time.

A hundred steps from his cabin, behind a pink, granite boulder, Mathis stopped. Old-Timer, standing wolflike on tiptoes, three paces in front, watched curiously, his eyes roving but his head still.

Mathis pumped a cartridge into the barrel, slid the safety off the little red dot, and looked at the dog, but without raising the gun. His face twitched. He blinked rapidly, hesitated. Then he slid the safety back over the red dot with a hand that trembled.

"Too close to th' foxes," Mathis muttered. "They're not used to shooting. We'll go on a ways."

It was only an excuse to himself to put off the inevitable, and he was perfectly aware of it.

Ahead a little distance, a tongue of land-wash, covered with tall eelgrass, jutted out toward the big reef. To it, Mathis went resolutely. The dog kept close beside him, wondering what he was expected to hunt.

"It won't hurt much, b'y," the man said gently. "Th' worst'll be when I have to pick you up and throw you into th' rattle. What made you do it, Old-Timer? Here, now, here. Come close. Closer. Hold there."

Old-Timer growled softly. A growl was his usual answer to a caressing word; but looking down the barrel of his rifle, Mathis saw the dog was bristling in anger. His upper lip curled to uncover white fangs. He half crouched, looking

not at his master, but toward the point of the jut.

Again Mathis lowered the gun, perplexed. He knew Old-Timer's slightest sign, knew something was wrong. "What is it, b'y?" he encouraged. "Go to it, b'y!"

The dog slipped forward, sidewise in wolf-fighting fashion, growling his husky menace. The man followed close.

They stopped near the point of the jut. The rifle slid from Mathis' hands. In a trampled and draggled space ten feet across lay a big Labrador wolf, stone dead, and mangled worse than the fox had been.

IV.

WITH Old-Timer still bristling against his leg, Mathis stood in his tracks and stared down at the wolf—a tawny-and-black slinker as big as a yearling caribou. Again Mathis read signs. It was the dog's work; his tracks were mixed with the wolf's in the soft soil. Old-Timer had come across it killing the fox, had chased it out upon the point where water cut off its escape, had leaped upon it, and slit it to ribbons before giving that finishing slash across the throat.

"You didn't quite wind him in time to save th' fox from him, b'y," Mathis said huskily. "But you got him quick and gave him a-plenty, for all he was twice as big as you, b'y."

He slid the safety back over the red dot with a feeling that a miracle had saved him from making a horrible mistake. He shut the very thought of it out of his mind.

"That slinker wouldn't swim any more than a fox, Old-Timer," he reflected aloud to the dog. "But he got here on th' island, for there he is. And th' way he got here is th' way th' four blacks got away! When you chased him, he made for this p'int. He must have come by it. He must have come from th' reef. But how? Let's go and see, b'y. I accused you of killing th' fox, when in fact you tackled this brute to save th' fox for me. If you're innocent, Old-Timer, John Buckney must be, too! And maybe you've given me the cue to prove it by."

In a few minutes Mathis had pushed the light rodney across to the reef and

set the dog to work. They searched the tangle of dwarf junipers, the jumble of tossed-up rocks. Old-Timer's infallible nose found not the faintest sign of the foxes. They were not on the reef; of that Mathis was sure.

He pushed on to Buckney's island, lying nearer to the reef than his own. He was impelled by something more than a wish to have his partner's counsel. He was forced on by a fierce desire to settle his gnawing doubt, once and for all. From the crest where the cabin stood, he saw Buckney stalking a seal on a reef a quarter of a mile away, and signaled for him to join him.

While Mathis waited, pacing in front of the cabin, he heard a scraping sound and a thin, repeated whining inside. Wondering, he went in, strode to the wall bunk, looked under it.

In the live cages were the blacks, the four of them, his very own.

Mathis refused to think. He sat dazed on the step of the cabin door, watching his partner row toward the island.

V.

FOR the first time, as he turned his head, Mathis noticed the bare, stark poverty of that cabin. He remembered how ragged was Buckney's old jacket. For four years the man had lived on the rocky edge of nothing, stubbornly refusing offers of aid, trying to save, fighting against his interminable evil luck.

Buckney came up to the slope in a few jumps. He had not seen Mathis go into the cabin. "I pushed over to see you last night, Barr," he said, half out of breath. "Meant to help you look for them blacks. You were gone somewhere."

"I went across to see old Jasperson."

"You haven't found 'em?" Buckney queried. "Then get up and let's go look for 'em right now."

Barr Mathis did not answer, did not move. The black shadow was coming over him again.

"What's t' matter, b'y?" Buckney asked.

Mathis shook his head. His throat was dry.

"Well, I'll tell you something and put

you out of your misery!" Buckney chuckled. "I've got your ebonies caged right there in my cabin!"

Mathis could have shouted to the heavens. The words raised him upon his feet. They lifted from him the blackest cloud under which he had ever walked.

"Last night when I come from your place," Buckney went on, "I thought I heard a fox yelp on th' big reef. I didn't pay much attention then, for I had something else to consider about. Just before dark, I heard it again. Couldn't understand how they'd get over there, till I remembered noticing that th' tide has been pulling some mighty big slob fields out of the harbors at night and turning 'em through these passages. Th' foxes must have crossed on a jam. I took a chance and baited two cages over there last night; and this morning, there they were, all four of 'em. I was bringing 'em across to you as soon as I got some seal beef for my own measly bunch."

"Yes; I—I saw 'em, Buck," Mathis stammered.

"You did, now!" Buckney snorted, crestfallen. "I thought I was springing something on you."

"There's something you can spring on me, Buck. What's th' idea of these cages you've been making, and what were you

holding back from me yesterday when you come over to see me?"

Buckney looked away, toward the distant tan sail of a trim little schooner beyond the berg line. "I didn't want to tell you beforehand, b'y, that I was leaving you. But I've got to go. You're having all th' luck at this business. I was getting th' cages ready to take my scrawnies alive to St. Johns and buy some sort of a tub with 'em. Then th' steamer dropped me a note from Ethel. I had to have three thousand dollars more than what I could raise. I didn't want to ask for help; it hurt me almost as bad as letting th' schooner slip. But after that note, I had to. I knew you were going to sell them blacks. When I come over, it hit me pretty hard to hear you had lost 'em, for I thought—you see—we being partners for so long—I thought—you see—"

"That I'd loan you th' three thousand, b'y?" Mathis asked huskily. "If you hadn't asked me, I'd—I'd wrung your neck! Since you've already got 'em caged, you can take 'em along with you. Then when you buy th' schooner and load her to th' water line with cod this summer, you can bring th' schooner's lady and come up to visit me and—Old-Timer."

CHRISTMAS IN THE AIR

By M. C. Foster

EVERYBODY in a rush—
 Christmas in the air.
 Perfect jam and perfect crush—
 Fact, I do declare!
 Autos speeding up an' down,
 Crowds a-surging through the town,
 Not a face seen with a frown—
 Christmas in the air!

Everybody wears a smile—
 Christmas in the air.
 Trouble's banished for a while—
 Fact, I do declare!
 'Tis the best time of the year—
 Love and peace and goodly cheer;
 'Tis the time to all most dear—
 Christmas in the air!

Everybody has a heart—
 Christmas in the air.
 Each one tries to do his part—
 Fact, I do declare!
 'Tis the time of loving thought
 That to earth the Christ-Child brought;
 'Tis the time with blessings fraught—
 And angels hov'ring near.

Christmas Triumphant



By
Edward C. Boykin

(COMPLETE IN
THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

ECHOES OF THE PAST.

IT was nearing Christmas. You knew that Christmas was in the offing the moment you entered the gate. All day long "Big Abel" swung his shiny ax at the woodpile, while the chips flew in widening arcs from his mighty blows, and the pyramid of hickory and oak outside of the back door grew higher and higher, for Christmas was not Christmas without a great blaze on the hearth at Fairfield.

Eph, the major's dusky and ancient factotum, displayed a sprightliness that completely eclipsed the customary leisurely performance of his manifold tasks. Invariably, each year, Christmas entered Eph's bones, displacing numerous ailments, real and imaginary, that slowed up his progress in other seasons. Contrary to his long-established and seemingly unbreakable habit, he arrived precisely on the dot each morning with the mug of hot water for the major's matutinal shave. His willingness to be of service knew no bounds.

Major Drewry, too, felt Christmas coming. Often he wondered if Christmas could be the same anywhere else. With the arrival of each holiday season, his memories went roving back to the long-gone Christmases of his boyhood before the War. What Christmases they were! How their memories lingered!

What celebrating there was on the plantation when the big wagons returned from the city where his father went to purchase something Christmasy for every member of the Drewry entourage, white and black, big and small. Down the big road he would race to meet the wagons, groaning along under their precious holiday burdens. How sternly his father rebuked him when he peeked under the big canvas covers in hope of glimpsing something that was destined to remain a mystery until Christmas morning.

And Christmas Day! What jollities! They began with the crack of day. A present for every one! Santa Claus never forgot, never slighted. The largess met all needs. Not a soul was overlooked. And what feasts! Turkey, terrapin, duck, partridge, ham, sausage, plum pudding, mince pies, fruit cake—and the kitchen fairly bristled with cooks who vied with each other in producing culinary masterpieces.

Overhead hung mistletoe, under which sly kissings ensued in unguarded moments, and holly laden with red, red berries. The great house fairly bulged with guests and pretty girls galore. In the broad hall stood a tall evergreen, brought in from the near-by woods. Near the hearth where the logs blazed merrily flourished a bowl of toddy which the ladies only tasted, but which the men were loath to leave. Days of gladness followed. There was music, minuets and reels. Sometimes they rose at dawn to

follow the shrill running cry of the pack, chasing some wily old fox across the hills of the Blue Ridge.

For of such was Christmas in the Old Dominion before the War, and the memories of those days had never faded. How could they? Each Christmas in these after years, the major, seated before the blazing hearth, would summon back these cherished, long-gone scenes. Vividly he recalled the last gala Christmas at Fairfield. It was just after Lee's masterful stroke at Fredericksburg, and the major was home on furlough from his regiment in the Army of Northern Virginia.

The hopes of the Confederacy ran high, and victory was on every lip. Christmas brought a conclave of youth and beauty and valor at Fairfield. The gallant Pelham was there, and every man wore the gray of the Confederacy. One night they danced while the fiddles sobbed till the break of day and the sun sent its gleaming shafts dancing across the distant line of blue hills. Of all who gathered there that memorable night, the major was the last. Soon, he reckoned, he, too, would have joined the rest of that gala company.

Now Christmas was coming again, and the major once more succumbed to its benign influence.

"Eph," he said that morning, as the old black man appeared with a mug of hot water for his shave, "I reckon I'll go to town to-day and do a little shopping."

"You ain't sho nuff, is you, Marse Tom?" gasped Eph, almost dropping the mug.

"It's only a week till Christmas, and somebody's got to do some shopping or there won't be any Christmas around here," returned the major, as he applied the lather to his face.

"I s'pose you better go den," replied Eph with a trace of anxiety. "Is we gwine ter have one of dem reg'lar Chrismus dinners lak we uster have, Marse Tom?"

"Did you ever know a Christmas when we didn't have a good dinner?"

"I reckon I ain't," agreed Eph. "I jes' lak to talk 'bout old times, Marse Tom. Dem sho wuz real Chrismuses way back yonder. I ain't nebber fergits 'em, and

I reckon you ain't, either. Dere warn't nebber any Chrismuses lak 'em, wuz dey, Marse Tom?"

"They were pretty good Chrismases, Eph," affirmed the major, from the depths of his lather.

"Dey wuz de eatines' Chrismuses I ever seed," asserted Eph, as he laid out a freshly laundered shirt for the major to wear.

"What do you mean, Eph?"

"I means dere was mo' ter eat den any Chrismus we had sence," explained Eph. "But we sho did have real hard Chrismuses in de ahmy."

"We surely did, Eph," agreed the major heartily.

"I ain't nebber fergits dat las' Chrismus befo' Gen'ral Lee surrendered. You and me wuz fightin' de Yankees roun' Petersburg, and de night befo' Chrismus me and you and Marse 'Buck' Whittle goes in de town, and I stays on de poach while you and Marse Buck goes in ter coat dem Pegram gals. Marse Buck sho wuz in love wid dat little Pegram gal. And dat night long 'bout midnight we cum back ter de ahmy, and you and Marse Buck starts fightin' de Yankees ag'in. And jes' at daybreak de Yankees killed Marse Buck. De bullet hit him spang in de forehead.

"And you send fur me ter cum and git him," he went on, "and I teks him on my shoulder lake he warn't nuthin' but a little feller, and I carries him right ter his home in Petersburg where his ma wuz waiting fur him. And dat little Pegram gal sho wuz cut up, bekas she wuz suttinly in love wid Marse Buck. And dey buried him in de gahden. And I digged de grave, bekas dere warn't nobody else ter do it. And Gen'ral Lee writ his ma how brave Marse Buck wuz, and when dey put a stone over him, dey cut what Gen'ral Lee sez right in de stone. And hit's dere ter dis day. Dat sho wuz a terrible Chrismus."

"Yes, Eph; it hardly seemed like Christmas," said the major. "Now I want you to have the buggy at the door promptly at nine o'clock."

"Hit'll be right dere, Marse Tom," replied Eph, who exuded punctuality at every pore.

"And tell Rhody to bring in breakfast

right away. I'll be down in five minutes. Have you raised the flag yet?"

"Dat flag's bin flappin' up dere mos' an hour."

With a bow, Eph hurried off to carry out the major's injunctions. Breathless with excitement, he burst into the kitchen, where he proceeded to pour out a highly embellished yarn about the numerous presents the major was preparing to lavish on every member of his household. Eph waxed eloquent. He was preparing to describe precisely what the major was planning to bestow on Rhody when the old man's footsteps descending the stairs cut short his gilt-edged narrative.

CHAPTER II.

OLD WARRIORS AT ODDS.

NOON found Major Drewry winding up his Christmas shopping. There was not a great deal to buy, but no one was forgotten—not even the little black boy who came occasionally to the house to shine the major's boots when rheumatism put Eph's hands temporarily out of commission.

The sun had crossed the meridian when the major turned Mazie's head homeward. For the first mile it was a long, winding climb, and he let Mazie take her time. Seldom he hurried the old horse, and at the top of the slope he drew rein to let her rest. The road he followed was the old Wilderness Road along which the pioneers had pushed their way westward across the Blue Ridge, one hundred years earlier.

The air was brisk, but he was well bundled up in overcoat and lap robe. The day was clear, and far away he descried the blue bulks lifting their spires higher and higher toward the sapphire heavens. Below him—between the crest where he paused and the distant foothills—lay the valley where Fairfield nestled in its sere winter setting. Faintly he discerned the old house and a wisp of smoke curling from its tall chimney.

He urged Mazie ahead, and the old horse descended the long, gentle slope at a dogtrot. Presently he came in sight of an old brick house, the domicile of the major's nearest neighbor, Captain Dick Beasley, formerly a sergeant in the Army

of the Potomac. From a flagpole in front of the house, the Stars and Stripes drooped lazily.

A decade had elapsed since Captain Beasley ensconced himself in the modest home down the road from Fairfield. The captain had never explained to a wondering community why he had taken up his residence within a stone's throw of such an unreconstructed person as Major Drewry, but the fact remained that the captain had gradually acquired the respect of the entire countryside, regardless of its Confederate leanings.

If the truth were known, the captain had first glimpsed this pleasant, peaceful valley when, as a trooper under Sheridan, he helped carry the sword of war through it. This fact the captain kept to himself, for there were old folks in the valley who still recalled the roughshod visit of the great general. The captain had never forgotten the valley, and when in these later years he cast about for an abiding place in his declining years, he returned to the valley he had learned to love at first sight as a soldier.

Each morning the captain hoisted the Stars and Stripes to the peak of the mast he had erected in his front yard, and each morning the major flung the Stars and Bars to the breeze at Fairfield.

On all subjects but one, the major and the captain were generally in accord. Both raised tobacco and shared its adversities and its blessings. As long as they conversed on crops, weather, present-day politics, and kindred topics, the sailing was smooth enough, but the moment they embarked on the stormy history of the 'sixties the veterans were hopelessly parted by winds of conflicting loyalties.

One by one, battle by battle, they had gradually refought the War between the States. Their controversy on the battle of Gettysburg produced a three months' rift in their friendship. The captain's brief but pungent comment on Lee's questionable generalship at Malvern Hill parted them for two months. Antietam was a rock on which their bark of friendship was twice wrecked. On one occasion, when the major insisted that the Confederacy had been "overpowered" while the captain was equally eloquent

and insistent that the South was "licked," they severed the lines of communication and occupied the trenches of dissension for four months.

They were actually friends to the core, however, veterans of a great struggle of which few but they realized the fierceness. The major fairly worshiped Lee and his galaxy of leaders, while the captain peopled an Olympus with Grant and his generals. The heart of one was clad in gray—the heart of the other wore a cloak of blue.

As the buggy drew near, the major discerned the captain putting about the yard, bundled up in a long, blue, army overcoat. He drew rein opposite the house. "Oh, captain!" he called.

The old veteran of the North ambled down to the side of the road.

"Been to town, major?"

"Doing a little Christmas shopping," explained the major. "And that reminds me to tell you I'm expecting you to Christmas dinner at Fairfield."

"You are!" ejaculated the captain.

"I certainly am."

"I'll be just delighted to come, major."

"Twon't be much of a Christmas dinner, but it'll be good. Rhody's the best cock for miles around, and I've got a fine turkey. And Eph's nephew's going to bring me some birds."

Here the major veered off to an account of an old-time Christmas at Fairfield to which the captain listened attentively.

"That was long before the War," added the major. "The last big Christmas celebration we had at Fairfield was just after Fredericksburg. I was home on furlough. My regiment did so well that we were all given leave for ten days."

The captain merely stared, venturing no comment. Fredericksburg was something he would prefer to have left unmentioned.

"You know it was my regiment that broke your attack at Fredericksburg," added the major.

"Whose attack, did you say?" inquired the captain, puckering up his lips.

"Your attack—Burnside's attack."

Silence intervened for several minutes.

"I never understood why Burnside attacked us at Fredericksburg," said the major.

The captain flushed slowly. "If Grant had been there, it probably would have been different," he remarked.

"I'm not so sure of that. What makes you think so?"

"Grant understood Lee."

"But Grant didn't understand Lee!" snapped the major.

"I know he did," asserted the captain. "How could Grant lick Lee if he didn't understand him?"

"Grant didn't lick Lee," returned the major in a rising voice.

"He did."

"He didn't!"

"Well, if he didn't, who surrendered at Appomattox?"

There was silence, deep silence. Their eyes met and sheered off.

"Grant never did lick Lee," asserted the major flatly. "Lee licked Grant at Cold Harbor, Spottsylvania, and lots of other battles. I was there. I helped do it. I ought to know."

"I ask you once more: Who surrendered at Appomattox?"

Again all bets were off, with Christmas only a week away.

"Git up!" said the major to Mazie. He drove off, boiling mad, leaving the captain's question unanswered.

As the buggy came to a pause at the gate, Eph came scuttling down the walk to meet the returning caravan.

"Is you back, Marse Tom?" he inquired.

"Doesn't it look like it?" returned the major.

"Is you got lots of Chrismus presents?" asked Eph excitedly.

"I wouldn't say lots, Eph, but I have a plenty."

"Oh, mercy!" ejaculated Eph, as he unloaded the packages from the bottom of the buggy. "Dis sho duz remin' me of ole times. Jes look at dese Chrismus things. Is all dese fer us, Marse Tom?"

"Now, Eph, nothing is to be opened till Christmas," admonished the major, as he clambered out.

"Jes' lemme take a little peek," pleaded Eph.

"Not a peek."

"Oh, Marse Tom! I can't wait."

"You've got to wait."

"Ain't you tek a mighty long time ter

git back?" inquired Eph. "Is you stopped ter talk wid de capt'in?"

"Yes; and I wish I hadn't. We had another disagreement."

"What you and de capt'in fussin' 'bout now?"

"He said Grant licked General Lee," explained the major.

"Cose Grant ain't licked Gen'ral Lee! Grant jes' sort of wrap hisself 'roun' Gen'ral Lee till he can't move no mo', but he ain't licked him. I wuz rite dere wid you when he done it."

"What do you mean?" asked the major testily. "Don't you dare insinuate such a thing!"

"I ain't 'sinuatin' nuthin'," avowed Eph promptly and flatly. "Grant warn't nuthin' but po' white trash noway. He didn't have no biznis 'sociatin' wid Gen'ral Lee."

"You must be careful what you say, Eph," warned the major.

"I'se keerful, Marse Tom."

CHAPTER III.

NEARING THE BIG DAY.

IT worried the major considerably, this latest rift in his friendship with the captain, and it left an unfillable gap in his preparations for Christmas. He had counted on the captain to help demolish the breastworks of good things that Rhody would construct in the dining room at Fairfield. He had even purchased a small Christmas memento for the captain.

While browsing about the local bookstore, the major had come across a small engraving of General Grant. Putting aside his prejudices, he had invested two dollars in the engraving, realizing that nothing he might select for the captain could strike such a responsive chord in the old man's heart. For Grant was to the captain what Lee was to the major—the leader ne plus ultra.

So the days passed, but there was no communication between the two old men. In the meantime, the major made another trip to town, but he urged Mazie at her fastest gait past the captain's domicile both going and coming. He really felt that the captain owed him an apology.

At last Christmas Eve dawned bright

and clear. There was no sign of snow. Oh, how they used to long for snow at Christmas before the War! Mistletoe hung from the chandeliers and holly festooned the windows. In the pantry, pies and cakes and puddings stood in a long, tempting row. Eph went about as in a dream of ecstasy—a dream, no doubt, considerably fortified by a series of visits to the major's pet decanter. For the occasion, he had donned an old plum-colored cutaway, cast aside many years ago by the major.

"I'm sorry about the captain," said the major at breakfast. "It's too bad he won't be with us to-morrow. I don't see how we'll ever eat up all the things Rhody's made."

"Ain't you and de capt'in patched up dat ruckus yit?" inquired Eph, as he passed the waffles.

"No; and I doubt if we ever will, Eph," replied the major solemnly. "I don't think I could ever forgive him for what he said to me."

"I ain't knowed 'twuz bad as all dat."

"It's even worse. I don't think he has a bit of respect for General Lee."

"He ain't? 'Twuz time he wuz gittin' some. What dey reckon we Confedrits did all dat fightin' fer, ef dey ain't gwine ter have no respect fer Gen'ral Lee? Ain't we killed 'nough Yankees ter git some respect' outen dem? Cose, dis is Chrismus time, and mebbe you could jes' sorter fergit what de capt'in sez."

"I wish I could, Eph, but I can't."

After breakfast, the major walked abroad. His steps carried him to a cabin in the low grounds where five little pickaninnies were faced by complete neglect on the part of Santa Claus. He stopped long enough to instruct their mother to bring them to Fairfield in the morning, where Santa Claus had promised to leave something for each of them.

Half an hour later he turned homeward. He had just rounded the last bend in the road when he caught sight of old Eph, hurrying toward him at a gait that augured something out of the ordinary.

"What's the matter, Eph?" he asked, as the old servant came within hailing distance.

Breathlessly Eph replied: "Dere's a young gent'man at de house ter see you."

"A young gentleman!"

"Dat's what he looks lak. He's in de big hall, settin' by de fire."

The major quickened his step. He went directly to the house and entered. As he appeared, a young man, neatly dressed and of pleasing deportment, rose from a chair by the fire.

"Are you Major Drewry, sir?" he asked pleasantly.

"I am, sir," responded the major, bowing.

"My name is Drewry—Bob Drewry," said the young man, smiling.

"Bob Drewry!" exclaimed the major excitedly. "That's one of the best names on earth. Where did you get it?"

"My father gave it to me, sir."

"Where do you come from, young man?" asked the major, his eyes lighting up.

"New York, sir. I've come down here to try to find out something about the Drewrys. I am considerably interested in my family's history. I know they're fine people and——"

"They're the finest in the world!" interposed the major proudly.

"That's just what my father used to say," remarked the newcomer. "He often told me that I must some day visit Virginia and look up my relatives. He said there were not many of them left."

"I'm the last of the Virginia Drewrys in this part of the State," said the major with a touch of regret. "Won't you sit down for a while?"

"Thank you, sir, if I'm not intruding."

"Intruding! No Drewry ever intruded at Fairfield. Now tell me what you know about the Drewrys."

"Not a great deal. My father once told me that his father came North just before the War. He went back South and fought through the War under Lee. Then he returned to New York."

"It was just like a Drewry to come back and fight for his State," put in the major. "The Drewrys have always done their duty. But I can't recall any Drewry who ever left Virginia to settle in the North."

"Perhaps it was some other branch of the family," suggested the visitor.

"Perhaps so," agreed the major.

"I never knew the exact connection,

but I've always remembered my father's last wish for me to come to Virginia and meet some of my relatives. So here I am."

"I'm glad you've come, sir. Welcome to Virginia and Fairfield."

Presently the major led his visitor through the house and showed him the Drewry family tree and paintings of the old Drewrys in wig and peruke.

CHAPTER IV.

TREASURES OF GREAT PRICE.

SEATED later before the blazing hearth, the major unfolded the history of the Drewrys to his new-found kinsman. He gave it with a wealth of description, for the major was inordinately proud of the part his predecessors had played in the making of the Old Dominion, and he drew a fine picture of the old Cavalier, William Drewry, stepping ashore from the *Susan Constant* at Jamestown in 1607.

"My father always said it was a good thing to be a Drewry," commented the newcomer with earnestness.

"I can think of nothing finer," said the major. "Did you walk all the way from town?"

"Most of the way. A man coming this way gave me a short lift. But I enjoyed the walk. And the country's beautiful."

"Wonderful. I've spent a happy lifetime here. And where are you staying?"

"Nowhere as yet. I have only a small grip, and I'm thinking of taking the afternoon train to Washington."

"Why not stay here at Fairfield over Christmas?" suggested the major eagerly.

"I couldn't think of trespassing on your hospitality like that!"

"But you are not trespassing. Fairfield is the place for a Drewry. Besides, Christmas is almost here."

"I'm afraid I can't, major. You see, I have urgent business in New York."

"But business will wait," argued the major.

"It might. But are you sure you have room enough for me?"

"All the room in the world. I've known Fairfield to shelter a score of souls."

"All right, I'll stay."

The major was overjoyed. "Eph! Oh, Eph!" he called.

"I'se a-cumin', Marse Tom," responded Eph, who appeared with surprising alacrity. "Heah I is."

"Eph, this is a kinsman of mine, Mr. Drewry, from New York."

"I'se pleezed, sub," said Eph, salaaming deeply.

"Mr. Drewry is going to spend Christmas with us," went on the major. "He will occupy the big company room, next to mine."

"Yes, Marse Tom."

The day passed quickly and soon enough came dusk and the mellow glow of the big lamp in the hall. The old man's heart beat freer than it had in years. The finding of another Drewry had brought him great peace of mind, and he even considered forgiving the captain the slanderous things he had said about General Lee. The major never quite got to the point of absolving the captain, however, though he wondered many times how the captain would spend his Christmas.

Supper over, the major led the way into the library, where he unlocked a cabinet and revealed a tarnished array of Drewry heirlooms.

"I thought you might like to see these," he explained.

It was a goodly accumulation of silver and gold to which each generation had contributed its share—tumblers and plates brought to Virginia by the first Drewry, gold hunting and loving cups about which long-gone romance still shed its glamour—the dearest of all the possessions at Fairfield.

"Aren't they beauties!" exclaimed the young man.

"They are," agreed the major, his gaze wandering lovingly over the shelves of gold and silver. "Lem Gwathmey, who runs the bank in town, has often told me that I ought not to keep them here. They are very valuable, he says. He wants me to keep them in the vault in his bank. But I don't believe anybody will ever take them away. Nobody knows they are here."

He lifted a gold cup from its shelf. "That belonged to your great-great-great-

great-grandfather. It was given him by Governor Dinwiddie."

One by one, the major lifted each piece of gold and silver from its place. Each had its history, each its association with some long-vanished Drewry. Presently he closed the cabinet and put the key behind the old daguerreotype on the mantelpiece.

Half an hour later, at nine o'clock, the major's visitor rose from his place before the fire. "I think I'll step out and get a breath of fresh air," he said. "I haven't been out of the house since I got here this morning."

"Maybe I've worn you out talking about the Drewrys," remarked the major with a laugh.

"Not a bit of it. I'll be back in five minutes. A breath or two is all I need."

He crossed the yard quickly and five minutes later had reached the bend in the road. Here he waited until shortly his patience was rewarded by the approach of an automobile, which slowed down and came to a stop beside him.

"Well, Jo," said the man in the automobile, "how is it going?"

"Working like a charm," replied the major's visitor. "He fell for it like a duck for water. Invited me to spend Christmas with him. I've accepted. He's just showed me the stuff we're after. You never saw such a lot of shiny metal in your life. Real gold—lots of it."

"Who told you about this, anyway?"

"A bird that came through here last summer selling picture frames. He put frames on all the old Drewrys in the house. When he got through, the old bird showed him this stuff, and he told me about it."

"What's the next move?"

"We're going to bed soon. He's so sleepy now he's about to fall out of his chair. I'm going to let him get good and asleep before I leave. Meet me right here at midnight."

"That's three hours from now. What'll I do in the meantime?"

"Anything you want. Drive back to town. I want to make a clean job of it. There's an old servant, too. I believe he's asleep already."

"All right. You're running this party."

"Midnight—sharp!"

CHAPTER V.

ABROAD AT MIDNIGHT.

BEDTIME came soon enough. The major escorted his guest to the bedroom on the second floor, where a high old tester bed awaited his slumbers. "I can't tell you what a sincere pleasure it is to have you here with me," said the old man.

"Thank you, major. It's a pleasure to be here with you."

"This will be the pleasantest Christmas I've had in years," added the old man.

The major returned to the hearth downstairs. Sleep tugged at his eyelids. Presently he stepped out on the porch. The night was cold and still. The moon poured down serenely, drenching the distant hills in silver. What memories the old porch invoked! Here, long, long before as a boy, he used to sit in the moonlight with his father and mother, listening to the subdued sounds floating across the fields from the quarters beyond. Here he was seated the night a rider drew rein at the gate and announced thunderously that Virginia had seceded from the Union.

He went inside, dropped into a chair before the fire, and dozed off almost immediately. The gentle magic of sleep summoned back a scene from his beloved past. It was that never-to-be-forgotten day, years before, when the major's Starlight led a field of Virginia thoroughbreds home in the Albemarle Handicap. Of all the major's stable in those days, there was none to equal Starlight. He had loved the horse as only a man can love a horse. How vivid it seemed with a blue sky overhead and primroses under foot! Starlight had won, and the major was the happiest man on earth.

"Marse Tom!" It was Eph. "Wake up. Hit's time you wuz in baid."

The major opened his eyes and got to his feet dizzily. "I thought I was watching Starlight win the Handicap."

The old servant smiled sleepily. "Dis ain't no time to be projeckin' 'bout Starlight. Dis is Chrismus Eve."

"So it is, Eph. And to-morrow's Christmas. I want you to call me early."

"I'se sho gwine ter git you up early. Rhody sez s'he jes' can't sleep no way, thinkin' 'bout dem presents you got."

"And, Eph, I reckon I'd better run over in the morning and bring the captain back with me. It wouldn't be Christmas without the captain, but I certainly wish he wouldn't talk the way he does about General Lee."

"I sho is glad ter hear you say dat," said Eph. "De capt'in is de bes' friend we got. And it looks lak we wuz gwine ter have one of dem real Chrismus'es."

Midnight had chimed from the big clock in the hall when the self-appointed scion of the Drewry family began taking his leave. He climbed carefully out of the tester bed, where he had spent the last hour, fully clad save for his shoes, awaiting the time when he thought the major's household would be sleeping soundly.

Opening the door, he crept noiselessly on stocking feet to the stairway. As he passed the door of the major's room, he paused and listened to the old man's insistent snoring that let it be known the major had slipped away to dreamland. With the aid of a flash light, the visitor descended the stairs.

The embers on the hearth in the hall were still flickering. Two minutes later, he had opened the cabinet and was transferring the relics of the Drewrys to the small grip brought for the purpose. Quickly he stowed the booty away in the grip, closed the cabinet, and returned to the hall, where he paused long enough to put on his shoes.

Speedily he left the house. Outside, the moonlight was spilling down through the great, gaunt elms in the yard. It was a scene of infinite peace and beauty. He turned once to look behind. The old house seemed to be watching him depart with a pale face. He ran into the road at a dogtrot.

At precisely the same second, an old man, clad in a long, blue, army overcoat, was hurrying along the road in the direction of Fairfield. In the moonlight, he might have been mistaken for one of Grant's vedettes. Over his shoulder, he carried an old musket, a muzzle-loader, to which was attached a long, business-like bayonet on which the moonlight glistened.

The musket was loaded, not with a single bullet, nor even with bird shot,

but with finely chopped, salt-pork fat, than which there is nothing more efficacious, being painful but not fatal in its effects and being famed for raising large elliptical blisters wherever it encountered the recipient's anatomy.

At the old man's belt dangled a large, dark apparatus, which the initiated would have recognized as a specimen of "hoss pistol," a weapon that flourished in the 'sixties and immediately thereafter. A horse pistol, it is said, acquired its name from the fact that it was commonly supposed to possess the power not only of stopping a man in his tracks, but a "hoss" as well. There was a time when pretty much every prominent citizen in those parts was the proud possessor of a horse pistol.

This walking arsenal was the redoubtable Captain Dick Beasley. The road stretched ahead of him like a ribbon of silver, and he covered the ground as fast as his infirmities would permit.

CHAPTER VI.

A GOOD TIME TO STOP.

THE captain's suspicions had been thoroughly aroused early in the day, when an automobile containing two strangers suddenly came to a pause in the road opposite his home. From his window, the captain watched one of the strangers alight from the motor and set out down the road, grip in hand, in the direction of Fairfield, while the other turned the car about and sped away back toward town.

It puzzled the captain considerably. All day, he wondered about the strange behavior of the two strangers. Night fell, and still the captain pondered. About nine o'clock, he looked up from his book to hear unmistakably the sound of an automobile on the road. In two minutes, he had put on his overcoat and was out of the house. The automobile had slowed down, and he could see its light going in the direction of the major's domicile. Cautiously he followed, until he became aware that the automobile had stopped in the road.

Suddenly the captain turned sleuth. Leaving the road, he crept closer and closer to the automobile across a field

of broom sedge, at last halting about twenty feet from his quarry. The captain heard enough to convince him that wrongdoing was on foot. He remained motionless in his hiding place until the two conspirators separated, the automobile turning about and the erstwhile Drewry returning to Fairfield. Two words, "Midnight—sharp!" were sufficient for the captain.

He started toward his home. His first impulse had been to hurry to Fairfield and inform the major of what he had seen and heard. What the captain did, however, was to go home and make his musket ready for a return to the road at midnight. He spent ten minutes chopping up a load of fat meat and ramming it down the muzzle on top of a goodly charge of black powder.

Ever since the major and the captain had staged their latest contretemps, the old Northerner had yearned to smoke the pipe of peace with his friend. The approach of Christmas made the yearning even greater. As Christmas Eve wore along, the captain determined that, regardless of what had happened sixty years before, he would go the next morning to Fairfield and wish the major a Merry Christmas.

Now, however, the captain was hurrying along the road. He flattened himself out in the broom sedge as the automobile came by, only to get to his feet the moment it passed. Again the automobile came to a stop, and the captain crept up behind the unsuspecting occupant until he stood in the road barely fifty feet away.

Almost immediately a third person appeared in the road from the direction of Fairfield.

"Is that you, Jo?" called out the man in the car.

"Right-o," came the reply.

"Everything all right?"

There was a laugh. "I'll say so. This is going to be a big Christmas."

The other man laughed. "All right. Climb in, Jo. You are certainly the candy."

"Halt!" shouted a voice—the captain's.

"What's that!" called out the man in the automobile, looking backward.

"Halt!"

"Shut up! Git in, quick, Jo. Who is he?"

"I don't know."

"Halt!" Captain Beasley advanced slowly.

"Oh, shut—"

Without a moment's hesitation, the captain raised his old musket, took aim, and pulled the trigger. The report shattered the quiet of the night and echoed down the valley.

"Oh! I'm dead!" screeched a voice, as the charge of fat meat went hurtling toward its victims.

"Help! Help! Help!"

"Don't shoot any more!"

The captain came up quickly. "Who are you?"

There was no answer. One of his captives stood trembling at the side of the automobile, while the other stood up in the car, his arms raised high above him and silhouetted against the moon.

"What you got in that bag?" demanded the captain, in whom the fire of battle now burned fiercely.

"Nothing," was the sullen response.

"Don't lie to me!" snapped the captain. "What have you been stealing from Major Drewry?"

There was no reply.

"If you don't answer me, I'll let loose again."

"Tell him, Jo, tell him!" urged the individual in the automobile in a piteous voice.

"A few things that belong to Major Drewry."

"What are they?" demanded the captain huskily.

Again there was some hesitation, and again the figure in the car pleaded with his confederate to speak out.

"Oh, how my leg hurts! Tell him, Jo. Go ahead. He'll shoot us again if you don't."

"Drewry relics."

"You hound!" blurted the captain. "And that goes for you, too, you varmint standing in that car. This is a fine piece of work to be doing on Christmas Eve. Now both of you step ahead of me. Pick up that bag and take it along. Now march! I'm right behind you, and if you get frisky, I'm going to let you have

another barrel, if I don't stick this bayonet clean through your gizzards."

They obeyed with considerable alacrity. The trio, with the captain bringing up the rear, set out for Fairfield.

Not even the gunshot had been able to arouse the major from his Christmas dreams, and it was with much effort that he at last resurrected himself from his slumbers sufficiently to realize that some one was calling him loudly outside. "What is it?" he asked sleepily, sticking his head out of the window.

"It's me," came the reply from below.

"Who's me?"

"Captain Dick Beasley."

For a moment the major was astounded. "What do you want?"

"Come right down quick," replied the captain abruptly.

Dropping his dressing gown, the major slipped down and opened the front door. Outside, the yard was sprinkled with moonlight. At the foot of the steps stood the captain, the bayonet of his musket glistening in the night.

"What on earth is the matter, captain?" asked the major in a shocked voice, as he recognized his "kinsman" and noted the third individual.

"I caught these rats trying to carry off everything you've got," explained the captain.

"Impossible!" exclaimed the major. "That gentleman is a relative of mine."

"So that's the way he worked it!" Quickly the captain related what he had seen and heard. "Open that bag and be quick about it," he said to the two crooks.

"Drewry" obeyed at once.

"There's the evidence," said the old Northerner.

"It's almost unbelievable, captain."

"I couldn't have believed it myself, major, unless I'd seen it. You ought to have heard them howl when that fat meat hit them. It would have done your heart good. And now, you two varmints, about face."

The two crooks obeyed quickly.

"Now march, and when you reach that automobile, get into it and get out of this neck of the woods before I change my mind and take another shot at you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"This gun shoots most a mile," called out the captain, as the two miscreants hurried toward the road. "I ought to take you to town and lock you up, but being as it's Christmas Eve, I'll make you a present of letting you go."

The two old men watched the crooks fade into the night.

"Captain Beasley," said the major in a shaky voice, "I don't know what to say or how to thank you. I'm sorry we had that fuss the other day."

"So am I," agreed the captain, as he went indoors with the major.

"It's Christmas Day now, captain!"

"So 'tis, major. Merry Christmas!"

"And Merry Christmas to you, captain."

They shook hands before the hearth.

"You know, captain," said the major with a twinkle, "if General Grant and General Lee were here, they'd tell us to stop fighting their battles over again. And Christmas is a good time to stop."



THE LAST FRONTIER

By Clarence Mansfield Lindsay

THE covered wagons blazed the trail
 By mountain gorge and plain;
 Where men once faced the leaden hail,
 Now waves the golden grain.
 No longer armed the red men go;
 No more the white men fear
 The hidden ambush of the foe
 Upon the far frontier.

Ay, we have conquered all the land;
 We've pierced the wilderness;
 A mighty continent is spanned;
 The east linked with the west!
 Yet—ye who seek the high emprise—
 There's still one more frontier;
 That way the great adventure lies;
 With danger always near.

On ocean's heaving breast the bark
 Carves a thin track of foam,
 Which fades and leaves no path to mark
 Which way the wanderers roam.
 The terrors of the crafty sea
 Which frightened men of yore,
 They yet remain for you and me;
 And shall, forevermore!

Then heave the anchor, lads! We'll plow
 Straight through the beryl way!
 With harbor lights behind us now—
 Before, the gates of day!
 Grasp firm the wheel! Ride out the gale!
 Ye, who would pioneer!
 Spread to the wind the straining sail,
 And storm the last frontier!



CHAPTER I.

DANGEROUS EVERYWHERE.

T was the second and last period of the hockey game between Rogers Tech and St. John's Military Academy, and the conflict, bitterly contested from the first minute of play, still remained deadlocked.

In the second row of the spectators' gallery on the north side of the Tech rink, Jefferson Arns watched the game thoughtfully, for it affected not only himself, but the five other players on the Bushnel College hockey team.

In less than a week, Bushnel was to clash with the military academy, and it was to witness what the St. John's six could do in action that had brought Arns, Stover, the Bushnel left defense, and Wendell, the right wing, to Rogers. There, in the solid ranks of the hockey fans present, they were able to see and judge for themselves just how formidable the Academy was.

The first thirty minutes of the opening half had proved conclusively that St. John's Military Academy would be no mean rival when it came to Gaylord's Rink at Bushnel. Its stick work was admirable; it skated fast; and its offensive worked like well-oiled machinery. Facing the Tech that had been triumphant on the ice all winter, the Academy, in pursuit of the elusive puck, outclassed

though it was, had by fast and furious playing kept the scoring even.

A thunder of cheers turned Arns' retrospective eyes back to the battlefield. By successive dribbling and passing, the Academy had taken the puck well down into the enemy territory, where every member of its team, striving valiantly, fought to shoot the rubber between the goal posts. Science, nerve, and muscle were a combination that proved irresistible.

Of a sudden the St. John's right wing took the puck after a clever bit of combination work and used his stick. One of the Tech wings darted out to block and make a return, and for an instant he hung directly in the path of the Academy's right wing.

Breathlessly Arns waited for the St. John's player to alter his course, but the Academy skater in his forward spurt did nothing of the kind.

Plunging ruthlessly on, he smashed into the Tech wing, sent the other spinning out of his way, and with a beautiful sliding pass shot the rubber to one of his team who, in turn, found an opening and shot the goal an instant before the referee's whistle ended the period and game. Arns stared across at the fallen wing. Several of his teammates had picked him up and were helping him off the rink. In the tumult of cheering, there were loud cries of foul play and protests.

Roy Stover, touching Arns' arm, smiled

grimly. "Technically," he said, "there's no foul, but morally—finish it yourself. It was dirty playing, but what can you expect from Carter Black?"

Arns looked up. "Carter Black?"

Wendell turned from considering the referee in conference with two of the Tech players. "They call Black the 'Ice Terror,' don't they?" he inquired, a bland note in his soft, persuasive voice.

"The label wins the double boiler!" Stover laughed. "Come on, let's move. St. John's won, and that's all there is—there ain't no more!"

Thoughtfully, Arns followed his friends toward the aisle that led to the exit from the rink.

Since the hockey season had begun, he had heard considerable campus gossip concerning Carter Black. The St. John's player, through his merciless offensives and steam-roller tactics, had earned the sobriquet Wendell had mentioned. In the dozen or more games the military academy had participated in, Carter Black had left in his wake a choice collection of bruises, broken bones, and ugly rumors.

It was said by many that his career as a hockey player was founded on a basis of fear; that by a carefully masked brutality, which kept just within the laws of hockey, he strove to let the terrorizing threat of his reputation awe and influence an opposing team before the puck was placed in the center of a rink and play begun.

Whether this subtle idea of Black's proved a success was a question, but the fact remained St. John's had met and defeated hockey teams far superior, as superior as the Tech seven.

"Ice Terror!" Arns said under his breath.

Outside, the winter night was cold, clear, and starless. The busses that had brought the St. John's supporters down from the Academy began to rumble up, and for a minute there was the confusion of embarkation. In the background, one or two of the Rogers undergraduates hurled remarks at the departing visitors. It was evident that Tech was in a surly humor after its unmerited defeat.

As the station trolley was not due for twelve minutes, Arns, Stover, and Wen-

dell snapped up their overcoat collars and watched the crowd depart.

"I hear," Wendell observed, "that some of these Tech men are demons with the pasteboards. The next time I make a killing at the Hockey Club, I'll run over here with the proceeds and clean this crowd out."

"Honestly, do you ever think of anything except poker?" Stover asked.

Wendell answered without smiling. "Yes—faro and roulette. I only wish the club would break out with a wheel. I'd show them how it's being done in Monte Carlo every evening!"

He was about to add something to this remark when a youth in a white sweater ran forward, shouting resonantly.

"One side, everybody! Make way for the conquerors! All together, fellows! A cheer and a tiger for the Academy!"

The six St. John's hockey warriors began filing out, sticks over their shoulders, skating shoes in hand. The frosty electric light at the entrance to the rink glimmered on smiling, satisfied faces. Jefferson Arns leaned a little forward, searching for Carter Black. The Academy's right wing was the last to leave the building.

When he swung abreast of him, Arns knew a tingle of surprise. On the ice, Black had seemed slim and lithe, a perfect piece of hockey machinery, but viewed at close range he was broad and bulky, had none of the grace and the fine, trim lines of the speedy hockey player. Wrapped in a sheepskin coat, Carter Black was so swarthy as to be almost saturnine. Arns noted his sardonic eyes, the thin slit of his mouth, and his hawklike nose.

Black pushed a careless way through the crowd, addressing some one on the edge of the road as he moved forward. "Where's my gas buggy, 'Dink?' If you've let it freeze up, I'll pulverize you. Bring her around and make it snappy!"

A laugh ran along the line at the remark.

"The ideal bully himself!" Stover exclaimed. "Honestly, did you ever see anybody with more of a swelled knob?"

As he spoke, the laughter died, and his words sounded loudly in the sudden silence. That Black had heard it was evi-

dent when the St. John's right wing wheeled around and came toward them.

"What's that?" The sardonic eyes moved from Wendell to Arns and then rested on Stover. "Did I hear you say something?"

Arns felt the old touch of an inner emptiness that always came in tense minutes. He looked at Stover, who stood immovable, staring back into the dark face of the Academy player.

"If I did say anything, it wasn't to you," remarked Stover.

Black laughed harshly. "That's just as well—for your health." He peered at him narrowly. "You're just like all of these Tech men—squealing because you were beaten. Like the rest, you're a bum loser."

Stover shrugged. "That's your mistake, Black. I'm Stover of Bushnel. We'll be better acquainted when we hook up next week at Gaylord's!"

Whatever the outcome of the conversation would have been, Arns had no way of knowing, for an instant later the military-academy hockey coach came through the throng as Black's motor rolled up.

"What's all this?"

Black swung around, his belligerency vanishing. "I'm just talking with Stover of Bushnel, chief," he answered, the sarcastic tone veiled. "Here's my car now. Can I give you a lift back home?"

He followed the coach into the car, but turned before seating himself to give Stover a level, deadly glance. The engine of the touring car purred, and the machine moved forward.

"Four-flusher!" The cry of one of the Tech undergraduates sped after the motor like a jeering phantom.

CHAPTER II.

MYSTERIOUS NOTES.

ON one side of Bushnel's gently sloping campus, the Marianic River ran sluggishly past the inlet and under the drawbridge at the bend in it. Sometimes the Marianic froze to the depth of three or four feet, but for the past four seasons all of Bushnel's hockey games had been held within Gaylord's Rink, which was at the lower end of what was popularly called Eating House Row.

It was too severely cold on the river for those hockey enthusiasts who turned out, and Gaylord's, with its one-hundred-and-twelve-foot rink, its perfect, artificial ice, tiers of benches, and lighting facilities, was a more pleasant arena for the winter sport.

It was toward Gaylord's that Jefferson Arns made his way two afternoons later for the last practice game that came before Bushnel would encounter the St. John's team. Thinly feeble sunshine illumined the Row, and the reflection of the gray winter clouds paved it.

There was a foreboding chill in the keen, stinging air that made Arns shiver, for though he was nearing the end of his four years at Bushnel, he had never lost entirely the desire for the warmth of the sunny Southland whence he had come.

The thought of Virginia kept pace with him as he swung along. It was odd that one who had never skated, who had never known the slippery slide of ice under singing steel runners, had actually made Bushnel's first hockey team, was its left wing, and had gone through a series of triumphs and defeats, and was looked upon by the campus as one of its steadiest and most reliable players.

Arns' face shadowed as he passed the most exclusive frat house fronting the Row, and again an old, old question repeated itself. He asked himself if he would ever be able to overcome entirely his secret terror of the ice, that fascinated and repelled, and his intense dread of injury that he had so carefully hidden from those who were his friends.

On a hundred occasions, in the white heat of a hockey battle, he knew it was not pluck, but sheer will power alone, the fear of being marked as a coward, that had inspired a fast rush through a bunch of fighting players, through swinging, smashing sticks that, in noise and movement, resembled a threshing machine.

He knew that it was not courage that was back of each desperate jump, each block of the puck, each play that meant facing punishment. Deep in his soul, Arns knew that he was a cringer—the man who waited outside of a scrimmage until by chance the rubber slid to him—the man who feared not only each hazardous dive, but some opponent. It

was this knowledge that during the hockey seasons at Bushnel had been a relentless goad, a haunting shadow by night and day that had allowed him no peace of mind or tranquillity.

Countless times he wondered what was the matter with him. Hockey had made him strong physically. He had trained carefully, using exercises that enlarged and hardened the muscles of the arms, back, and chest. His legs had been brought into condition by hiking and skating, and his reputation was that of an unselfish player who used every effort to assist his teammates in scoring. On the surface he understood that he was perfection itself, but under the veneer he winced at the thought of what he knew dwelt there.

As he went on toward his destination, Arns wondered when he would crack, when he would show the white feather, reveal the yellow streak. He remembered Carter Black charging ruthlessly down upon the Tech wing and Carter Black facing Stover, the sardonic eyes deadly and dangerous. He wondered what he would have done had he been the Tech player or Stover.

Would the will power that had lashed him into action still hold good, or would he have played the craven before all and crawled away like a beaten dog? He thought of Black and Black's sobriquet as he turned into the players' entrance at Gaylord's. A few minutes later he was in the dressing room where the Bushnel hockey team had put on their skates and collected their sticks. He was still facing questions.

For the afternoon, they had as adversaries the subhockey team. Larry Martin, the coach, lounged on the side lines and watched the game as it progressed. The substitute six were easily overpowered, and presently the practice periods were over. The team gathered about the coach. Arns dropped down on the end of the bench.

Larry Martin looked them over slowly. "You fellows," he began, "have every chance in the world to defeat the Academy easily. They can't approach you for teamwork, and you're faster in every respect. Now pay attention to this. It may sound like a foolish and trivial thing

to say, but I hope none of you men are taking any more stock in this Ice Terror stuff than you are in the threats that one of the team has been receiving every morning so mysteriously."

Arns looked up, but the coach's face was inscrutable.

"Fear," Martin went on, "is principally a matter of imagination. A selling-plater race horse quits cold with victory in sight, because he imagines he can never make the wire without being beaten. The yellow boxer drops untouched for the count, because he imagines his jaw is about to be cuffed.

"The cringing hockey player passes up opportunities, because he imagines that to seize and act upon them might mean injury. Fear, not only in sport, but in every walk of life, is the most deadly enemy any one can have. I just mention this because I've been told that this Ice Terror thing has actually beaten a couple of university teams before a game was even called."

"It won't beat us!" the Bushnel goal keeper broke in confidently.

The coach smiled. "Puncture the myth that the St. John's right wing is as dangerous as some people imagine he is. Play hard and clean when you meet the Academy, and you'll win. That's all now, men."

He dismissed the team, and Arns, finished in the dressing room, joined Roy Stover at the door.

"What did Martin mean by mysterious threats?" Arns asked. "Do you know anything about them?"

Stover laughed. "I ought to, because I'm the blue-eyed boy who has been receiving them. Walk back to the dorm with me and I'll give you the whole plot, Jeff. Maybe you can pull a Sherlock Holmes and deduce what it's all about."

Stover roomed at Headley's, on the Walk on the west side of the Marianic. It was an expensive suite, and its spacious living room was decorated with hockey trophies. Framed photographs of past Bushnel teams were on the walls. A silver cup sat in the center of the mantel, and over the fireplace two splintered hockey sticks were crossed above a pair of rusty, much-used skates.

The gray winter dusk crouched at the window, but Stover, once they entered, switched on a tall floor lamp.

"Here's the way it is," he began, pulling off his sweater. "For the last three mornings when I've come in for breakfast, there has been an anonymous communication neatly propped up on the dining-room table. All the doors to these rooms—both of them—have been locked as well as the fire-escape window. Figure it out yourself."

Arns looked across at him. "There isn't much to figure, is there? Your mysterious mailman is probably one of the hall attendants downstairs who has a pass-key, the porter, or somebody else who comes in to clean."

Stover shook his head. "I thought so at first, but I've checked up on all the help here at Headley's, and I'm positive none of them are slipping in mornings to leave the notes. Just a minute and I'll show you my collection."

He got up and went to the secrétaire in the corner, where he unlocked a drawer and brought back three envelopes. The stationery was of a fair quality, and the superscription on each had been printed with a heavy black lead pencil. Stover opened the first and passed it over.

The letter had been printed with a black pencil and read:

This is to inform you that you are requested to resign from the team before the St. John's game. Do so to-day.

The second communication was similar in tone. It read:

You have not resigned as yet, and we will warn you only once more. We shall not be responsible for what may happen to you if you continue to disregard our wishes.

"To-day," Stover explained, "I made up my mind to trap the letter carrier and got up an hour earlier. It didn't work, however. When I reached the dining room, there was billet-doux number three. Take a look at it."

Arns took the last anonymous missive and unfolded it. It read:

You can't say you weren't warned!

"Why don't you turn these over to the association?" Arns asked. "It's easy to see the one who has printed these letters is plugging for the Academy to win."

"Sure! They figure the use of a substitute at left defense will give the game to St. John's, wrapped up in pink tissue paper. I mentioned the notes to Larry Martin, but I see no reason to carry them to the association, for the reason that I'm going to play a hunch of my own. You know I have a memory as long as a tenement-house clothesline, and after dinner to-night I'm going down to nose around the cellar. I'm almost certain the answer lies there."

"Cellar? What do you expect to discover there?"

Stover made an airy gesture. "The coal bins, the steam heating plant, the storeroom, and plenty of cobwebs. If you'll wait until I wash up, I'll take you to dinner, Jeff. Hungry? Personally, I could go through a table d'hôte like Sherman to the sea!"

CHAPTER III.

FIGHTING SHADOWS.

THE training routine for those on the Bushnet hockey team called for bed at ten o'clock punctually, but it was after eleven when Arns and Wendell left the rooms over Gaylord's that were rented and used by the hockey club. The regular poker game had been in progress with its usual high stakes. Time had rushed by so rapidly that when Arns, faithful always to the instructions of his coach, had imagined it was not yet ten, he had been astonished to find that his watch marked the hour as being sixty minutes later.

After that, he had made haste to cash in his chips and, with some difficulty, had pried Wendell away from the fascination of a jack pot that cost a dollar to enter.

"How did you make out?" Arns inquired, as they went down the Row.

Wendell, a well-built individual who was a cinder-track star as well as a hockey player, shrugged. "Lost—as usual!" he replied. "But give me a chance. Some night I'm going to have a rush of luck to the head, and then I'll clean those birds out."

As Wendell's losings were supposed to be in the neighborhood of twelve hundred dollars since the previous November, Arns smiled faintly at his mention of "luck." Wendell always spoke of what

he was going to do when fortune turned, but it never seemed to swing around for him, and the campus wondered how he kept going.

"I hope," Arns said, "Martin won't find out about this purloined hour. I wouldn't want him to think I deliberately broke training on the eve of the Academy game."

"Neither would I," Wendell agreed. He looked at his watch. "It might be a good idea if we separate at the next corner. There's a lot of gossiping old women at this college who'd like nothing better than to inform Larry that two members of the team were seen returning home at this late hour after a gambling orgy. See you to-morrow. Jeff. So long."

"Good night," Arns said, as they separated, and he saw Wendell break into a dogtrot.

His own rooms were two streets beyond the Walk, but before seeking them Arns stopped off at Greenfield's drug store for a hot drink at the fountain. To reach his dormitory, he decided to use the alley that was a short cut past Headley's. In about five minutes, the alley was ahead of him, the moonlight faint and obscure on the ice along the Marianic. The sight of it seemed to swing his mind around to the game with the military academy and what Coach Martin had said that afternoon.

Was fear only imagination? Arns asked himself if he was only a mental coward and if the same will power that had kept him going was strong enough to throw off the dark mantle of dread. Could he don the shining armor of courage? Was it fated that there would be some inspiration powerful enough to bring him out from the shadows into the sunshine, where he could look straight into the bright face of danger and banish, forever, the haunting specter that had trudged along at his elbow?

Asking himself these questions, Arns reached the lower end of the Walk and turned into the alley. The narrow thoroughfare was in murky darkness, but there was light enough for him to become suddenly and sharply aware that a motor, displaying no riding lights, was drawn well down the length of it, a sinister shape in the gloom.

Arns slowed his pace doubtfully as the low murmur of voices drifted to him through the cold air. Intuition told him that all was not well, for there was a lawless aspect not only to the automobile, but to those who lurked about it.

Retreating to a point where the shadows were darkest, Arns halted and eyed the silent machine. It was parked, he saw, close to the side entrance of Headley's, which was often used by students on a return from some nocturnal festivity. From the voices, he was able to judge there were two people present. These two were joined by another figure that came jogging up the alley from the opposite entrance. A minute later, the trio took up positions on either side of the doorway.

With an inner chill gripping him, Arns looked over his shoulder. Usually the night watchman employed to patrol the Walk began making his rounds at eleven o'clock, but now there was no sign of him or his lantern, and the idea of seeking assistance was quickly ended by the dénouement that followed. The first indication of this lay in the words: "Here he comes now!" Then the side door of the dormitory opened, and the ghostly glimmer of the night light burning in the inside corridor of the building was to be seen.

For a brief space the figure of a young man was silhouetted against this light. He closed the door behind him and began to descend the four steps that led to the street level, while Arns, striving to call a warning, found his tongue had become suddenly paralyzed.

A tingle went through him as the one who had come out of Headley's reached the last step, and two of the lurking figures ran forward without forewarning. In the next watch tick a desperate scuffle was in progress, a conflict made eerie and awesome by the quietness of it, a quietness that was broken only by panting breaths and low oaths.

Spellbound, Arns stood rooted to the spot, aware of the heavy, spasmodic beat of his heart. He looked wildly back over his shoulder, but the Walk beyond was still deserted. Then, slowly and gradually, he recalled what Larry Martin had said that afternoon and, sick with appre-

hension, used every ounce of his will power to lash his shaky legs forward.

CHAPTER IV.

DESPERATE PLAYING.

WHEN the second period of the game between Bushnel College and St. John's Military Academy ended, there was a ten-minute intermission. The Academy supporters sent their war cry echoing along the length of Gaylord's Rink, for in the last few minutes of play, St. John's by a bitter and strategical attack had overwhelmed the college. The score, at the conclusion of the second period, was Bushnel, 7; St. John's, 12.

Skating in for the minutes of much-needed rest, Jefferson Arns wondered if the eye he had had painted that morning at Greenfield's was beginning to betray the angry, purplish tints that surrounded it. Surreptitiously he glanced at Roy Stover, but the Bushnel left defense wore an expressionless countenance and was taciturn and reserved—queerly different from the flying, fighting phantom on skates whose brilliant stick work, speed, and courage had more than once prevented the Academy from doubling the score it had made.

Wendell came up and pushed a way through the imploring ranks of the Bushnel spectators who were pleading for a sharp rally. The team went on into the dressing rooms, and a minute later the coach followed and slammed the door behind him.

"What's the matter with you fellows? You're letting St. John's overwhelm you. You're not fighting! This Black is tearing through you like paper, and your combination work is awful. I've told you a dozen times that in close quarters the puck should be passed to a man's stick and not in line with his skates. You're working too many lifted passes, and your cushion shots at the side of the rink are rank. Pull yourselves together. Bushnel must win!"

While he regained his wind and felt his strength returning by slow degrees, Arns allowed his mind to turn back to the shadowed hours of the previous night. Each detail of the fight in the alley was as sharply cut and as clearly defined as

if it had been photographed indelibly on his mind. How much did Stover know? Arns looked thoughtfully across at the left defense as cheering outside told him that the St. John's players were on the rink and ready for the last period.

Arns picked up his stick and joined the line that filed to the door. Martin came up beside him and touched his arm.

"Nice work, Jeff," said the coach. "I've been watching you. You're playing a pretty game. Don't weaken!"

The cheering in the Bushnel stand contained a savage note of defiance that seemed to heat Arns' blood. The white calcium lights quicksilvered the ice and appeared to mark each frosty line made by the grind of skates on the polished surface, but the swirl of pennants and the blur of the spectators were things unseen by Arns.

Bushnel must win! Its superior team must conquer. There must be no repetition of the Rogers Tech affair. The Academy six had skated to position and were waiting.

"We—want—you—to—win—Bushnel!" The thundering cry rolled across the ice as the home team took their places and the puck was placed in position. A sudden hush followed that was broken by the referee's cry.

"Play!"

Then came the clatter of sticks and the grind of skates. Getting the puck, Stover shot it deftly to one side of the rink where it caromed off and was picked up by Wendell, who smacked it to a teammate. In a turmoil of confusion, the rubber darted into a scrimmage where, in sheer desperation, Bushnel shot a goal, and the strident college yell rang out triumphantly.

"That's—good—Bushnel!"

St. John's foiled the next two efforts at scoring, there was off-side play, and the puck was brought back into position five yards inside the rink lines.

"Now—Bushnel!"

Drawing upon his reserve strength and speed, Arns dashed into the heat of the ensuing conflict and found himself face to face with the Ice Terror of the military academy. Black's sardonic eyes blazed under their lowered lids, and the muscles in his weather-beaten cheeks twitched as their sticks touched. There

was a furious clash before Arns took the puck and passed it to Wendell who, in turn, got it through to Stover.

A palpitating rush down the ice, a breathless mix-up, and Bushnel had added another point to its score. Two more goals followed before Black hung up a point for the Academy, and Arns, skating to position, felt a lethargy begin to steal into his legs and arms.

"Three more!" he told himself grimly. "Two goals to tie the score and one to win!"

The Bushnel right defense glided up and past. "Look out for Carter Black, Jeff!" he said. "He's pulling rough stuff! Tried to cut me down a minute ago."

In the sudden and brilliant rally that brought every Bushnel man to his feet in a frenzy of excitement, the two goals needed to even the score were made, and bedlam took possession of the rink.

A cryptic elation gave Arns new strength and fresh hope. The two teams were on equal terms now. Could they hold the Academy and win? Did enough time still remain to earn that one goal?

Arns thought that not more than five or six minutes separated them from the blast of the whistle that would end the game. In a forward play, he whirled around on his skates and headed for a scrimmage across the rink. An Academy player secured the rubber and lifted it. The puck whistled past his head—to be pounced upon by the fast-skating Stover, who started it down the ice.

As Arns took up pursuit, a hockey axiom stole through his mind.

"It is better," Martin had told him, "to think more and rush less than to rush more and think less!"

Arns dug the points of the runners of his skates into the ice. To charge headlong into the fray would not be thinking. The enemy goal was behind him, and if Bushnel lost the puck, it must come sliding out of the heat of battle. Even as he told himself what was logical in the circumstances, the puck came whirling directly up to him. He stopped it with his skates, took it in his stick, and with something singing within him started a charge across to the right side of the rink where, for a second, the way was open.

He heard the cries of Bushnel rooters

and saw Wendell opposite him, but to shoot the rubber was too dangerous. Arns decided to dribble it until he had the chance for a desperate shot.

The steel runners of his skates whined as they flew across the ice. He thought it odd that the rink was a chaotic blur. He was aware that his heart was leaping and pounding, and that his name and some one else's name was being hurled the width of Gaylord's. Presently the other name became clear.

"Black!" the Academy supporters were shrieking. "Black!"

Arns knew the meaning of the cry when he heard the ring of runners beside him and saw the Ice Terror sweeping up to him. In that minute Arns caught the other's expression of fury, the lips drawn back over his teeth, and the darting gleam of his eyes.

"One side!" Carter roared at him. "One side or I'll run you down! I'll break you in two——"

Arns recalled the game between the Academy and Tech and, in fancy, heard the crunching crash as the Tech player was smashed into by the Ice Terror. The memory of it was as fleeting as a shadow in the spreading dawn, for Arns knew that this was his minute, that last night the miracle occurred, and that, clad in the shining armor, there was no earthly power to unman him.

Arns laughed at the menace of the St. John's right wing as he sped up to the Academy left defense and laughed again as he swung his stick back for the shot. "Try it, Black! This is one time that foul play won't work!"

There was a whistling rush as the Academy player surged forward, thrashing with his stick. Carter Black was a second too late, however. Arns shot the puck, pivoted on his skates, and lunged—in time to allow the enemy right wing to swing past him and crash directly into the St. John's left defense.

Both went down with a thud, but Arns was unaware of it. Like a motion picture on a silver sheet, he caught a glimpse of the face of the goal tender beyond and saw the black circle of the puck reposing safely in the net, while the whistle blew sharply somewhere, a discordant note in the tumult.

"Bushnel! Bushnel!" the stands were roaring. "Arns! Jeff Arns!"

CHAPTER V.

THE REASONS WHY.

ONE hour and ten minutes later, Roy Stover, in the living room of his suite at Headley's on the Walk, propped his legs up on the seat of a convenient chair and looked quizzically from Coach Martin to Arns.

"Now that it's all over, and Bushnel is supreme on the ice for another season," Stover began, "I might as well supply an explanation. To begin with, my little excursion down in the cellar last night produced results. A certain person supplied a complete and full confession this morning, and here are the words and music.

"Our friend Carter Black, who has been using this Ice Terror thing principally to cash big bets on the Academy's winning, thought he could even up for what he heard me say outside of the Tech rink that night and at the same time better St. John's chances by making it so a substitute would have to play left defense to-night. Briefly, Black thought he would practice land buccaneering, kidnap me, and keep me a prisoner for a few days."

"Go on," Martin grunted.

Stover looked over at Arns. "So last night, Black, with a pal from the Academy and a would-be traitor from this college, motored up and parked in the alley," Stover went on. "The pal came upstairs to tell me I was wanted on the telephone in Greenfield's drug store. When I came down, they tried to beat me up and get me into the car.

"I won't deny that they would have done so if some one who happened to be passing hadn't jumped in to lend a hand—I mean two hands and an equal number of fists. He must have been a professional pugilist or something, because his very first wallop laid Black like a carpet. After that, he knocked the pal for a loop, and when I finished polishing off conspirator number three, I found my helper had disappeared—"

Stealthily Arns pushed his chair back from the glare of the reading lamp on

the center table. "What did you do down in the cellar?" he asked.

Stover grinned. "Nothing much. As I told you, I have an eighteen-carat memory. Some time ago, I received an invitation to a smoker printed almost in exactly the same way as my three threatening letters. This invitation was down in my trunk in the storeroom together with a bunch of old souvenirs. I dug it out and compared the lettering and, as I suspected, found they were identical.

"Really, learning the identity of the young man in question was hardly necessary, for I had the pleasure of knocking him cold last night. When I called this morning, he was already to admit that, for a quantity of currency which he could use to gamble with, he had agreed—"

"Wendell!" Arns exclaimed.

Stover nodded, while the coach compressed his lips.

"Wendell—the near-traitor," agreed Stover. "He rooms upstairs, you know, and his front-door key fits my door, too. It was a cinch for him to flit in here, leave a letter, and exit noiselessly. He admitted that Black's money had fixed him for playing a losing game against the Academy, but he changed his mind when I told him that the Hockey Association as well as the dean might be interested in not only looking at the smoker invitation, but my three threatening letters and hearing my tale of what happened in the alley. I left him to think it over carefully, and that he did goes without saying. Like you, Jeff, he played the best game of his career to-night. That's what fear can do."

Arns cautiously let a finger touch his painted eye. "Fear?" He laughed under his breath. "You're wrong there. There's no such thing as fear—it's only imagination!"

He Didn't Begin

EMPLOYER: "Is it true that when the clock strikes six you put down your pen and go, even if you are in the middle of a word?"

Clerk: "Certainly not, sir. When it gets so near to six as that I never begin the word at all!"



Frozen Magic ~

By
Albert M. Treynor ~

CHAPTER I.

FINDING A MYSTERY.

NEAR the foot of the valley slope lay an inanimate, drab-colored object of some sort, barely defined against the smooth sweep of the snowy mountainside. From the wooded ridge above, it appeared as a faint speck upon the panorama of wintry landscape. Ninety-nine travelers in a hundred might have passed that way and never have noticed any break in the monotonous waste of white. On that evening, however, a little before the fall of dusk, there rode by chance, from out of the pass and over the trail, the one man in a hundred. There were few things worth seeing in the wilderness that escaped the restless scrutiny of Corporal David Dexter of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

A glance ranging across space, as the eagle gazes, and the horseman tightened rein and checked his pony on the brow of the slide. He sat immobile, looking downward. The dun-tinted shape could have been mistaken at the distance for a hillside boulder or a rotted stump or a tussock of sun-dried grass. Corporal Dexter was not deceived, however.

October's first snow had swirled over the ranges that day, and the three-inch fall spread its covering impartially over mountain and forest and open park. The brownish object below should have been

sheeted white, like everything else in view. Whatever it was, it must have fallen there in the new snow, some time after the last flurry had passed, not more than two hours before.

The place was a lonely, isolated spot, deep in the remoter fastnesses of the northern Rockies, a haunt of bighorn sheep and wandering grizzly bears. There were few white men who had ever sighted the line of unnamed mountain peaks that jutted like broken saw teeth against the eastward sky. The evidence of any recent visitation was of interest to the police.

The rider paused only to reconnoiter the ground below him, and then thrust his knee into his horse's withers and urged the animal over the shoulder of the declivity. The slope was steep and slippery, but the wise little mountain pony was used to hazardous going.

She settled back almost upon her shaggy haunches, and with forelegs reaching stiffly before her, she went scrambling and sliding to the bottom. A quick jog carried the horseman across the snow-smoothed level beyond, and then he knew what it was he had come out of his way to find.

At his pony's feet lay the drab-colored object that had caught his attention from a distance. It was a stiff-brimmed hat—a handed uniform Stetson, such as Dexter himself wore tilted to the crease of his straight-drawn brows. The hat had fallen

crown up in the snow, and near by, half buried in the white drift, was sprawled a motionless human figure, clad in the familiar summer tunic of the Mounted Police.

Corporal Dexter slid out of his saddle and a second later was kneeling on the ground. He raised the body to a sitting posture, with one of his arms supporting the lolling head, and it needed no further scrutiny to apprise him of the fact of death.

Dexter's hand pressed against the wet, still-warm face, and he looked at the closed eyelids and tight-locked lips of a man he knew. It was Constable Tommy Graves, R. C. M. P., from the inspection post at Fort Dauntless, two hundred miles to the south.

Corporal Dexter was attached to the barracks at Crooked Forks, on the old Dawson Road, far across the ranges. He had met young Graves now and then on long patrol and remembered him as a gay and gallant comrade.

Skirting the edge of a juniper clump, there approached from the southward a line of nearly effaced footprints. Thus, after devious wandering, Constable Graves had come to the appointed hour and place, and here his life's trail ended.

The hair at the base of the man's skull was matted red, and Dexter's probing finger discovered an ugly opening where a bullet had entered from behind. The skin over the forehead was bunched and broken, and the corporal, using a delicately wielded penknife blade, a moment later came into possession of a flattened chunk of lead, .30 caliber size.

The words "vengeance" and "reprisal" are never spoken by a Mounted officer. Nevertheless, there is no place on earth where the murderer of a policeman may feel safe from the menace of the reaching hand. Dexter at present was on long patrol in the wilderness, seeking two fugitives who were wanted in the settlements for a brutal case of assault and battery. Now his plans must change. New and more urgent business called him.

He crouched on his heels beside his fallen comrade. Then Dexter took off a glove and blew his breath to warm his finger tips. From his pocket he brought forth pencil and notebook and with a

calm, steady hand, he wrote his brief report. He himself might be summoned at any time to meet a similar fate, and as a member of a methodical organization it was his duty to leave the written record behind. The bullet was sealed in an envelope with the scribbled page, and the packet then buttoned securely in his tunic pocket.

His own terse statement tucked away for safe-keeping, Dexter bent over to learn if Tommy Graves' journal sheets were inscribed to date. The young constable's notebook held the usual daily report, beginning three weeks back, when he had set out on his last journey from Fort Dauntless.

The record, however, told only of trivial matters, of miles traveled and landmarks sighted, and did not mention the errand that fetched him to this far, lonesome valley of the British Columbian mountains. Possibly he was on a secret mission that he dared not particularize by written words.

A single clew was afforded by a photograph, found in the constable's inside pocket. It was a double Bertillon card, carrying the stamp of detective headquarters of Chicago, Illinois, and showing full-face and profile portraits of a man whose name was written down as "Roy 'Pink' Crill."

The subject of the police photograph was a gross-featured man with no eyebrows and very little hair. It was a repellent physiognomy; thick, pendulous jowl, puffy cheeks, eyes sunk in deep sockets. The cranium was flat on top, and there was a peculiar indentation behind the man's temples that somehow made Dexter think of the pits in a copperhead's skull.

Whoever this Pink Crill might be, the existence of a Bertillon picture at least proved a criminal record. It was not an unnatural assumption to suppose that he was in flight from the other side of the border and that young Graves had been assigned to the business of stalking him down.

Crill's body and facial measurements had been jotted down in the columns allotted for the purpose, and after running his glance over the card, the corporal was able to form a vivid mental picture

of the man. He would know him if he met him.

Pocketing the Bertillon card for future reference, Dexter stood up, his hands balanced on his hips. With his underlip thrust slightly forward, he moodily scanned the ground where the tragedy had taken place.

The restaging of the crime presented few difficulties for the experienced observer. Behind the fallen body was a snow-shrouded log. Fifty paces beyond, the course of a frozen creek ran past. The banks of the stream were thickly fringed with junipers, but at this one point there was a break in the cover.

Winding up from a distant notch in the mountains, the creek afforded the logical trail for any voyageur making in that direction from the southeast. The log commanded the opening in the juniper bushes, and Constable Graves had been sitting on the log.

Even under the covering of fresh snow, the marks were legible. The policeman's rifle lay buried, as it had fallen in the cold drift near the log. Graves evidently had sat there for a long while with his rifle across his knees. Like a deer hunter, he had chosen his place in the open and allowed the falling flakes to cover him, while he waited, motionless. The still hunt needs patience, but usually it is the surest way.

In this instance, however, something had gone wrong with the hunter's plans. No one had come along the course of the brook. The snowy stream surface was as smooth and level as placer sand. Dexter contemplated the lower stretch of ground and then turned with meditative eyes to search the slope behind him.

A stand of dense-growing cedars climbed upward along the mountainside. Obeying the trailer's instinct, Dexter walked straight across the open ground and entered the nearest point of cover. There he found, as he was sure he must find, the imprints of booted feet.

Somebody who wore a crisscross pattern of hobnails had stood concealed in a bower of frost-rimmed branches. The furrowed snow in a breast-high crotch indicated the place where a rifle barrel had been rested for steady sighting. From the powdery drift at his feet, the

corporal picked up an empty cartridge case, .30 caliber, that smelled of fresh-burned powder. The story was complete.

The trail of the departing hobnails went northward through the cedars, and thence Corporal Dexter's future pathway lay, inevitable, unswerving, relentless as the summons of fate.

A policeman does not desert a policeman, in life or death. Dexter returned to his fallen comrade, and as gently as though he feared the hurting of sensate flesh, he gathered the pitiful human shape into his arms. Dexter was not a big or powerful man, but there was a lithe, cougarlike adequacy hidden in the muscles of a lean and hard-trained body, and the corporal made little effort of his task.

Susy, the pony, objected to her new burden, but Dexter had no time to parley. He crowded into the horse with his shoulder, and before she could really think of acting skittish, the limp weight was deposited across her saddle. Dexter bent a few turns of a lashing thong under the cinches, and after that she could do nothing but submit to the arrangement.

As coolly as a workman taking a needed tool from his kit, the corporal pulled his carbine out of the saddle holster. Then, with the reins twisted in his fingers, and the pony shambling at his heels, he turned back afoot into the cedars and started northward, following the hobnailed boots.

CHAPTER II.

SERVICE OF THE LAW.

IN the wild mountain district where Corporal Dexter and a few knightly comrades rode in the service of the king's law, there was not more than one officer available to patrol each two hundred square miles of territory. In the back hills were certain inaccessible regions never visited by civilized beings. A crime committed in such an out-of-the-way valley as this might remain unsuspected for years.

The murderer of Constable Graves could have no inkling that a second officer had just ridden down through the passes. It probably did not occur to him that

there was any danger of pursuit, and he did not try to mask his trail.

The tracks led for a distance through the thick timber and then slanted down to the brook and continued northward along the unobstructed course of the stream. The killer walked with a free, unhurried stride, without pausing to listen or glance behind. Particles of feathery snow still held loosely around the edges of the prints, and Corporal Dexter knew that the maker of the tracks was traveling not more than twenty minutes ahead of him.

For a distance of two miles or so, the trail followed the meanderings of the winter-bound brook. At last, near the banks of a forking stream, the hobnails turned aside and entered a dismal spruce forest that extended upward over the valley slope in an unbroken area of over-weighted treetops. The failing twilight scarcely filtered through the interlaced branches overhead, and Dexter found himself groping among shadowy tree shapes in a purple-tinged dusk that thickened and deepened as he advanced.

He quickened his pace, hoping to run down his quarry before night overtook him. Dexter had traveled scarcely five hundred yards among the spruces, however, when he discovered open ground ahead and stopped short at the edge of a stumpy clearing, cut in the standing timber.

Before him in the darkness, vague and unreal as the apparition of a wood troll's dwelling, there loomed the dingy outline of a low-roofed log cabin.

The horseman instinctively reached back to grab his pony's muzzle. The precaution was needless, however. Susy stood with drooping head and apparently lacked interest to announce her arrival. Dexter eyed her sharply, with a passing glance at the burden she carried, and then quickly turned back to reconnoiter the shadows.

He had not heard of any settlers living on this side of the range. Apparently the builder of this cabin was a newcomer. The logs showed recent ax marks, and the second growth of seedlings had not yet found time to spring up among the stumps.

The silence was like a weight upon the

senses. Dexter heard no sound except the faint creak of saddle leather as Susy breathed. He might easily imagine himself alone in all that vast stretch of forest. As he peered forth from behind his shelter of brush, however, a vagrant puff of air brought to him an odor of chimney smoke. He strained his vision to see in the gathering darkness and was aware that the hobnail prints ran directly across the open ground to the cabin door.

Dexter left the pony to browse in the thicket, with the reins dangling from the bit, and strode forward alone into the clearing. Placing his own feet in the marks left by the other boots, he followed his man to the cabin entrance. For ten seconds he held motionless, his foot touching the outer sill. Still he heard no sound. The line of tracks ended here, however, and he knew that Constable Graves' murderer was inside the cabin.

Between two men who had not yet seen each other, the door of spruce slabs held shut like the closed book of doom. Once it was opened, the warrant of death for one or the other must be read. If Corporal Dexter crossed the threshold, he would walk forth again to escort a manacled prisoner to the hangman's gibbet at Fort Dauntless—or else he would not walk forth again.

It was the custom of the Mounted to play for all or nothing and ask no odds of fortune. The corporal's lips harbored a half-cynical smile as he accepted the terms. He hoped only that the drawbar was not fastened.

The click of his carbine sounded fearfully loud in his ears as he thumbed back the hammer. He did not wait after that, but reached with his left hand to hit the wooden latch. The door swung ajar, and he kicked it wide on its squeaking hinges.

Even in that moment one corner of Dexter's restless mind was absurdly detached from the rest of himself, engaged in trivial speculation. The cabin builder must have come there after the grizzlies boled-up for the winter, he reasoned in lightning flashes of thought. Otherwise he would have got him a silvertip and so had bear grease on hand to lubricate hinges. Dexter's orderly soul hated annoyances that could be prevented, such as squeaking doors.

He crossed the snow-buried sill with crunching feet and halted on the threshold, his glance sweeping the square, murky space before him. Details impressed themselves instantaneously: walls of peeled logs; tiny, four-paned windows; bare puncheon floor; a disorderly grouping of ax-hewn furniture; a smoldering fire in a clay-daubed fireplace; the odors of camp stew and wood smoke and steaming garments.

A man with a shaggy beard knelt by the fire, stirring a cooking pot. He whirled at the rush of cold air from the doorway, and then his stirring spoon rattled on the hearth as he stumbled to his feet.

Corporal Dexter had counted on the chance of there being more than one person in the cabin. It was well for him that he was on his guard. Some intuitive faculty of the brain called a warning, and without seeing or hearing, he was aware of a gliding movement along the wall at his right.

Dexter caught the edge of the door and swung it back toward him as a buckler of defense. As he jerked his head aside, a spurt of flame scorched his face, an explosive report slammed in his ears, a bullet plowed the door slab and deflected in spattering pieces.

His face stung from the flying splinters, and there was a trickle of warm crimson at the corner of his eye. Choked by powder fumes, half blinded, he flung the door against the wall. A crouching shape and the oval of a white face loomed in the smoke.

Dexter caught the blurred outline of a hand and a pistol poked almost into his face. Lacking time to shorten the reach of his carbine, the corporal did not try to fire, but struck, instead, with the heavy barrel.

The rap of the steel on knuckle bones made a crisp, nut-cracking sound. He laughed aloud. There was a thump at his feet, and he saw the pistol on the floor. He could reach the weapon with the toe of his boot, and he worked it toward him and kicked it through the doorway.

Then he backed away a pace, with carbine leveled. He spoke with restraint, keeping the excitement from his voice.

"Take warning," he said. "I arrest you in the name of his majesty, the king."

The light from the fireplace reflected upon the shadowy figure of his assailant. The man had clutched at his right hand with his left and was glaring at the officer with the tense, sullen ferocity of a trapped animal. The position of the hands, partly extended, gripped together in pain, was an unintentional invitation.

In a trice Dexter had brought a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. With incredible swiftness he reached forward, and there was a double click as he deftly linked the steel circlets about the man's wrists and sprang fast the locking wards.

The prisoner shuddered at the cold touch of metal and shrank backward, an instant too late. He was an undersized man, sallow of face, with short-cropped black hair, sharp, hawklike features, and dark, wide-spaced eyes that glittered with unnatural brightness in the firelight. The corporal's glance went down to the heavy mountain boots, which his prisoner wore tight-laced over the tucked-in bottoms of his trousers. The boots were wet with melting snow.

Dexter nodded grimly. "Why did you kill Constable Graves?" he asked.

The man turned his head in surly defiance and refused to answer.

"Who are you?"

The stranger breathed harshly, but still maintained his stubborn silence.

"Very well," said Dexter. "It's your privilege not to commit yourself. But I warn you of the facts to be submitted to the minister of justice. Young Graves murdered—thirty-caliber bullet through the back of his head. Thirty-caliber case in the snow. Queer-pattern hobnails leading here—tracks that match those wet boots you're wearing."

Dexter glanced sharply about him and stepped suddenly into the corner and picked up a rifle that was leaning against the wall. "Thirty caliber," he observed, and then threw down the lever to sniff at the breach. "Fired recently and not yet cleaned," he added, and thrust the weapon behind the door, out of the way. "All complete! Not to mention the fact that you fired at sight, with murderous intent, when Corporal Dexter strolled into your doorway."

CHAPTER III.

EVASIVE ANSWERS.

FROM the moment he had entered the cabin, Dexter had kept the corner of a wary eye on the shaggy-haired individual by the fireplace. The man had scrambled up from his cooking pot when the door banged open, but after that he had remained standing uncertainly on his stumpy legs, without venturing to join in the hostilities.

Now for the first time the corporal turned to look squarely upon the unkempt, bearded countenance. With the glance, the officer's eyelids flickered suddenly in pleased surprise.

Here, at least, was some one he knew without asking introductions. In the travel-stained man with the untidy whiskers, Dexter recognized one of the fugitives he had been following across the ranges from Crooked Forks. "Well, now!" he ejaculated. "Jess Mudgett!"

"Yes, sir," muttered the other, with a furtive, hangdog lowering of the head.

"Warn you, also," asserted the corporal crisply. "You and 'Phonse' Doucet assaulted and almost killed the trader at Crooked Forks. He foolishly tried to make you pay the last year's account, I understand. We needn't go into that now. This new matter is more important. Accessory in murder, perhaps. At any rate, you'll go with us to Fort Dauntless. I arrest you in the name of his majesty, the king."

"I don't know—what you're talking about," faltered Mudgett, his forehead paling under the grime. "That storekeeper—I can explain about that. And as for—anything else, I ain't had nothing to do with—anything wrong. I swear my Bible oath."

Dexter surveyed the man curiously. He knew Mudgett of old—a trapper in season, general ne'er-do-well at all times, sneak thief on occasion, notorious coward—he never would have assaulted anybody unaided.

Phonse Doucet, of course, was the instigator in that affair—Doucet, the half-breed, braggadocio, and bully, a giant of a man, with a dangerous habit of going amuck when liquor was to be had.

"Where is Phonse now?" asked the

corporal. "I trailed you two as far as Wild Swan Creek, and then I lost you."

"Phonse went north," answered Mudgett. "He'll be far from here by now."

"Who's your new friend?" the officer inquired.

Mudgett started to speak, but at the instant he happened to meet the beady glance of the shackled man across the room; and he received a look of baleful warning that made his teeth click over the half-uttered word. He rubbed his nose nervously to hide his confusion. "Never s-s-saw him before," he stammered. "Just came here a while ago for shelter. Didn't tell me his name."

Dexter himself had felt the threat pass, like an electric discharge, and he knew that he could get nothing out of Mudgett while he remained under the malevolent eye of the murderer. The corporal did not pursue the subject. "Whose cabin is this?" he asked, after an interval. "It's new."

"I built it this fall," replied Mudgett uneasily. "Figured to trap marten and lynx over the winter."

The corporal gazed at him, and his brows arched in sudden curiosity. A slab table was placed against the wall near one of the windows, and on the table stood a telephone.

Dexter blinked with the startled expression of a man who imagines that something had gone wrong with his vision. For an instant he peered toward the table, then he turned back to Mudgett. "A telephone!" Dexter exclaimed. "Here in the wilderness! What's it for?"

"It ain't connected," the trapper pointed out. "No current or wires. It ain't for anything much."

Dexter crossed the room and picked up the nicked instrument. It was an ordinary desk telephone, but, as Mudgett had explained, there were no attaching wires. A dead and useless piece of equipment, it seemed. Surely it was a strange thing to be found in that remote mountain valley, more than a hundred miles from the nearest rural telephone line.

"Just what were you thinking of doing with this?" asked the corporal, bringing the instrument over to the hearth.

"Nothing much at all," replied Mudgett. He hesitated for a moment and then

went on glibly: "There's a settler up the valley a ways—man named Stark, who came in here not long ago and put him up a shack. We figured some day, maybe, when we got around to it, to run a private line between our places—so's to be neighborlylike."

Dexter observed Mudgett with quizzical eyes, but there was nothing in the corporal's manner to indicate his opinion of the story.

"Who's this Stark? Never heard of him."

"Trapper, mostly," answered Mudgett. "That's about all I could tell you."

Acting on impulse, the corporal brought out the Bertillon card he had taken from the pocket of Constable Graves. He showed Mudgett the photographic likeness of the man known to the Chicago police as Pink Crill.

"Is this your Stark, by any chance?" Dexter asked.

Mudgett leaned forward to see it better. If he recognized the ill-favored physiognomy, he gave no sign. "Never saw him before," he declared in his whining voice.

The inquiry was leading nowhere, and Dexter decided he might better save his breath until some later time, when he had Mudgett alone. He buttoned the photograph into his tunic and smiled grimly.

"I'm going out to look after my horse," he observed, "and meanwhile I'll truss you for safe-keeping."

Dexter had only the one pair of manacles, but a brief search of the cabin discovered a length of elk-hide thong. Approaching Mudgett, he twisted the rawhide about the man's wrists and knotted the loop tight. The cringing trapper protested his innocence almost with sobs, but his pleading went unheeded. Dexter glanced about with a speculative frown and then motioned Mudgett toward the double-deck bunk, built against the wall at the right of the fireplace.

"I'll feel more comfortable about you two if you're in bed," the corporal said. "We'll all might as well sleep a few hours before we start south. So climb in, please."

There was something in the quality of the officer's voice that made Mudgett obey instantly. Without a word, the

trapper shambled across the floor and hoisted himself into the lower bunk.

Dexter turned next to the handcuffed man. "You get in the upper berth," he commanded.

The stranger stood backed against the logs of the opposite wall with his shoulders drooping, his arms hanging limply. As the officer addressed him, he looked up with his somber stare. He must have appreciated the futility of resistance, however, and after a second's hesitation he lurched forward and moved toward the bunk on heavy, dragging feet.

"You still prefer to remain nameless?" inquired the corporal.

The prisoner made no answer, but as he stumbled past Dexter, he shot him a glance so charged with venom that even the seasoned man hunter was startled.

The officer refrained from further remarks and stood by with compressed lips until the man had climbed into the upper berth. Then, in silence, he fastened the booted feet together with rawhide. This done, Dexter pushed the end of the thong between a crack of the foot logs, drew it taut, and secured it to the outer bunk post, where the knot could not possibly be reached by manacled hands. Mudgett's feet then were similarly bound and lashed flat against the end of the bunk.

"I'll ease 'em up a bit when I come back," Dexter promised. "Meanwhile, you'll have to make the best of it."

Serene in the knowledge that his prisoners would not escape during his absence, he walked out of the cabin and slammed the door behind him.

It was dark outside and growing colder. The corporal felt his way across the clearing to the thicket where he had left Susy. He was not greatly astonished to find that the pony had disappeared. His pocket lamp revealed her hoofprints leading through the timber, and he followed her for a half mile or so across the slope and at last overtook her in an open ravine where she had smelled out a patch of elk hay that could be pawed up from under the snow.

She came back a few steps to meet him and meekly nudged him with her forehead while she was receiving her deserved scolding. Dexter relieved her of the grim burden she carried. He made a ham-

mock sling of his bed tarp and picket rope; and as the Indians protect their dead, so he hoisted among scented tree branches the muffled figure of his one-time comrade and left him for the night.

This melancholy service done, Dexter took off Susy's saddle, removed the bit from her mouth, and permitted her to remain in the gulley where she had found shelter and pasturage for herself.

Then, with his thoughts on the savory pot that Mudgett had so opportunely set stewing in the fireplace, he turned back on the trail and retraced his steps to the clearing in the spruces.

Dexter had been absent nearly an hour, and the unattended grate fire must have burned itself out. Not the faintest flicker of light showed from the cabin windows, and it was impossible to discern even the outline of the building in the all-engulfing darkness. He groped his path among the stumps and at last reached the door.

Stamping the snow from his feet, he was fumbling for the door latch when the deathlike silence was suddenly broken by a shrill, loud, whirring sound, as though a telephone bell were ringing.

He stood stock-still, open-mouthed, listening in blank astonishment. The bell stopped ringing; there followed a momentary hush; then he heard a voice speaking. The tones, clear and distinct, carried to him from the darkness within. His eyes opened wider, and for seconds he stood motionless before the door, tense and wondering. Incredulous for a moment, Dexter instantly realized that he could not be mistaken. It was a woman's voice he heard.

CHAPTER IV.

WITHOUT MERCY.

FOR a breathless interval Dexter held his position before the closed door, listening to the amazing voice from within. A woman! Her words came to him decisive and sharp, in high-keyed, excited tones. It was too dark to look for new footprints, but whoever she was, she must have arrived there during his absence. But whence had she come? What was a woman doing in this far-off, snow-buried forest? Even a vivid imagi-

nation failed to answer. In his moment of bewilderment, he quite lost sight of his lesser discovery that Mudgett had lied about there being a connected telephone in the cabin.

Had he acted on his first impulse, Dexter would have thrust his way into the room and demanded explanations. Reflection stayed him for a time. He probably would learn more about her if he kept out of sight.

She was talking excitedly, in quick, broken sentences. "Betrayed!" he heard her say to some one invisible. "The police are in the valley!"

There ensued a brief pause, as though she might be listening to the words of the person at the other end of the line.

Then she spoke again. "Yes! Both arrested! Murder—a constable from Fort Dauntless!"

Another silence followed, and the listener outside waited in acute suspense.

"That's what I feared," said the woman, at last, apparently in response to a question asked from a distance. "They quiz them until their nerve breaks, and they tell all they know. But don't worry. I'll take care of that danger. Nobody's going to talk—this time."

There was a hushed interval once more, and then the woman laughed. It was a strange, mirthless laugh with a wild, inhuman note in it that sent a shiver through the hearer's veins.

"Lifeless tongues never talk!" the woman cried recklessly. "You lie low for a while, and you're in no danger. I give you my word! There's one thing left to do, and I'm doing it now!" A breathless interlude passed, and the woman spoke with sharp finality. "I'm going through with it!" she declared in rising accents. "That's settled! Good-by!"

The voice broke off with a hysterical catch at the end. For five seconds, no sound came from the cabin. From the spruces somewhere, a little timber owl sent forth a hollow, long-drawn trill that floated in the air, lonesome and remote, and died like an expiring breath. The veering wind eddied around the north wall of the cabin, cutting with razor sharpness through protecting woolens, flinging snow particles. Corporal Dexter

shivered, and again his hand reached for the door latch.

Before he found the handle, however, the silence was rent by a man's scream—a hoarse voice, straining to unnatural falsetto, that carried terror and craven pleading in a frenzied outcry. "Don't! Oh, no! Merc——"

The appeal broke in the middle of the word, and the door of the cabin trembled from the jarring concussion of an exploding firearm.

There was an appalling hush, and then the horrid thump of another gunshot jarred the door of the cabin.

The corporal's chilled fingers found the latch at last. As he lifted it up, he flung his weight forward to throw open the door. The latch seemed to have jammed, however, and his shoulder bumped forcibly against solid planks that failed to give. He hammered at the catch and heaved himself recklessly against the barrier in an effort to break his way in.

The result was that he bruised his shoulder, for the door did not yield. Instead of making more futile efforts, he stooped sensibly to discover what was wrong. Then he understood. The bar was down. The door had been locked from the inside.

From the darkened cabin, there came a vague jumble of sounds—a soft thud as of a weight falling, a stifled groan of mortal anguish, a fluttering movement of something on the creaking floor boards. The wind, too, was sighing in Dexter's ears, and he could not have sworn definitely just what it was he heard.

He remembered a split log on the ground; he had stumbled over it when he crossed the clearing a while before. He retraced his steps and dug the heavy billet out of the snow. The quartered section of tree trunk was as much as his strength could manage, but he lugged it back to the cabin and contrived to swing it as a ram.

The first and second blows seemed to have little effect on the stoutly barred door, but the continued battering began to tell. At last he heard a splintering crack within, and with the next blow, something gave way entirely. The door broke from its frame and sprang open with a crash. He dropped his log and

stepped across the threshold, his narrowed eyes searching the gloom of the smoke-filled room.

The hearth fire had dwindled down to a few smoldering coals that threw a dull-red shimmer to the opposite wall. Beyond the faint streak of light, the darkness was impenetrable. An ominous silence hung in the oppressive, tainted atmosphere.

Dexter's finger was on the trigger of his carbine as he held impassive, listening for some rustle of sound to betray another's presence. He knew that his figure loomed in silhouette against the dimly glowing hearth, and he was keenly alive to the imminence of his danger. At any instant he might see the flash, hear the crash of a shot fired treacherously from the darkness; and he steeled himself unconsciously to the shock of sudden hurt.

His weapon was balanced lightly at his hip, and with his free hand, Dexter drew out his pocket lamp. The shaft of light struck across the room, throwing its brilliant white bull's-eye upon the bunks. He looked, and his eyes dilated at the ugly sight before him.

Fallen backward, half in and half out of the bunk, Mudgett hung, feet uppermost, his head and shoulders resting on the floor, his ankles still tied to the foot logs, as the corporal had bound them. Mudgett's long, matted hair had tumbled back from his temples, and he gazed up at the ceiling with unmoving eyes that shone with the luster of opaque glass. His hands were still bound together by the elk-skin thong. From under his shoulders, a dark-tinged stain trickled and spread upon the floor.

Automatically, as a man acting in a daze, Dexter shifted his light upward. The higher bunk was still occupied by the prisoner whose name the corporal did not know. This man was lying on his side, still and lifeless, his manacled arms dangling limply over the edge of the bunk. His feet were securely tied to the end post, and so, like Mudgett, he had met his fate while fettered, tethered like a sheep for slaughter, without a chance of fighting back.

The fierce, dark eyes were closed, and the bitter lines of malice somehow had

been erased from the man's pallid face. His temple was black with powder burn, and just behind his eye there showed the red mark of an entering bullet. Dexter observed certain other details, and it needed no closer examination to tell him that both prisoners had been delivered from his hands by death.

CHAPTER V.

SHADOWS OF SILENCE.

THE corporal had faced horrors before. It was not the sight of the two lifeless men in the cabin that chilled him to the marrow of his bones; it was the haunting memory of the voice he had heard—the voice of a woman. "Lifeless tongues never talk!" she had said in dreadful resolve.

The sound of that voice still echoed in Dexter's brain. The fatal shots had been fired by a woman.

Somewhere in the shadows, this woman must be hiding now, backed in one of the dark corners, probably crouching catlike with a weapon in her hand, watching every move that Dexter made.

The policeman stood in a situation of peril. For once in an adventurous career he was at loss to know how to meet an emergency. He never before had been called upon to deal with an armed and desperate woman. There came over him suddenly a strange feeling of inefficiency as he realized that, no matter who she was or what she had done or might do, he could not make himself draw the trigger of his gun.

Masculine pride, the honor of the Mounted, every deep-rooted instinct—heritage of a warrior race and breed—cried out against such an unnatural encounter. He would have to take this woman alive and unharmed, or else she must go free and leave him with his two prisoners in the cabin among the spruces.

He still clung to his carbine, on the offchance of bluffing through a most disagreeable business. When it came to a show-down, however, he knew he would have to trust to luck and his quickness of movement.

With taut nerves, Dexter faced about and flashed the bull's-eye of his lamp around the walls of the room. The bright,

searching light discovered no human shape.

Incredulous, he winked his eyes two or three times and turned for his second survey of the cabin interior. Slow and deliberate now, he moved his lamp from left to right, dipping the shaft of light from rafters to floor and upward again; and so wove luminous circles around the four walls of the room.

He scrutinized the underside of the clapboard roof, looked beneath the bunk, poked behind a row of garments hanging on pegs, and at last even peered up the fireplace chimney. He saw neither substance nor shadow of any lurking intruder.

There was a quantity of cut brush and faggots piled by the hearth. The policeman stooped for an armful of the kindling, tossed the fuel into the fireplace, and applied a match. The dry, pitchy material took flame instantly and crackled into a furious blaze. The yellow flare reflected to the farthest corner, searching out every black nook where a person could hide. There was no trace visible of the woman.

For a moment, Dexter stood irresolute, with puzzled lines drawn between his brows. A woman had been in the cabin a little while before. She must have entered shortly after he went to search for Susy. The woman had barred the door behind her. Apparently she had locked him out with deliberate intention, while she did the work she had hardened herself to do.

On his return, Dexter had heard the mysterious ringing of a bell. He had heard the woman's quick, overwrought speech, the shots that were fired. His hearing was always trustworthy. If by chance, however, he were tempted to doubt the testimony of his own ears, there remained the two lifeless, huddled objects in the bunks to bear mute witness of the ruthless visitation.

It seemed unlikely that the woman could have found her chance to escape in the short time it had taken him to pick up the log and batter his way into the cabin. The possibility of some secret cubby-hole, behind the logs or under the floor, suggested itself.

As his glance strayed about him, Dex-

ter's eye caught the metallic glint of something that had been dropped near the wall, across the room from the bunk. Crossing the floor, he reached down and picked up a small pearl-handled revolver.

The gun Dexter had knocked from the hand of his first prisoner was a big, heavy-framed weapon. This was a small-caliber revolver, light in weight, delicately made—the sort of firearm a woman might choose to carry in her hand bag. With a grim tightening of his lips, he tilted up the breach and snapped the cartridges from the cylinder. Two were empty cases that had just been fired.

He nodded to himself. This, of course, was the weapon of death. Either it had fallen accidentally from a trembling, guilty hand, or else the owner had flung it away as a hateful possession. Dexter pocketed the revolver and set about his distasteful task. The woman must be hiding somewhere, and he would find her, he promised himself, if he had to turn the cabin inside out.

Dexter was standing near the doorway, and he started to work systematically around the walls. The structure, which contained a single, four-square room, was built of six-inch logs, saddle-notched at the corners, and chinked with moss and clay.

An inspection of the cubical interior quickly convinced him that the walls could hold no closet or compartment large enough for the concealment of a human being. From the floor to the slanting roof, all space was accounted for.

As Dexter reached the fireplace, he paused to examine the telephone which he himself had placed on the mantel a while before. Apparently it had not been moved during his absence. Again he satisfied himself that there were no connecting wires. Even the terminals and bell box were missing. Nobody could have talked through this telephone, it seemed.

Yet certainly he had heard an electric bell ringing and a voice that apparently was talking to a distant person by some means. There might be another telephone—a "live" instrument—hidden somewhere about the place. He did not find it, however. He searched high and low, in the fireplace, behind the bunk, back of the door, under the window sills.

Every log and chinked crevice between the logs was subjected to minute scrutiny. He even climbed up on the bunk poles to assure himself that there was no false work between the rafters and the outside roof. Neither telephone nor entering wires were discovered; nor could he find any sign of a hiding woman.

There still was the floor to be looked under. The floor was made of adz-hewn puncheons, uneven and loosely laid, without being spiked to the beams. With an old spade he had found, Dexter got a purchase under one of the rude planks and pried it up.

He had eliminated all other possible places of retreat, and as he snapped on the button of his pocket lamp and dropped to his knees, he felt with a certain sense of disquiet that something at last was due to happen.

A dank odor of forest mold came up from the hole Dexter had made, and in the darkness below, he heard the squeak and sudden scampering of a family of pack rats. There was no other sound or movement.

Dexter raised a second strip of flooring, and then, with a quick-drawn breath, he squeezed his lean body through the opening. There was no knowing what he might find under the floor, and as he flattened upon his chest to avoid the beams, he could not help reminding himself that quarters were a bit cramped for active maneuvering.

The ground beneath him was littered with decaying forest stuff and evidently had never been disturbed by rake or spade. There was barely enough space under the floor for him to move, but by wriggling along at full-length, he made his way to the end of the cabin and back again. He found nothing whatever. The mystery of the voice and the telephone remained unsolved.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS SHOEPRINT.

EMERGING from the opening in the floor, Dexter brushed the leaves and dirt from his uniform and stood motionless for a space, a look of perplexity clouding his keen, weather-bronzed face. The enigma of the telephone seemed to

frustrate every effort toward its solution. A telephone in service must have wires leading somewhere, but he had examined every square foot of ground and walls and roof and found no connected instrument, nor any vestige of electric wiring in the cabin. It was bewildering.

For the time being, however, Dexter was most concerned about the woman. She was not in the cabin—that much was settled. She must have managed to get away somehow.

His glance strayed to the door, hanging partly open on its broken hinges. There remained one possibility. She might have been standing by the wall when he had battered his way into the cabin. Waiting her chance, she could have slipped behind him in the darkness, as he stumbled over the threshold, and passed out unseen through the open doorway. In that event, her departing footsteps would betray her. Dexter crossed the cabin and stepped outside.

His flash lamp served him once more. The light scintillated upon the fresh-fallen snow, awakening a sparkle of diamonds. From the darkness beyond the clearing came the trail of the hobnail boots that had led him in the first place to this dismal habitation in the forest. Also, the marks of his own making were clearly defined. There were no other prints, however.

He rubbed his wet sleeve across his eyes and gazed searchingly about him. There was nothing to be seen, but whited stumps and the soft, unscuffed surface of snowy ground. The woman had not gone out by the door; that seemed quite apparent.

There were windows in the cabin—one on each side and two in the rear—which were large enough, perhaps, to allow a small and frightened fugitive to squeeze her body through. Dexter walked around the building, throwing the light rays back and forth as he advanced, examining the ground underfoot and each window sill as well.

He made the circuit of the cabin and came back, hopelessly perplexed, to his starting place at the front door. The snow lay as it had fallen, on the sills and under the windows, without any imprints of human making. The slayer of the

two men in the cabin bunks had vanished without leaving any trace behind.

Dexter was ready to admit his utter mystification. A queer feeling of unreality gripped him, as though he had suddenly discovered himself in contention with some strange, unnatural denizen of the forest, who flitted about on darksome errands without touching foot to the earth. Some one had been there a few minutes before; murder had been done; and now this some one was gone—disappeared like a shadow in a dream.

In his tour of the outside of the cabin, the corporal had looked for telephone wires. If there had been a line of any sort leading to the cabin, the snow-covered strands would have revealed themselves in the bright glare of his flash light. He had found no wires.

The idea of a radio set occurred to him and was immediately abandoned. Such a means of communication would require aërials and a connecting wire running to the cabin; or, if not that, at least an inside loop antennæ. Also, there would have to be batteries, not to mention the bulky receiving and transmitting instruments.

There was no such equipment on the premises; and an escaping fugitive could not have had time to dismantle and carry away a radio outfit. Of this, Dexter was positive: The voice he had heard was not talking by wireless.

Dexter checked up his facts and considered the last remaining possibility—a chance so remote that it was scarcely worth seriously considering. Could there be a tunnel or conduit leading underground to the cabin? He could think of no motive that would compel men to undertake the enormous labor of digging a trench through the forest. The notion was preposterous. He had his report to write, however, and he was trained to thoroughness in all matters of investigation. It would be easy enough to determine if the ground had ever been broken.

Equipping himself with the spade he had used to pry up the floor boards, Dexter proceeded to shovel a narrow pathway around the cabin, tossing aside the light covering of snow and inspecting the bare soil underneath. He worked assidu-

ously, and it did not take him a great while to complete the full circuit of the building.

The ground was strewn naturally with the season's carpet of leaves and fallen twigs, and the topsoil below was the rich forest loam that requires ages in making. The experienced woodsman needed only a glance around the circular pathway to assure himself that the ground hereabout had not been disturbed since the beginning of time. He was convinced thoroughly, beyond all doubt. There was no tunnel.

Dexter tossed his shovel aside and stood for a while by the open door of the cabin. His lips had fallen apart, and his head was thrown up to listen. He heard only the familiar sounds of the forest, the moaning of the north wind in the trees, the crack and snap of sap-frozen branches. For a moment there was silence.

Then the eerie plaint of the owl came wavering from the darkness, but the empty, ghostly note seemed only a part of the great hush that brooded over the wilderness. The last man left on earth could not feel a sense of lonesomeness more poignant than Dexter felt at that moment as he stood before that doorway, vainly waiting for some sound or movement to break the stillness about him.

Except for the discharged revolver in his pocket and his knowledge of what lay in the bunks, he might almost have persuaded himself that the events of the last two hours were the delusions of a strangely disordered brain.

Dexter had investigated the cabin inside and out, had left nothing undone that a searcher could possibly do. The mystery of it all seemed to lie beyond human power of solving. As he remained there, sentinellike in the darkness, his hand strayed to his pocket and brought out a pipe and tobacco pouch.

He carefully stuffed the bowl with fine-cut leaf and then absent-mindedly returned both pouch and pipe to his pocket. For a while longer he lingered by the doorway, his unseeing glance roving slowly about him. Then, with an ironic shrug, he suddenly stirred and stepped out into the clearing.

Inasmuch as he had seen everything there was to be seen about the cabin and its immediate premises, it occurred to Dexter that he might as well extend his circle. The intuitive sense that belongs to all ramblers of the silent places seemed to tell him during the last few minutes that he was alone in the valley. The "feel," the woodsmen and mountaineers say, has nothing to do with the consciousness of smell or hearing or sight.

Dexter merely felt that now there was no one else in the neighborhood. He did not expect to make any momentous discoveries, but a restive will insisted upon action of some sort. Flashing his light before him, he chose his direction at random and strode across the clearing.

At the edge of the open ground, he found a runway that wild animals had trod out through the thicket during seasons past. He glanced below the trailing branches and checked himself abruptly, his eyes blankly staring. In the snow he saw the freshly made outline of a narrow, high-arched foot—a woman's shoeprint.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRAIL OF TRAGEDY.

IN a moment Dexter was on his knees with his face close to the ground. He studied the mark in the snow with the peering concentration of a man trying to read a page of fine-lettered type. A light dusting of wind-blown drift had begun to form in the trampled depression, and instead of crumbling, there now was a slight banking up around the edges.

As near as he could reckon by the faint clews vouchsafed him, the print was less than an hour and more than half an hour old. So this woman, whoever she was, had evidently been there when the murders were committed.

The officer's mouth was set in a harsh line as he scrambled to his feet. He had found a trail at last, and the fact that the prints were narrow and small and gracefully arched in nowise softened his recollection of the ugly affair in the cabin. It was not so easy to forget the faces of the two men left behind in the bunks.

With the tense, quick movements of a hunting dog, the policeman cast back a distance along the runway. There were

other tracks, clean-cut and plain to read. It was a double trail, with some of the prints pointing toward the cabin, and others turned in the opposite direction. The woman had approached from the north and departed over the same pathway, and the deeper toemarks of the retreating prints indicated the fact she had fled from the scene, almost running.

Dexter followed for a short distance through the underbrush, then retraced his steps to the clearing. There was no hurry. A few faint stars were beginning to prick through the darkness of the sky. The weather was clearing, and he knew there was little likelihood of more snow-fall for thirty hours at least.

When he was ready to follow, the trail would still lie in the forest. The fugitive was in the desperate situation of a fish firmly hooked at the end of a fisherman's line. Wherever she went, the line of her footprints tethered her relentlessly to the place of tragedy. Dexter could overtake her whenever he was ready.

He lingered for a last scrutiny of the marks at the edge of the cabin clearing. Singularly, the high-arched tracks stopped short on the margin of the thicket, at the spot where he had first picked up the trail. Unbelieving, he searched about with his light and at length made the entire outer circuit of the stumpy ground. He was much puzzled when he failed to find any small footprints within a radius of ten yards of the cabin.

Here was mystery piling upon mystery. He had heard a woman's voice in the cabin. He was as positive as any one may be in matters of evidence that it was a woman who had shot and killed the two helpless victims in the locked room. Here was a trail, obviously made by a woman, in an almost unexplored region of the snowy wilderness, where he was quite certain that a white woman had never set foot before.

These facts were left behind, within the cabin and without, in the grim record of events. There was, however, a startling discrepancy to be explained. Between the thicket, where the footprints halted, and the cabin, where the two prisoners lay dead, a thirty-foot space of smooth-fallen snow intervened. If the

maker of the tracks had been in the cabin, how had she crossed the open stretch? In what manner had she escaped, without leaving shoe marks in the clearing?

There was no way she could have swung across above the ground, and there was no underground passage. Dexter's stern mouth relaxed for a moment in a grin of self-depreciation. He did not know the answer. There was nothing he could do but follow the trail and try to wring the truth from the woman when he caught her.

Still, he felt no great need for haste. He returned to the cabin and paused for another survey of the scene of crime. Again he bent over the lifeless forms in the bunks, and this time he ascertained the caliber of the bullets that had carried sudden death.

Mudgett had been shot through the heart; a bullet to the brain had flicked out the life of his dark-faced comrade. The muzzle of the weapon had been thrust close in each instance. The bullets were short thirty-two caliber, but the killer evidently had aimed with deliberate care. At such nearness of range, the small bits of lead were instantly effective.

The weapon with the two fired chambers, which Dexter had picked up from the floor, was a thirty-two caliber revolver. As in the tragic case of Constable Graves, cause and consequence were logically brought together. The fouled firearms and the bullets were left in his hands as gruesome relics; but the murderers had escaped him—one by death, the other by inexplicably vanishing.

In the bushwhacking of the constable, followed by the killing of his assassin, Dexter sensed the working out of some strange, vaguely revealed drama that apparently involved the fate of several actors. He had pushed his way into an uninhabited country, expecting eventually to encounter individuals who were fleeing from the penalty attached to a lesser offense; and he had walked unexpectedly upon a stage of wholesale crime.

The motive underlying the attack upon the constable was understandable. The young policeman had traveled across the range on official business, and his slayer

no doubt had reason to put him out of the way. The man who shot Graves, however, was in his turn shot and killed. And Mudgett also! It was not so easy to fathom the motive of this double affair in the cabin.

Dexter recalled every word spoken by the mysterious voice, before the gun reports sounded behind the closed door. The woman had mentioned the prisoners under arrest and expressed the fear that they might be forced to talk. What could they talk about? What dangerous secret did they know? It must be something dreadful, if such a desperate method were needed to enforce their silence.

From the few facts in his possession, the corporal tried to pick out some logical thread of connection between the people thus far enmeshed in the three-fold tragedy of the wilderness: Mudgett, the stranger in the upper bunk, the woman from nowhere. Besides these, there was the trapper, Stark, who, Mudgett had declared, had built himself a winter shack farther up the valley.

Phonse Doucet, the assailant of the Crooked Forks storekeeper, had escaped somewhere on this side of the mountains. So there were five, at least, who had suddenly pushed into this lonesome, isolated territory where even the marks of squaw hatchets were seldom found.

Dexter had not forgotten the face of the man in the Bertillon photograph, which Constable Graves had carried in his pocket. For some reason, the name of Pink Crill stuck insistently in Dexter's mind. Was this outlander also sojourning in the wilderness? If so, was he in any way involved in the affairs of the others? There was no saying.

The corporal could not escape the feeling that he had touched the sinister web of some large criminal business—of plot and counterplot—that entangled the members of some unidentified outlaw band. What hope of profit might draw traffickers in organized crime to such infertile, out-of-the-way fields, he was unable to guess. He only knew that the country had been suddenly invaded by a mysterious and dangerous company of intruders.

Dexter's glance returned grimly to the silent figures in the bunks. No doubt

these two held the secret to which he himself had failed to find the key. He could scarcely believe, however, that murder had been committed just to prevent their telling what they might know.

If this were the only motive, why was not the corporal shot instead of his prisoners? Dexter had not dreamed of the presence of a third person in the cabin, and the woman might have left the door unbarred and ambushed him with perfect safety as he entered.

He shook his head grimly. There must have been other reasons for the wanton shooting. Vengeance? The voice had said something about being betrayed. Had Mudgett or his companion sent the word that summoned Constable Graves into the woods? Such a supposition was improbable. If the constable's murderer had betrayed any one to the police, why had he himself shot the policeman?

Dexter sighed as he realized that his speculations were leading nowhere. Until he knew a great deal more than he knew now, he was groping vainly, without any enlightening clew to suggest the meaning of this strange and dark affair. It was wiser to leave off theorizing and go after the woman.

There was nothing further to detain him. He paused only to prop the broken door in place, to prevent the intrusion of forest creatures, and then quit the cabin and struck off across the clearing.

CHAPTER VIII.

CURVING PATHS.

WHERE his new quest would take him, he could not foresee. In all probability, he would have to travel for some distance through the dense forest. Susy, the pony, was sure to prove more or less of a hindrance on such an expedition, and moreover she was tired after her long journey that day across the pass. He had previously unsaddled her, and she would do well enough by herself in the sheltered gully by the brook. So he mercifully left her behind and set forth on foot.

The trail of the small shoes was easily followed. For a distance, the woman had continued her headlong course, but the underbrush was too thick for heedless

going, and it was soon evident that she had been forced to moderate her pace. Still, she had kept on as fast as darkness and difficult ground permitted.

By the accumulated signs along the way, the policeman knew that she traveled without a light, groping her path as best she might. Frequently she had stumbled over some unseen obstruction and now and then walked blindly into a tree trunk or windfall. In the denser thickets, splatterings of snow told how invisible branches had swished back in her face.

Dexter continued to use his pocket lamp, and he had eyes for everything. By the promptness with which she had recovered from each misstep, he gathered that she was an agile, quick-witted woman, probably young. It must have been a painful ordeal to go plunging through the thickets, but she had taken the punishment with apparent stoicism, scarcely pausing at any time in her hurried, free-swinging stride.

At one place, where she had touched the edge of a briery clump, Dexter found a wisp of hair caught on a thorn—three soft, wavy, silken threads of a deep-bronze shade. He pulled off his glove to twist the gossamer strand about his forefinger and almost imagined a sensation of human warmth. Somehow he felt a sudden dislike for the work he had to do.

There are times when police business calls for sterner qualities than simple courage and loyalty. The corporal was confronted by a duty that outraged every knightly instinct; nevertheless, he pushed onward at a faster pace. He could not shirk a disagreeable task and so was resolved to have it over with as quickly as possible.

The woman did not turn down toward the more open ground along the course of the valley stream, but continued to travel through the deeper forest. She had soon wandered away from the vaguely defined runway and was forced to seek out her own pathway.

Through occasional openings in the treetops, Dexter caught glimpses of the north-bearing star Capella, which the Indians call "The Little White Goat." For a while the fugitive had kept on in a northerly direction, but presently her

trail began to bend to the left, turning toward the back hills. As the corporal followed, he began to realize that he was swinging on a wide arc toward the west.

The line of prints meandered back and forth in a rather aimless way, but the trend of divergence was generally to the left. By the signs, Dexter inferred that the woman had missed her bearings, and, as usually is the case with lost people, was circling gradually around the compass.

Experienced wayfarers of the wilderness learn to "average" their windings, always bearing toward an imaginary fixed point ahead, like a ship tacking at sea. The star Capella served that night as an infallible guiding beacon for travelers in the trackless country. The woman, whoever she was, continued to wander farther and farther off her original course, however. By the time he had followed a half hour on her trail, Dexter was certain that she was a newcomer in the Northland.

In spite of darkness and the denseness of the timber, she still kept up her rapid pace. It seemed to her pursuer that she was in panic-stricken flight. Surely she would tire very soon. Her circling path led Dexter on and on through the dismal forest, however, and still there was no evidence of lagging on the trail.

He was beginning to marvel at the story of brave endurance that he read in the trail of the little footprints. The fugitive might not be versed in woodcraft, but she seemed to have the pluck and physical stamina of a seasoned voyageur.

The corporal had his lamp to light the way before him, and he plowed through the snow with enormous energy. He was certain that he gained steadily, yet at the end of an hour he had not overtaken the woman.

By almost imperceptible degrees the line of tracks kept on curving in a left-hand arc, and after winding his way for another twenty or thirty minutes through labyrinths of the woods, Dexter became aware that he was now heading more to the south than to the west. He trudged onward until a rift in the drooping branches overhead gave him a momentary glimpse of the sky, and he found the

beacon star twinkling above his left shoulder.

The trail he followed had swung around the compass, and he was traveling back to the east. He half smiled to himself as he reckoned distance and direction. The hunted woman had wandered by curving paths through miles of darkness, only to turn back at last toward the tragic spot from which she had fearfully fled.

By the freshly trod prints, the skilled tracker knew that he was running down the fugitive. In places, fluffy bits of snow were still breaking at the edges of the new-made tracks. He should overtake her at any minute now. As he lengthened his stride, Dexter listened for sounds of lightly crunching feet and peered sharply ahead, expecting with every step to catch sight of a hurrying figure in the spruces.

Dexter was advancing through a tangle of snow-sheeted brush, his arm thrusting aside the trailing branches, when suddenly he caught a red glint of light in the darkness beyond. At the same instant, a stray breath of wind brought to him a resinous smell of wood smoke. A fire of some sort apparently had been kindled in the forest ahead.

Wondering, he broke his way out of the thicket and paused for a moment to stare before him. A flaming glow flickered among the trees, throwing ruddy reflections upon the wintry landscape. A glance told him it was too big a blaze to be a camp fire.

He knew that a forest conflagration seldom starts and never gains much headway when the trees are laden with snow, but for the instant he felt the sharp sense of alarm that comes to all woodland dwellers at the sight and scent of burning timber. He left the trail he was following and plunged straight through the underbrush toward the crimson light.

Crashing forward, heedless of the lash of branches, he forced his path through the densest thicket. As he advanced, he caught glimpses of fire and saw sparks leaping up among the trees. He passed through the intervening stretch of forest and stumbled to the edge of an ax-hewn clearing.

In the middle of the snowy ground

stood a log building, with smoke and flames spouting upward from the walls and roof. The surrounding area was illuminated with the brightness of day, and at a glance Dexter identified the place. He had circled back to the scene of murder. The cabin had been fired and was blazing like a lighted torch in the forest.

CHAPTER IX.

CAUGHT IN THE FOREST.

WITH the hot glare beating back in his face, Dexter stood blinking his eyes, hearing the hiss of falling sparks and the fierce crackle of the mounting flames. Tongues of fire lapped around the windows and darted angrily from the crevices between the logs. As he peered through the black smoke, a gust of flame lashed out at the corner of the cabin, and he saw that the door was open.

He remembered closing and wedging the door fast when he left the place a while before. It would seem that a visitor had been there some time during his absence. His glance ranged swiftly around the clearing and came back to the doorway. For a second longer he hesitated, and then suddenly he left the concealment of the trees and strode forward across the open ground.

The snow near the cabin had melted and formed pools of muddy water. Dexter drew a handkerchief from his pocket, wetted the fabric, and tied a protecting mask over his nose and mouth. Then he pushed across the threshold into the suffocation of smoke and heat and showering embers.

He was groping his way toward the center of the room, feeling for the table which stood near the fireplace, when he collided blindly in the hazy dark with a soft substance of warm flesh—something that moved and breathed and was alive.

His hands closed instinctively, and he found himself gripping a slight, lithe, human figure that gasped and struggled for release with the fluttering fright of a captured bird. A curl of flame darted out through the smoke, and in the flash of light, Dexter had a momentary vision of a youthful, grime-streaked face, a waving tangle of hair, and a pair of luminous dark eyes that stared wildly from under

the shadowy curves of thickly fringing lashes. It was a woman—a girl—and his startled intuition told him she was the fugitive who had led him the long chase in the forest.

He saw her full lips tremble as the smoke cloud rolled about them, heard her stifled cry of fear. Her breath came quickly upon his cheek, and he could feel the rapid pulse throb in her straining wrists. She writhed in his grasp, fighting to free herself. He had not counted on the supple strength of softly rounded muscles that desperation called suddenly and fiercely into use.

Before he could overcome his normal reluctance to hurt a weaker being, she had thrust her elbow under his chin. As his head snapped back before the unexpected attack, she broke the grip of his fingers, wriggled out from the crook of his arm, stumbled beyond his reach, and ran for the doorway.

Dexter recovered himself a second too late. The girl evaded his outstretched hand, brushed lightly past him, and he turned only in time to see her rush out of the burning cabin.

"Stop!" he shouted.

She cast an anxious glance behind her, but did not heed him. In the haze of smoke, he vaguely made out her slender shape as she darted across the clearing. She reached the edge of the timber and vanished among the spruces, leaving him with the tingling remembrance of a warm and vivid presence that had touched and eluded him, like an ephemeral fragrance. For the present, he did not try to hinder her flight.

The fire had broken through the roof and was swirling up from the interior walls with hot, roaring sounds. With his arm doubled across his face, Dexter turned again toward the bunks where he had left Mudgett and his comrade lying. Either in life or death he always felt a responsibility for the prisoners he arrested. The corporal tried to reach the bunks, but with his first step a gust of flame swept across the room and drove him back.

For a few seconds, Dexter lingered, his head bowed under the falling embers, hoping for a momentary lull in the rush of fire. As he stood irresolute, trying

not to breathe, one of the roof beams cracked overhead and swung crashing to the floor. At the same instant a wreath of flame circled the doorway behind him. It was time to go.

Shielding his face, he turned and plunged for the opening. A searing wind eddied about him, and the next instant he stumbled across the threshold and found himself choking and panting as his almost-bursting lungs took in great gulps of the heated air outside of the cabin. He beat out the sparks that smoldered upon his jacket, briskly rubbed his aching eyes, and then drew back farther across the clearing, beyond the scorching waves of heat.

The cabin was enveloped in high, leaping flames that threw a red glare above the snowy treetops. Overhead, he could hear the affrighted cries of birds that had awakened in the night to fly in darting confusion among the spruces. As he watched, he saw a corner of the cabin roof curl upward like paper and drop inside. The structure was doomed. There was nothing he could accomplish by waiting.

Dexter remained a couple of minutes longer, observing the falling sparks. The flaming embers were snuffed out, he saw, almost as soon as they struck the soft snow. There was no actual danger of fire communicating through the forest.

He cast a last regretful glance toward the cabin, but accepted the inevitable with fatalistic calm. What must be had already happened. He listened momentarily to the direful crackling of flames, and then with grimly set lips he turned to seek the departing footprints of the mysterious girl.

The fresh trail was picked up at the edge of the clearing. Dexter scrutinized the familiar impression of the high-arched instep and knew beyond question that she was the woman who had led him around a wide-drawn circle through the snow, from the cabin of death and back to the cabin again.

Until this moment, he had supposed that her fateful return was brought about haphazard by a changing sense of direction that nearly always befuddles people who lose themselves in the woods. Now, he had reason to wonder whether he had

misinterpreted the signs. Had she deliberately drawn him away from the spot so that she might swing back alone, ahead of him? Had the cabin been fired purposely, to destroy the evidence of crime?

The fire might be of incendiary origin, or it might have started from the smoldering coals he himself had left carelessly in the hearth. Of one fact only was he certain. He had found the girl in the cabin. What stress of circumstance had induced her to enter the place, or had kept her there with the walls blazing about her?

Dexter could not guess the answer to that question. If she actually had found her way back intentionally, after traveling miles of dark, unblazed forest, her skill in woodcraft surpassed that of every woman and almost all the men he had ever met.

With a troubled and gloomy face, he once more took up the trail of the small footprints. The girl had struck off toward the brook this time, but whether she really knew where she was going, or was fleeing aimlessly, he could not say. As he pushed after her, he discovered that continuous use had nearly exhausted his flash-lamp battery. There was still some current left, but from now on he would have to use his light sparingly. He hastened on, determined to end the pursuit as quickly as he could.

He was weaving his way through the icy wattles of a juniper clump when, in the stillness of the night, shrill and plaintive, he heard the whinny of a horse. For an instant his heart seemed to skip a beat, and then he remembered Susy. He had left the pony in the gully, a few hundred yards south of the clearing.

The tracks of the girl ran in that direction, and the breeze was from the north. Susy must have discovered that somebody was approaching. She was a friendly little beast, and no doubt she had begun to feel lonesome and neglected in the dismal forest. It must have been Susy.

Dexter had halted for a moment to listen. The cry was not repeated, however. A dull glow of distant fire still shimmered before him, seeping through the woods like twilight, mottling the coverts with strange, ghostly shadows. His straining senses caught no sound or

stir of life. He was starting forward again, but as he bent to pass under a drooping bow, some alert faculty within him prompted him with sharp warning to look to the rear.

He was conscious of no actual noise; not even the tiny crack of a twig. Like most men who live in constant danger, however, his nerves were as sensitive as a seismograph to any slight movement near him. He was aware of a muffled shape that had stepped soft-footed from the dark thicket behind him. At the same instant, a living weight pressed against him, he felt the swift, circling contact of arms closing about his waist, and a pair of steely cold hands gripped upon his wrists.

As Dexter lurched about to face his unknown antagonist, the night silence was broken sharply by a cry in a woman's voice, a crashing in the underbrush, and then the muffled beat of a horse's hoofs galloping along the winterbound brook.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and out January 1st.

What the Waiter Meant

A PARTY of four, just returning from the theater, called in at a restaurant. A very prim woman, who was the guest of the evening, was charmed with everything, especially the music.

While the waiter was standing by the table, she asked him to find out the title of the piece the orchestra was playing. The willing waiter promised.

Other duties claimed him for a time, and when he returned, the prim woman had completely forgotten her request.

When he bent toward her and softly whispered something in her ear, she recoiled in horror. Then, recovering from the shock, she turned with cold, relentless fury upon the hapless man who waited.

"How dare you!" she cried. "How dare you!"

And it took the terrified waiter quite a time to explain why he had merely breathed the title of the piece so softly—"What Can I Do To Make You Love Me?"

TOP-NOTCH TALK

News and Views by the
Editor and Readers.

DECEMBER 15, 1924.

Good Will to Men

TO all our readers greetings! At this season of the year the words "Merry Christmas" slip from every tongue, passing along to all the joyous spirit. Every well-wisher desires to send to others the message of cheer and the general feeling of good will, and we all benefit by the mutual exchange. So to our great family of TOP-NOTCH readers we, too, extend our sincere wishes for a Merry Christmas and a bright and prosperous New Year. With thousands of you we have been brought into contact through the letters you have sent us during the year now drawing to a close, helpful letters of appreciation and praise, which have been a constant stimulus to further efforts on our part. We have been unable to thank you all properly for these messages of cheer which you have been good enough to send us, but we wish now to assure you that for these year-round tokens of kindness and good will we are truly grateful.

Then, too, we would thank the silent members of our family, those who have not written to us, but who have shown by their regular purchase of TOP-NOTCH their appreciation of our work for them. Some people don't talk much, and some are not given to writing letters, but their steady support of the magazine is a most effective way of letting us know how they feel about it.

Christmas is in the air, as one of our poets expresses it, and on the Great Day we trust that the real meaning of the season will not be overlooked. It is more than a time of festivity; it is more than a time for giving gifts. Two thousand years have rolled away since the angels sang their song of peace and good will to men, and that song has yet to reach its fulfillment. It has touched us only partially. Peace is too often merely a temporary thing; good will is apt to die

before the New Year dawns. The heavenly song finds a glad response in our hearts at each Christmas season, and it should be our part to see that its message lives and grows into a real power in the world, a vital force in each community, large or small, crushing out strife in every form, and bringing in the reign of eternal peace based on the beneficent Christmas spirit of good will to all men.

In the Next Issue

NATURALLY we like to start the New Year well, and we feel that the number which will come to you on the first of January is a remarkably good beginning. For the complete novel you will get a story by Stephen W. Meader, whose previous work has been appreciated by our readers, and we have no hesitation in saying that this is a tale you will thoroughly enjoy. The title is "Texans Can Ride," and the emphatic statement is fully borne out in the story. They can and did ride to considerable effect. The Texans are a likable bunch of cowboys, who managed to mingle polo playing with their work.

The novelette is called "The Fog Ghost," by Erle Stanley Gardner, who, as you know, is a master at turning out a gripping tale. The extraordinary mystery starts in a San Francisco hotel on a foggy Saturday night, and then Mr. Gardner unfolds one of the most remarkable detective stories we have ever given you.

There will be two sport features, in addition to the polo playing in Mr. Meader's novel: An ice-hockey tale called "Clashing Blades," by James W. Egan, and one of C. S. Montanye's humorous baseball stories called "My Kingdom for a Coat!"

Other short stories will be: "No Law for a Larimore," by Hapsburg Liebe; "The Faith of Bullhead Jones," by William Merriam Rouse; "Tangoed in Mexico," by Nels Leroy Jorgensen; "The Almost-Perfect Secretary," by Jack Bechdolt; "Torn in Tatters," by Thomas Thursday; and "His Better Idea," by Allan LeMay.

You will find also the next installment

of E. Whitman Chambers' big novel, "Wizard of the Desert," and the continuation of "Frozen Magic," the great serial of Canada's Mounted Police, by Albert M. Treynor, which begins in the issue you have in your hands. You will find this one of the most fascinating stories you have ever read, and you should not miss it.

The poetical contributions will be: "Happy New Year!" by James Edward Hungerford; "The Welcome Messenger," by Rena H. Ingham; "Beyond Comprehension," by Emory Stobart; and "With Wings of Steel," by Clarence Mansfield Lindsay.

What a Printer Likes

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Just finished reading your magazine of October 15th. As a printer, I have not failed to observe the manner in which points in your stories are brought out, interestingly. I wish to compliment you on "The Rangoon Rose," by William Henry Wright. This story is flawless. Two other stories—"Bookworms will Turn," by Freeman Harrison, and "That Pitching Morning-Glory," by George B. Jenkins, were of the highest caliber. Give us more of this kind of stories. The other stories in my estimation are fairly good.

Wishing you continued success, I am, yours respectfully, MILTON TOSKY.

Westwood Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Glaring Advertisements

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I wish to announce that your stories in TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE are lately assuming great prominence in the literary world. I like to read all your wild West and clean, non-idiotic sport and romantic-love novels.

Since I am an advertising man and believe that a good advertisement is necessary to produce results, I think that your fiction stories and little side-cracking jokes in your TOP-NOTCHES are best suited to be called glaring advertisements for good people to read good literature. I hope your good work continues. Yours sincerely, ROBERT R. GORDON.

Oak Street, New Haven, Conn.

In Praise of Wright

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Just a line to let you know that I especially liked Wright's story, "The Ran-

goon Rose," which appeared in the October 15th issue of TOP-NOTCH. Sincerely,

A. B. C.

Greenville, S. C.

A New Reader's Opinion

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR EDITOR: As you asked the readers of TOP-NOTCH to give their opinions of the stories contained in it I am expressing my opinion of this month's issue. This is the first copy I have read, and I think it is a real thriller. I especially liked "The Net Result," by Day Edgar. The complete novel, "Destiny at the Crossroads," by William Wallace Cook, was also very good. I didn't care so much for "Wise and Reckless," by Stella and James W. Egan. I remain, very truly yours, MELVILLE Q. HICKS.

Montgomery Street, Jersey City, N. J.

Another Wright Admirer

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: A friend advised me to read "The Rangoon Rose," by William Henry Wright, in October 15th number of TOP-NOTCH, so I bought a copy and did so. Seeing your note at the end, I gladly give my opinion of this worth-while story.

It is clean, interesting, true to life, and written in such a natural, easy style, that one is not kept on the qui vive continually—one just enjoys it.

I should like to read more by this author. Very truly,

(MRS.) MARIAN F. DONALD.

Sumner Avenue, Springfield, Mass.

From An English Reader

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Have just finished reading the January issue of your fine magazine and would like to congratulate you on the high standard of all the stories in it, especially "A Man in a Billion" and "His Headway to Success," though, to be candid, I felt like saying things when I came to the end of the latter to find those very unwelcome words—"To be continued." The only chance I have of getting copies is at a secondhand bookshop, and that's not always sure. Again congratulating you and your writers, I beg to remain, yours faithfully,

H. E. A. FULLER,

Franconia Road, Clapham, London, S. W. 4, England.

P. S. When I have read your magazines I send them over to Ireland, so they sure travel some.

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