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Magazine



FIRST SEPTEMBER
NUMBER
ON SALE AUG. 1, 1929



GOOD STORIES
ALWAYS

David Hurnison

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Real Mint Leaves

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WRIGLEY'S SPEARMINT.

The dry mouth is moistened and
edgy nerves calmed by this
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in cost.

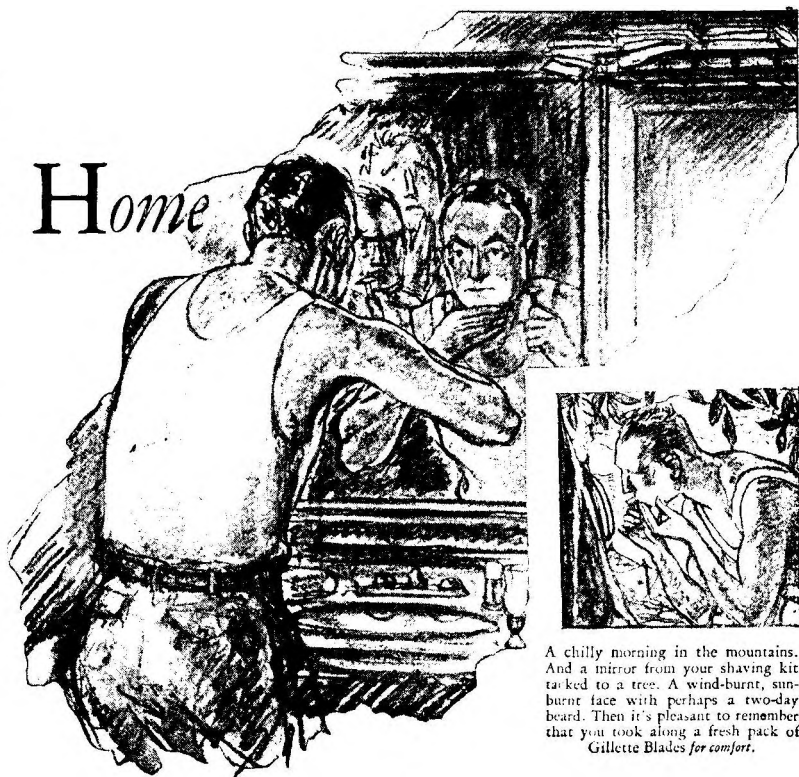
J-28



Away from Home



Here you are in your *own* bathroom. A place for everything, and everything in its place. Hot water always, a good mirror, and a fresh package of Gillette Blades on the shelf. Then it's easy to get your full measure of comfort.



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... you can't expect as smooth a shave

WHETHER you shave quietly and luxuriously at home; or strenuously, over the shoulders of other harassed travelers in a Pullman washroom; or primitively in camp, with the cold lake for your wash basin—no matter how different the shaving conditions may be—put a fresh Gillette Blade in your holder and you're sure of a smooth, comfortable shave.

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But you can count on your Gillette Blade to give you a comfortable shave anywhere

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less search for any blade that may be below par.

You see, eight out of ten men in America shave with a Gillette and expect every Gillette Blade to do its duty. So every blade *has* to be good, no matter how difficult the conditions it goes up against—hard water, cold water, tough beards, tender skins, slapdash lather—a dozen varying conditions that affect the comfort of your shave. Conditions change—the blade doesn't. That's why you can always slip a fresh Gillette Blade in your razor and enjoy a swift, sure shave wherever you are. Gillette Safety Razor Co., Boston, U. S. A.

Gillette



On sale the 1st and 15th of each month

TOP - NOTCH

TWICE-A-MONTH

MAGAZINE

Volume LXXIX

Number 1

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Complete Novel

- PIRATE CAY *Lester Dent* 1
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Twice-a-month publication issued by Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary. Copyright, 1929, by Street & Smith Corporation, New York. Copyright, 1929, by Street & Smith Corporation, Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, January 8, 1915, at the Post Office, New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Canadian Subscription, \$3.50. Foreign, \$4.00. This issue dated September 1, 1929.

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If you have been thinking of "taking a course" but have held back because you were afraid you didn't have education enough to learn better-paid work—if you have hesitated to take the risk that it would actually land you in the better position and increase your salary—then here's the best news you ever heard in your life!

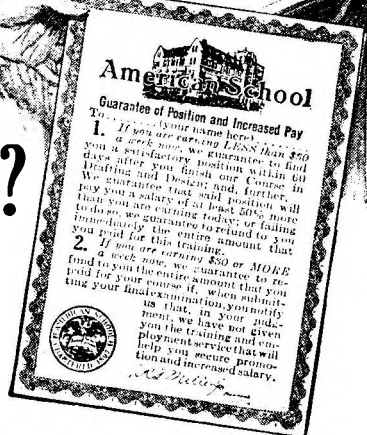
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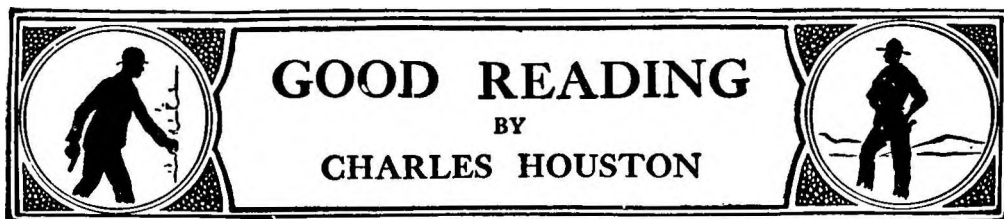
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THE AMERICAN SCHOOL

Dept. DC-2, Drexel Ave. and 58th St., CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



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Are all artists grown-up children? Must they be forever pampered?

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To make matters more complicated, a young actor, just winning his spurs, was madly in love with Janet, who, more out of pity than anything else, responded to his attentions. Then of a sudden there came tragedy. The "greatest actor" made his last bow and Janet was thrown on her own resources. Instinctively she turned to the stage where she met adventures galore; the telling of which is done in a pleasingly swift-paced manner.

THE LOVE BRIDGE, by Mary Imlay Taylor. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

I am not saying that under all circumstances I would walk that famous mile for a book. But "The Love Bridge" is worth going right out for. It's the story of an engineer who has two things in the world that he esteems above all others—a girl and a bridge that spans a turbulent Western river. All the while that he was bossing the perilous job of throwing a gleaming arc between two canyons, he had in the back of his busy

mind the vision of his girl back home who would some day be the first to cross the bridge.

And then another girl came out of nowhere, a girl dressed in trousers and a flannel shirt like a boy's, and before the young engineer could stop her, she had swung down the lone cable above the rushing waters and was the first of her sex across.

From this thrilling start the book plunges the reader into a maelstrom of adventure. There are those who would destroy the engineer's lifework and come dangerously near doing it. But always he has for ally that girl whom he almost hated at first, the flaming beauty who swung down the cable.

There was a time when it seemed as though the maker of the bridge would never see the wonder of the finished product. His enemy had thrown a bomb which blinded him.

And at the end—but not from us shall you have the thrilling finish. It would be a shame to spoil it for you by attempting to reproduce it here.

THE GOLDEN TEMPTATION, by Victor Thorne. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

Here is a man, Clayton Carr, so absorbed in money-making that he has no time for the finer things of life. His wife finally revolts, and he turns to the woman he thinks he loves.

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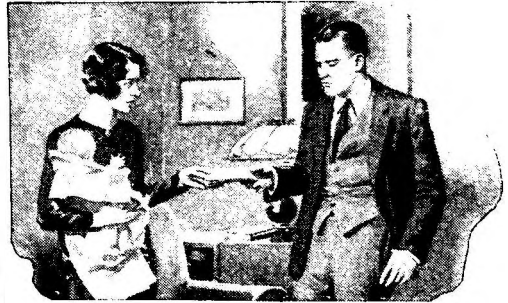
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TAYLOR HAT & CAP MFRS.,
 Deck L-120, Cincinnati, O.



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"Then one day I met Tom Wilson, who used to work right beside me. He told me he was making \$5000 a year and had a nice home in the suburbs, a new car and everything. I asked him how he happened to get ahead so fast. 'Oh, I got tired working for a small salary,' he said, 'so I started studying at home through the International Correspondence Schools.'

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THIS IS NOT A MAGAZINE CONTEST
Some Person with a Sharp Eye is Going to Win

If you can find the lucky key, you may win. You do not have to buy or sell any magazines to win any of the 21 big CASH prizes. We are offering these prizes to quickly advertise the name and products of the Paris-American Pharmacal Company. To make them better known, we are dividing our profits and absolutely giving away the \$2,000.00 CASH first prize, 20 other CASH prizes and in addition a new HUDSON TOWN SEDAN for promptness. What's still more, duplicate prizes will be given on all awards in case of final ties.



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Here is a treasure chest and ten keys, one of which will open the lock. Find the right key. Make the \$2,000.00 yours and get the HUDSON TOWN SEDAN, too, for promptness. There's too much at stake for you to delay a minute. These keys are all the same size and apparently are exactly alike. If your eyes are sharp you may find a key different from the other nine. The top, the bottom, the shaft, the notches or anything else is likely to be the point of difference. If you find the right key, it may mean \$2,000.00 and the Hudson or \$3,500.00 cash if you prefer.

If you find the Right Key, mark it with an "X" and Mail this Ad Quick

Put an "X" on the key right away if you find it. Cut out this ad and rush it to us at once. Be quick—because the first prize winner, if on time, gets the \$2,000.00 CASH and a new HUDSON TOWN SEDAN, too—or \$3,500.00 in all. If you win the \$2,000.00 CASH first prize you will want the new HUDSON TOWN SEDAN. Send your answer TODAY. We will forward you at once complete rules of this prize offer, telling you how close you are to winning, how to get the \$2,000.00 first prize and make the new HUDSON TOWN SEDAN yours. There will be no delay in giving you your award, so mail your answer at ONCE.

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See your dentist every six months. And every morning and night when you brush your teeth, brush gums vigorously. But be certain to use the dentifrice made for the purpose . . . Forhan's for the Gums.

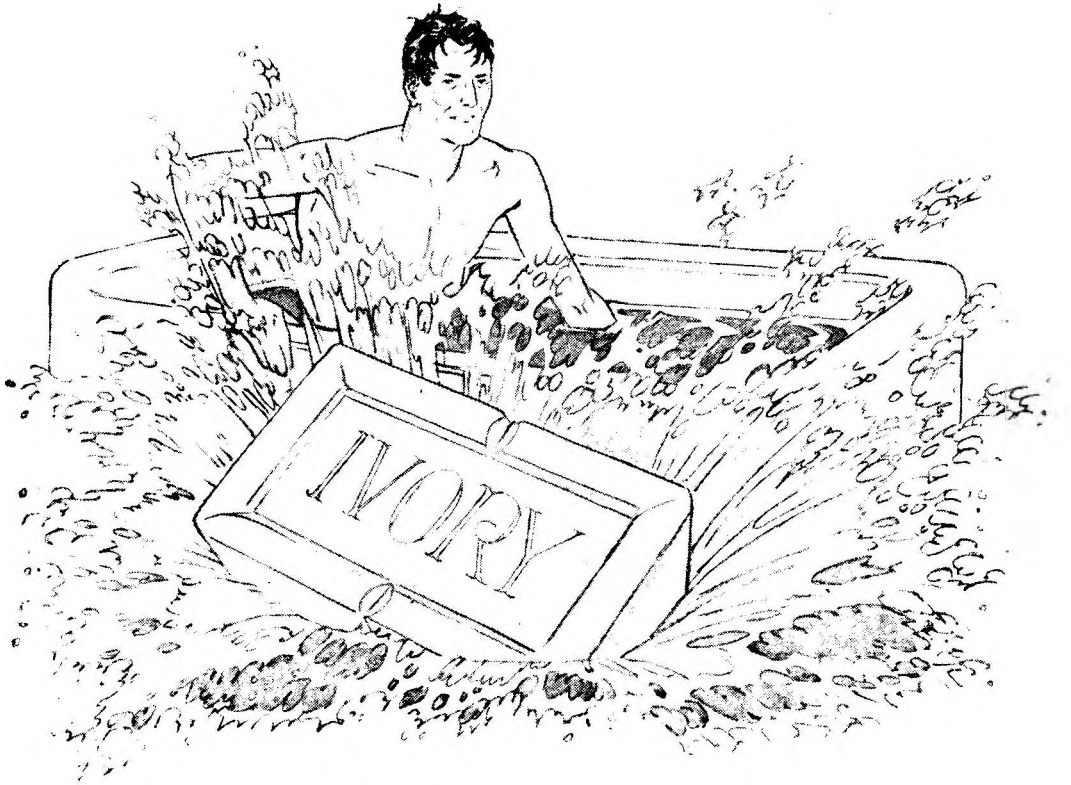
A few days of faithful brushing will prove its worth to you. You'll be delighted the way your gums look and feel. Forhan's helps to firm gums, keep them sound, thus warding off such dread diseases as Pyorrhea. In addition it cleans teeth and helps to protect them from decay. Get a tube of Forhan's from your druggist, today, 35c and 60c.

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Forhan Company, New York

Forhan's for the gums



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Splash in!

Old man Sun! When he's got you nearly to the melting point, you can still laugh—and splash back at him!

Where? In your tub, of course, that's filled to the brim with coolness as fresh as a clear mountain pool.

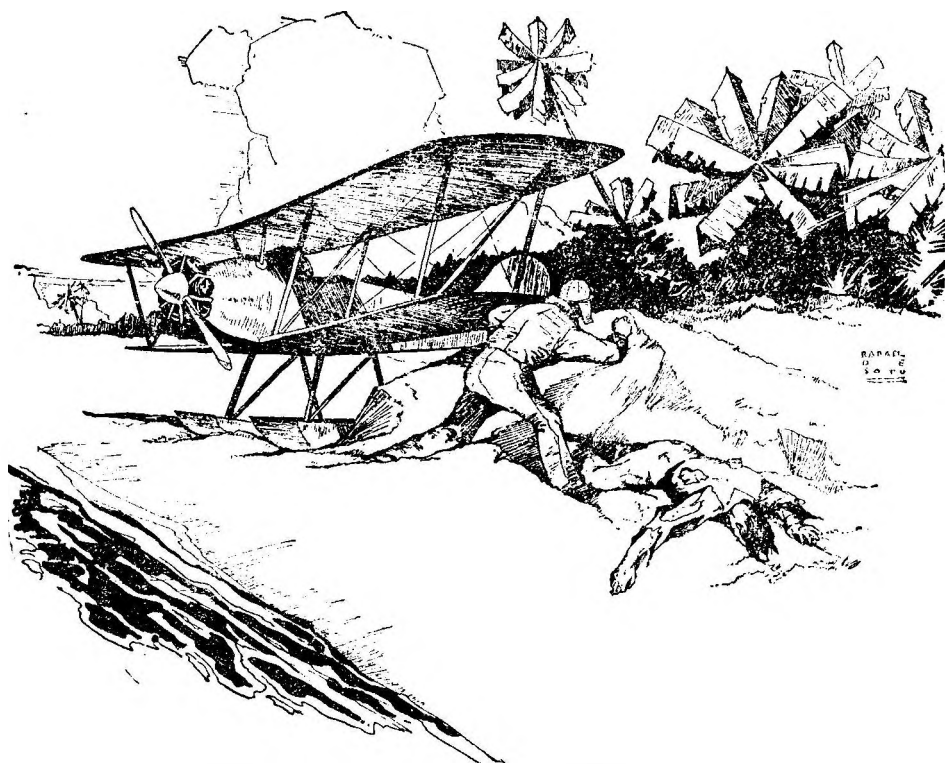
Blissfully submerged . . . that will be you. Blithely afloat—that's sure to be Ivory! And when your wilted spirits have completely revived, the friend of millions of American

bathers will demonstrate anew its genius for quick-rinsing foam!

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Pirate Cay

By Lester Dent

A COMPLETE NOVEL

CHAPTER I.

GALVANIZED INTO ACTION.



MAN struggled through heat-seared, festering tropical vegetation; through an impenetrable barrier of twisted mangroves and tangled creepers—a slender man whose scholarly, near-sighted eyes burned with a consuming terror. His white flannels were tattered and foul with black muck.

Drowsy parakeets and macaws, baking in the tropical sun, erupted into startled life; gaudy splashes of color against the overripe background.

Many times the runner tripped over tangled mangrove roots and sprawled headlong, but always to drag his weary body upright and stagger on. His frightened eyes, brimming with a sort of frantic hope, crept continually upward where the scorched heavens vibrated with a singsong drone like the buzzing of a huge hornet.

In the footsteps of the runner, not more than a hundred yards behind, lumbered a second figure—a seminaked giant of a man, his eyes murderous and bloodshot with purpose. He was sweat soaked, panting, his hairy torso bare above the waist. He mouthed vicious

Spanish and Portuguese oaths that rose and fell in a passionate crescendo.

It was a race—a race for life and death, and the fleeing man was losing ground, slowly, inexorably.

ROSS MacGUIRE peered down at the sea, over the leather padding that edged the pilot's cockpit of the little Waco. His eyes, behind the goggle lenses, radiated little of appreciation and much of disgust.

Four thousand feet below, the cay swam on a mirror of coral; like an emerald lost from the tiara strung from Elbow Cay to Port au Prince. Lined with palms that curtsied to the surf, it was like a bit of paradise inside the semicircle of protecting reef, marked round by a line of angry foam.

"More bugs and fever!" Into the flyer's words went the accumulated disgust of six unprofitable weeks of barnstorming in the Caribbean—a period rich in experience but not in monetary reward.

Mosquitoes, sand crabs, spiders with great bulbous bodies, steaming unescapable heat, lurked on these genlike bits of green. But the sun was now a glowing disc of bronze half lost below the horizon, and mute evidence that a haven for the night was imperative.

Ross kicked the rudder bar and nosed the Waco down in a hissing corkscrew that brought the sea gyrating upward.

Signs of life, invisible from the four-thousand-feet height, assumed detailed form. A chunky, short-keeled cabin cruiser was moored inside the reef, off-shore from a ramshackle dock.

A half mile inland, the approximate heart of the island, a natural meadow, level as a floor, formed a lighter patch against the velvet green of the jungle. Against the sea grass of the meadow bulked three buildings, white walled and with roofs of red tile; a plantation estate, apparently lifeless and deserted in the scorching equatorial heat.

Nothing stirred aboard the boat as the pontoons of the Waco skimmed close to the short mast and struck the water in a welter of foam. Scanning the shore for an anchorage, the flyer decided upon a two-foot stump of ancient piling, in a state of semi-decay, which protruded in lonely grandeur from the packed expanse of sloping sand.

He cut the ignition, pulled his cramped frame out of the cockpit and slid down on the flat fin of the duraluminum skinned float. There he chanced a dip in the crystal-clear waters, swarming with life, as he waited for the trade wind to sail the plane, tail first, directly toward the pile.

Tide was on the ebb, which meant that in fifteen minutes the Waco would be stranded high on the sand.

His heels left marks that filled with water, as he leaped ashore and kicked at the piling to test its soundness. Then he bent over to loop the tie rope in a full bight.

Suddenly he flattened. A shot boomed out near by. Tagging its echoes came another and another, until the damp shore line was tumbling with sound. Lead ripped through the leaves in the jungle and squealed viciously overhead.

Almost simultaneously with the advent of the sudden bedlam, a disheveled figure burst from the wall of foliage, a hundred yards down the beach, and raced toward the plane.

The man was half staggering with exhaustion; perspiration soaked. His clothing was soiled and he ran only with a superhuman effort. He made no effort to use a revolver carried in one hand.

The man had covered barely half the white sheet of wave-sculptured sand when a pursuer plunged into view. He was a half-breed, giant in stature, his bloodshot eyes blinking in the sun's glare and filled with a consuming de-

sire. Without hesitation, he raised a big nickeled revolver and fired.

At the shot the runner dropped to his stomach. The gun in his hand barked viciously, the lead blasting a handful of sand under the breed's feet. The giant wavered uncertainly, then headed for the protection of the jungle with a series of prodigious leaps.

Then the stranger resumed his race. He collapsed in a heap alongside Ross, his face a bloated green, his chest pumping in great gulps of the warm air.

The sharp crack of a gun came from the spot where the breed had disappeared. The bullet skipped angrily along the waves and out past the foam that marked the reef. Galvanized into action, Ross seized the revolver from the man's helpless fingers and shot until the hammer clicked on empty chambers.

Then he pulled the newcomer down beside him and, with his hands, began to heap up a small parapet of sand.

The stranger spoke with an obvious, hacking effort. He was hardly able to breathe, convulsed with overexertion. "Shells—in—coat pocket."

Ross found the gleaming brass cartridges and crammed them into the cylinder of the revolver.

"Watch—that—devil—in the bush!" The warning was uttered with difficulty.

"Sure thing," the flyer grunted as he shoveled feverishly at the mounting ridge of sand. "What the devil's happening?"

There was a copper glow in the west where the sun had disappeared. From the darkening jungle several shots barked, proof that the big half-breed was entrenched for a siege.

Ross fired at the darting tongues of red. He ducked as answering slugs thudded into the sand parapet, kicking up a spray of particles into his eyes.

The stranger turned an appealing glance toward him. "Papers in—money belt—he's after them."

"Take it easy, old fellow." Ross spoke soothingly. "You can talk later. Better pull yourself together now."

The man could not speak above a whisper, the result, undoubtedly, of the run in the insufferable heat. Though patently terrified, his face was rather likable. He would recover soon, and detailed explanations could wait.

Between the plane and the water was a fifteen-foot strip of sand, glistening and moist. It blocked any hopes for an escape in that direction. The stranger gradually began to control his breathing. He half rose on one elbow in his eagerness to speak, although his voice was no louder than a whisper.

"Papers—belt. Keep them for me. Help my——"

The words ended in a piercing gasp and a shudder that ran from head to toes. A shot roared from the direction of the jungle. A scarlet patch appeared, magically almost, in the man's scalp and he dropped like a falling log.

The silence that followed was gruesome, interrupted as it was only by the harsh cries of gulls that dipped over the sea. Ross held the slender wrist between his finger tips for a long interval. When he dropped it, unable to entirely suppress a chill shudder, he muttered feelingly.

He seized the revolver and emptied it at the spot from whence the shot had come. He was a little surprised when he drew no return fire. It was extremely improbable that any of his random shots had been effective, so he clung to the shelter, certain the killer was hiding another choice opportunity.

A QUARTER of an hour passed without a sign of further hostilities. In the undergrowth nothing stirred: no sound carried above the faint rustle of swaying palm fronds. Dusk had turned into night and the air was sticky with heat.

In the interval, the stranger's last

words suddenly came to Ross' mind. The money belt! It was a task to remove the wide, pocketed band of chamois, but he succeeded, the operation drawing no fire from the killer's gun.

He strapped it over his shirt without any effort at an examination. Whatever its contents, their perusal would have to be delayed until there was sufficient light.

The anchored boat had showed no signs of life. Ross gave his undivided attention to the beach, convinced the craft was deserted.

The moon appeared, a shimmering disc of silver, and the stars twinkled out between tropical rain clouds—wandering, isolated balls of soiled cotton, that drifted across the sky, remnants of the short, torrential downpour that had fallen early in the afternoon.

Ross, watching the masses of vapor churn across the heavens, began to form a plan. At frequent intervals the shore line was plunged into comparative darkness. The sandy beach was not level, but again the tiny hillocks and valleys that paralleled the waters' edge were scarcely deep enough to offer concealment.

A long time had elapsed since the last shot had rung from the line of vegetation. A tomblike silence wrapped the place. Ross tightened his lips grimly, determined on a move that was well-nigh reckless in its boldness.

A moment came when the sand was shrouded in gloom. Like a crab, Ross sped along on all fours, hugging the phosphorescent glow where the wavelets broke upon the sand. The first hundred feet was the most dangerous. He was not interrupted. Either the killer had been caught off guard or he was not watching the beach.

Ross paused, reconnoitering. A moment later a lance of flame flickered sharply out of the dark girdle of leafage. With the roar of the shot, Ross

froze against the wet sand. He tugged at the revolver under the money belt, where he had shoved it to protect the mechanism from sand. Then a volley of reports roared out and he breathed easier.

The firing was directed at the spot he had fled—at the parapet of sand and the motionless body it concealed. The volume of fire had indicated reinforcements had arrived.

Ross scurried ahead and his face brushed against a wall of vegetation that loomed, like a cliff, overhead. He scuttled into the welcome shelter.

The light of the stars was blotted out; everything was sooty, dank darkness. He moved quickly away from the beach, parting the twining tendrils of the undergrowth with meticulous care.

The firing stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Loud shouts sounded; excited cursing, proof that the gang had rushed the beach and discovered the lifeless body. Knowing pursuit was sure, Ross tried running.

Almost at once his toe hooked a trailer and he fell, a noisy, painful plunge flat on his face. Dagger-sharp thorns bedded the spot. He sat still, smothering an involuntary grunt of pain.

It was minutes before he concluded the noise had passed unnoticed. The tumble did one thing. It brought home the fact that the safest course was a waiting one, for chances of discovery in the impenetrable maze were slim indeed.

From the beach a hoarse voice barked disjointed orders, part of them in English and part in an unintelligible dialect. Other sounds indicated the pursuers were beating the jungle.

These last persisted for some minutes, then the heavy voice boomed further orders and the search was suddenly abandoned. The flickering beam of a flash light bobbed off out of sight down the shore line.

CHAPTER II.

THREATENING DEATH.

FOR a full half hour Ross crouched among the mangrove roots, puzzling over the situation and trying to plan things. At last he crept back toward the shore, sliding silently through the shadowy darkness.

He reached a point where he expected at any moment to catch a glimpse of the sea and the plane. He saw the ship, a glittering moth of silver in the moonlight.

Suddenly, a great rustling of the leaves arose, not a half dozen paces distant.

"Yo' all right, Jacko?"

The query came from the water line, pitched in a heavy tone.

"Sure, Castro! Keep your shirt on. I'm scrapping with a sand crab as big as a bulldog!" the scuffling continued.

Ross subsided quietly into the decaying bed of leaves. The voices were a monkey wrench in his plans, for they meant a guard.

And a guard complicated his rather hazy schemes; either to board the anchored boat or, better yet, to launch his plane. Two men—one in the plane and another concealed in the vegetation a few feet distant. Possibly more. What did it all mean?

Ross MacGuire lay silent and statue-like for a time, assembling ideas. The buildings he had viewed from the air. What sort of a reception could he expect there? At least he could acquire much desired information. The thought of action was preferable to the dead monotony of a wait in the vegetation.

Ross carefully back tracked the route he had so recently traversed under the mangroves; a slow, tedious process in the darkness, menaced by the chance of discovery. He entered the growth at a point some distance from the spot where the plane lay.

The need for caution and absolute

quiet, coupled with the fact that the atmosphere was as thick as drafting ink and as warm as dishwater, slowed his progress to a hare snail's pace.

Thorns and jagged branches sprang mysteriously out of the labyrinth to jab viciously. Mosquitoes, enormous fellows whose wings beat like miniature propellers, cruised about bearing visions of wracking fever. Creeping bugs and enormous pulpy spiders crawled over his face, or squashed unpleasantly under his fingers. Webs brushed across his face.

At times he remained almost stationary, making no headway whatever in his struggle against the clammy maze and the torrid, oppressive darkness. In an open spot, a little glade where the stars were framed through shivering palm fronds, he checked his directions.

Unexpectedly, radio music sounded somewhere ahead. Lights appeared as he crept forward, illuminated squares of windows. He reached the margin of the clearing, where the jungle gave way to a level meadow floored with rank sea grass.

Flat on his stomach among the thick blades, Ross wormed toward the structures, two of which were dark and deserted, while the third teemed with light and sound.

The radio speaker died suddenly as some one shut it off. Loud conversation carried clearly through the moonlight.

"Who d'ye think that bird is?" The tone was mildly inquisitive.

"Have no idea. Castro says he never seen him before."

The voice that answered was the same heavy tonal organ that had barked commands on the beach when the escape was discovered.

"I don't trust that damn breed. He may be putting something over. How about it, Lait?"

"Naw. Castro and Looper are

watching the plane. When daylight comes we'll all beat the bush together."

Ross lay motionless, straining his ears to catch the words. There was a movement in the shadows midway between two of the lighted windows. A cigarette glowed dully and, a moment later, a point of fire described a flaming parabola as the smoker flipped the cigarette aside.

The white rays of a strong flash shone for an instant as the guard consulted his watch, then moved closer to the open window. Ross crouched lower, alarmed by sight of the flash.

"What the devil we going to do with 'em?" It was the fellow with the mild voice who made the query.

"We'll put 'em out of the way. How about the place we put the bird that Castro shot?"

"That's the safest place for our own good." A harsh purposeful laugh accompanied the words.

"All right then, let's have some jazz."

The radio broke into noisy activity again, drowning out all that followed. Ross ducked silently back into the vegetation, his mind well stocked with food for thought. He did not pause until the lighted windows were lost to sight and the tinkling notes of the radio came as from an incredible distance.

"So I'm due to be shot," he grunted unpleasantly. "That means I've got to clear out of here to-night. I'll have to get hold of the plane some way."

He hurried on toward the beach, wincing inwardly as the prospect of another inky session with the darkness and underbrush became a reality.

IT was a quarter of an hour later, perhaps more, when Ross suddenly halted and stiffened. His ears had registered a faint rustling among the leaves, a bare whisper of sound that was hardly perceptible. It came again, a slithering of leaves, as some heavy body forced a passage.

Ross tensed into immobility. He was invisible in the intense night gloom. The sound might be some prowling island creature. He probed his memory, distressingly unable to recall what species of dangerous animals haunted the Caribbean.

Visions of giant snakes flickered across the screen of his mind; unpleasant customers to meet while crouched in that bottomless darkness. There was also the potent possibility that one of the gang might be stalking him.

The sound approached. A twig cracked close ahead, causing his finger to tighten on the cold steel of the revolver until the hammer hung poised above half cock. He elevated the weapon until the muzzle covered the living darkness and waited momentarily for the feel of hot breath against his face.

CHAPTER III.

THE SURPRISE PROWLER.

AN indistinct figure, a black blot against the ebony curtain, took form at the same instant that a footstep squashed in the soggy soil. A searching hand fell on the flyer's arm; a frightened, gasping cry shattered the superheated stillness.

Ross removed his finger from the trigger and lunged forward. His hands met smooth skin and cloth. He found a face in the darkness, and clamped his fingers over an opening mouth just in time to choke off a muffled scream.

"Quiet!" he commanded in a low tone.

The struggling form became limp, almost lifeless. Struck by an astounding suspicion, Ross allowed his viselike grip to loosen. The prowler was a woman!

He came near dropping the flaccid body in startled surprise, then stood wavering uncertainly, listening to the even unconscious breathing of his burden. By the sense of touch, he found

the spindly bole of a royal palm and propped the nerveless body against it.

She was small, hardly more than a hundred and ten pounds. He chafed her wrists vigorously. At the first uneasy stirring he placed his hand over a tiny rosebud of a mouth.

"Keep quiet! Don't scream. I won't harm you!"

He repeated his warning over and over. There was a momentary struggle when consciousness came, but gradually she relaxed. When her head bobbed in comprehension, he removed his hand.

"Who are you?" Ross demanded in a whisper.

She did not answer immediately, rather pausing for a moment.

Then she countered in a voice that was low and toned like some priceless musical instrument. "Are you one of Castro's men?"

"Not guilty," Ross assured her.

She seemed relieved, although still uncertain. "Then you don't belong on the island?"

"I'll say not!" Ross declared fervently. "The sooner I get off the thing the better I'll feel."

"What was all the shooting shortly after sunset?"

"Part of it was for my benefit," Ross said.

"What has happened?" Then she continued without pausing for an answer. "Did you see a small, rather elderly, gray-haired man?"

She spoke with a hopeful eagerness.

"Slender chap, dressed in flannels?" suggested Ross.

"Where is he?"

Ross hesitated.

"Is he—is he a relative of yours?"

"My employer."

"I'm sorry to have to break the news. You see—well, it was this way: I beached my plane, intending to spend the night at a plantation I saw from the air. Busted right into a mess of

some kind. A man came tearing out of the bush with a big breed at his heels, trying to polish him off. The first thing I knew, I was tangled up in the scrap."

"And Mr. West—my employer?"

"The—the breed got him. Through the head."

There was a quick choking sob in the darkness.

Ross held to an awkward silence, uncertain what form his sympathy should take, regretting his brusqueness in divulging the information. He found her shoulder in the black void and patted it comfortingly.

"I'm sorry. I should not have been so blunt. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

He could only feel her horrified tremor.

"I'll be glad to offer any aid," he repeated sympathetically.

"But you have no idea what you are getting yourself tangled up in. It is dangerous; they will stop at nothing," she warned.

"Already been one attempt to kill me," grunted Ross. "We might as well throw in together."

Then he told her his name and his story, as much of it as was necessary.

"There is a guard over my plane," he concluded, "which means we will have more than a little trouble getting to it. When they quiet down for the night we may be able to do something. In the meantime, suppose you tell me your story."

IM afraid that I am almost as greatly puzzled as you are," the girl imparted in a worried tone.

"Mr. West was a retired lawyer who spent his time contributing to trade and technical publications. Almost a month ago, he decided quite suddenly upon an extended cruise of the Caribbean."

"Since I was asked to go along to

take dictation on a book he is working upon, there was nothing to indicate the trip was other than a pleasure cruise such as he often made.

"At Nassau, Mr. West leased a boat, owned and captained by a man named Redding. There were two in the crew, a big half-breed called 'Black Castro,' who was the engineer, and a white man named Jack Looper, who did the cooking and steward work.

"Three days after we sailed from Nassau, Redding mysteriously disappeared. I am becoming more and more certain that he was murdered.

"Yesterday we anchored at this cay, which seemed to be the destination. Mr. West never hinted where we were bound. Black Castro and Jack Looper vanished soon after the boat was anchored and that seemed to give Mr. West considerable worry.

"Neither returned until this morning, shortly after dawn, when the breed came back alone. He flourished a revolver and ordered that we follow him. There was nothing to do but obey.

"He led the way over a well-beaten trail, leading inland from the wharf. A few hundred yards from the beach, Mr. West managed to strike the breed over the head with a heavy branch and we fled into the jungle.

"Castro was only stunned. Other men appeared, several of them, and they began to search for the two of us. We managed to elude them all day, until shortly before darkness came, when the breed seemed on the verge of discovering our hiding place.

"Mr. West apparently had some object in his possession which Castro desired; although why we were not murdered and robbed at sea, I cannot imagine.

"Mr. West left me hiding in the branches of a tree while he attempted to decoy Castro away. That was the last I saw of him. From what you saw, he evidently did not succeed."

ROSS MacGUIRE turned the words over in his mind. The whole thing had the tenor of a wild bit of fiction; but when she spoke, her voice had a ring of truth. There was also the concrete evidence, certainly corroborating to the utmost her tale, offered by his sudden, explosive reception on the beach.

He wished suddenly that he might study her face. How old was she? Secretaries of retired lawyers were usually old spinsters. Yet her voice sounded like that of a schoolgirl. Was she blonde or brunette?

Equally irrelevant thoughts preyed upon his brain, driving out the more urgent consideration of ways and means.

"Your name?" prompted Ross.

"Oh, yes!—Lucille Russell. I am Mr. West's niece and private secretary."

"Then you have no idea what this fellow, Castro, wants so badly?"

"Not the slightest. The thing is more than ever a puzzle. What are all those men doing here? Have you any idea?"

Ross started suddenly. He had half forgotten the money belt.

"Mr. West asked me to take care of a money belt he was wearing under his shirt. He seemed worried about it. Do you suppose that is what our friend, Castro, is hunting?"

"It must be. What is in the belt?"

"I haven't had a chance to investigate," said Ross. "He mumbled something about papers, but that was all."

"You have it with you?"

"Sure. You want it?"

"I'd rather you would keep the thing. I'm sure I don't want it. Perhaps we can strike up a bargain with the belt."

"And get shot the next minute. You see, we have witnessed a murder. Or at least, I did. They would never let us get away alive."

"Then what can we do?"

"I don't know. It'll have to be something, and that to-night," declared Ross.

"I overheard them say they would get us when daylight came. To get hold of the plane is our best bet. The tide will have it afloat in a couple of hours. Once in the air, we can fly to some island and turn matters over to the authorities."

They were both silent, their thoughts ample company. The conversation had been carried on in whispers, with many a pause for careful attention to the myriad of night noises that formed a soft, muffled blanket of sound.

Ross glanced at the dial of his wrist watch and found that perspiration from his arm had penetrated the case, fogging the luminous figures until they were illegible. He calculated the time as somewhere near two o'clock in the morning.

"LET'S get started," Ross suggested. "Let me have your hand. This is going to be anything but easy."

There was no sign of fear in the pressure of her hand on his arm. The trembling had disappeared and full confidence had taken its place. His respect mounted. It was remarkable courage that led her to face the danger of such a venture without flinching.

The growth of weeds and leaves were slimy, the earth a soggy sponge underfoot. The girl clung closely to his side, holding to his arm for guidance. It was a tedious, heart-tearing task, feeling their way along inches at a time.

As through an open portal, they reached the beach between two immense mangrove thickets. The sea was an unbelievable blue and was dancing with reflected star glow. Waves beating on the sand made a gentle murmur, which, coupled with the many small noises of the jungle, created a blanket of deadening sound.

As yet, they were not in the illumination that beat down on the open beach as from the disk of the incandescent sun.

Ross placed his lips close to the girl's ear. "I am going to leave you here while I scout a bit," he breathed.

"But——"

"Dangerous," he admonished, interrupting her half-voiced expostulation. "It is much safer here. But do not leave this spot."

He left her, crouched like a frightened animal in the bush that ringed the bole of an immense palm, and crept along the sand, hugging the fringe of mangroves.

The plane was outlined against the phosphorescent ripple of the sea. It was like a gigantic beetle perched on the water's edge. Ross removed his ruined watch and buried it under the sand, where its glow would not betray him.

He dropped to his knees and explored the swampy earth, as he progressed, for something that would serve as a bludgeon. His fingers eventually encountered it, a long, smooth-barked limb that had the heft and balance of a lead pipe.

A spot glowed red, a pin point of fire against the thick darkness. Ross lay, frozen into immobility. The tiny spot of radiance again brightened and vanished—the guard was incautiously smoking.

Palm fronds chattered in the breeze and now and then two branches rubbed together to squeak an eerie protest. Grateful sounds, for they simplified the stalking. Ross lay for a long time just at the edge of the jungle, every sense strained into the impenetrable void about him, searching for the remaining watcher.

The smoker strolled out into the open, bulking doubly large against the snow white sand. He eyed the plane, then discarded his cigarette with a muffled curse as it scorched his finger tips. He vanished and a flurry of leaves arose as he stretched out lazily.

Ross proceeded to creep in, working

his way inland at an angle that carried him to the rear of the unsuspecting lookout.

An age later, it seemed, he caught the fellow's bulk penciled between himself and the beach. The guard turned, facing the flyer.

Ross froze, a rasping sensation chasing up and down his spine. His smothered breath was like the puffing of a locomotive to his strained ears. For what seemed an interminable time he stood thus, momentarily more and more certain that discovery faced him.

CHAPTER IV.

WRESTLING FOR LIFE.

THE guard yawned like a drowsy lion and shifted his eyes to the sea, half asleep, visibly nodding, his back against a palm. His head, under an enormous sombrero-like hat fell forward almost to his chest.

Staring past the guard toward the sea, bright under the lunar rays, Ross discovered a shadowy figure in the cockpit of the beached plane. The second guard! He did a bit of rapid calculation.

In the event of failure to dispose of the man on shore with the first blow, the ensuing struggle would certainly bring the fellow in the plane down on his back. The consequences of such a mishap were not pleasant to contemplate. But no alternative remained.

Ross moved closer, an indistinct shadow of vengeance, poised on tiptoes for the down stroke. He intended to put plenty of strength in the blow.

A flash of movement in the darkness, a soft thump like the sound returned by an overripe melon, and the guard folded slowly. Ross caught the fellow, but the hand he clasped over the open mouth was needless. Beyond the breath wheezing through his nostrils, the guard emitted no sound.

Ross straightened quickly, his eyes

on the plane. Nothing indicated alarm. Satisfied that he was undiscovered, Ross employed the victim's own leather belt and rough shirt to bind his hands behind his back and secure his ankles.

By the slight radiance from the moon that penetrated the thicket, Ross discovered the guard was a white man, medium in size, with a face dark and scraggly with unshaven beard. It was Jack Looper. Therefore the man in the plane was Black Castro—by far the most formidable one of the pair.

Cyclonic speed had characterized the operation. It was only an instant until Ross was again on his feet and staring at the plane. The shadowy mass of the big head and shoulders had not stirred.

With quick movements, Ross searched the guard, finding but a single weapon, a deadly Luger automatic which he transferred to his own person, shoving it under the money belt with respect for its unfamiliar mechanism.

Struck by a sudden thought, he fished among the odorous weeds for the guard's hat, knocked aside by the blow. He found the oversized headgear, pulled it over his ears, and thus partially disguised, stalked boldly through the white moonlight.

He kept his hand on the checked grip of the revolver; his eyes searched painfully for signs of movement. The man in the plane seemed to be asleep.

Ross scuttled swiftly under the tail skid, which stood as high as his head above the sand, and crawled between the pontoons. Here he was ankle deep in lapping brine. The tide gurgled softly past the ends of the floats, a welcome sight in itself.

He listened to peaceful, sonorous breathing in the cockpit overhead. A series of foghorn snores added to the machinelike respiration—sounds more musical to his ear than the booming tuba of a symphony orchestra.

A moment later Ross stepped silently

from the concealment of the fuselage. As he straightened, a kinky head, enormous in proportions, nodded a foot above his eyes. He swung the club back and up, muscles tense.

Poised disaster seemed to penetrate the unconscious mind of the big breed. He reacted like an animal. Eyes flashed open; relaxed muscles bunched; the round coconut of a head flashed forward with the speed of a striking cobra and the club cracked harmlessly on the cockpit padding.

Castro, a living mountain of ebon-skinned flesh, leaped erect before Ross could recover his balance. His height was more than six feet. His arms were whiskered like the limbs of a gorilla. His face was so low and broad as to appear horribly deformed.

Some mishap had deprived him of even the semblance of a nose. Over a knife slit of a mouth were two huge, round holes, which, as he crouched over the flyer, snarling in the brilliant moonlight, stretched into slits that threatened to reach from ear to ear.

Ross shuddered and for one priceless instant was charmed into hypnotized paralysis. A big hand leaped up, gripping a pistol that glittered wickedly. Ross shed his lethargy and swung his club frantically. The flashy pistol exploded harmlessly in mid-air and spun fifty feet into the sea.

Black Castro came over the rim of the cockpit like a falling pachyderm. There was no time to strike again. Ross was crushed; knocked from his feet, down in eight inches of water; smothering, blinding water that burned his lungs. He lost his grip on the club.

A HEAVY animal voice growled unintelligible imprecations. Ross found his arms pinned under a great weight, helpless to reach the guns that were stuck under the chamois money belt. In the snarling face that glared into his water-blinded eyes, he read

murderous intent. Calloused fingers clutched at his throat.

Slowly he began to strangle. Over and over they spun, the shallow sea water foaming as though lashed by a whirling propeller. Ross unexpectedly found himself on top for an instant and he bunched his muscles, staking all on one prodigious effort.

With a herculean tug, Ross tore free. Instantly he whipped his arms over Castro's head to secure a head lock. Quickly he worked his arms around until the bone of the forearm crushed against the thick windpipe.

Then he closed his eyes and exerted every ounce of strength stored in his tough one hundred and eighty pounds.

It was the most vicious of strangle holds and Ross wrapped his legs about the breed's barrel of a midsection to retain his advantage. His head began to clear and he was able to exert more and more leverage.

Castro seemed not to think of the revolvers. Perhaps he did not know they were there. He tore at the locked fingers; fell backward, crushing the breath from the flyer's lungs; clawed at his eyes, forcing Ross to hang on with a desperation born of what he read in the bloodshot eyes.

Castro—close to three hundred pounds of blubbery fat, sheathing knotted muscles that were tough as mahogany—seemed never to weaken. But no human could long withstand that punishing hold. The massive shoulders began to quiver like those of a poled ox. The knees slowly gave way.

Ross threw his head far back, where the frenzied fingers could not reach his hair, and kept the hold for several moments after the big body slumped into the water. Then he leaped clear and his hands swept to the two guns.

The giant was possessed of an enormous stamina. He lurched to his feet, big hands working at his throat. He uttered croaking sounds, filled with hurt

rage. At the thudding impact of the barrel of the revolver on his tangled thatch, he collapsed—this time to stay down. Then Ross staggered up on the beach, very much winded.

MR. MACGUIRE—Ross! Are you hurt?"

It was the girl, her voice ringing with anxiety. She stood beside him, a short club gripped in her small hands. Ross struggled with a sudden coughing spell, the effect of water in his lungs and throat, then looked down admiringly when it subsided.

"I'm all right," he said. "I told you to keep out of sight. There may be other men watching the beach."

"I know. But the shot—I, well—I was scared."

For the first time she stood under illumination that disclosed her features. Ross felt his jaw drop in admiration.

The girl was a beauty! Her bobbed hair was a fluffy blond mass, over lips that were perfect and a nose that inclined toward snubness. Dressed in masculine garments, breeches that were laced to the knees, high leather boots and white shirt, she was a boyish figure that came scarcely to his shoulder.

Moonbeams played through her hair, giving it the sheen of burnished platinum. Her attire was soiled and frayed from contact with the tropical forest.

Ross started, and his face reddened uncomfortably as he realized he had been staring unduly. "We've been lucky so far," he said quickly to cover his confusion. "But it will not last much longer. They will hear the shot at the plantation and be here in a few minutes."

"What are you going to do with this man. He is the—the murderer. He is Black Castro."

"I guessed as much. But we can't do a thing now. He's not dead, much as he deserves killing. The authorities will have to take care of him. Let me

have your hand. We've got to get away from this spot. The rest of the gang will be down on our heads if we waste much more time."

The small figure mounted to the cockpit with a lithe grace.

"Better fasten the safety belt," Ross suggested.

Then he spun the hand inertia starter vigorously, balanced none too firmly with one foot on the wing reinforcing and the other on a stream-lined guy.

The engine caught, the first rumble like a peal of thunder in the night air. Darting tongues of flame played about the exhaust pipes. While the motor warmed up, he struggled with the knot in the tie rope.

As a hound unleashed, the floats slid through the water, rapidly picking up speed, while Ross scrambled precariously into the cockpit. The dancing ripples ahead were free of obstruction.

He pulled the throttle back as far as it would go, then rocked the stick gently back and forth to hasten the operation of getting the plane on the step—the floats skipping across the surface. Momentum came rapidly then.

Reluctantly almost, the ship left the water and roared along a few feet above the surface as it picked up flying speed. Then a quick spiral upward.

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERIOUS PLANE.

VISIBILITY from the air was excellent. The three buildings, a distinct huddle of white against the darker background, were seething with activity. A brilliant light beam appeared at intervals through rifts in the leafy jungle canopy—a sure sign the take-off had been timely in execution.

In the forward cockpit, a mass of blond hair whipped back in the slip stream. Ross fished in the map pocket for extra helmet and goggles.

"Put them on," he barked at the top

of his voice. "I'm going to fly back over the island."

The blot of green slid below the floats. The beam of a pocket flash light flickered here and there, gleaming against the white walls of the buildings.

Suddenly a sputtering stream of sparks left the earth and streaked, cometlike, high into the heavens. It was a rocket flare, and it burst above and slightly in front of the plane. Ross squinted against the sudden glare as the ship was etched in gleaming silver against the dark dome of the night sky.

Spitting points of fire appeared in the shadow of the buildings. They were under fire!

Cursing the foolish curiosity that had led him back into danger, Ross kicked the rudder viciously and tugged at the knurled knob of the gas lever. The roaring of the Hisso engine's cylinders beat down all other sound. The Waco groaned a throaty protest as the strain increased.

Staring at the earth, Ross saw the scattered flashes of revolver and rifle and, from one spot, a steady flicker of flame. A machine gun!

Good marksmanship against the brilliant glare of the rocket was hardly to be expected. But a machine gun was something else again. Thundering through the night at a hundred and thirty miles an hour, in a matter of seconds the plane would be out of range. Until they were, danger menaced every foot of the way.

Ross kept his eyes on the frenzied drama below.

Suddenly he ducked. A series of holes appeared in the lower wing fabric, clearly visible in the light of the flare. Over the vibration of the engine he felt the shock of lead against the framework of the plane.

He turned his glance again to the earth. It was then that he stiffened in surprise. In the light of the rapidly dropping flare a plane had appeared!

It was a large yellow-and-black ship. Men were wheeling it from one of the red-roofed structures. The unexpected apparition was quickly swallowed in the shadows when the flare struck the earth and became a fizzing patch of red.

The plane passed out of range. Behind them signs of shooting died away. Ross raised his voice above the sound of the Hisso.

"Did you see the plane?"

"Yes." The tones carried no trace of fear.

"There is an automatic pistol in the suitcase under your feet," Ross shouted. "Will you dig it out? Looks as if we're going to be followed. An extra gun may come in handy."

The blond head bobbed comprehension. Ross kept his eyes to the rear, braced against the tug of the slip stream as the island dissolved into a wide patch of shadow against the soft shimmer of the moon-bathed sea.

In perhaps two or three minutes, another flare arched a sparkling trail into the sky. He saw the mysterious plane, a tiny insectlike dot in the distance, scamper across the carpet of sea grass and leap into the air, to be lost almost instantly against the dark background.

Overhead, tangled clouds crept, like slinking leopards, across the face of the moon. A strata of rolling vapor got appreciably nearer as the nose dipped upward and the Hisso's roar took on a deeper, more labored note. Ross tugged nervously at the already wide-open throttle.

Wispy streamers of moisture appeared, whipped into raindrops that peppered sharply against their faces and clouded goggle lenses. The moonlight was snuffed out with the suddenness of a falling curtain as they entered the clouds.

Ross turned to the instrument panel. He switched on the tiny dash bulb. It's soft radiance brought out the markings on the dials with a black-and-white

distinctness. He pursed his lips in a whistle of satisfaction that died a sudden death. The gasoline gauge registered less than two gallons!

He felt frenziedly in the capacious map pocket for his flash light and threw its rays on the wing section that housed the tanks of fuel. A stream of colorless liquid that was not water whipped out from the trailing edge. Mingled with the rank smell of the exhaust was the ranker odor of raw gasoline!

For an instant Ross sat stunned by the calamity. A bullet had ripped a jagged path through the tank wing section.

Their logical objective, Nassau, ancient metropolis of the historic Fortune Islands, lay a full two hundred miles northward and westward. The islands that were scattered between offered, as far as Ross was concerned, an uncharted maze.

They were roving over the dark Caribbean at a hundred and twenty miles an hour, with, at the most, a few minutes supply of fuel in the punctured tank.

Ross hanked sharply about, then shouted the news to his unsuspecting companion.

"Bullet through gas tanks. Have to take a chance and land. I'll make a try for the boat. It's our only hope now."

The plane was holding enough altitude to glide back to the cay, but hope of averting discovery was futile. They would be silhouetted plainly against the heavens. The motor began to sputter as the dark jungle slid under the pontoon tips. The reef was a chalk mark against the background of cobalt blue.

Ross picked out the boat and hanked in a narrow spiral over the craft. When the motor finally died, the propeller a lifeless blade of shining metal, Ross raised his voice again.

"Can you swim? We may miss the boat a little."

The girl nodded an affirmative.

The floats hissed into the sea, at first slapping the waves lightly, then sinking deeper and deeper in the bubbling foam.

The ship was unusually sluggish. It came to a stop almost immediately, some two hundred feet from the boat. Alarmed, Ross craned his head over the cowl and shot the flash downward. What he saw sent a shock, as from a high-frequency current, racing along his spinal column. The right hand float was riddled!

CHAPTER VI.

LASHING SLUGS.

THE craft began to sink rapidly. Almost simultaneous with the discovery, came a heavy, booming voice from the beach.

"Come ashore! Queek!"

Three figures appeared on the ribbon of sand as though placed there by a conjurer's art.

The water that poured through the ruptures in the thin duraluminum shell made a faint gurgling sound. Ross glared uncertainly at the trio on the beach.

As though in answer to his unspoken question, a stream of shots roared out. A machine gun! Slugs lashed angrily at the water; first to the right and then to the left of the plane.

"Sweem! Pronto!" the voice roared. "You get heem in head next time!"

The Waco lurched as the punctured pontoon sank. Very slowly, as if from a great sickness, the right wing tip slipped beneath the surface.

"Into the water!" Ross commanded. "Get behind the plane. We're close enough to shore that it won't sink."

The machine gun again ripped the silence into a million echoes. Lead tore at the fabric and screamed shrilly as it glanced off the steel tubes that made up the framework of the fuselage.

The plane sank slowly until one wing reared to the stars, then whipped unexpectedly over. The water was deeper than Ross had calculated. The Waco had capsized.

Caught under the right wing, Ross was carried under the surface. He came up half drowned and looked dazedly about. His companion was nowhere in sight!

The water was a bubbling cauldron of phosphorescent fire. Ross filled his lungs with air and dove. His hands found a struggling body and he pulled back to the surface. The girl strangled for an instant, then gasped an explanation.

"The plane struck me. Everything went black. I'm afraid I dropped your automatic."

Her words brought home with a rush a disagreeable fact. He had dropped the two weapons he carried in his hands. They were unarmed!

"Never mind," he deprecated. "Are you all right now?"

"I think so. For a moment I thought I was gone. All the breath was knocked out of my lungs."

"Down!" Ross warned.

The rapid-firer was chattering again.

"Come along or we keela you!" The heavy voice came as the weapon paused for an instant.

"Damn!" Ross groaned. "We're in a fine fix now."

Following their silence, the machine gun went into action again and hot lead snarled and tore about their half-submerged heads. It was only a matter of seconds until the end was certain to come. The voice roared a final warning.

"Give up and we no keela you theese time!"

"That a promise?" Ross shouted, loud enough that his voice carried to the beach.

"Si, she's a promise," was the answer.

"We'd better make the best of it," Ross advised with considerable trepidation. "They'll shoot us down if we stay here. We haven't a Chinaman's chance."

He gave the girl's hand a squeeze of confidence. Side by side they stroked toward the three figures on the beach. The voice stopped them as they stood erect in water less than knee-deep.

"It ees far enough!"

Jack Looper, whom Ross had sent into unconsciousness in the mangrove thicket, stepped surlily forward, apparently none the worse for wear and tear.

LOOPER slapped his hands over their persons none too gently. The girl cringed from his touch as from contact with some poisonous reptile. The two others were Black Castro and a small, squat, thick-lipped black whose sole apparel was a frayed pair of dungaree trousers. In the crook of his arm, Castro snuggled a riflelike, dangerous-looking submachine gun.

"All right, Castro. They got no guns," Looper declared as he stepped back.

The short black, a stupid-looking travesty on humanity, carried a shotgun. Ross catalogued him as an island native in whose veins the blood of runaway slaves and renegade Spaniards had surged for centuries.

The machine gun Castro gripped caused Ross to watch him closely. The look in the breed's eyes gave him a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Fanatical rage and murderous frenzy were there.

With a gloating mutter, Castro pounced on the money belt. He grumbled something in dialect, an unintelligible vernacular. Portuguese probably. Ross was not sure.

They moved down the beach, the muzzle of the machine gun prodding the small of the flyer's back. Castro's little bloodshot eyes were flecked with

points of fire and his fingers trembled with excitement.

A small boat was drawn up on the beach. The entire party embarked and, with Looper and the black at the oars, headed for the anchored craft. The tender bumped against the steel hull of the boat with a fine disregard for shining paint.

Castro scaled the rail, apeline, then reached down a hairy hand and yanked them roughly on the scrubbed deck.

"In cabin," he grunted.

An electric light flashed on. The wicker furnishings of the cabin were dilapidated and worn. The squat black magically appeared with a hank of fishing line.

Without ceremony Ross and the girl were bound to separate chairs, the cords wrenched cruelly tight about their arms.

The big breed seemed in a frenzy to reach some goal. Looper, with leisurely movements, fashioned a dirty looking cigarette out of brown papers and leaf tobacco that he rolled between his grimy palms, apparently satisfied to do the bidding of his leader.

With fingers that visibly shook, Castro dragged a wicker chair close to the mahogany-topped table and plucked at the buckled fastening of the money belt. He uttered no word.

Ross suddenly saw why they had not been shot down in the sea. The money belt would have gone down with their bodies, perhaps to be dragged out to sea by scavenger sharks.

Castro was having difficulty with the belt. It was soggy with moisture. With a curse, he ripped the chamois pocket open by main strength. A packet, tightly wrapped in yellow oiled silk tumbled out on the polished boards and dropped to the floor.

Ross caught his companion's eye and smiled reassuringly. The look she returned was one of confidence, although her features were strained. The laced

breeches and masculine shirt, all soaking wet, clung revealingly to her form.

Jack Looper leered approvingly at her striking figure as he puffed at his cigarette, but when the packet dropped to the floor, he peered over Castro's shoulder with absorbed interest.

The breed squinted avidly, his deformed features a few inches from the table top. From where he sat, Ross could not see the object that held their interest. The black seemed uninterested in the proceedings.

Castro looked up, his cavernous eyes burning like hot coals. He opened his lipless mouth as if to speak, but closed it with a toadlike snap. Instead, he grunted and whispered to his two companions. All three clumped out on deck. Words shot back and forth, but they were in the lingo.

"Any idea what they're saying?" Ross whispered hopefully, thankful for the lack of a gag.

"I can't understand a word. I think it's Portuguese," the girl answered.

"It looks like they have something more important on their hands than our disposal," Ross reflected.

The keg-bodied black reappeared, his shotgun gripped purposefully. For an instant Ross thought they were to be shot down in cold blood. But he was mistaken, for the black took his position at the companionway, indicating by his attitude that he had been placed on guard.

A moment later, the splash of oars told that the tender was headed away from the craft.

CHAPTER VII.

SMOKE AND BULLETS.

THERE was nothing for Ross to do but wait and try to plan things. The black guard blinked owlishly from where he stood against the bulwark close to the companionway.

Perhaps five or ten minutes ticked

into eternity with infinite slowness while Ross pondered upon the mystery of the black-and-yellow airplane. Granting that it had lost the Waco in the clouds, by now it would have made considerable of a search.

As if materialized by his own thoughts, the booming whir of a plane gradually grew into a great babble of sound that drowned out the lispings of waves against the boat's steel sides. It circled the anchored craft twice, motors roaring like mammoth dragon flies. In a moment the blaze of a flare appeared through the landward portholes, and an abrupt silence fell as the ship landed.

Ross spoke to the guard, principally to see what the fellow would say. The black came back with a guttural, excited flow of words. Ross had no idea what he said, but the significant gesture with the shotgun spoke more forcibly than classical English.

An attempt to converse with his companion was halted instantly. The girl was dejected. She slumped in the straight-backed chair, shifting about often to relieve the bonds. In spite of the strained look which had settled on her features, Ross was charmed more and more by her indisputable beauty.

Practically every instant of his short sojourn on the cay had been crammed with action. Now for the first time he had minutes to devote to thought. He spent them puzzling, trying to make heads or tails of the whole queer procession of events.

The contents of the money belt—what was its value that it provoked wanton murder? The strange plane? These and a score of kindred webs in the puzzle were a scrambled heap in his thoughts. An hour, perhaps more, rolled by, filled with vain speculation, as he came no nearer a solution.

Limbs became numb, the condition in nowise abetted by the fact that there was no sign indicating, even to the minutest degree, how long they would be

kept thus, or perhaps more important, what fate waited when the elected time came.

Ross tried to speak to his companion again. The squat black strode over and smashed him in the mouth with a knotted ebony fist.

The blow was sharp and crimson welled from Ross' bruised lips and streaked the front of his shirt, already soaked with sea water and perspiration. He could do nothing but curse under his breath and promise himself dire vengeance.

Suddenly the guard came to a position of attention, then strode to a porthole. A faint splashing of oars sounded, along with muttered words. A heavy object, a boat, grated along the steel hull and noisy footsteps pounded on the deck. The two prisoners instantly roused themselves.

Three strangers crowded down the companionway. The black lowered his weapon and grinned amiably. The group displayed unmistakable evidences of haste, fairly plunging into the cabin. They carried powerful electric hand lanterns.

Of the trio, two were white, the third a black man. One was portly, smooth shaven, fastidiously attired, fairly radiating authority.

His companion was a slender wiry fellow whose face was burned a deep bronze by the tropical sun. His forehead was of a lighter hue above a plainly defined semicircle, the mark of a flyer's helmet.

Ross placed him instantly as the pilot of the mystery plane. The fellow's eyes held a half-humorous twinkle and he seemed not greatly concerned. The black, a nondescript islander of the Bahamas, did not enter the cabin, but remained in the companionway, staring stupidly.

The authoritative-looking stranger swept his eyes over the two prisoners, studying each one curiously. His black

eyes were sharp, and as penetrating as the emanation of a radium vial.

In the man's face, Ross thought he saw bafflement, surprise, and, overshadowing all other emotion, a growing rage.

"Who are you two?" he demanded in perfect English.

Ross answered, but merely identified himself and his companion.

"You working for West?"

"The young lady did," Ross explained. "I'm a free lance. I'm here through no wish of my own. Suppose you tell me what's going on."

The stranger looked at him curiously, but let the query go unanswered. His voice was one of those that had come from the lighted structure in the clearing a few hours before.

"Did Castro get the money belt?"

"He sure did," Ross grunted.

"What did it contain?"

"How should I know. There was a little package wrapped in oiled silk. They didn't open it and I have no idea what it was."

"You sure about that?" The demand was full of suspicion.

Upon receiving a reassurance, the portly one began to curse, laying down his oaths with a liquid precision born of long practice.

"How long has that damn breed been gone?"

"More than an hour," Ross answered. "How about taking these ropes off?"

"No chance. We'll dispose of you two later."

The man stared at his companion, the flyer, and the latter grinned wryly back at him. The big man strode angrily around and around the table. More than ever were the signs of baffled rage present in the florid face.

Suddenly he turned on the black guard who had been left by Castro. The black cringed before the burning gaze the man pinned on him.

A volley of cryptic Portuguese rolled back and forth. Then all three leaped for the companionway. They left a stream of profane comment in their wake, as oars scraped against the hull and they pushed hurriedly off.

Ross saw mirrored in the girl's eyes the puzzlement that filled his own. It was beginning to look like certain members of the gang were working at cross purposes.

A MOMENT later a roaring pandemonium broke loose on the landward side of the boat. Shots rang out—a machine gun vomiting a spewing, staccato snarl of reports.

In the hot murk of the tropical darkness the noise was like the rolling play of thunder between the craggy walls of a mountain gorge. A strangled cry of rage and pain penetrated the din.

The black guard at the companionway stood for an instant with his eyes rolling in surprise. Then he leaped for the deck. The maw of his shotgun belched flame and acrid smoke, booming like a miniature cannon. The second barrel followed in wild haste.

The machine gun snarled again. The black crumpled and his weapon fell on the scrubbed planks of the deck. The sickening *chuck, chuck*, of lead plucking at his dark-skinned body came plainly to the ears of the two prisoners.

Bullet rained against the steel sides of the boat—a noise that was like the rumble of a hammer on metal plates. The glass of the portholes dissolved in a brittle cloud, one after another.

As the first lead smashed into the cabin, Ross lunged sideways, tipping his chair, bringing the girl down on the floor beside him.

"Stay down," he commanded. "The hull is bullet-proof but the cabin walls may not be."

"What on earth has happened?" the girl demanded wonderingly.

"Looks like a split up. Either that

or there are two outfits. Wonder what'll be next!"

The clamoring machine gun suddenly quieted. The magazine was exhausted, for an instant later the leaden hail was resumed, pattering like bell taps against the hull or sinking hollowly into the woodwork.

The brightly lighted interior of the cabin seemed alive with spraying lead, until the electric bulb vanished with a plop and a blinding flash of green flame, plunging the interior into darkness.

The turmoil died as suddenly as it had arisen. One moment there was everywhere a roaring bedlam, the next, complete quiet, except for the gentle slap of waves against the boat's hull.

"Miss Russel," Ross spoke anxiously into the murk that had followed the smashing of the electric bulb.

"I'm all right. Are you hurt?" Her voice was steady.

Ross thought he detected more than an ordinary anxiety. "No harm done. A few splinters in my face where a hunk of lead glanced and hit the floor."

The guard was dead; he had not stirred. Ross was left with no idea as to what had happened. But either way the fight had terminated, the result boded no good for his companion and himself.

"Can you move your fingers about?" he asked the girl.

"They are numb. I can't do a thing with them."

"I'll roll over and work on your cords," Ross suggested. "Let's see what I can do."

His hands cut mercilessly into the flesh, taut as fiddle strings, gnashing at his wrists. The skin had broken when he tumbled to the floor. Warm crimson ran down his fingers. He struggled, for what seemed an eternity, with the knots. Then he felt them loosen.

In a moment she was free. A few seconds later he was erect beside her. They had almost lost the use of their

limbs due to the restriction of the circulation and the cramped position.

In the silver moonlight outside the companionway the body of the black sprawled grotesquely. From the twisted form, a dark ribbon puddled across the bleached white of the deck planks. The shotgun lay almost under the tips of the fingers of one outstretched hand.

"Listen!"

The girl hissed the warning. Ross tensed into an attitude of strained attention as a faint sound, a scraping noise, little more than a distorted fancy, sent cold chills through his nervous system.

Moving swiftly, Ross spun the girl about where the spectacle of horror on the deck was out of her sight, then leaped for the companionway. He stretched his arm toward the shotgun, his body hidden from the beach.

Then, swallowing his distaste, he plunged a hand into the black's jacket pockets. He transferred the half dozen shells he found therein to his own coat.

He stared shoreward through one of the smashed ports. Beyond the opening, framed with jagged glass, was the dark outline of the tender. A shadowy body was huddled amidships, silent, unmoving.

The jungle behind the creamy ribbon of beach loomed black, motionless and quite empty. There was nothing to indicate what made the sounds they had heard.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOUNDED STRANGER.

ROSS listened. The noise came again, like the dragging of some lifeless, heavy body along the side of the boat. Electrified, he sprang to the seaward side of the cabin and glued his eyes to the port. In a moment a hand, then an arm, appeared, followed by a bedraggled figure that streamed salt water

A man was coming over the rail, hauling himself up by a dangling rope end. In the uncertain light, Ross recognized him. It was the slender fellow he had identified as the pilot of the mystery plane. The man was wounded, his left sleeve wet with something that mingled with the brine and dripped crimson stains.

"Don't move, you!" Ross barked. He thrust the barrel of the shotgun, newly reloaded, through the smashed glass of the port.

The pilot raised his right hand without bidding. The other hung helplessly at his side.

"Don't shoot. I'm a friend," he said in a voice that expressed pain and, at the same time, concern.

"No tricks. Can you make it through the companionway?" Ross asked a little sharply.

The man tumbled in a soggy pile on the cabin floor, a stream of lead nipping at his heels as the machine gun roared into renewed activity. He forced a twisted sort of grin at the rattling volley of lead.

"Lucky this hull's thicker than my arm," he said grimly.

"What happened?" Ross questioned.

"We were double crossed. The three of us ran into a whole flock of lead before we got to shore."

"Where are the others?"

"Dead probably. The boss, the big fellow, his name's Tom Lait, in case you don't know, was standing up in the boat. He got the first blast and stopped at least twenty bullets. He went down like a log. The black tumbled over in the bottom of the tender just as I got it in the arm, trying to jump. I rather think he's gone too."

"Who fired on you?" Ross demanded.

"The breed, Castro. I jumped out of the boat before I saw much and swam under water most of the way back here."

"How many men has Castro with him?" Ross queried, his voice full of anxiety.

"Two. One white by the name of Looper and a black cook." The man spoke freely.

Ross grunted aloud in relief.

"We've got an even chance then! Here, let me use this sheet to bind your arm."

WHEN the flow of blood had been stemmed from the flesh wound in the man's arm, Ross took up a position at the landward porthole, eyes on the silent beach and the death boat that drifted so lifelessly. The boat sank lower and lower, finally to vanish, with a gurgle of swirling dark waters.

Its hull had evidently been punctured close to the water line. It carried with it the huddled, unmoving figure that slumped between the thwarts. Objects inside the cabin were discernible, now that the pupils of the occupants' eyes had expanded to fit the darkness.

"You're a flyer, aren't you?" Ross queried of their wounded recruit.

"Yeh."

"What's your game here?"

The slender, wiry fellow hesitated briefly, then shrugged his shoulders in reluctant resignation.

"I'm just a hired pilot."

"Hired for what purpose?"

"Smuggling."

"Smuggling?"

"Yeh. Smuggling everything. Booze, Chinamen, contraband, the whole list. Lait's plane, the black-and-yellow job you saw—she's a two-motored amphibian powered with Hornets that make her do a hundred and sixty. He uses that to set the high-class stuff up in Georgia and Alabama."

"Up to date, I call it," Ross commented.

"Yeh. He's got three boat crews working for him besides, or rather he did have. Redding and Castro were

one. The two others are up on the Florida coast now."

"But what's the present rumpus about?" prompted Ross.

"You've got me. Castro and Looper turned up at headquarters yesterday. Right away Lait put out orders to search the island for a man and woman. That's the first inkling I had that anything was in the air. Guess maybe you know more about what's happened since that time better than I do.

"When they brought a fellow, who said his name was West, into camp last night, he didn't seem to have what Lait and Castro were after. This West fellow wouldn't talk much."

The girl leaped erect, her face white with anxiety. "What do you mean, wouldn't talk? He was killed!" But there was a ray of hope in her voice.

"Naw. Did you think——"

Ross interrupted. "He was alongside me when he got shot—a bullet through the head."

"Yeh. That so. Well, he's all right, or at any rate, he'll be on his feet in a day or so. Just a little gash in the scalp," the pilot assured them. "He's locked up in the storeroom, able to walk around."

The girl was sobbing her relief. The pilot studied their faces for a time, then grinned a bit shamefacedly and extended his good hand.

"What do you say we see this thing through together?" he proposed. "I've been mixed up with this gang for some time. Lait was a straight guy. He didn't want any killing. He gave Black Castro a cussing this afternoon and there was bad blood between them.

"How about a truce between you two and myself. My name's Jimmy Arnold."

The fellow was outspoken, evincing certain likable qualities. He had not hedged when he told his story. They were a long way from safety, a fact that brought home the knowledge that

this adventurer would be a valuable addition to their little force.

Ross extended his own hand to meet that of the pilot. He was accepted as one of them. Together they turned their eyes to the beach.

Ross jerked his thumb silently toward the strip of sand. "Mighty quiet all of a sudden. Reckon they'll try to flank us?"

"No boats left," said Jimmy Arnold. "How about yanking up the mud hook and putting out to sea?"

"It won't do to leave West. He is Miss Russell's uncle. Besides, you can't tell what that breed will do to him. I think he's crazy as a loon. No fate to leave a white man to."

"You said it. We'll stick and get him," Arnold declared.

The scrubbed deck was bathed in a brilliance that rivaled sunlight. The cloud banks had vanished. Ross pushed the body of the murdered black away from the area visible from the cabin.

They searched for arms, first the cabin, then later the entire boat. The net result of the search was a revolver and a small rifle, the latter hardly of value for anything other than small birds, monkeys, and surface fish for mess purposes. But there was plenty of ammunition for both, making the weapons welcome additions to their armament.

"What do you make of it?" Ross asked, looking up from the port where he had been eying the strangely lifeless beach for signs of movement.

"Not a thing stirring in the hush," Arnold agreed. "It's funny. I wonder if Castro has given up the job. On the other hand, possibly he was only after Lait."

"The moon is so bright there's nothing to be gained in trying to get ashore before daylight," Ross grunted. "When the sun gets up enough to light the jungle a little, I'll have a try at getting West back to this boat."

CHAPTER IX.

TROPICAL STALKING.

THE hours, until the quick coming of the tropical dawn turned the brackish air into a scalding, feverish inferno of oppressing heat, passed without anything untoward taking place. The temperature rose with the sun, like the interior of a blast furnace under full stoke.

Of the Waco, only one silver wing tip showed above the water, like the dorsal fin of some strange piscatorial monster. Steam arose from the shore line as the mangrove thickets began to bake, while farther back from the water line, royal and cocoanut palms shimmered under dancing heat waves.

Lazy looking gulls circled the reef, now and then pouncing upon an unlucky fish that was cast up by the surf. Long-legged sand runners prowled the strip of white beach, while in the tangle of vegetation, gaudy parrakeets croaked querulously at their less brightly marked rivals. Nowhere was there a sign of human presence.

Ross questioned the wounded pilot closely, regarding the layout of the island. From what he learned, he managed to put together a definite plan of action.

Arnold warned him it would be well to avoid the trail—a lamentable fact, for the jungle everywhere was a tangled maze, at spots almost impenetrable. It would be a two-hour task to force a passage as far as the headquarters buildings.

While Ross was gone, everything would be in Arnold's hands; it would necessitate loyalty and allegiance to their cause; a good deal of trust to bestow upon the new recruit. However, there was no other choice.

Jimmy Arnold disappeared into the lazaret in search of canned food, shortly after dawn. While he was out of sight, Ross spoke to the girl in an undertone.

"Do you think we can trust this fellow?"

"I believe so. We'll have to depend on him. But is it safe for you to go ashore?"

"I've been watching the beach closely. From what I can see, and from the way the birds act, I judge the jungle to be deserted."

"Why can't we all go, then?" she demanded.

"Dangerous. Besides, some one has to remain and guard the boat. It is our sole chance of escape."

Arnold came out of the lazaret with a can of sea biscuit, a jar of preserves, and two containers of tinned meats.

"Can you and Miss Russell hold the fort?" Ross asked him, watching closely for disquieting signs.

"Sure!" the wounded man assured him heartily.

Arnold gripped Ross' hand with a firmness that spoke of sincerity. "I mean it, buddy. You can lay heavy on me doing my part."

Ross went about certain simple preparations. They consisted only of tying his shoes to his belt, discarding his socks, and rolling his khaki trousers above his knees.

While he was engaged in this, a shot boomed out suddenly from a point somewhere inland. It was muffled, the sound carrying as from a considerable distance.

"Did you hear that?" Arnold grunted in surprise.

They waited for a long time, but no other report crashed through the hot silence.

"Now's your time," the wounded pilot urged. "It means that Castro is not watching the beach."

"I think you're right," Ross agreed, hastily tearing a two-foot square from the skirt of a southwester out of the clothing locker and wrapping the revolver, fully loaded, therein.

He hung to the rail for an instant, by

his fingers. The girl started to speak to him impulsively, but only squeezed his arm. But as he let go, the look in her eyes was strongly in his mind.

The sea was as clear and sparkling as an oriental mystic's crystal ball, and swarmed with fish that were tinted with all the colors of the solar spectrum.

Ross breasted the outgoing tide strongly; then stumbled up on the beach. He bent almost double as he dashed for the protecting jungle, half expecting, at any moment, to encounter flying lead.

The wounded pilot's guess had been correct. Ross was not fired upon. Once under cover, he replaced his shoes and plunged into the leafage. Thoughts of the single shot were heavy on his mind. What did it portend?

The heat was intolerable. Ross began to realize uneasily that he was not far from the point of exhaustion. Perspiration literally bubbled from his pores with each step. He gulped great lungfuls of the hot, pungent air, unable to rid himself of the half-choked feeling that oppressed him.

He listened many times, remaining quiet for so long that the fluttering of tropical birds about him, stilled as he approached, was resumed.

Arnold had been correct in describing the impenetrability of the growth. All of an hour was taken up with the struggle, before he approached within close range of the clearing.

He rested for a time while still a few rods from the rim of jungle that circled, like the edge of a saucer, about the open space which the smugglers had used as a landing field. His strength returned quickly and he moved ahead with the utmost caution.

The same hot, dead silence, rather horrible and oppressing, that had wrapped the shore, hung over the group of buildings. Even the harsh cries of the feathered folk seemed strangely subdued. Ross shivered in spite of the

perspiration that dripped from his soaked garments. To say that the atmosphere reeked of death was the only expression fitting the hot quiet.

A HUNDRED feet separated the spot where he was hidden, peering through a rift in the line of bush, from the building that, according to Arnold, served as the smuggler's living quarters.

Farther on, the black-and-yellow plane was baking in the sun, where it had been deserted during the night. The sea grass that carpeted the earth was two feet high and as rank as a Louisiana canebrake. Ross wallowed through it on his stomach, forcing the stems aside as he went.

There was no sign of life as he approached the structure. The same ghoulish silence prevailed, unbelievably weighting to the nerves. The wall was pierced with three windows, their sills waist-high above the earth.

Ross reached the wall and crouched under the eaves, his ear against the rough stones. Then, hearing nothing to indicate human occupancy, he lifted his eyes cautiously to the level of the dirty pane of glass.

The chamber was empty! Garments hung on the walls. Mosquito nettings draped the canvas sleeping cots. Everything was undisturbed and nowhere were there signs of a struggle.

Ross dropped back into the grass and crept cautiously along the wall, gun in hand. His eyes were on the two remaining structures as he rounded the corner. His foot struck a yielding object before he was aware of its presence. His eyes dropped, then he recoiled suddenly.

The body of a man lay at the corner of the building. Flies buzzed about a blue-rimmed bullet hole in the middle of the forehead and a ribbon of blood had congealed and was turning black beside the matted hair.

CHAPTER X.

SKYWARD AGAIN.

IT was Jack Looper. Ross felt the clammy wrist. The unwholesome-looking fellow was stone dead. The sun glittered back from the polished frame of a revolver that lay, half concealed, under the sprawled body. Ross examined the weapon. It was fully loaded.

He kept it. With a gun in either hand, he leaped through the open door and into the room he had inspected from the rear window. It was empty.

He did not doubt now that the shot they had heard on the boat, nearly an hour before, was the one that had brought death to the man lying outside.

But who had fired it? Had Castro gone on a killing rampage? Had West escaped?

From the door, Ross ran his eyes minutely over the clearing. He could see the entire inside of the hangar and it was empty.

He ran swiftly for the storeroom. It was here that Arnold had declared West was imprisoned. He rounded the corner and halted again. The building's single door, a massive affair of two-inch planking, was gaping, wide open! In addition, the rough interior was empty!

A bit of white cloth crimson stained and twisted, lay on the packed dirty floor. Casks and drums, their liquid contents plainly designated by label, were stacked in heaps—mute corroboration of the pilot's testimony.

Ross turned instinctively to the plane. The wicker seats in the slender, boatlike hull were empty. He crawled through the doorway and removed the hatch over the baggage wells, but they too were unoccupied.

The clearing was quiet; the red-tile roofs of the buildings shimmered under the heat waves. It gradually dawned on him that further search was useless.

An oppressive uneasiness settled like a cloud over his puzzled mind. Quite inexplicably, he was afflicted with a great impatience to reach the boat again.

He threw a glance of longing at the trail, but passed it by. Common sense dictated that danger lay in its reaches. His hands were leaving smirches of blood as he tore at the matted vines. He was well-nigh exhausted, dizzy, staggering, half mad from the heat. The journey back to the beach was to forever remain a mad delirium.

So near had exhaustion claimed him, that when he staggered through the last mangrove clump and out onto the white sand of the shore, he was scarcely aware that he was out of the labyrinth.

Then he halted, suddenly cold. The sea inside the reef was empty!

The boat had vanished. Unbelievably, he rubbed his eyes. The submerged wing tip protruded from the coral-bottomed waters as before—the sole touch that proved the realization that another link in the puzzle had welded itself into great obscurity during his two-hour absence.

The shore line was empty, and the sea also, as far as his eye could reach. Weariness and exhaustion dropped from him like a cloak. The plane!

THE black-and-yellow ship was his sole remaining hope. His feet pounded over the packed sand toward the wharf with no pretense at caution.

As he ran along the trail, points of fire played before his eyes, the result of undue exertion under the scorching sun. Superimposed was the vision of the look the girl had given him as he dropped from the rail and into the sea.

He knew all at once that her safety had assumed stupendous proportions in his mind.

The plane lay as he had left it, undisturbed, the door swinging open. He literally fell into the wicker-backed pi-

lot's seat behind the wheel of the controls. He ran an eye over the ultra-modern instrument panel.

Gas and oil needles registered well over toward the right-hand edge of the dials. Tanks were full. The ship was ready for the air. He threw the two-point switch of the electric inertia starters and the motors caught with almost the first rasping whine of the bendix shafts.

The same dead silence, the same ghostly desertion, undisturbed by human presence, wrapped the open space and the cluster of colorful buildings.

The tall grass made a hissing sound against the hull as the plane acquired momentum. Then he levered back on the mahogany rim of the wheel and zoomed over the nodding fronds of slender royal palms with a dozen feet to spare.

The first suspicion that struck him, overwhelming in its horrible significance, was that the boat had sunk.

The sea stretched away as far as the eye could reach, dropping below the horizon at what seemed an incredible distance. Nowhere on the vast expanse of cobalt was there even the tiniest fragment that resembled a surface craft.

Ross slid back one of the unbreakable glass panels and thrust his head outside, sweeping the sea with frantic concern, scarcely conscious of the screaming rush of air that tore at his eyeballs with clutching fingers.

The cay was shaped like an immense egg, and, at one end a high promontory presented an apparently unbroken line of rocky cliffs to the pounding sea.

Convinced the sea was empty, Ross cut his motors until the plane's speed was a bare ninety miles an hour and began tracing the shore line at an altitude of five hundred feet.

Over the lower end of the island he flew first, sweeping close to the coral formation. Then he pulled up the nose

of the ship and headed down the opposite side of the cay, toward the rocky headland, almost mountainous in its bluff steepness.

He came near passing up the missing boat. It was moored inside a little inlet, a bare gash in the sheer cliffs. It was lined with a fringe of towering palms that trembled in the breeze.

With wreckless disregard for safety, Ross dived so low above the inlet that the palm fronds clattered together, as from a hurricane, at the wind of his passage.

Aboard the craft, nothing stirred.

"I'll be damned!" Ross gave vent to the grunt as the amphibian thundered across the sheer sides of the little marine hiding place.

The boat was moored to the ruins of an ancient stone wharf. On the headland above the little inlet, more ruins, tumbled stone walls and abutments of weather-beaten, aged masonry, marked the site of an ancient town. Sizable palms grew out of the cracked walls and the whole was almost canopied over with a blanket of twining creepers.

It was out of the question to land the plane on the rocky headland. The nearest beach was a full three quarters of a mile from the inlet, and it was hardly wide enough to serve as a landing field for the ship.

Ross pulled the landing wheels of the amphibian up in their wells, then brought the plane down on the brine as close to the headland as possible. He ran the hull head on into the sloping beach with a force that skidded it high on the sand, threatening damage to the thin veneer planking.

The propellers had not stopped turning, when he was out of the pilot's seat and running toward the line of cliffs.

The short rest had been of immeasurable benefit. That, coupled with the stimulus of anxiety, more potent than a powerful narcotic, lent wings to his heels. He ran boldly, heedless of pos-

sible danger, a revolver swinging loosely in each hand.

A half mile ahead, the strip of sand that was the beach funneled off into a ribbon of white that vanished almost under the frowning headland.

Beyond, where no reef broke the running swell of the Caribbean, mounds of green water piled against the sheer cliffs, reaching up and up until their tips collapsed and fell back in a whipped, creamy mass of foam.

The sound of the surf, like the booming rush of many waterfalls, carried plainly to the ear.

Possibly it was the noise of the surf, possibly it was the hiss of his own labored breath through his clenched teeth—at any rate Ross did not notice the frantic creature who ran toward him until less than fifty feet separated them.

CHAPTER XI.

AMUCK!

A SQUAT, thick-lipped Carib, bare above the waist, dungaree trousers rolled to the knees, nostrils flaring, was bearing down upon him. With every leap, the native groaned prodigiously as though in mortal terror. The black attempted to dodge past, seemingly heedless of the white man's presence.

"Not so fast! Stop!" Ross harked.

Then he saw words would have no effect. He flourished both guns warningly and the runner came to a reluctant stop.

"Who are you? What's the matter?"

The black broke into a babble of Carib, of which Ross could understand no word.

"Speak English!" the flyer growled impatiently.

The black rolled his eyes in excitement, all the time glancing fearfully backward over his shoulder. He fairly blubbered as he poured out more of the dialect.

Ross seized the tangle of black hair and shook the squat native as he would an unclean rag.

"Savvy English?" he rapped impatiently. Then he demanded: "*Comprez Espanola?*"

"*Diablos—Caverno diablos!*" the terror-stricken black wailed.

"Say that again! Where's your devil?" Ross urged.

But the Carib's command of Spanish and English was little better than his questioner's knowledge of Portuguese, which latter seems to be the basis of the mongrel dialect that is the common medium of expression of the Caribs.

The story he finally put together from the negro's gestures and the few words they had in common was far from comprehensive.

The black man was as he suspected, the cook. Asked repeatedly as to the whereabouts of Black Castro, the negro waxed excited and unintelligibly loquacious.

Castro was gone! A devil in a cave had leaped out of the solid stone and with a fiendish screech and a flash of fire, gobbled up the gigantic breed. The Carib was indeed a pitiful spectacle of insane terror. The tale he told was ridiculous and preposterous. At the same time, there was no question but that something very much out of the ordinary had contributed to his state of abject fright.

More than likely he had witnessed the slaying of Jack Looper. Was the thing which had so thoroughly robbed him of his wits, the taking of three more lives?

Suddenly, Ross brushed his hands across the cook's ebony shoulders. It came away crimson with blood. Yet there was no cut or abrasion on the shiny skin.

When he thrust the stained hand under the flat, bulbous nose, the Carib was instantly off on another spasm of fear. He bleated shrilly and tried to jerk

free, and when that move met with no success, his teeth beat together like castanets.

"*Diablos!*" he whined. Then again: "*Diablos!*"

"Show me your devil!" Ross ordered firmly, shaking the black again.

The words increased the fellow's fright. He bolted. The flyer attempted to stop him, but he broke and fled with amazing speed, leaving in his wake a moaning torrent of gutturals.

Ross watched him go with furrowed brow. He was too tired to give chase. Besides, it was doubtful if he could have overtaken the frightened runner had he tried.

"You sure got the jeebies if any black ever had 'em," Ross grunted in perplexed tones. "I'd give a good deal to know whether you're naturally that flighty or if something has touched you off."

In his heart a desperate fear was growing as he took up the interrupted jaunt toward the mysterious cove. The narrowing strip of sand disappeared and he was forced inshore.

Struggling up the bluff, Ross found that travel on top was much easier. The jungle had thinned out until it was no longer the tangled mass that blanketed that portion of the island which was of coral formation.

The narrow inlet leaped up as from the stroke of a magician's wand, almost underfoot before he saw it. He halted, well aware of the foolhardiness of plunging headlong into the danger that might lurk below, and crouched, watching for signs of life aboard the craft.

There were no sounds other than the harsh cries of birds and the chattering of palm fronds above the booming surf.

URGED onward by his mounting trepidation, Ross descended the steep side of the cove, at times half sliding down the almost vertical slope and at others forced to cling labori-

ously to the jagged stone sides, feeling for footholds with his toes.

He landed with a jar on the ancient wharf and bounded toward the rail of the boat, half expecting each instant to feel the tear of hot lead at his vitals.

The very heedlessness of the move seemed to destine it to success, for the hollow clump of his feet on the deck planking brought nothing but their own echoes.

The body of the black had vanished. A dirty brown stain, swarming with flies, marked the spot where he had fallen. Ross advanced cautiously through the companionway, guns held before him. The interior of the cabin reeked of emptiness. The pair had disappeared!

A minute of searching over the rest of the craft convinced him of that. He vaulted to the roof of the pilot house and studied the sides of the inlet.

Higher up the rocky headland were more jumbled ruins, scarcely distinguishable from the vine-draped natural stone.

Why had the boat been brought to this spot? There must be some hidden significance to the move. Could the ruins be the explanation? What had happened to the black cook to reduce him to such a state of terror?

Ross leaped to the crumbling wharf and fought his way up the steep incline. By pure accident, he found what had once been a cobbled path, so wide that it might be termed a road.

The path wound around the opposite side of the inlet, ever ascending the rocky bluff toward the higher portion, where the headland towered like a sentinel over the narrow confines of the entrance.

Unexpectedly, he was precipitated into the chaotic ruins of an ancient fortress. A green-hooded parrot squawked excitedly and flapped away.

At the sound, Ross slid behind a crumbling abutment. His eyes bored

into every vine-curtained recess, into the tufted tops of royal palms and behind every square block of masonry that could conceal the giant breed.

Cold fingers laid themselves along his perspiring spine. Mentally, he cursed the haste that had caused him to mount the footpath without taking the time to examine the earth for footprints.

The ruins were extensive—a typical pirate stronghold, well-nigh impregnable in the seventeenth century.

Built by Spanish captives of the buccan-eating pilferers of the Main, under strict eyes and stricter whips, the old fortress had been a marvel of defense in its day, hovering as it did over the very mouth of the inlet where ample protection could be afforded the murder ships that lay moored to the long stone wharf.

But the state of destruction was not entirely the work of nature. Evidently the old cutthroat rendezvous had fallen, then been destroyed by powder and force of arm. Gigantic palms, growing out of the cracked walls, spoke of a decadence that had taken centuries to accumulate.

The ruins, sprawled across the up-thrust chin of the rocky bluff, were deserted. Ross moved cautiously from shelter to shelter, bestowing minute care on every fallen cube of stone. Nowhere was there a sign of those whom he sought.

He turned forlornly back toward the deserted boat. He had hoped to find Black Castro or, at the least, some trace of the big breed.

Suddenly he gasped and dropped to all fours. His eyes had found a cobbled path that angled off along the sheer side of the headland. There were footprints in the soft loam between the cobbles! Several of them. A number of persons had passed that way, and recently too, for the prints were sharply etched, not yet baked dry by the scorching sun that beat on them.

CHAPTER XII.

DEATH-DEALING ANCIENTS.

ROSS followed the trail, and he ran, although at times creepers formed an interlocking arch that forced him to stoop almost double. The cobbles suddenly vanished beneath a layer of damp earth.

He went to his knees and barely stifled a cry of exaltation. More footprints! In the soft soil was the sharp mark of a high-heeled, almost tiny boot.

His heart pounded furiously. Miss Russell had worn high-heeled, leather walking boots! He was on the right trail!

A little farther on another ruin appeared, likewise half smothered under a blanket of vines. It differed little from the first, except perhaps that more of the blocks of masonry were intact.

The tumbled mass crowded the very lip of the sheer bluff. Part of the formation even extended over the crest to form a terraced balcony overlooking the sea.

Ross stepped lightly, moving but a few inches at a time, straining his eardrums until they were on the point of snapping. A chalk-white mark left by a scraping heel guided him to what he was seeking; what he had half expected to find.

It was the mouth of an underground passage.

The passage was the work of man. Heavy blocks of skillfully cut stone had been torn down to expose the yawning, amazingly ancient, opening—torn down recently too, for the sun, as in the case of the footsteps in the soft loam of the trail, had not baked the moist black earth to a grayish, alkaloid consistency.

Sunlight penetrated for several feet into the tunnel, bringing into distinctness the network of cobwebs, freshly disturbed, that were heavy with dust.

Ross tensed in every muscle. Foot-

prints, undeniably of recent making, were thick in the half-inch layer of dust.

For long minutes, each one an eternity, he strained eyes and ears into the gloomy passage. Nothing stirred, no sound came back to indicate what waited within.

It required every atom of his courage to steel himself against the double menace of the darkness and the unknown. He plunged into the low-ceiled, musty smelling tunnel.

Once past the sun's illumination, he was forced to move slowly, feeling ahead with his hands along the wall. The layer of dust deadened the sounds his feet made.

As though shut off by the swinging of a door, the boom of the surf died to the faintest of murmurs and in the silence that followed, he became conscious of the odor of extreme age that hung over everything. The sound of his breath between clenched teeth was distressingly loud.

Ross moved forward for perhaps a score of yards. Then, without the slightest warning, the floor gave sickeningly underfoot. Ross clawed at the empty air. Equilibrium gone, he leaped frantically down and out, muscles bunching for the jar. He brought up with a stunning jolt, flat on his stomach, less than two feet down. The noise of falling stone was deafening in the narrow confines.

He lay where he had fallen until the echoes died and the breathless silence returned. The sounds brought no sign of movement from the pitch-black labyrinth ahead and he shivered involuntarily, for the quiet was like that of a tomb.

Further caution was hardly necessary. He had made enough noise to warn those he sought. His hands felt for the patent cigar lighter in his pocket.

It was safe, along with a dozen

matches, their sulphur heads rendered useless by water. It was dangerous to continue his search without light.

The contrivance gave a healthy spark from the tiny flint, but the wick refused to burn. Nervously he plucked at the cotton thread, pulling it out to expose a spot that was not waterlogged. Still he had no success.

As a last expedient, Ross unscrewed the plug of the fuel reservoir and jabbed the packing with one of the ruined matches to force petrol into the wick. Then at the first burl of the wheel it caught—a high, fragile, wavering flame.

LOOKING about him, Ross found he had not fallen into a subterranean room. The passage, no more than six feet wide, ran onward through the solid stone, the irregularities of the stone etched in shadows.

Behind him was a two-foot drop in the floor, the edge of which had crumbled under his weight. Merely a high, clumsy sort of step.

The lighter's flame died down, turned a sickly red. Hastily, Ross extinguished the flame, to conserve the meager supply of fuel, and stumbled back into the brilliant sunlight.

There he cast about for something that would serve as a torch. On the cracked flags, he found it, a dead limb, baked to a punkish dryness under the scorching sun's rays.

Kindling a fire of withered palm fronds with the lighter, not without difficulty, he ignited the end of the dry limb. While the flame was getting a start, he examined the revolvers. Then he faced the yawning blackness once more.

The improvised torch sent a sickly red glow that splashed the raw stone with scarlet. Smoke swept down, the pungent odor of scorching cobwebs and burning wood, and it was all he could do to avert a paroxysm of coughing.

As long as the skein of footprints was visible, the floor was probably sound. Ross half ran into the depths of the high stone bluff. In haste lay, to a certain extent, safety.

Beyond the step over which he had fallen in the darkness, the passage widened slightly. Shortly afterward a massive door of planks appeared, rotten with age. The big hinges of pig iron were sealed uselessly with rust. The door had been kicked down. It hung inward, half concealing what lay beyond.

Ross crowded past the wrecked portal and peered into a sizable chamber, hewn, like the tunnel, from stone.

He listened. Everywhere was the sepulchral quiet that was so unnerving. The dust-covered floor was marked with many footprints. He trembled with eagerness as his eyes picked up the telltale print of a small walking boot.

Ross stepped into the room and raised the smoldering limb, fanning it from side to side. The wood blazed up anew, bringing every detail of the chamber into smoky distinctness.

The room had been the arsenal of the old fortress. Round piles of rust—cannon balls dissolved by the corrosion of ages of exposure to the dampness of the floor—were scattered about. Several ancient carronades, their muzzles solid with rust, added to the litter that covered the floor.

Ross turned slowly on his heel, taking in the scene of musty, damp, corroded age with searching eyes. The flare of the torch carried a fitful sort of illumination to every cranny, throwing weird shadows along the dusty, jumbled floor.

Suddenly he gasped and stumbled backward. His head collided with an edge of the smashed door. The torch trembled in his nerveless hand.

Fighting a shocked paralysis, he brought his pistol hand slowly up.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BUCCANEER'S LAST LAUGH.

ROSS did not press the trigger. Death, sudden blasting oblivion, had already stricken the figure before his eyes. He shuddered, then ran a parched tongue over his dry lips.

The headless body of Black Castro sprawled grotesquely, one hand convulsed in death, clutching at the stone floor.

Ross stood rooted to the spot, bereft of the nervous impulse to move. Towering above the dead breed, as though poised in the middle of the death blow, was a grinning caricature of vengeance.

A suit of sixteenth century chain mail enveloped the body. The eyeless sockets of a human skull stared malevolently where the head should have been.

The flyer's first thought was of some ancient warrior, standing thus in death. Then he saw that the immense, rust-eaten sword the thing gripped in one mailed fist was sticky with fresh drawn gore.

Fighting down the horror that gripped him, Ross held his torch close. The illumination crept in behind the heavy slab of stone against which the thing stood, and crude machinery was visible behind the pivoting block, itself taller than a man.

Trembling in every fiber, Ross seized a rusted iron cannon ball and hurled it with all his strength, straight into the fiendish workings of the thing. He heaved another at the half-upraised sword and the blade snapped off short with a metallic clang.

Then he fought for a grip on a badly shaken set of nerves. One disquieting fact stood out glaringly. Where was the breed's severed head? It was not in sight.

Black Castro was not the first victim to be claimed by the hideous mechanical jokester. A pile of human bones,

whitened and musty, held tightly together by bits of aged cloth, lay in a pile where the breed had pushed them carelessly aside. Ross counted three skulls.

The flickering of the firebrand brought him abruptly to himself. There was no sign of those he sought. He fanned the limb briskly to revive it; then cast hurriedly about for another outlet.

Behind three of the rust-eaten cannons, he found steps that led down into impenetrable gloom. A maze of tracks marked the ever-present film of dust.

The torch was burning low and Ross almost leaped forward, down the steps and along the narrow passage that led him onward.

Scarcely had he covered a dozen paces when he stumbled and fell headlong. His head struck the rough wall and the torch hurtled from his hand and sizzled in the moisture on the floor. For an instant, points of flame flickered before his eyes. He recovered the torch hastily and scrambled to his feet.

Ross examined the object over which he had tripped. It was another carronade, so rotten with rust that part of the bore had caved in under the impact of his toe. He stared at the ancient weapon. What he saw sent a sudden feeling of unreality sweeping over his person.

Then he drew himself together. There was no time to lose. Exploration would have to be quickly done, for less than a foot of the torch remained.

The tunnel changed direction a few feet farther on. The dust-laden cobwebs made a hissing sound as flame consumed them.

A barrier loomed abruptly up out of the darkness. It was an age-rotted plank door. A few well placed kicks felled it down. A massive block of stone was behind it, evidently turning on a pivot, for there was no sign of a hinge.

A metal ring was affixed in the stone. Ross seized this and pulled until his ears rang and his eyes bulged, but the block did not budge more than an inch.

He held the torch close to the floor. The pattern of footprints indicated plainly that those he had sought had passed through it and beyond.

While his eyes were on the floor, he discovered why the door would not open. A round stob of stone, cunningly contrived, rested in a hole in the floor and formed a clever stop.

Ross pulled at the plug, threw it aside, and seized the ring again. The heavy panel squeaked, then moved outward with a grating screech that eclipsed its previous complaints.

A room of uncertain size lay immediately beyond. It was wrapped in Stygian blackness. Ross stepped forward.

The torch chose that instant to burn its last. Flame wrapped about his fingers and he dropped the charred end on the stone floor, where it died in a brilliant shower of sparks.

A rushing body struck Ross amidstships with the force of a battering-ram. Arms wrapped about him. It seemed there were dozens of groping hands in the darkness. He was swept from his feet.

Going down, a great load seemed to fall on his head, a crushing weight that drove away all capacity for material feeling. Then the blank void of unconsciousness came with a rush.

WHEN Ross regained his senses, he was first conscious of strong sunlight beating into his eyes. He squinted against the glare and turned his head to one side in an effort to see what was going on about him.

"Mr. MacGuire—Ross!"

The tones were soft, anxious, feminine. It was the girl's voice!

"My head! What happened?" Ross groaned.

Other voices came out of the brilliant glare of sunlight against which his eyes were refusing to function.

"You're all right, buddy. Just a little hump on the think tank." Jimmy Arnold's tones.

Ross found he could move his arms after a certain amount of painful effort. He folded them above his eyes, shutting out the direct rays of the white-hot sun.

His head was pillowed on something that was alive and moved. He stared upward curiously and discovered Lucille Russell's anxious eyes almost against his own. His head was pillowed in her lap!

Near by stood the girl's uncle, West, whom Ross had seen shot down on the beach. The man appeared little the worse for his experience, other than a turbanlike bandage around his head. Beside him was Jimmy Arnold, who also seemed unharmed.

"You are all safe?" Ross demanded unbelievably.

"All of us," the girl echoed.

"But—how—"

"How did you get laid up? Very simple. You opened the door to the underground room in which we were prisoners. Thinking you were Castro, Arnold here, and myself piled on you," West explained. "Sorry we made the mistake we did."

"Where are we now," Ross asked. Then he sat up and saw they were outside the mouth of the secret tunnel. The girl got quickly to her feet, a look of relief in her eyes.

"How on earth did you find this spot?" West asked curiously.

Ross explained in a few words. He did not mention the finding of Black Castro's body. Without a light, the party had undoubtedly passed out of the passage without discovering it.

"But where is Black Castro and the black?" West demanded. "Aren't they liable to return?"

"No—at least, Castro isn't," Ross told him. "Castro—well—he met with an accident."

"He's dead?"

"Very much so! I didn't do it, however." Ross added quickly, when he caught a flicker that passed over the girl's face. "It was—well—I'll explain later."

"And the black cook?"

"Scared out of his wits. He will give us no more trouble."

"Can you walk?" West inquired. "If so, we'll go down to the boat and I'll mix some whiskies. I feel badly in need of one, myself."

"How did Castro get hold of the boat?" asked Ross when the party was headed, single file, down the pathway.

Arnold, walking immediately behind him, volunteered the explanation. "It was painfully easy. Castro used West for a shield. He swam out to the boat, threatening all the time to drown West if we resisted. Nothing to it but surrender. Then he brought us here.

"He had some sort of a drawing, which he followed in finding the mouth of the passage. The wall seemed solid, but he dug out a few blocks and there was the tunnel. After he looked the place over a few minutes, he left us locked in that old dungeon cell.

"Some place that! Skeletons of men that had died in chains, along the walls! Regular hell. We had no light after he left and took his electric lamp with him, but we had seen enough while he was examining the place to make sure it was solid enough to hold us.

CHAPTER XIV.

PRICELESS!

THEY reached the boat and filed down the companionway, away from the scorching sun. They sprawled on the furniture, while West dug up a squat, big-bodied, small-necked rum bottle and a seltzer siphon.

"Better take a good shot of quinine with that whisky to stave off the fever," he warned. "You have been wet off and on all day and last night."

"I don't see yet what this mess is all about," Ross puzzled aloud, his eyes on West.

The retired lawyer returned his glance levelly, then spoke in even tones. "You remember that money belt I asked you to guard?"

"Sure."

"There was a map inside it. That was what Castro was after. It was the map that he employed in finding the underground tunnel. The passage had apparently been sealed tight for years. Without the map, the chances are that it never would have been found, except by accident."

Ross listened intently. He felt no ill effects from the attack, other than a slight ringing in his ears and a headache, which hardly occupied a place in his thoughts. Like the others, he was fatigued, but the potent stimulant was doing considerable to dispel this feeling.

"A treasure map?" Ross queried curiously.

West nodded, then continued:

"The story back of the chart is a rather long one, but not at all exciting until recently. I found the map where it had been hidden, presumably centuries ago, in the barrel of an old pistol which is part of a collection that has been something of a family heirloom for a good many generations.

"I found the thing by accident and, at the time, did not place a great deal of faith in it. In fact, I gave it hardly a thought. That was two years ago.

"The chart lay neglected in my desk until two months ago, when I was confronted with the necessity of cruising in the Caribbean for my health.

"What could be more fitting than that I should test the genuineness of the chart while I had such an opportunity?

"I leased this boat from Redding at Nassau. He agreed to make the trip for me for a very nominal price, without, of course, knowing the real objective. In fact, he did not seem greatly concerned on that point.

"From what Mr. Arnold tells me, I suspect the authorities were pressing upon his trail and that he took the cruise merely to allay any suspicions.

"I know now that this fellow, Black Castro, must have discovered the presence of the map. He killed Redding, in my opinion, by pushing him overboard some time during the night. What followed grew out of his attempts to get his hands on the chart.

"I grew suspicious immediately. We anchored here and Castro disappeared along with the other member of our crew, Jack Looper. When Castro returned alone in the morning, I was doubly cautious. I managed to knock the big breed unconscious and, with Miss Russell, attempted to regain the boat.

"Black Castro had obtained help from this smuggling gang. They approached so close to our hiding place that I thought it best to attempt to decoy them away.

"I was unsuccessful, for Castro gained on me and I saw he was in a killing mood. I lost my wits. Later I heard the noise of your plane and just managed to reach the beach as you landed."

"Your map must have been a genuine, then," Ross hazarded. He was silent for a moment, then asked unexpectedly: "Got a lantern or an electric flash lamp aboard?"

"In the navigating locker, I think," West said.

"Get them. I've got something you'll be glad to see. That is, of course, if you feel equal to the task of walking back to the tunnel."

The party repaired to the ruins, to the spot where the heavy blocks of stone

had been torn away from the concealed passage.

"How about that black?" Arnold suggested as they were about to enter the low archway. "He's liable to get a grip on his nerve. One man, hiding outside the entrance to this thing, could cause a lot of trouble."

"That's so," Ross agreed. "are you willing to guard the entrance?"

The smuggler pilot agreed readily. Ross laid a restraining arm on the girl's shoulder as she was about to enter.

"There is—well—an ugly sight in there. You had better wait outside with Arnold."

She did not offer objection. Rather, she seemed to be relieved. The horror of the imprisonment in the underground cell was a memory that still lingered.

THE body of Black Castro lay where Ross had last seen it. When he caught sight of it, West gasped aloud in horrified surprise.

"You will notice the floor of this chamber is of blocks, rather than solid as in the tunnel," Ross said to the retired lawyer.

"See that square crack in the floor around which the dust has been freshly disturbed? I think your treasure lies under it. Seems to be a trapdoor of some sort.

"I suspect that the act of lifting it set the mechanism that operated the sword into motion. There is probably no danger, now that the machinery is smashed."

Together they levered up the slab, exposing a recess that was full two feet in dimensions. A chest, ancient and corroded, filled half of the cubical recess. Both men turned away in nausea. The severed head of Black Castro grimaced horribly up from the lid of the chest, where it had fallen when the death blow fell.

They removed the head, placed it by the body, and Ross covered the mutilated form with his coat. The chest grated metallically against the floor as they dragged it to the middle of the room.

Together they bent over the lid. It was welded tight by corrosion.

"Jar the top with a stone," Ross suggested.

West held the flash while the flyer wielded a stone the size of his fist. With a surprisingly negligible amount of persuasion, the flat cover came free.

The musty remains of many layers of velvet, which covered the contents, fell away in their hands as they attempted to remove it. A mass of scintillating fire was revealed.

Diamonds, rubies, in mountings of tarnished gold; tiaras, bracelets, buckles, queer-shaped coins—all lying loose in the rotted remains of what had once been leather and silken bags. The light thrown back into their eyes was that of a million spectral rays.

"Priceless!" West gasped, his voice a croaking effort in the musty chamber.

Ross, finding no words that fitted his thoughts, kept silent.

"A fortune beyond doubt," West muttered.

"Come with me. There is something else," Ross said, bringing the man out of his ecstasy of observation.

They followed the flickering shaft of the electric flash along the tunnel to the spot where Ross had fallen over the rust-eaten carronade.

With his toe, Ross enlarged the hole he had accidentally kicked in the rotten metal.

An examination revealed what had given Ross his feeling of extreme unreality as he searched for the missing trio. The cannon's bore was stuffed with jewels and gold! With treasure!

A small fortune in gold coin and bejeweled ornaments trickled out as he

rolled the carronade over and over. Pieces of eight, doubloons, and odd shaped coins that were of hammered virgin gold.

CHAPTER XV.

NEW SIGNIFICANCE.

THEY buried Black Castro on the high headland that same afternoon. The murdered Jack Looper, they interred in the clearing. Once they caught sight of the cook, but the frightened black fled as though pursued by demons.

"Let him go. He's harmless," Ross grunted, and the others agreed.

The three men removed the chest to the boat. Then they returned with a duffel bag and rifled the bore of the carronade. They searched the underground magazine and the stone passageways but turned up no more treasure.

"We are going to be wealthy," West declared, after he had inspected the trove in the light of day.

Ross got the engines going and they sailed out of the hidden cove and back to their old anchorage off the spidery wooden wharf: less than a hundred feet from the spot where the silver wing tip of the sunken Waco protruded above the sparkling waters.

Jimmy Arnold suddenly refused to accept any part of the treasure. He summarized his views thusly:

"I've been in the smuggling racket so long that I have quite a stake salted away. And I'm off this booze-running racket from now on. Me for the straight and narrow. I'll get me a couple more ships and start an aviation service somewhere in the States."

And to this Arnold stuck, obdurate to argument.

The tropical night came, more splendid, more gorgeous, than ever it seemed to the party on the boat. Despite almost thirty-six hours without sleep, Ross loafed on the deck for a time, inhaling the delightful fragrance of a perfect from West's supply.

His mind was on the fortune that reposed in a wooden packing box below decks. On the morrow it would be transferred to Jimmy Arnold's plane and they would take the air for Miami and the States.

From West's rough estimate, Ross was in possession of a sum that amounted to more than he had thought was in the world thirty-six hours before.

"To-morrow we'll be in Miami."

It was Lucille Russell's voice making the observation. She had approached, unobserved, and was standing at his side.

"Yes. Sort of hate to leave this place. I spent about the swiftest twenty-four hours I ever put in chasing around over it."

"You lost your plane, too."

"What's the difference! It was about worn out. West says the treasure will assay into the hundreds of thousands. I can buy a whole fleet of planes."

"Yes. And will you?"

"Expect so. What are you thinking of doing?"

Perhaps there was something of an eager question in the casual query. Ross' eyes dropped to the face of his companion. What he read there caused his tones to suddenly change.

"Miss Russell—Lucille—"

For the first time the tropical heavens, shot with all the glory of the moon and an infinite number of stars, took on a new significance.

BLACK HAND

By Vic Whitman

Another radio cop story by this popular author, complete in our next issue.



Hot Music

By Vic Whitman

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

SIGNALS IN CODE.

IN one of the broadcasting rooms of Station KYK a famous dance band was setting up its instruments preparatory to a half hour's entertainment. The players were laughing and joking, with no need for silence. The power had been switched to a little room overhead where Officer Dave Cates, official police announcer, was holding forth in code to police details all over the great city.

"Nothing further has been done by those in authority about the addition of fifty new plain-clothes men to the force," Cates said into the microphone. "Headquarters is inquiring into the matter, however, and may be expected

to give out more information at any time."

All of which meant to the listening ears of the police:

"There have been no more developments in the Van Goss jewelry robbery of two weeks ago. Headquarters is planning to assign more men to the case."

This was the job of Dave Cates, who was listed on the books as an officer solely because of his connection with the department. He was a verbal messenger boy, conveying the reports and orders of headquarters over the air to the police details of the city. Because plenty of red blood flowed through the small body of Officer Cates the job sometimes got very tiresome.

If only he could go out on such a case as the Van Goss robbery, he would

find the action he craved. Then again, the solving of such a case with its monetary reward would bring his dream that much nearer; a dream intimately concerned with a hazel-eyed, laughing little dancer and a white, green-shuttered bungalow with a forty-foot garden plot out back.

Probably Anabelle Talbot was listening in to him now. She usually did every evening before she went out to the Salon Quintesse to dance to the music of Leo Archer's famous band.

Cates sighed and glanced at the electric clock on the wall. "There is yet five minutes of time remaining to us," he announced, "but since there doesn't seem to be any more——"

He stopped suddenly. Some one had come hurriedly into the little telephone room and was talking in excited, petulant tones.

"A woman," Cates murmured. "Now what the deuce does she want up here?" Louder, he said, "Please stand by for one moment." Then he stepped into the telephone room.

A young woman was firing questions at the harassed telephone operator. Her clothes, her manner and her intonation, told Cates that she was a woman of culture and apparent wealth.

With her was a man in his early thirties. Tall, lean, handsome, with a cynical mouth and a complexion that tended to the sallow, Cates recognized him instantly as Leo Archer, leader of the dance band which was waiting below.

Archer was leaning indolently against the door, obviously bored by the proceedings. He stifled a yawn as Cates looked at him.

"Here he is now," grumbled the operator. "S'pose you talk to him."

The young woman turned swiftly. "You are Mr. Cates, the police radio announcer?" she asked.

"Yes." Cates noticed that her face was white and distracted, that her lips

were trembling. He failed however to see that first faint look of surprise in her eyes.

It was difficult for most radio listeners to reconcile Dave Cates' rich, golden voice with his small, stocky body, his sandy hair and his freckled face.

"Yes, I'm Cates," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh!" Her exclamation was part sob. "I—I came up to tell you that I have just been robbed of a very valuable necklace and two diamond rings. I thought you might broadcast it to the police. That seemed better than——" Her voice trailed away.

Cates' blue eyes lighted with interest. Could this robbery be connected with the Van Goss robbery? He thought quickly how strange it was that she had happened to report it to him first. He wasn't superstitious, but—— A fleeting picture of the bungalow went through his mind.

"Certainly," he said promptly. "Your name and address, please?"

"Miss Meusel—Miriam Meusel—apartment No. 8 at the Dutton Arms."

"Can you describe the robbery briefly, Miss Meusel, and give me any clues you may have to the bandit's appearance? This is just so the patrolmen in the vicinity can be notified to watch out for a certain type."

Cates' coolness seemed to steady the young woman.

"I haven't any clues or any ideas about it," she told him. "I just returned to my apartment and found out then that the jewelry had been taken from my wall compartment."

"About what time should you say it was taken?"

"Some time between four thirty and eight. That was the time I was out."

"I see."

Cates glanced at the clock as he went back to the microphone. He saw that the time was eight thirty-three. It

would do little good to report this robbery by air; still, it would be imparting instantly such meager information as he had.

Briefly, in code, Dave Cates announced the robbery. Then he signed off for the evening and returned to Miss Meusel and Archer.

"The information has been given, Miss Meusel," he said. "We can't do much more until we get more facts."

"That won't do you any good," yawned Archer. "You chaps couldn't see anything that was plain before your eyes."

Cates looked at the man. Naturally hot-headed, he had trouble in checking the retort that impulse prompted. Archer's contemptuous remark reflected upon the department and, hence, reflected upon Cates. Then and there he accepted the challenge.

He turned to the telephone operator. "Henry, connect me with Captain Hennessey, will you?"

In a moment the captain's gruff voice sounded: "Police headquarters."

"This is Cates," reported the radio cop. "Get the dope all right?"

"Too well. Where are you now?"

"At KYK." Cates drew a deep breath and braced himself. "Captain, how's for me to go over and take a look at Miss Meusel's apartment?"

"You!"

"Sure. I can get the dope for you. I know I can."

Silence for a moment. Cates could imagine the energetic veteran considering.

Presently: "All right, go ahead. You can't do any worse than the others, anyway. And listen: you know how you like to talk when you get started? Well, cut it out, and let the others talk. Understand?"

Cates grinned. "Yes, captain," he said meekly.

"All right, then. Bring me as full a report as you can get."

Exultantly Cates turned from the phone.

"Now, Miss Meusel," he said, "if you don't mind I'll go over to your apartment."

Archer left them at the door to the KYK studios.

"My band starts broadcasting in ten minutes," he explained, "otherwise I'd go over with you, Miriam." He grinned sardonically at Dave Cates. "Oh, pardon me. I forgot the master mind here."

"Don't pay any attention to what he says, Mr. Cates," urged Miss Meusel.

"I don't," said Officer Cates quietly.

CHAPTER II.

CRASHING SYNCOPATION.

THE Dutton Arms was near by, which probably accounted for Miss Meusel coming to the broadcasting studio instead of at once notifying headquarters. Her apartment was roomy and furnished in quiet, luxurious taste.

"Do you live here alone?" Cates asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I play a concert violin and I do all my practicing here." She smiled faintly. "Nobody else would want to be around, even though my violin is very old and considered one of the best in tonal quality in the country."

Dave Cates rubbed thoughtfully at his chin. Then, without comment, he started to look around the place. Nothing had been disturbed, according to Miss Meusel, save that the wall-compartment door was swinging on its hinge.

Cates strolled to the window and looked out. The automatic fire escape had not been used, as he realized when he tapped the edge of the draw and found that dust clung to his fingers.

Turning from the window he went across the room. A violin case lay on the table and Cates gazed idly at it.

Something on the floor caught his attention and he stooped, then looked up at the watching girl.

"Have you been playing recently?" he asked.

"No, I'm sorry to confess that I haven't touched the violin for two days," she answered. "It hasn't been out of its case."

Cates sat down.

"Suppose you tell me of your activities between four thirty and eight," he suggested.

Miss Meusel considered for a moment.

"Well," she began, "about four fifteen Leo Archer phoned and asked me to meet him over at the Renhurst, where his band plays for tea dances. I put my necklace and rings away, and started out with Mr. Hughes who had called to see me about a business matter.

"In turning to say something to me, Mr. Hughes bumped into that table, knocking over a flower vase, a box of candy, and some books. My maid was out for the afternoon and evening and since I was in a hurry and couldn't attend to it, Mr. Hughes kindly offered to remain behind and clean things up a bit."

"It looks as if he did, too," commented Cates negligently. "Do you by any chance mean Arthur Hughes?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

Cates knew of him only by reputation as being wealthy and somewhat eccentric young idler.

"I've heard the name," he replied. "It doesn't matter. Please go on with your story."

She continued: "I left Mr. Hughes behind and went to the Renhurst, where I waited some fifteen minutes for Leo Archer. We had tea and afterward we drove out to an inn for dinner with Gerald Terhune—he's the manager of Archer's band.

"Then, when I returned to the apart-

ment, I found that the jewelry was gone."

"You say you had to wait fifteen minutes for Archer at the Renhurst?"

"About that long—yes. But that's nothing unusual, for he's never on time. He told me he was up in his office at the Renhurst working on a new number he's writing."

"A good band leader, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's wonderful!" she enthused.

"You wouldn't think to look at him that he can direct such a band. Yet his team is one of the jazziest in the country. He's awfully temperamental, though. He can write and score the weirdest numbers, but he needs actual inspiration to do it."

Cates rose and went to the radio. "Do you mind if I tune in on him for a moment?" he asked. "I never paid any attention to his band, probably because I'm not much of a musician."

"Of course not."

CATES turned the dials and presently the music of a dance band filled the room. It was crashing syncopation of the first order with a steady foundation of piano, banjo, bass, and drums holding solidly beneath a structure of silken saxophones, shrilling violins, and cutting trumpets.

Despite the worry of her loss, Miriam Meusel's foot tapped to the tempo of the music and her shoulders swayed gracefully.

"Isn't that marvelous!" she exclaimed.

Musical or not musical Dave Cates could not but feel that compelling sweep of the rhythm.

"Hot stuff," he agreed.

He was frowning a bit as he shut off the radio and reseated himself.

"By the way, Miss Meusel, are there any other keys to this apartment besides your own?"

She hesitated, looking at him oddly.

"Yes," she responded. "My maid

has one and the janitor, of course, has a pass key."

"Any others?"

"No."

"I suppose you have a number of friends who know this apartment quite well."

She became indignant.

"Yes, naturally, but I don't see what on earth my friends have to do with this."

"Nothing," murmured the little radio cop. "Nothing at all. Only we have to consider everything, you know."

At that moment some one came to the door, and there was a sound as of a key being put into the lock. Miriam Meusel rose hurriedly and went to the door where, Cates thought, she made some whispered remark.

Then a short, florid-faced man entered. Seeing Cates, he turned to Miss Meusel.

"I didn't know you were entertaining, Miriam," he said in a purring voice. "Otherwise I would not have called."

She avoided Cates' eyes as she made the introduction.

"This is Mr. Cates, Mr. Terhune," she said. "Mr. Cates is from headquarters, Jerry."

Cates acknowledged the introduction with a quick handshake. He knew of Terhune, manager of Archer's band and recently appointed chairman of the general committee for the Charity Ball.

Yet he reacted strongly from this first acquaintance. Terhune's softness, his ingratiating smile, went against Cates' sturdy grain.

"Ah, the robbery—yes," said Terhune softly. "A great shame, Miriam, and probably the work of some clever, experienced crook. Getting so a man hardly dares take his afternoon nap. In fact, this afternoon I fancied I heard some one prowling about my room. Doubtless it was purely imaginary."

"May I ask where your room is?" said Cates.

"At the Renhurst, Mr. Cates."

A loud knock came on the door. Miss Meusel admitted Arthur Hughes, a tall, big-shouldered young man with gray eyes, and a suggestion of recklessness in his bearing.

"Say, this sure is tough, Miriam!" he burst out impetuously. "About the robbery, I mean. I just heard about it and ran in to see if I could help out in any way."

The girl patted his arm.

"You're a dear, Arthur," she said, "but Mr. Cates is handling the affair."

Introduced, Cates took a quick inventory of Hughes and found that he rather liked him. But perhaps that was because Hughes appeared to good advantage when contrasted with Terhune.

"Don't misunderstand my questions," Cates said to Hughes, "but I understand you were up here this afternoon after Miss Meusel left the apartment."

Hughes grinned boyishly and drew a cigarette case from his pocket.

"I knew I'd come under suspicion," he remarked. "Yes, I was up here. I came because I had heard from some friends of mine in Philadelphia in regard to a concert booking for Miss Meusel, and I knew she'd be interested."

"How long were you here after she left the apartment?"

"Oh, a matter of ten or fifteen minutes," said Hughes indifferently. "Just long enough to pick up some things I kicked over."

"Did you meet any one going out?"

"Not in the building. There were people passing outside."

Cates nodded. "I see," he said. "Well, I guess that's all for now, Miss Meusel. I'll give you a report as soon as possible."

At the door Cates paused. "By the way, Mr. Terhune," he asked, "are you having Leo Archer play at the Charity Ball?"

Terhune wriggled like a puppy eager to please.

"Why, yes," he answered. "Don't you approve?"

"You bet your life I do," answered Officer Cates with conviction.

CHAPTER III.

PIPE DOWN!

CAPTAIN HENESSEY looked up as Cates came into headquarters. Then he threw down his pen, grinned, and leaned back in his chair. The stalwart, grizzled veteran liked Cates and secretly admitted that the boy had possibilities aside from oratory.

"How'd you make out?" he demanded.

Officer Cates of the wave-length squad dropped down in a handy chair and lit a cigarette. Then he drew a deep breath and set himself for speech.

"Not so bad, captain," he said. "To begin with, there are plenty of probabilities in connection with this case as I see it; so many, in fact, that it's going to be a tough job to reconcile all of them to the distinct end of any definite lead. Now, when it comes to robberies in general——"

Captain Hennessey interrupted with a bang of his big fist on the desk.

"Must you always begin everything with a public speech?" he roared. "I haven't got time to listen to the history of the world! What I want are the facts on this Meusel case. Have you got them or must I crown you with the record book?"

Officer Cates grinned, not in the least abashed. He knew the captain quite as well as the captain knew him.

"I have 'em and here they are," he said.

At the conclusion of the story Captain Hennessey frowned.

"Let's see now," he summed up, "Archer was fifteen minutes late in meeting her, Hughes remained behind

in the apartment, and Terhune evidently had a key that she wouldn't tell you about. Added to that, the maid, the janitor, and other unknowns must be considered."

"I know," agreed Cates. He eyed his superior with some speculation. Might as well broach what he had in mind now.

"Any objections if I go on this case unofficially?" he asked, hoping he sounded casual.

Captain Hennessey glared at him. "What are you talking about!" he demanded.

"Just what I say," answered Cates sturdily. "I've got ideas and plenty of spare time and I'd like to put 'em both to work. Somebody's got to solve the thing and it might as well be me."

"Well, speaking of nerve——"

"Sure," retorted Cates. "A guy's got to have it these days. Just look back along the ages and consider the men who have put themselves forward. Look where they got! See what they did! Consider Julius Caesar, for example. Why, he——"

"All right," said the captain hastily. "This is no debate."

Thoughtfully he toyed with a pencil on his desk. Recalling the Margolo gang affair, the captain realized that his small radio cop had police stuff in him. The point was to bring him along gradually; not let him get discouraged too many times.

"Suppose you tell me some of your ideas on this case, lad," he suggested.

Cates' reply was instant. "Sure thing. I think that whoever took that jewelry had a key to the apartment; I think that both robberies were done by the same person or persons.

"To-morrow, if you don't object, I'm going to talk to Mrs. Van Goss and try to make the two robberies dovetail.

"Also, I'm going to put a lot of time on that key Terhune had. And finally, I won't interfere in the least with the

work the other men are doing. Only —only—"

"Only what?"

"If I run down these jewels, I'd like to claim the reward myself. You see, captain—" He hesitated and blushed like a schoolboy.

"Yes, I see a lot that you don't think I see, lad," observed the captain gravely, though with a twinkle in his shrewd eyes. "She's a fine little girl, and I wish you luck. Run along to her now and consider yourself on the case."

EARLY the next afternoon Dave Cates presented himself at the apartment of Mrs. Van Goss—a sparkling little widow who rumor had it, had received an immense fortune with the death of her husband. She met Cates pleasantly enough, though with a questioning lift of well-placed eyebrows.

"I'm from headquarters, Mrs. Van Goss," he explained. "May I ask you a few questions?"

She sighed. "Dear me, I've answered hundreds of questions since my apartment was broken into. But go ahead and I'll tell you what I can."

"I'll try to be brief."

He smiled, and she smiled in return. Somehow Cates' twisted little grin reflected the richness of his voice, and few people could resist the combination.

"Now," he continued, "was it a phone message that called you out on the day of the robbery?"

"It was."

"Would you mind telling me who the call was from?"

"Not a bit," she answered promptly. "It was from Mr. Hughes."

"Arthur Hughes?"

"Yes. He was asking me to have tea with him at the Renhurst."

Cates felt a quick excitement that his voice did not betray.

"Your jewels were taken during your absence, I presume," he said.

"They were. I returned here about six as I recall it."

"I see. Do you happen to know Leo Archer, or Terhune, or Miss Meusel very well?"

"Oh, yes, I know them all very well indeed," said Mrs. Van Goss. "In fact we're in and out of each other's places all the time."

"Are there any other keys to this apartment besides the ones your maid and the janitor have?"

"No."

"Do you always carry your key with you when you go out Mrs. Van Goss?"

"I do now," she confessed with a rueful little laugh. "Before the robbery I always left my key out in a potted plant in the corridor, simply because I seem to have a propensity for losing keys."

"Which is unfortunate, sometimes," smiled Dave Cates. "I think that's all, Mrs. Van Goss, and thank you very much."

She went with him to the door. "I hope you have learned something of value to you," she said. "Good afternoon."

OUTSIDE, Cates' smile faded as he realized that the thing was in more or less of a tangle. He had become convinced that the same man committed both robberies—due to the likeness of the two telephone calls and the fact that the robberies were almost identical in points of time and circumstance.

Going strictly by formula Hughes was the obvious suspect, since he had phoned Mrs. Van Goss and since he had been in Miss Meusel's apartment after she had left it.

But it was a bit too obvious to satisfy Cates, regardless of the fact that Captain Hennessey's best men were constantly watching Hughes.

Much more pertinent to him was Miss Meusel's denial of any one's possession of a key other than her own.

Walking slowly, Cates reasoned. If only he could locate those jewels the rest would be easy. The only way he might do that was to carry out the idea he had in mind—a dangerous but possibly effective plan. That plan, in brief, was to search a man's rooms.

He hesitated, then his bulldog jaw squared. After all, he was working toward that little white bungalow, and that was worth any risk. If he could get evidence this way, so much the better.

Within the next hour Officer Cates had found the place he wanted, had made sure no one was around, and had entered by means of a skeleton key.

He searched hurriedly but thoroughly, taking care to replace everything he overturned, in order that the occupant might not become suspicious.

Finished, Cates scratched his sandy head and swore.

"The son of a gun!" he muttered. "I was sure there'd be something up here. This knocks everything into a cocked hat."

CHAPTER IV.

ZOWIE!

DEJECTEDLY Cates returned to headquarters to make his report to Captain Henessey. The captain laughed.

"Don't take it so much to heart, lad," he encouraged. "Sometimes it requires weeks, months, years to untangle one of these things."

"I suppose so," nodded Cates despondently. "Say, captain, what makes a crook, anyway?"

Captain Henessey eyed his little radio officer uncertainly.

"So help me, you can ask some of the damndest questions I ever heard of!" he ejaculated.

Then, seeing that Cates was in earnest, he went on more kindly: "If you must know, Dave, there's probably a million different things, as you'll find out when you've been in this business as

long as I have. Environment, moods, impulses, hatred, hunger, needs excitement, mental—why, what's the trouble? Got an idea?"

For Dave Cates had suddenly sat bolt upright his blue eyes eager.

"I'll say I have! How good it is I don't know, but I'm going to sock it for all it's worth. Listen."

Captain Henessey didn't scoff at the plan. He was much too experienced in police work for that.

"Not bad at all, lad," he acknowledged. "It may not work, but then again it may. Anyway, I'll see that a microphone is installed where you want it."

Cates looked at his watch.

"Time for the broadcast, captain," he said. "Give me the stuff you've got ready. Afterward, I think I'll take a run out to the Salon Quintesse and listen to Leo Archer. I'm getting to know quite a lot about music."

Syndicate Park, where the Salon Quintesse was located, was a-glitter when Cates arrived. It was a warm evening and couples were sauntering through the grove during the intermission between dances.

A big car came roaring up the drive to give forth its cargo of laughing, voluble, noisy youngsters. Down by the river some one was playing a ukelele and the mellow chords blended oddly with the booming music of Leo Archer's band.

Cates went quietly into the big hall and sat down at a corner table. He was an unobtrusive little figure and nobody paid the least bit of attention to him.

The room was filled with amusement seekers, most of them in evening dress. There were laughing faces, flushed faces, sad, serious, and vindictive faces but Cates gave them little thought.

He was watching the tall lean figure of Leo Archer as the band leader put his men through their paces.

It was a wonderful band Cates thought. Hot music, probably none hotter in the country. Funny that Archer could get such effects when he was such a bored, cynical guy. Almost beyond understanding, but not quite.

Dave Cates became a bit wistful. He wished he had such talent as Archer's. It must be great to be up there leading a band like that. Even music that boomed and crashed seemed connected with that vague green-shuttered bungalow with the garden plot out back.

Then a slim, graceful little figure slipped out on the floor and began to dance. Cates sat forward, his eyes sparkling with pride. If anybody could beat Anabelle Talbot's dancing, he'd like to know it!

It was one of the world's prize mysteries, why she accepted his attentions, but since she did he'd not question his blessings. She was a dream girl suddenly come to life—*his* dream girl.

Whirling, pivoting, gliding, she moved about the floor, smiling steadily as one who dances must smile. Then she saw the little radio cop sitting alone in the corner, and her smile became radiant.

Lightly she blew him a kiss, finished her dance to a mad burst of syncopation, and skipped into her dressing room.

"Gee!" exclaimed Dave Cates softly. "Gee!"

In a few minutes she came out of the dressing room and hurried over to Cates' table. Grinning broadly, he rose to greet her.

"You sure can dance, Ann!" he told her. "Boy, how you can dance!"

Hazel eyes sparkled up at him and a red little mouth crinkled at the corners.

"I'm glad you think so, Dave," she said. "Just the same I wish I didn't have to do it. Oh, did I tell you that Leo Archer wants me to sign a contract to dance exclusively to his music?"

Cates shook his head. "No, you

didn't," he said slowly. "Are you going to sign?"

"I don't want to, Dave. But you know a girl must do something." She stopped and studied his face. "Anyway," she finished, "he gave me until the Charity Ball to decide."

"Which is just a couple of days anyway," mused Cates. "Say, Ann, when did he offer you this contract?"

"Yesterday," she answered. "He called me up to his office at the Renhurst."

"At what time?"

She looked wonderingly across the table. "Why all curiosity about it, Dave?"

"I'll explain some time, Ann. What time was it?"

"Why, shortly after four o'clock, I think."

"How long were you there?"

"Only a few minutes. He was working feverishly on a new number he expects to introduce at the Charity Ball. He offered me this contract, and told me I could take it or leave it. Then he gave me till the Charity Ball to decide."

Suppressed excitement was in Dave Cates' voice. "Did any one come in while you were there?" he asked.

She considered.

"N-no," she said presently. "That is, nobody but a bell boy who had a little package that he gave Archer."

"Wow!" Cates smacked his fist jubilantly into the palm of his hand. "I've got it now; sure as the deuce I have! What a break this is! Zingo!"

He reached across the table and took both her hands, caring not what people around might think. "Gee, you're a dear, and a sweetheart, and how you'd fit into that little bunga——"

"Dave, behave! What in the world ails you!"

"Nothing, honey. I can't tell you yet, but the first thing I'm going to plant is tomatoes. Zowie!"

GREATLY as the city was interested in the Van Goss-Meusel jewel robberies, the interest in the Charity Ball overshadowed all else. It was an annual affair and tradition and skillful publicity had built it up to a point where attendance was a matter of civic pride. A hundred social leaders served as patronesses; the best show talent in town was secured for the acts; and the general populace prepared for a gala night.

As chairman of the general committee, Terhune hustled around attending to this and that, a smile of smug importance on his florid face. Had he not been so preoccupied he might have noticed that he was trailed by a small, stocky figure, homely and determined of face.

At this last hour Dave Cates was overlooking no bets. Not only did he watch Terhune, but he kept an eye on Miss Meusel and Leo Archer. To Hughes he paid no attention.

"It's got to break right," was his constant thought. "When anything means as much to a guy as this does to me, it's got to break right."

CHAPTER V.

HOT MUSIC.

THE Spanish room of the Grey-stark, the most magnificent hotel in town, was engaged. At eight o'clock on the night of the event the huge ball-room was nearly filled. Gaudy decorations had transformed the room into a great hacienda; brilliant streamers waved and floated and intertwined in a glowing mass of color.

Gay parties met and chatted, and the hum of steady conversation provided an accompaniment for all other sounds—the tuning of the instruments, the ceaseless rumble of passing traffic, the occasional clear laugh of a woman.

Up on the specially constructed platform, Leo Archer and his band were

making ready. As always, Archer looked extremely bored and cynical. A sneering smile edged his lips as he looked out upon the festivities. Now and then he said something to the radio announcer of KYK, who faced a microphone just to the left of the platform.

On the floor Terhune was moving about from group to group, greeting all and sundry with his fixed smile. Over in a corner were Hughes and the dazzling young widow, Mrs. Van Goss.

Dave Cates could take in the whole scene from where he was sitting—up in an obscure little balcony with the curtains drawn just enough to permit of concealment. Before him, too, was a microphone, and beside him was a little lever by which he could switch the control instantly from the floor announcer to himself.

"Some gang, isn't it, Ann?" he grinned. "Hadn't you rather be down there with 'em than sitting up here just looking on?"

"Don't be silly, Dave," she said softly, smiling at him.

She was rather puzzled at all this, the microphone and the partly drawn curtains; but she asked no questions, realizing that Cates was on police duty of some sort.

With a crash of cymbal the band went into a modern, popular trot. The blue eyes of Officer Cates went to Archer. For all his boredom the man was a genius, and he was at his best to-night.

Leading his band with the baton, his eyes gleaming to the cutting thrusts of the trumpets, to the sense-lulling croon of the saxophones, to the twang of the banjo, he was a master of jazz.

Then the music softened and a hokum man stepped to the front of the platform, singing:

"The moon was new
And so was love.
This eager heart of mine was singing
Lover where can you be—ee—"

CATES glanced at Anabelle Talbot.

In that music he could feel the expression of a longing—of a longing that was universal and poignant. Well, he knew what it was. He knew from the sudden throb in his temples as Anabelle's hazel eyes met his for the briefest of instants. The age-old, deathless search for an ideal—and the ideal was here by his side.

"Oh, lover come back to me."

Then the trumpets caught up the chorus and tossed it tempestuously about. Booming, thrilling, haunting music! No wonder Leo Archer was called a genius; no wonder he could name his own salary.

With a swirling rush of syncopation that died abruptly on a piercing, sustained note, the number ended. Thunderous applause broke out, applause in which Dave Cates joined.

"Gee, that music gets me!" he exclaimed.

Miss Talbot nodded understandingly.

"It gets me, too, Dave," she said. "But wait until you hear the number he's just written. He wrote it in three days, they say. The title of it is 'Hot Music.'"

Officer Cates stared, then threw back his head and laughed.

"Well, if that's not a pip!" he cried. "Lady, lady, that one wins the world! I've got to hand it to him, he's good."

"Why, what in the world——"

"You'll find out shortly, Ann," chuckled Gates. "Yes, very shortly."

He pushed the curtain a bit to one side and scrutinized the crowd carefully. Ah, there she was—the woman he was looking for! She had just stepped in front of the band platform where Archer could hear her, and she was saying something to her companion. Then the two of them moved near Terhune and spoke again.

Dave Cates grew tense. Watching like a hawk he saw that Archer was

stirring restlessly about, that Terhune seemed uneasy. In a moment Terhune left the hall.

Archer faced his band and held out his baton. The instruments came to attention. Down came the baton and seemed to strike forth a coherent cataclysm of sound from brass and strings. Flaring, the music rose to the heavens. Then, with the introduction well under way, Leo Archer laid down his baton and went hurriedly from the hall.

CHAPTER VI.

STRONG EXCITEMENT.

ANABELLE TALBOT seized Cates by the arm.

"Oh, it's his new number, Dave," she exclaimed. "It's 'Hot Music'!"

Dave Cates grinned widely. "Great!" he answered. "I'll never forget it."

Reaching down he snapped the lever that swung the control to himself.

Into the microphone he said simply: "Cates speaking. Leo Archer's band is now playing 'Hot Music.'"

Then he switched the control back to the man on the floor, and the thousands who were listening in gave little thought to the interruption.

But Cates' words started things at headquarters. Captain Hennessey came to his feet with a bound, and roared orders at three plain-clothes men, who rushed for the door.

Five minutes, ten minutes, a half hour, and then Captain Hennessey poked his grizzled head into the little balcony.

"Got him dead to rights, Dave, and recovered every piece of jewelry," he announced with poorly concealed jubilation. "You had the right dope, boy, and don't forget it." The captain smiled at Anabelle Talbot. "You don't mind if we clear up a point or two, do you?" he asked.

She rose uncertainly. "If you'd rather talk business by yourselves——"

"You sit right where you are," said

Captain Henessey genially. "You'll be prouder than ever of this boy when he finishes his story. Go ahead, Dave, and let's hear how you worked it out."

It has been said that Officer Cates liked to talk. And who is there who can blame him for wanting to outdo himself while the lovely Anabelle was listening?

He cleared his throat and cut loose: "It's this way, captain. We know that Hughes phoned Mrs. Van Goss in that first robbery. Our friend knew of it—maybe accidentally, maybe not—and hit upon the scheme of robbing her apartment.

"It seems that Archer can play and write better music after strong excitement of some sort. Anyway, he knew the lay of the land, the time the widow was going out, and where she left the key. The rest was easy.

"Since Archer got such a kick out of that robbery, he decided to do another and plan it all himself. He knew that Terhune was in the habit of taking a nap, and he bribed a hell hop to get Terhune's key book for him. Anabelle, here, was in his office when the hell hop passed in the keys.

"Then Archer made the date with Miss Meusel to meet him, saying he had a business conference on and couldn't call for her.

"Luckily, Hughes was out of the apartment by the time Archer got there. He got the jewels and started out, but saw that rare old violin of Miss Meusel's and couldn't resist trying it out, being the musician that he is.

"In doing so Archer spilled just enough of the resin for me to see. I began to think something was phony when Miss Meusel told me she hadn't touched the violin for two days.

"Still I kept on eye on the others, too. The main thing was that I couldn't figure out what he'd done with the jewelry. I didn't think he'd hock it or sell it, but when I took a chance and

searched his rooms nothing was there. Then I got a rush of brains to the head. If he swiped the jewels to get inspiration to write better music, he'd naturally keep 'em handy, where he could look at 'em. Funny, but some guys are that way.

"I knew that there was an iron safe in his office and that I couldn't get into it. So, knowing that the jewelry would be on his mind, I got a plant to go down on the floor to-night and mention casually that she'd heard the police had found the jewelry of the Van Goss-Meusel robberies.

"Sure enough, Archer hustled over to his office to check up on it. I guess that's all."

"But how about Terhune having a key to the apartment and why should Miss Meusel want it kept quiet?" demanded the captain.

Cates grinned. "They were married," he answered. "I checked up on it at the City Hall. Because of concert bookings and other things they decided to keep it secret for a while."

"Then how did Archer know that Terhune had the key?"

"Because he stood up with Terhune at the marriage, and they made him promise to keep quiet about it."

Anabelle Talbot's lovely eyes had been widening during the recital.

"Do you mean that Leo Archer was the robber?" she said breathlessly.

"He was, Miss Talbot, and he had the earmarks of a good one, too," nodded the captain. "As the lad here has said, Archer wanted excitement and felt he could put out better music under its spell."

"I never liked him," said the girl slowly, "but I didn't think he'd do anything like this."

"You never can tell," observed Captain Henessey. He rose. "Well, Dave, you'll get a good sum out of this. That ought to be enough to——"

He stopped, gazing from the red-

faced little radio cop to the wondering girl, and grinning broadly.

"Oh, well, I guess you two can settle that yourselves." With a nod he was gone.

Anabelle Talbot looked inquiringly at Cates.

"What was he talking about?" she asked.

"Gee, I don't know, honey," stammered Officer Cates of the radio squad. "Maybe he meant that you wouldn't have to sign any contract to dance. You see, I'm going out to-morrow to take a look at a little bungalow and if

you—an'—if you know what I mean by——"

Miss Talbot's cheeks became the color of a red, red rose, and her hazel eyes softened wonderfully.

"I—I think I understand, Dave," she murmured. "I'd like to see the bungalow."

"Gee!" marveled Dave Cates some moments later. "Gee! I can't even carry a tune and just think what made this possible!"

"What, dear?"

"'Hot Music'!" finished Officer Cates in tones of awe.

HAWKS OF THE MIDNIGHT SKY

A Long "Speed Dash" Story

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Complete in our next issue

MISCELLANEOUS SOUNDS

WHEN you hear a motion-picture-theater organist exploit the possibilities of the instrument, think of the marvels of this complicated apparatus.

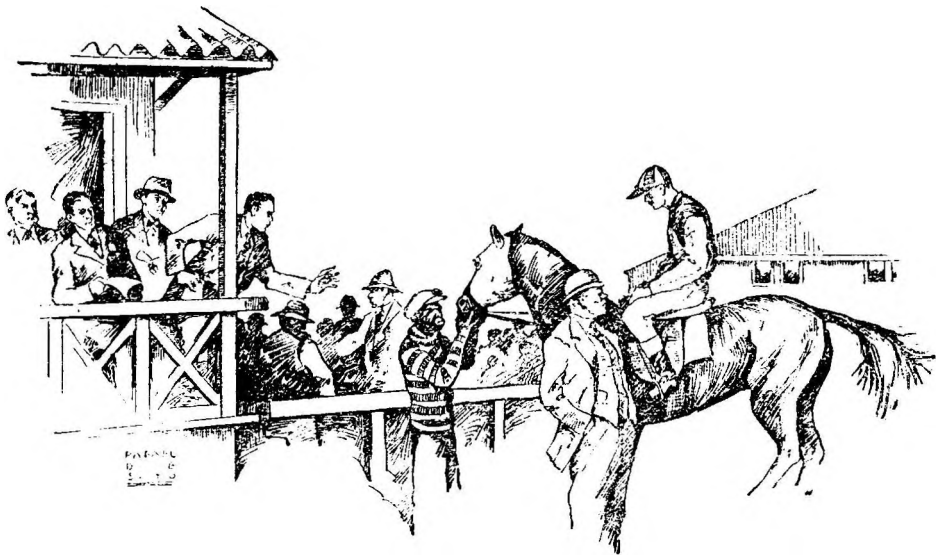
A big one can produce about eighteen thousand individual sounds, simulating anything from the screech of a cat that has been stepped on to roars like thunder.

In one of these instruments, a forty-horse-power motor produces the electric current and compressed air necessary. Thick tubes, more than twelve inches in diameter, convey the air to reservoirs. The player presses upon a key; electric current transmits a message; the sound results.

The pipes range in size from one half inch in width, to huge fellows six inches across. In one compartment of the organ are pipes that imitate stringed instruments. In another are those that simulate woodwinds and brasses. There are bells, trap or bass drums, harp effects, contraptions that make sounds like the twittering of birds, and other effects.

Experts are in constant attendance upon an organ of this size, seeing that it is in perfect condition, and that its pipes are kept in the proper pitch. Otherwise a "sour" note might spoil the whole effect of the organist's performance.

TN-3A



Lady Fiash

By Gene D. Robinson

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

TATTOOING HOOFES.



W. c'm'on, Tod, take a swig. It'll fix you jest right fer the race!" And Beck Mayer lifted the thermos bottle of hot coffee to his own lips.

"Well, gimme a short swallow," accepted Tod Morgan. "Maybe it'll calm me down." He took the bottle and drank generously. "Thanks, Beck," he said, handing it back. "Now I gotta go. See you after I show the field in."

A few minutes later he was lifted upon the back of Star Moment, the crack gelding of the Meredith stables. "Gonna bring him in first, Mr. Meredith," he promised. "Don't worry, sir."

"I'll be watching you, Tod!" cried Stella Meredith.

TN-4A

Bruce Meredith said nothing as the chestnut horse carried the jockey away. But a strained look on his face displayed his anxiety.

A bugle sounded, calling the horses to the post. The fifth, the big race of the Randolph course, was about to start. Silently, tense, but smiling, Meredith stood beside his daughter and kept his eyes glued upon Star Moment.

"Oh, father, he simply must win!" exclaimed Stella.

"Blue Boy's the horse we got to beat, honey," muttered Meredith. "Don't worry. Star Moment has the best rider in the world on him."

"They're off!" Hoarse voices seemed to blend as one in a great shout. Men and women alike rose to crane their necks. A heavy, stifling silence spread over the stands.

Now the horses were by the stands

—ten of them! Ten straining, driving horses with ten smaller crouching bodies atop them. But neither Blue Boy nor Star Moment—the favorites—had gotten away in front. A seasoned bay had leaped to the fore and taken the rail. Blue Boy was second, but Star Moment was pocketed back in fifth place.

Now they were at the first turn. Somewhere in that whirling, swirling vortex, Meredith's colors were hidden.

"Oh, why don't they let Tod out!" cried Stella.

"Just wait, honey. Tod'll pull him out. He got away to a bad start—but remember Tod's riding him," encouraged Meredith. Inwardly he was dismayed.

A sudden streak of dizziness had smitten Tod. He shook his head to clear the black spots dancing before his eyes. "What inarnation ails me?" he muttered. "Feel plumb sick!"

He was raging over Aztec and Alice Amber trapping him. He continued to shake his aching head and waited for his chance.

The straining horses were now across the track and beyond the infield. Meredith and Stella saw with eager eyes that Tod had brought Star Moment into the first division. His whip was pumping up and down as he went after the leaders. Blue Boy was now in front of the field, the seasoned bay at his flank.

"C'm'on boy! Le's go now! Le's go!" begged Tod to his flying mount. He suddenly held on desperately as another dizzy spell—that almost blinded him—set his head to whirling.

But he shook it off savagely and bent his eyes upon Blue Boy.

A murmur was rising from the multitude as the horses were turning into the stretch. One horse was nearly a length in front—Blue Boy. But closing in on the leader like a streak was Star Moment.

Tod's whip was beating down in a tattoo as he tried desperately to clear his eyes of the dancing black spots before them. He felt sicker than he had ever felt before in his life.

"He's gaining! Oh, father, he's gaining!" cried Stella.

Roars for Star Moment and Blue Boy swelled up from the crowd. Then there came a sudden hush. For Star Moment at the moment of passing the leader, was dropping back. On back behind onrushing horses, he fell, Tod Morgan swaying drunkenly upon his back. A howl of derision went up at the obvious pulling of the horse. Then a wild roar greeted Blue Boy as he swept under the wire by a length.

The roar died into silence as Star Moment came in behind the field.

His head still aching but not so dizzy now, Tod brought Star Moment through the little gate at the judges' stand. The horses came trotting back with heavy sides and distended nostrils.

A raised whip, a motioning judge, and Tod hurried up before the judges. They had some very pointed questions to ask as to why a horse passing the leader should fall back to last place.

"I swear I had a dizzy spell!" Tod cried desperately. "I was dizzy and sick all 'round the distance. Nearly fell off two or three times. Couldn't understand it.

"Then, just as we was taking Blue Boy, everything went plumb black for a minute. Had to grab at something to keep from falling. Mebbe it was the reins. When I got my eyes cleared we was under the wire—trailing the field." He almost sobbed out the last sentence.

But the judges smiled grimly.

"Morgan, you'll have to find another state to have your dizzy spells in on the stretch," said the senior judge. "Suppose, though, you had to have some explanation. You're set down for thirty days. You're getting off light because of your former fine record.

Otherwise we would be much harder on you. That's all."

BACK at the paddock, Tod found a white-faced, grim-eyed owner. Before Meredith could speak the jockey glanced appealingly at Stella. But the girl gave him a cutting look of scorn from her blue eyes.

"You don't believe what they're saying, do you, Mr. Meredith?" almost sobbed the little fellow. "Honest—hope to die—I got plumb sick on Star Moment. Would have fell off if I hadn't held to him."

"It's a pity you didn't—and break your neck!" cried the girl, tears welling in her eyes. "I never want to see you again, Tod Morgan. You—you traitor!" And she left them, dabbing at her eyes with a little handkerchief.

"You say you were taken sick?" asked Meredith grimly. "I want to believe you, Tod. But—well how can I, boy?"

"Know it looks bad, Mr. Meredith. Believe that sneaking Beck Mayer—you know him—he's 'Shorty' O'Hara's flunky—believe he doped me. He gimme a drink of coffee as I was waiting for the call. But he took a drink, too. Mebbe it wasn't that."

"After we got started I began to get dizzy. Fought it off, but it kept getting worse. Then just as I was taking Blue Boy—tell you I had him—just as I had him, everything went black—nearly tumbled off. Grabbed to something and held on."

"When I could see outa my eyes again, we was under the wire—and behind. Honest to heaven, Mr. Meredith, that's the truth, whether you believe me or not."

For several moments Meredith did not speak. He was considering the absurd story. But he had never known Tod Morgan to tell him a lie. And he trusted the little fellow implicitly.

"It's just about ruined me, Tod," he

finally said. "But, son, I believe you. Guess I'm the only man in the state that would—but I know you, boy."

"Thank you, Mr. Meredith," cried Tod, grabbing his hand. "You reckon it was that low-down Beck Mayer, sir?"

"You couldn't prove anything, Tod. Better not say anything else about it. But between you and me—I think that was it."

Tod told him of being set down for thirty days. There was no contract between him and Meredith—no need for one. They understood each other too well.

Meredith considered Tod Morgan the best jockey in the world. Tod loved Meredith as a father. And Stella—he thought the slender, blue-eyed girl was an angel.

"Listen now, Tod," continued Meredith. "You know how things were with me before. Now I'm nearly flat. You can't ride for me now and of course you want your back pay."

"Naw, I don't, Mr. Meredith. You don't owe me a cent. You just forget it."

"You must have your pay," went on Meredith firmly. "But as I can't spare the money—how about taking Lady Flash for what I owe you?"

"Lady Flash!" ejaculated Tod in amazement. "You mean that, Mr. Meredith? Lady Flash! Sure not, sir?"

Meredith smiled sadly. He knew how fond Tod was of the black mare. Though he regarded the horse as worthless he knew the little fellow considered her a world beater.

"Tod, you know she hasn't taken a step without limping in eighteen months. You know she isn't worth a dime."

"Don't believe that, sir. She has pulled up lame after her works. But she's bound to get over it in time. Remember those three races she won for you before she went lame?"

"No use, Tod. What about the ones after that?" asked the owner sorrowfully. "If you don't take her, Tod, I'll sell the mare for the best offer—maybe to a huckster. Want to get rid of her before we ship to Lexington."

"Huckster!" cried Tod in alarm. "No—not that, sir! I'll take her, sir. The little lady and me'll go through the country to Uncle Ben's in the blue grass. I'll cure her of that limp, sir. Then for Lexington! There I'll ride her in the Dixiana Stakes—as your horse, Mr. Meredith. And the Lady's going to put you back on your feet."

"No. Take her as your own, Tod. I'll give you a bill of sale to show she's yours. You'll treat her good. Nobody else would."

CHAPTER II.

TREKKING HOMEWARD.

BRUCE MEREDITH was getting bad breaks in the South after a disastrous season in the North. The season before he had flourished. He had added three horses to his stable and started the new season with seven. His dream of a farm in the blue grass had been almost realized. He had made the first payment on it at the end of that successful season.

Then his second-and-third-best horses had been hit by pneumonia. One win was all he had gotten from Star Moment in the North. Now in the South his crack horse had come in last in the race he had counted on so much.

Meredith planned to sell out some day and retire with Stella to his blue-grass farm. He would breed race horses and take life easy. Stella should have the best things of life. But now it looked like he would lose everything. Maybe he could pull through until the Dixiana Stakes at Lexington and recoup there.

Tod Morgan and Stella Meredith were children of the blue-grass country. Children of the stables, they were. The

little jockey had been riding for Meredith as long as he could remember. While he regarded his employer almost as a father, he hoped some day to call him his father-in-law. He knew that Stella was fond of him.

Tod looked for Beck Mayer, but the shifty-eyed fellow was careful to keep out of his sight. But Tod finally cornered him in a corner of the paddock.

"Aw, you better lemme 'lone now, Tod Morgan!" Mayer whined. 'Ain't done nothing to you!"

"Nothing but gimme doped coffee," snarled Tod. "Pretended to take a drink yourself to fool me, huh? You low-down sneak!"

Bam!

Tod's right fist caught Beck Mayer on his chin. As the fellow's hands flew up, Tod crossed his left to his stomach.

"Remember your dirty trick with this!" Tod panted, shooting his right.

Mayer sagged and fell sprawling. Tod walked off without looking back.

Before Tod started the long ride to the blue-grass region, he went to tell Stella good-by. But the girl refused to see him. He left sorrowfully after bidding Meredith good-by. But he was happy over his ownership of Lady Flash.

TOD didn't know how long it would take to go through three states to Kentucky. Shipping the mare was out of the question. He barely had more than enough money to pay his own fare. The little fellow believed in the black mare. Eighteen months back she had gone lame. Despite all customary methods and training practices, Lady Flash had continued to limp in her walk. Started in a couple of races she had finished so badly that Meredith refused even to start her again. Before that he had regarded the mare as his best chance of retirement to his dream farm.

Several days later, Tod and the black

mare were trudging northward through the country. He would ride her awhile, then dismount and lead her, whistling or singing as the fancy struck him. So far he hadn't paid out a cent for expenses. Kind farmers, touched by the limping mare, had fed them both, giving him little chores to do—for his pride.

Tod was riding the Lady without a saddle, using a blanket secured by a cord in it's place.

"Shame that Beck Mayer got into my way," he muttered. "Just had to give him a poke in the eye on general suspicions. Gimme doped coffee, huh! Next time I see him again, I'll knock his attic down in his cellar!"

"Guess you an' me is both outcasts, Lady," he crooned to the black mare. "They all say you ain't fit for a huckster even. And they set me down—me, Tod Morgan! Never had nothing like that happen before. Lady, we're gonna show 'em. Ain't we, old gal?"

They spent the night at a poverty-stricken little farm. Tod helped the farmer with his chores until well after darkness, to secure food and quarters for himself and Lady Flash. Sunup found them on their way again.

It wouldn't be such an awful long time now until Meredith would be shipping to Lexington, Tod mused. When the winter season closed Meredith always happily shipped for the blue grass.

"He may not be able to get back this time," Tod murmured.

He smiled happily as he dreamed of what he and the Lady were going to do for Meredith. But his smile faded and his eyes bore a hurt look as he recalled the contemptuous look in Stella's eyes.

DAYS passed. Each time the sun went down it found the black mare and her owner closer to the blue grass. Tod had been forced to pay out some

of his closely hoarded money. But not much. Farmers continued to be kind. And he was very helpful with their chores. His story of taking a limping, outcast mare to redeem herself in the land of her birth, always gained them sympathy.

Back there, Lady Flash had enjoyed the care and pampering of a thoroughbred. From the blue grass she had gone to choice oats and sweet hay, deep bedding and the regular rubbing of the racing stable. Her life had been spent in equine luxury and work-outs had been short and regular.

Tod figured the tramp through the country would toughen her up. Maybe she'd even get rid of her lameness. If she did! He whistled joyfully as he pictured such happiness.

By this time, the mare was whinnying when he left her for a moment, and would nose him affectionately when he returned.

On the outskirts of a small town, Tod found a new way of paying for their journey. A pretty girl admired Lady Flash as he stopped to water her. Tod told her his story, and she asked if he would hire the Lady to her to ride for two weeks. The girls of the town had just formed a riding club, she explained.

So for the next two weeks Lady Flash carried a new admirer. And then they started on again greatly rested—and with Tod's financial situation comfortably enhanced. The girl's father was a store owner in the town and Tod had worked for him during the period.

Once more they were headed northward. Relieved of the saddle she had borne for two weeks, Lady Flash stepped jauntily along. Somewhere off yonder lay mellow, green hills—and Lexington!

Then, one day, a new hope flashed across Tod's mind. They were going along a level stretch of country road when an automobile whizzed by them

from behind. Lady Flash playfully shied—for she knew what motor cars were—and dashed down the road at full speed.

Tod let her have her head for half a mile. Then he pulled her up, leaning down to study her mincing feet.

The mare had not shown a suspicion of a limp while running. But she immediately began limping when slowed down to a walk. He rode along thoughtfully. The next day he rode her miles farther than he had ever done before. But the following morning she started out as fresh as ever.

"Uh huh!" Tod muttered. "Mebbe you think you got some folks fooled, Lady—but you ain't got me!"

The next morning he measured off as accurately as he could by stepping, a half-mile stretch on a level road, marking the start and finish. Then he climbed on the mare, took out a cheap stop watch, and was ready to give her a half-mile trial.

Tod dug in his heels, flicked the bridle reins—and she shot down the road. Tod crouched low, urging her to show all she had. As she flew past the finish mark his hand closed upon the watch. Stopping her, he examined the dial. A smile of triumph came to his lips.

"Uh-huh! Sho' been fooling a heap of folks, ain't you, Lady? Sho' have. Le's go, gal! We're due in Lexington before long!"

CHAPTER III.

THOROUGHBREDS.

WEEKS passed. Through rainy days and dry, under bright sun and clouds, over straight roads and steep hills, the black mare and her owner made their way. Since the day of the half-mile test he had given her a stiff work-out each day. He watched her foreleg carefully but could see little change yet in her limp.

Finally they arrived at his uncle's

farm near Lexington. It was not a moment too soon, for his funds were gone. But he arrived happily and was welcomed joyfully.

"A mad stunt—but just like a Morgan!" Uncle Ben exclaimed proudly when Tod had told his story.

"You rest up a day or so, Tod. Then we'll start curing that limping habit of the mare's. So Bruce Meredith says she's worthless, does he? And you say she's better than Star Moment. Well, that settles it with me, Tod. Never saw nobody who knew more about a horse than you."

So Lady Flash was led out to green pastures—and Tod to a regular seat at a table always heaped with choice foods.

THE Lexington spring meet was just eight days off. Bruce Meredith was on hand with his depleted stable. He had been forced to sell Trail Lark and Roy Rose because of his desperate financial condition. Moreover he had been forced to sell at half their value.

Stella knew that her father was hard up. But she did not know that matters had gotten so bad that his stable and farm were threatened. Meredith had kept that from her.

"Just a little hard luck, honey," he explained. "We'll sell Trail Lark and Roy Rose to get over the hump. Star Moment will win at Lexington—won't he, honey?"

Stella felt sure that he would. But when they arrived in Kentucky and saw the many famous horses there for the same purpose—to win—she was much less confident.

"Tough competition but I've got to win," said Meredith as they were seated in the home of a relative they always stopped with.

"Don't fear the field so much as I do Just Passing—he's the favorite. 'Bucky' Benton's going to ride him, too."

"Bucky is a great jockey," replied Stella. "But I used to know a better—before he sold out."

"Tod's still better, honey," said her father. "You've got the boy wrong, Stella—all wrong."

"It's no use, father," she retorted. "I saw him pull Star Moment with my own eyes. That sick story was too absurd. He was just covering up. And that yarn about drinking doped coffee—oh, it's silly to even think about. I hope I never see him again!"

They heard a step in the hall. "Sorry to disappoint you, Stella," exclaimed Tod's voice, "but take a look at me. How is everybody?"

They glanced in surprise at the grinning figure in the doorway. Meredith rose and shook hands with him. But the girl only glanced coldly at him—and left the room.

"Kinda cold around here, Mr. Meredith," grinned Tod, gazing after the girl. "Thought things might have thawed out some by now."

"Give her time, Tod," smiled Meredith. "How did you and the Lady make it?"

"Okay. You oughta see her now, Mr. Meredith! All set to take the Dixiana Stakes. She can outrun Star Moment on three legs."

Meredith smiled dismally. "Wish that was true, Tod. I'd like to see you win if Star Moment couldn't. But Star Moment is a——"

"Me win! Lookey here, Mr. Meredith—the mare's yours. I come here to give her back to you. Heard you were in bad shape."

Meredith closed the door and pulled his chair close to Tod's.

"No—the mare is yours, Tod. Listen. I was just planning to send for you. Want you to ride Star Moment. It means everything to me, Tod. If I lose here I lose all I have—stable and—and the farm. It would break Stella's heart, boy. Star Moment's one

of the favorites. With you up he's got a better chance of winning."

"Sure, I'll ride for you, Mr. Meredith," agreed Tod instantly. "Wait!" he said as Meredith started to speak. "I'll ride for you—but on Lady Flash."

"Tod, you're crazy!" exclaimed Meredith impatiently. "The mare's a joke. Even if she could run—she belongs to you."

"Not so," cried Tod triumphantly, thrusting a paper in Meredith's hand. "There's the deed to her—makes her yours again. I'm gonna ride her for you—and Stella."

Meredith was deeply touched. "You're true blue, Tod," he said, smiling sadly. "But it's impossible."

Tod leaned forward and began to speak earnestly. He told about testing Lady Flash out on the road. He told of things they had found out at the farm. Meredith's eyes began to gleam in interest.

"She ain't no more lame than I am," Tod explained. "With the Lady, limp-in' is just a habit. Maybe, several times she did pull up sore and got to limpin'. Soon as she got over the soreness she kept on limpin' from habit. Folks have it and horses do, too. I've just about cured her of the habit now. She's as sound as the day she was foaled."

"I just got this proposition, Mr. Meredith," Tod went on. "We got a sort of course staked off out at Uncle Ben's. Same as the distance of the Dixiana. Let's take Star Moment out there and let him and the Lady race to decide which'll represent you. If he beats her, I'll ride him. If the Lady noses him out, I ride her for the Meredith colors. Whatcha say, sir?"

"So help me, Tod, I'll go you!" cried Meredith hoarsely. "It'd be a miracle, boy. We'll take him out this afternoon. Lucky it's such a short distance out."

"We will not!" promptly spoke Tod. "Want some clocker sneaking out and getting wise? You and Stella go out to—"

night. I'll sneak him out after midnight. We'll have the trial at day-break."

"You're right, Tod. I hope you're as correct about the rest. Here, take this paper. I can't accept it from you, boy."

Tod pushed his hand back. "How could I ride her if my name was in the records as owner? Can't be done. You got to accept, Mr. Meredith. I'll name my price after she wins. Whatcha say? Promise me you'll take her back!"

Meredith placed his arm across the jockey's shoulder. "Very well, Tod, I'll accept her. If she beats Star Moment in the test she can take his place in the Dixiana—and you can name your price later. If Star Moment beats her though, she remains yours."

DAYBREAK found a little group shivering on the Morgan farm. The early morning air had a touch of winter to it. 'Zippy' Edwards was on hand to mount Star Moment. Stella Meredith refused to meet Tod's appealing glance as he climbed on Lady Flash.

Meredith and old Ben Collins, who had been with the owner for years, clutched stop watches. The thoroughbreds nosed the improvised barrier. Then they were off!

Star Moment got away first. Tod kept Lady Flash at his flank. Not using his whip, he leaned over the mare's neck, crooning in her ears. Halfway around she let out a magnificent burst of speed and reached Star Moment's neck.

As they reached the stretch, the two horses were even. Zippy used his whip and Star Moment gave all he had. Tod was talking softly to the Lady. Then he tapped her with his whip. The mare responded with all her thoroughbred heart. She shot by Star Moment and came under the wire, winner by half a length.

As Meredith and Old Ben studied the dials their eyes bulged.

"Best he ever done—and she betters it!" gasped Collins.

Meredith made no reply. He turned to his daughter, his face aglow with a new hope.

"Do I ride her under the old colors?" cried Tod as he trotted back to them. "What'd I tell you, Mr. Meredith!"

Later, Tod had a chance to speak to Stella alone. "Listen, honey, if I win on the Lady will you still be frosty to me?"

A soft light glowed in her eyes for a brief moment. "You win first, Tod Morgan. Then hunt me up!"

Before he could answer she had left him.

Meredith was ridiculed widely for switching his entry.

Wise old track heads were shaken sadly. "Poor fellow! His bad luck has affected his mind!"

This was the answer accepted by all. But to the pleadings of old track friends and the scornful criticism of enemies, Meredith only smiled quietly. Lady Flash was entered.

Then Tod came to Meredith with an earnest request.

"Mr. Meredith, I got to raise four hundred dollars. Just got to be done. I know you ain't got it now. But can't you raise it among your friends—and let me have it a few days?"

Meredith had often loaned the little jockey money. And Tod had always paid it back promptly.

"Why, Tod, I'll try it for you," he replied. "Haven't it myself—I'm just that near broke. But I think I can get it." He thought he knew what Tod wanted with the money but he did not mention that.

Meredith found it harder to secure the money than he had expected. Loaning a prosperous friend money is one thing—loaning it to him when he is down is quite another. But he finally secured it. Tod took the money and thanked him.

CHAPTER IV.

ASKING HIS PRICE.

WHEN the bugle sounded for the event that meant everything for Meredith, he was standing with Tod and Stella in the paddock.

"Shake a leg!" warned the assistant starter, who led the parade to the post.

"Leg me up—just for luck, Mr. Meredith," asked Tod.

Meredith swung him into the saddle and watched him ride in the wake of the other entries—famous horses sent from all parts of the country for the Dixiana Stakes.

"Come on, honey," Meredith mumbled when the horses were upon the track. With his daughter in his box, he leveled his glasses upon the field as it lined up at the post—though he could see quite clearly with his naked eye.

Just Passing, the favorite, was showing a fit of temperament. He grasped the bit between his teeth and almost pulled Bucky Benton from the saddle. Lady Flash, her ears pricked up, was aquiver with eagerness. Tod petted her neck softly.

Now the horses were nosing the barrier. Just Passing's temper was a bit better. Then a hoarse roar from the stands announced the upward flash of the barrier. A line of thoroughbred horses sprang forward as though catapulted from giant engines.

The multitude arose and craned necks eagerly as the horses swept by the stands. A chestnut streak, Billy Brown, leaped to the fore and took the rail. Thundering at his flank was Madame Moon. Running gracefully and easily in third place came Just Passing, closely followed by Lady Flash. Tod was leaning over her neck, eyes watching Just Passing.

"Easy, Lady! Easy!" he sang out softly. "Proud of you, Lady, for that s'art. Easy now! Easy, gal!"

Nosing Just Passing's flank, Tod was perfectly willing for Billy Brown to go on and set the early pace. He knew the seasoned veteran was a wonderful goer at his distance. But they were going an extra furlong over his best, to-day. He would most likely drop out after that first spurt.

And there was Madame Moon—an in-and-outer. Couldn't tell what she was going to do. Might be 'in' to-day and show the field her heels. Tod knew she held two track records. But then he had seen her defeated by mediocre horses.

As the horses were thundering around the turn, Billy Brown began to drop back. So did Madame Moon. Just Passing shot ahead of the Madame and Bucky Benton glanced back at Tod with a derisive sneer. He was glad Tod was not on Star Moment.

"You'll have a sourer look under the wire," growled Tod grimly. "Le's go, Lady! Thatta gal! Too bad, Madame—too bad!"

Lady Flash had taken Madame Moon now. The Madame was coming back to the second division—having an 'out' day. Stella and her father saw Just Passing move up on Billy Brown and it looked like a favorite was going to come through.

"Oh, why doesn't Tod let her out!" cried the girl.

"Tod's doing just right," explained Meredith. "Knows he's got to beat Just Passing. Best rider in the pack. Just wait."

The swirling mass was across the track now. A wave of cheers rolled out from the stands. Shouts for the favorite floated out to Bucky Benton, bringing a triumphant grin to his lips. The public was calling for the favorite to come through.

Tod was crooning to Lady Flash. "Be yelpin' for us in a minute, Lady! Ah-hah! Here comes Billy Brown!"

The chestnut veteran had given his

best. His rider used his whip frantically as he tried to keep Just Passing, and then Lady Flash, from taking him. But the gallant old-timer was not equal to the place.

As the favorite shot into the lead for the first time, the stands arose and yelled madly. They saw the Meredith colors second now as Billy Brown fell back to third place. But only a grim-faced owner and blue-eyed girl attached any significance to that.

The straining thoroughbreds were rounding the last section of the upper turn. Just Passing was a half length in the lead as Bucky Benton straightened him out for the stretch run.

Bucky had taken Billy Brown with the intention of holding the lead. But he had found the chestnut much harder to pass than he had expected. Now his ears caught the drumming of on-coming hoofs. Lady Flash shot up to dispute the lead with him.

Made frantic by this showing of a horse held in scorn, he lost his sense of judgment and became panicky. His whip beat down on Just Passing as he coaxed out the speed he needed for the final heart-breaking spurt.

Tod was crooning soft words that Lady Flash loved to hear. Not yet had he used his whip.

"Time to go, Lady! Let's show 'em now! Yonder the wire, old gal!" For the first time he used his whip—once.

"Daddy, he's gaining! Tod's even with him! Oh, I believe he's going to win!" Stella was standing excitedly clutching her father's arm.

Meredith's eyes were distended wide, his hands clinched tightly.

Bucky Benton wanted that race badly. He would get a handsome bonus if he won. His whip was coming down in a tattoo of desperation. But he was forced to watch a black phantom forge ahead as if responding to the shouts of a scattered few and her owner and his daughter. For the

roar for the favorite had died away in amazement as a horse ridiculed by all, took the lead.

As Tod put her under the wire by a neck, he thought he could hear a hoarse shout of triumph from Meredith. He knew he could hear his own heart thumping madly.

"Told you we'd fool 'em, Lady! Told you!" Already Tod could vision tears of joy welling up in certain sky-blue eyes over his performance.

WHEN Bruce Meredith entered the sitting room the following evening, seeking Tod, who had dodged him all day, he found Stella and the jockey fully reconciled. The girl's eyes were glistening from recent tears of joy. Tod was grinning happily.

"Sit down, Mr. Meredith," he invited. "I'm ready to name my price for the Lady now, sir."

"The purse shall be yours, Tod," announced Meredith. "The Lady belonged to you—a bargain is a bargain with me."

Still grinning widely, Tod thrust a small oblong package in Meredith's hands.

"Got a fifty to one price on the Lady, Mr. Meredith," he chuckled happily as the owner took it in surprise.

"The bookies thought I was crazy. They don't think so now. Had a hundred of my own—and put up your four hundred for you. There it is back—at fifty to one."

"Tod, you're the biggest-hearted man I ever saw," said Meredith huskily. "But I can't take your money. It's yours, boy—I loaned you the money. Here, take it Tod." He tried to hand the money back.

Tod pushed his hand away. "No, sir. You've got to take it. Some day—when the farm breaks good for you, mebbe I'll let you pay me back. I'm giving you that and the Lady—for Stella."

"Tod Morgan!" cried the girl angrily. "You talk like you were buying me. Didn't I just tell you! Daddy, Tod and I are going to be married."

She ran over and was gathered in her father's arms.

"Didn't mean it that way, Mr. Meredith," floundered Tod. "What I meant was—your going to be my daddy-in-law and I got a right to give you what I please. You gotta take it, sir. I got money of my own now."

Meredith's hand shot out and grasped Tod's. "I'll accept it as a loan then, Tod. We'll all go back to the blue grass—to my farm," he murmured. "We'll be partners in it, Tod. We'll breed the best race horses in the world, boy. Why we'll——"

"Sure," grinned Tod. "But once in a while I can sneak out with the Lady and show the field in, can't I?"

"Perhaps," Meredith answered, a happy smile lighting up his face.

A Maine Woodsman and Guide.

REG DINSMORE

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DOG SENSE

to the Next Issue of *TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE*.

WARRIOR SONG

By EARL W. SCOTT

THIS is the song of the engineers
Who bridge tall cataracts,
And mock heat's pain and tropic rain
That dreams may grow to facts.

Song of the hardy sailors,
Daring the ocean floor,
Who face deep death and breathe tanked breath
Behind a sub's sealed door.

Song of the U. S. flyers,
Fighting the mile-high trails,
With a blizzard grim for a battle hymn,
Winging the looked-for mails.

Song of the correspondent
Who always the conflict woos,
Scribbling puns by light of the guns,
That the nation may have news.

Saga of all stanch fighters,
Who know when it's said and done,
When the hazard's light and it takes no fight,
There is no victory won!

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FINE TURKISH and DOMESTIC tobaccos,

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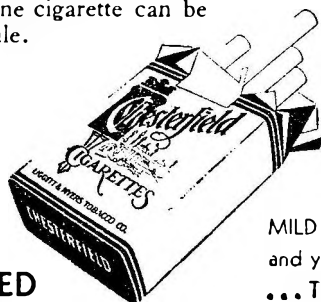
Not routine care, but tobaccos blended to scientific *balance*, to bring out the finer qualities that *make* a cigarette—and "cross-blended," the Chesterfield way, to round out and perfect the delicious flavor.

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MILD...

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...THEY SATISFY



Jinx House

By Earl and Marion Scott

A NOVELETTE

CHAPTER I.

IMPENDING DISASTER.

PHIL FARNUM, manager of the Farnum Stock Co., tossed his half-smoked cigar into a distant corner, jerked round in his swivel chair and faced his uncle.

"Hang it!" he snapped. "I'm not a wizard. I'm doing my darnedest, but as to guaranteeing a full house to-night for the opening, I just can't do it."

Uncle Toby Farnum hunched forward, his gnarled hands on his silver-headed ebony cane, his stubborn old face grim.

"All right, Phil," he cackled. "It's up to you. I'm not green enough to be backin' a losing proposition. I'll admit I ain't in sympathy with shows. I never approved of Edwin leavin' a decent profession like the law to go gal-

livantin' around the country with a bunch of skyootin' females, givin' shows, even if he was my brother.

"Edwin's gone now and I ain't sayin' any ill of him. You're his only child so I'm helpin' you, but, from the first, I've told you it wasn't possible to open this here theater and make a go of it."

Phil stirred impatiently. "Yes, I know the Forrest is a jinx house," he said.

Uncle Toby interrupted: "I ain't superstitious, Phil, but this house is bad luck. I'll admit you've worked hard to get started and I've put up the cash so far, but unless this house is packed to-night, my support stops. You might as well get used to that idea."

The old man leaned back, grumbling and blinking at the dingy disarray of the little office. Phil Farnum lit a second smoke and stared moodily before him.

"I want you to know I appreciate what you've done, Uncle Toby," he said thoughtfully. "I know you never approved of father's trooping and maybe he didn't have a fortune when he died, but he's loved by every trooper from Maine to Florida and I guess that's something."

Toby Farnum sniffed and scowled, but in his bright, restless eyes behind their severe gold spectacles was a suspicious moisture.

"I'll admit the Forrest is a jinx house," Phil went on, "but it was all I could get after the Columbia flopped me on my lease. I had to do something."

"We've been working hard for a week. The company is loyal to me. I've put out some corking paper and the dailies have given me real spreads—the old Forrest is always good copy. I'm hoping for a good crowd but——"

He sighed and half turned away. Phil Farnum *was* hoping, but even his optimistic nature was chilled a bit when he considered the immediate future. He was staking everything on the opening show. If it was a flop in point of attendance, his backing stopped.

Toby Arnold rose, pulling his coat tighter against the damp chill that pervaded the theater and seeped into the little office in spite of the newly installed electric stove.

"I was in this house the night André Libeadeaux was murdered back stage," he said dourly, "and that little red-headed dancer disappeared. They brought detectives from Paris and New York, they did, but no one ever found out who killed André and no one ever heard of the redhead again."

"I walked past this house every evening for five years after that and saw it dark. It don't help a house to stand dark so long. I was in Europe when it was reopened in 1912. The first night a piece of plastering fell and killed two people, besides injurin' a lot more. She

stood dark for three years more, then in——"

Phil Farnum rose impatiently: "Oh, yes, I know the whole list. An Italian named Trapassi tried it next, ran stock for two weeks and the foyer was blotted out with a bomb. Three years more—dark house. Then Forrest Glendenning thought he could change the story by changing the name and he did the place over, called it the Forrest."

"Dad knew Glendenning. He counted a heap on making this a paying proposition, but he died suddenly and rather mysteriously before the house brought any returns to speak of and then——"

"Then nearly ten years later a couple Italians get hold of it, and a young ass like you thinks you can break the jinx at my expense."

Toby turned angrily to the door, fumbling for his hat.

"I ain't superstitious, Phil," he threw over his shoulder, "but this house is bad luck. I was a fool to ever advance any cash on it, a doddering old fool, but mind you, if she ain't packed to-night, it's off, get that—all off!"

He stamped out grumbling and complaining. Phil turned to the window, staring out at the overcast morning skies. The noise and confusion of the street reached him dimly. Lumbering trucks, swaying vans, a motley, jumbled mass of humanity.

THE old Forrest Theater, a relic of earlier, braver days, stood now in a neighborhood of gaunt warehouses, ugly tenements, and cheap curb markets.

It was not an ideal location for the building up of a desirable clientele, yet only a block away—with the inconsistency of city arrangements—began a pleasant stretch of wide quiet streets lined with substantial homes. It was from this section that Phil hoped for his patronage.

He glanced at his watch—ten thirty. Time for the final rehearsal of "Too Many Crooks," that that very night was to tell the story of his immediate success or failure.

He jerked open the door and stepped into the darkened theater. The ornate decorations, yawning boxes, empty seats, the dim gloom of the distant stage, filled him with a certain chill. Yet from his infancy Phil Farnum had known and loved the theater.

Lights flashed up on the stage, voices reached him. The members of the company were moving around restlessly, awaiting his appearance. He frowned half angrily. Jinx house! He didn't like the sound.

Phil was too thoroughly the actor not to be superstitious. The old traditions, beliefs, and taboos of the theater were the warp and woof of his being. What actor faces the footlights who will not unconsciously bow to the carefully built up idea that a certain house is unlucky?

Phil Farnum quickened his pace. Work was the panacea for worry.

"George," he yelled, "heave that table around down left, you've got it where the piano will stand."

George Jefferies, the old character man, turned patiently, blinking into the lights. "All right, Mr. Farnum, only I thought the piano was down left."

"Well, I thought it was up right," Ollie Dinsmore snapped. "It's going to be a whale of a show, I'll say, when everybody's got the set pegged different. When the music box really gets in we'll fall over it."

Phil ran lightly up the stairs to the stage. "Don't crab, Ollie," he said good-naturedly. "You've played stock too long to let furniture bother you. Let's get going and make it snappy."

"Tommy," Phil called to Bradshaw, the general business man, "I hope you've got that court scene whipped."

"Miss French," Phil said, as the tall, willowy leading woman strolled on

stage, looking lovelier than usual in gray-fox choker and toque, "be yourself in that scene with Booth at the end of the second. It was tame yesterday. Pull the Leslie Carter stuff. Remember you're making a play for your sweetie's life, put it over."

Phil's voice unconsciously lost its professional tartness and his eyes softened as they rested on the slight figure of Dixie Cross curled up on the big divan the only other piece of furniture on the stage.

"Dixie, your moll's got the snap," he said, "but tone down in the court scene, stress the tear-in-every-smile stuff. You know, vamp the jury."

Phil Farnum went on with swift suggestions, fighting a sense of helplessness all the while. Jinx house! What bunch of troopers could make good in such a setting? Something would happen to jim the show, queer the crowd, kill the kick.

IN spite of all Phil could do, the last rehearsal was a gloomy affair. He was called away half a dozen times by telephone messages that added nothing to his comfort.

Max Lindenwood, the electrician, reported a threatened strike in his brotherhood. The scenery ordered from a New York house arrived two days before, but there had been a squabble over some damaged flats and it was being held up.

At twelve thirty, weary and dispirited, Phil dismissed the company and turned toward his office. The voices of the actors died in hollow echoes. The tap of rain came dully against the loft roof.

Phil scowled fiercely at the dark house. "Jinx!" he muttered angrily. "Jinx, that's what you are, but I'll beat you. I'll beat you yet!"

"Atta boy!"

He turned with a start. Little Dixie Cross stood at his elbow, her dark viva-

cious face glowing in the gloom of the darkened theater.

"Of course you'll beat it, Phil," she said softly. "It's just in everybody's minds, the memory of that Libeadeaux killing and the bombing and all the rest. Once we put that snappy bill across to-night, everybody'll forget it. As long as you've nothing worse to fight than memories——"

She stopped. Her eyes, suddenly troubled, turned from his. "It'll come out all right, Phil," she said a bit breathlessly. "Don't worry!"

Phil squeezed her arm. "Thanks, Dixie, you're a brick. Come and lunch with me. I'll not let the thing get me down. Uncle Toby's on his ear. It's got to be a full house to-night or the curtain drops as far as he's concerned."

Phil laughed ruefully as, still holding Dixie's arm, he walked slowly up the darkened aisle. Her head was bent. Phil's eyes rested speculatively on the curve of ruddy hair against the whiteness of her neck. Dixie was a good sport, a sturdy pal. He'd spent a lot of time figuring out exactly all the pleasant things Dixie Cross was, since she'd joined his company on the road two months before.

"That's unreasonable of Mr. Farnum, Phil," she said, looking up at him. "It's going to be a ghastly night and he ought to consider the ugly reputation of the Forrest. It can be lived down if he'll give us time, but to just cut things off if we don't have a crowd to-night—it's not reasonable."

"It's not," Phil agreed rather hopelessly, "but I've never known Uncle Toby to be reasonable. He's got a heart as big as a barrel, but he does everything he can to hide it."

He stopped abruptly. Dixie's head jerked up. A man had risen out of an aisle seat and stood before them, hat in hand, a smirking smile on his face.

"Sorry if I startled you," he said in an unctuous voice. "Could I have a

word with you, Mr. Farnum?" he extended a card.

Phil took it, straining to decipher it in the glow of an exit light. "Zebediah Strang, Attorney at Law," he read aloud.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Strang?" he asked curtly.

Zebediah Strang smiled unconvincingly. He was a loose-joined individual and seemed to be constantly slipping around inside his carelessly fitting gray clothes.

"My business is private," he suggested. "If I might have a moment with you in your office."

Phil hesitated. His first impulse was to tell the man to beat it. He wondered swiftly if he'd violated some obscure city ordinance. Certainly his professional standing was good. Still there was something insistent about the man and Phil really had no reason to be discourteous just because he didn't like him.

"My office is up front," he said shortly. "You'll wait in the lobby, won't you, Dixie?" he added in a lower tone.

Then he frowned at sight of the girl's face. In the dim light it seemed white as ashes. Her eyes were wide and were fixed on Strang's face.

"Yes," she said faintly, "I'll wait, Phil."

CHAPTER II.

RACKETEERING.

IN the office, Phil pushed out a chair for his caller and dropped down behind the desk. "All right," he said and realized that his thoughts were on Dixie.

She'd been different of late, since coming back to the city. There was something restrained about her, a sort of breathless fear as if she lived in momentary dread of some catastrophe.

Zebediah Strang was smoothing his thin, colorless hair.

"My business can be briefly stated, Mr. Farnum," he said in his slippery voice. "I represent the United Theater Corporation. Since you are new to the city you haven't had the opportunity to join us.

"I'm giving you that opportunity now. The initiation fee and dues are slight, considering the benefits you reap. Three hundred to join, a hundred and fifty a month after that until you get started, then a slight increase."

He tapped his long bluish finger nail with a silver pencil. His narrow eyes, which wore a continual and unconvincing smile, were on Phil's astonished face.

"You see, it won't take long to fix it up. I'll accept your check."

"What in thunder are you talking about?" Phil demanded. "United Theater Corporation! I never heard of the outfit. I belong to Equity, of course, and pay dues to——"

Strang gave the impression of slipping out of his coat with the faint shrug that rippled his thin shoulders. "Of course, being new to this city, you won't know of us. We're a young organization, but we're—powerful. I don't want to take up more of your time. I said I'd accept your check."

Amazement made Phil slow in replying. "You've got me wrong, Mr. Strang." He slapped down his caller's card with unnecessary violence on the desk. "I'm not joining any corporation, and as for paying three hundred bucks to join anything, not to mention a hundred and fifty a month——"

Phil laughed angrily and rose. "Sorry, but you'll have to sell your proposition elsewhere."

Strang did not get up. He smiled and spread his hands. He said softly: "I'm sorry, Mr. Farnum, but you don't understand. It's necessary for you to join if you wish to continue to operate the Forrest. The house has a bad reputation anyway. Further unfortunate oc-

currences won't help to increase its popularity."

A slight chill played over Phil. His eyes narrowed.

"Oh, it's a little racket you're engineering? That's a new one, holding up the theaters. Never heard of that."

Strang oozed lower inside his gray suit. "I think we'll agree the idea is new to you. That, however, doesn't exempt you, Mr. Farnum. Ignorance of the law, you know is no excuse for avoiding——"

"And pie-eyed banditry isn't going to make me pay blackmail to a bunch of cutthroats!" Phil said hotly, feeling the blood beginning to pound in his head. "You can get to thunder out of here. Go back to whoever sent you and tell him I said I'd see him everlastingly in Hades before I'll kick in on your strong-arm stuff. What's more——" Rage made him incoherent.

Strang was standing. "There, there," he soothed, "no call for such an outburst, Mr. Farnum. I simply gave you the opportunity to join us. There is no compulsion, none whatever.

"I'm sorry to add, however, that should you persevere in your thoughtless rejection of our little organization the results to you will be——"

"Yes, I suppose they will," Phil snapped. "I suppose you'll do your little damndest to put a crimp in my show, won't you? Jim the works, that's your line, isn't it? Well, hop to it!" He was shaking a clenched fist dangerously.

Mr. Strang hacked precipitately, blinking and moistening his thin lips.

"Hop to it!" Phil cried, his voice shaking with anger. "Go ahead! Strut your stuff! I'm out to beat the jinx off this house. A few more incidentals won't make any difference. Now beat it!"

Phil seized the palpitating Strang by the shoulders and sent him through the door with a force that nearly landed him on his face. He crowded him into

the lobby, jerked open the outer door and, forgetting all caution, shoved him into the street with a well-directed kick.

Strang staggered half across the sidewalk and saved himself from falling by catching frantically at the sleeve of a passer-by.

Then Phil noticed that Dixie was not waiting in the lobby.

HER absence added a sharp little pang to his increasing trouble. He glanced out the door. Strang, his face livid with anger, was arguing with the pedestrians who had broken his fall. The man seemed to think the lawyer had tried to pick his pocket. A policeman surged up and joined the controversy.

Then Phil saw Dixie.

She was standing on the curb, leaning over to talk to a man in an expensive black limousine. A uniformed chauffeur sat in front. Phil caught a glimpse of Dixie's face. It was still that queer gray white. She was talking excitedly.

The man in the car listened, a slight smile on his broad colorless face. Then he reached out, placed a large soft hand against the girl's chest and pushed. She stumbled backward and would have fallen if a quiet little man lounging near had not caught her.

Phil was out the door, across the sidewalk, and on the running board of the car. Just as the motor whirled, the door jerked open and Zebediah Strang tumbled into the front seat.

Phil's incoherent words were lost as the car shot ahead. He found himself thrown to the street, landing on his knees in the dampness of the gutter. His last glimpse of the car was of the broad colorless face of the occupant of the rear seat, grinning maliciously out the rear window.

Then he was jerked to his feet and a harsh voice demanded: "What's the big idea? What you think you're stagin'?"

Phil glared up at the policeman. "I'm staging a smash-up of that big cheese next time I see him," he rasped. "That bimbo that crashed the front seat just sprung his little racket scheme on me and got kicked out for his pains. He's promised to wreck my show to-night. What you got to say about it, officer? Going to let him pull any rough stuff, break up the show?"

"Pipe down, buddy, pipe down!"

The big policeman gave Phil a rough shove toward the theater. The growing crowd was staring curiously. Dixie's white face flashed before Phil's angry eyes.

"Beat it you!" the officer roared at the bystanders. "Get along outta here or I'll run you in, this ain't no side show."

He backed Phil against the door. "Now, you, what's on your mind?"

Phil's fury was cooling. He told the policeman as quietly as he could, the import of Strang's visit. "He calls it the United Theater Corporation. He asked three hundred dollars to join and one hundred and fifty dollars a month. He's promised to wreck my show if I don't kick in."

The policeman frowned and jerked his cap over one eye. Then he reached over and tapped Bill definitely on the chest. "Looka here, Percy," he said, "you been havin' pipe dreams, you been drinkin', and you take it easy or I'll run you in for disturbin' the peace."

"I know that gent and I know the gent in the car. They're citizens and good tax payers. Wanta know what I think?" He leaned back and glared.

"I think you're tryin' to stage a little publicity stunt to help your show along. You're the manager, ain't you? Well, lay off."

"When you got any proofs of Strang or Christy Matthews pullin' any rough stuff, report 'em to headquarters and you'll get attention. Until then, you observe the law and don't mess things up."

Now paste that inside your derby." He nodded sharply and stalked off.

Phil stared after him blankly. He had the feeling that a good-sized mountain had landed full on him.

Then Dixie touched his arm.

"I'm sorry, Phil, it was all my fault. I shouldn't have paid any attention. But when I saw him strike at the newsboy with his stick, I just couldn't help telling him what I thought. It served me right. Let's get something to eat."

Phil stared down at her. So that was the explanation. The man in the car had threatened to strike a kid and Dixie had interfered. He frowned. It didn't seem just right. The white intensity of her face as she had stood there talking, the near frenzy in her eyes—that didn't mean just indignation over a stranger's brutality.

He jerked open the theater door. "Yes, let's eat. Wait till I get my coat."

CHAPTER III.

STRANGE WARNING.

THEY found a quiet corner in a little restaurant near by, ordered and sat back.

"What is it, Phil?" Dixie asked. "What does Zeb Strang want—exactly?"

Phil lighted a cigarette and considered the girl through the smoke. He didn't remember that Dixie had seen the lawyer's card there in the theater.

"He wanted me to join the United Theater Corporation, three hundred down, one fifty a month. I kicked him out."

She folded at her napkin nervously. The waiter set bowls of soup before them.

"What are you going to do?" she asked without looking at him.

Phil's jaw set. "I'm going to kick out anybody that sticks his nose inside the Forrest talking about the U. T. C.," he said grimly. "I'm going to hire some

private dicks, since the police force doesn't seem to take its duties seriously. I'm going to put on 'How Many Crooks,' three full acts with lights and effects, if it's the last thing I ever do. With me?"

Dixie's eyes, wide and starry, were on his face. She said rather huskily: "Oh, Phil, I think it's splendid the way you're fighting, but I'm afraid—it's going to be hard—they may—do things. Don't you think you'd better pay?"

Phil shoved back his plate. "Say, Dixie, what's this line you're handing me?" He leaned across the table, lips hard. "You seriously mean you think I ought to kick in, pay money to that scound—"

I BEG your pardon."

Phil jerked round. Dixie straightened with a faint gasp. A little gray-haired man, hat in hand, was standing by their table.

"I'd like a word with you, Mr. Farnum," he said gently. "I happened to be in front of the Forrest and I'm—interested."

Phil's eyes flashed over his face. It was thin and lined, but there was a sharp shrewdness on it, mingled with a rather humorous kindliness.

"I don't know you," the young theater man said, "but I'll talk to any one as long as they're not asking me for hush money. Sit down. Think I've got you now; you caught Miss Cross here when that big gorilla almost knocked her down."

The stranger bowed slightly and sat down. "Yes, I overheard part of her conversation." His keen gray eyes were on the girl's face.

Dixie's hands clenched into the table cloth. She smiled with dry lips.

"I'm Tony Earp," the stranger said. "You don't know me, but anything that has to do with Christy Matthews interests me—extremely. I suppose he was trying his racket on you?"

Phil nodded gloomily. It was all very well to keep up a brave front, to hurl defiance in the teeth of the enemy and so on, but, after all, it promised to be a tough game.

"Yes, he was trying his racket on me through his representative, the honorable Mr. Strang," Phil said. "I don't know who you are, Mr. Earp, but just as a matter of curiosity, what do you advise?"

Tony Earp ordered coffee and toast. He waited till the waiter had gone, then said calmly:

"Offering advice is a dangerous business, Mr. Farnum. Maybe if I told you something of the strength of your opposition you could better form your own opinion."

Phil ate slowly, studying Tony Earp under lowered lids. Was this just another play of the United Theater Corporation, a further move to intimidate him?

"Christy Matthews," Tony Earp said, his voice low, "is a powerful man. He enjoys police immunity, not because the police are basically corrupt but because certain officials in high places are well paid by Matthews to see that he's let alone."

"I'm afraid you won't get much help there unless you can definitely prove, so it can't be ignored, that Matthews is blackmailing you. Your word that he's tried it won't get you anywhere with the police."

"Your wrecked theater to-night won't help. The men who do the dirty work will be minor crooks that won't squeal. Besides I figure that would be melancholy comfort, the arrest of a few small-timers after the show's jimmied. Right?"

"Damned right!" Phil said savagely. "Got any remedy to suggest?"

He couldn't explain it, but he was liking Tom Earp, overlooking the fact that he didn't know him from Adam, ready to confide in him, take his advice.

Tony Earp was staring hard at the salt cellar. "There is one remedy that would be infallible," he said slowly. "It's the only one I know. Present in the right quarters the straight dope about Matthew's part in the Barscardi killing, three months ago."

His hard glance flashed from one to the other of the tense faces.

"Arnold Barscardi was a member of the detective bureau that swore to put Christy Matthews behind bars. He'd worked for nearly two years getting evidence. He kept it to himself because he didn't trust any one."

"The night before Barscardi was set to spring his stuff, he was murdered. His body was found in a lonely house out Lake Forrest way, but he'd left headquarters in answer to a telephone call and he'd been taken to the old house in a car."

"There are men who would give a lot in the way of protection to know where Barscardi went that night. They were willing to believe at first that Matthews had one of his gang take Barscardi for a ride."

"Then a wretched little stoolie, Louie Blount, turned up with a story that Matthews had made it a personal matter, had used the gat himself."

"Matthews had an air-tight alibi—a party in his apartment, with twenty people to swear he hadn't left the place all evening—but Louie told a straight story and named a couple of Matthews' guns that had helped out."

"The police rounded up one of the guns, but he got pneumonia and died before he could tell anything—which was likely an act of God. The other was found up a dark alley with three bullets in him—which was certainly an act of—Christy Matthews!"

"Louie Blount passed out from poison hooch—which isn't so odd maybe except that the hooch was sent to him by some one and the poison was—strychnine!"

TONY EARP leaned back slightly. "It's a long way from the murder of a police officer to the racketeering of your theater, Mr. Farnum. But straight dope about Matthews' part in the killing of Barscardi would effectively check Matthews. There were some people at that party the police never found." He lifted his coffee cup.

Phil sat back with a sigh. The quiet words were filled with a grim reality that acted on him like a powerful narcotic. He felt numbed, dazed.

From the comparatively simple affair of an attempted racket, he found himself jerked to the contemplation of the unsolved murder of a police officer that still rankled in the minds of certain men. He roused with a start.

What Earp suggested was manifestly impossible. Who could spill the straight dope and why was Earp telling him this? He glanced at Dixie. She sat with bowed head, eyes on her plate, lips set in a grim little line.

"I'm not offering you advice, Mr. Farnum," Tony Earp went on. "I'm suggesting the only remedy I know. The theater racket is comparatively new, I think Stien and Lancaster over on Wabash passed up a chance to join the—corporation. They lost eight thousand dollars' worth of equipment when a match was 'accidentally' dropped back stage.

"Pat Elgin of the Bijou, uptown, is in the hospital with a broken leg and three smashed ribs following a riot that broke into the third act of his last bill. There are others. What time does your curtain ring up to-night?"

"Eight fifteen, and she's going up, Mr. Earp. What you say is interesting and impressive, but I don't know anything about the murder of this man Barscardi so I can't meet your requirements. If the police won't help out, I'll—well I'll take other measures."

There was a frosty speculation in Tony Earp's eyes.

"I wish you luck, and don't misunderstand what I say about the police. They'll take the matter seriously enough—to-morrow. They had half a dozen men working on the latest outrage at the Bijou."

He laughed shortly and rose. "I hope you make it stick. I'll likely be in the audience, if I get back in time. Just as a friendly tip, they'll go after the stage hands—arrange a strike at the last moment.

"And you'll, no doubt, have trouble with your lights. It'll be a roughneck audience—riots are their specialty. I shouldn't be surprised at a bomb tossed where it would do most good."

"Say, look here!" Phil was on his feet glaring down at Tony Earp.

"Just exactly what is your line? What's the idea of telling me all this? Trying to bluff me into kicking in? One of the gang, are you? You talk about justice and the police. Then you outline the deviltry this mob will stage like there was nothing to do about it. Just who in the thunder are you, anyway?"

Phil realized that he had raised his voice, that other diners were regarding him curiously. Tony Earp returned his angry stare. Back of the faint humor in his eyes was a hard metallic gleam like gun metal.

"I'm not personally responsible for the police force," Earp said in a low voice. "I'm only speaking from experience of what's happened at other houses. As to who I am——"

His grim lips hardened, he leaned forward. For a moment his glance met and held Dixie's. "I'm just a man who's suggesting you can spike Matthews' guns if information about the murder of Barscardi is forthcoming."

He slapped on his hat and walked quickly toward the door. With a sigh of bewilderment, Phil sat down opposite Dixie to finish his interrupted dinner.

CHAPTER IV.

FACING GUNMEN.

AT four thirty p. m. Phil put down the telephone and leaned back before his desk. He found little satisfaction in reviewing the afternoon's work.

Regardless of Tony Earp, he had made a visit to police headquarters and it had borne out the strange little man's predictions.

His story had been received with perfunctory attention, and interrupted by various telephone conversations and numerous barked orders. Then he was told:

"We'll tip the officer on the beat to keep an eye out, Mr. Farnum," the inspector had said. "Likely nothin'll happen. That's a rough neighborhood and some of the boys are just tryin' to scare you, but don't worry, the show'll go on all right. If anything definite comes up, let us know."

Phil had found himself, fuming and helpless in the rain-wet street.

"Oh, they'll give the matter careful attention—to-morrow!" He muttered angrily and set off to hunt himself up a private detective agency. He didn't know exactly what they could do, but he felt the need of some kind of organized force.

Melvin & Dickerson had seemed as good as any other and Dickerson's avid interest in his troubles had given him a melancholy comfort. They'd promised to send two operatives to the theater that night. Phil had taken other precautions, ending up by offering the doubtful electricians double pay. Now he replaced the telephone and leaned back.

The window framed a square of dingy grayness: rain beat drearily against the glass. Fine night for an opening! Even if everything else were rosy, the weather alone would kill the crowd. He rose angrily.

A light tap stopped him.

"Come in," he growled and dropped into a chair.

The door opened. Phil's eyes narrowed.

Framed in the doorway stood the man who had occupied the rear seat of the limousine that morning. Behind him was the lawyer, Strang, and a thin-faced man with beady eyes and a twitching mouth. The big man shoved his hat back and stepped in.

"Hello, Farnum," he said in a surprisingly thin, reedy voice. "I'm Christy Matthews. Thought it about time we got acquainted." Without invitation he dropped into a chair, lighted a cigar and leaned back. The other two remained on either side of the door like sentinels.

Phil's fists clenched. "All right, get it off your chest," he said through clenched teeth.

MATTHEWS blew a perfect smoke ring. "I'm one to give a man every benefit of the doubt," he said. "I never act hasty." He cast an appreciative glance the length of his gross, carefully tailored body.

"When my representative, Mr. Strang, reported your conduct of this morning, instead of flyin' wide and orderin' the works, I decided to drop by for a friendly chat. Speakin' plain and to the point is my specialty. I'm offerin' you a last chance to join our organization."

Phil choked down his anger. In the few hours that had elapsed since the visit of Strang he had come to appreciate the power that Matthews wielded. Bull-headedness and loud talking wouldn't get him anywhere. Matthews' pale eyes were on his face.

"I must decline—with thanks," Phil said curtly. "In the first place I haven't the money, can't get it. It looks like the crowd will be a flop. In that case you don't need to worry about revenue from the Forrest, Mr.

Matthews. The Forrest won't be operating."

He clenched his fists under the desk. How he longed to smash that broad colorless face.

Matthews crossed his thick legs. "That's what I want to make clear to you," he said. "When you join us, you get returns. We ain't askin' money for nothin'. You don't need to worry about the house bein' filled, Farnum, it'll be packed.

"As to gettin' the kale, I'll accept your check, predated, and give you time enough to deposit the money tomorrow. Then I'll let you pay the dues the end of the week after you've had a chance to cash in on your house. I can't say nothin' fairer." He leaned back with a satisfied grunt.

Phil's nerves had reached the snapping point. He forgot everything except that this well-groomed brigand was adding one more sizable hunk of trouble to his heavy load.

He said quietly: "You might as well get it, Matthews, I'm not falling for your racket. I told that to that slippery bozo you sent this morning. Now I'm diagraming it for you. I'm fighting you to the finish and I'm set for whatever you spring.

"What's more——" the relief of plain speaking lessened his restraint—"you're not going to find this nut so easy to crack. You're heading straight for a fall. I guess a tip about the inside of that Barsecardi killing might put a crimp in your style and——"

He stopped. Christy Matthews' big face had gone white as dough, his pale eyes were expressionless as marbles. A quiver shook his obese body.

Then the furtive-faced man stood at his side, automatic trained on Phil.

"Sap him?" he asked, without seeming to move his lips.

Something rose like a hunk of ice in Phil's throat. The hairs on his scalp were individual prickling needles. Too

late, he realized the deadly danger of baiting a man like Matthews.

Matthews moistened his lips. "Just a minute, Guiseppe," he said softly, "let's find out where——"

THE door opened. Dixie Cross called sharply: "Oh, Phil——" She stopped, widening eyes on the group before the desk.

Matthews jerked round. Guiseppe's gun dropped to a pocket. Strang stepped forward.

Dixie's hand was pressed tight across her mouth, stifling a scream. She was shivering violently and her eyes were wide pools of terror.

Matthews' cold glance never left her face. He rose slowly. For a moment the little actress and the big gangster stared at each other. Then Matthews grunted: his eyes flashed to Phil.

"I've known several pretty boys that talked too much, in my time," he said from the corner of his mouth. "There's more ways of closin' a mouth than stickin' court plaster over it. I'm leavin' word with you—accept my proposition or your curtain don't ring up. That's final.

"You can get in touch with Strang at Izzy Martindale's place in the next block any time between now and eight fifteen. That's all."

He pushed through the door followed by his satellites. The sound of their receding footsteps echoed hollowly in the empty lobby. Phil dropped back in his chair, perspiration cool on his brow.

"Thanks a lot, Dixie," he said. "You sure caught your cue that time. Guess I stirred up something. Mentioned that Barsecardi matter. Sure got a rise."

Dixie stood tense and straight, back against the wall beside the door. "Phil, Phil," she said faintly, "you didn't say anything to him about that, did you? Oh, Phil, I'm sorry—that is I'm—glad—I mean——" She put out her hands

blindly took one uncertain step and slipped down.

Phil was round the desk and had her in his arms almost before she struck the floor. Then he stood helplessly staring at the room, with the usual inability of the ordinary male to deal with similar situations.

Hurrying steps sounded outside. Old George Jefferies stumbled into the room.

"Say, Phil, what are those big bums figurin' on——" He stopped, jaw sagging.

"Clear off the desk top," Phil snapped. "Now get some water. Dixie has fainted. They're planning a-plenty, George, we're being racketeered. It's come through with more cash than the whole outfit's got or—— Look out, don't drown her! There, the poor kid's coming round."

Dixie opened her eyes, half sat up, caught at Phil's sleeve, then fell to a shivering sobbing. Phil, for the next few moments, had little thought of Christy Matthews and his ugly plans. He held the suffering girl tight in his arms, soothing and comforting her; while deep down inside him a wave of happiness grew, filling him with new strength and unshakable determination to battle through at all odds.

He looked up and met old George's astonished glance. He laughed joyously, hugging Dixie close.

"They'll put the bee on us, will they?" he half shouted. "Like hell they will! I'll fight 'em, I'll lick 'em, I'll ring the curtain up at eight fifteen or there'll——"

"I'm with you, Phil," George Jefferies said stoutly. "Sure we'll lick 'em. Any time a hunch of two-by-four crooks stops a bill of the Farnum Stock Company——"

Phil caught the old man's arm, jerked him round. "Bully for you, old timer. Get that, Dixie? George is with us. Ollie's with us I'll bet, and Amelia and

the whole lot. We'll give the show. They can't stop us!"

He paused, feeling considerable of a fool, aware that Dixie was not joining his jubilation. She rested listlessly against his crooked arm, tired eyes on his face.

Phil said breathlessly: "They can't stop us, can they, Dixie? We'll beat 'em, won't we?"

Dixie caught her breath sharply. Over her white face swept a slow wave of rosy color. In her eyes Phil saw something that made him exclaim sharply and crush her cold hands in his.

"Oh, Dixie, honey," he said softly, "if you mean it like you look it, there isn't a gangster big enough to stop me. We'll put such a crimp in Christy Matthews' style, he won't be able to walk straight.

"Won't we, Dixie, won't we crimp his style?"

Phil was talking nonsense, of course. Back of his boyish bravado was the ugly menace of Christy Matthews, who took little account of the enthusiasm of a young man in love. Dixie realized it, but happiness made her easy to satisfy. Her eyes were shining, but her mouth was grim and rather bitter.

"We will, Phil," she said soberly. "We'll—crimp—Matthews' style—we'll do it!"

CHAPTER V.

MOB DEVILTRY.

THE notes of the orchestra rustled softly through the semi-darkened theater. The rustle of feet and low-toned conversation mingled and combined to form a definite aura of sound and movement as the audience found seats.

Back stage, Phil Farnum, already in his make-up, had one eye glued to a slit in the curtain, studying the rapidly filling house. Under the smoothness of grease paint his face was grim and his

lean, strong body tensed as if he expected momentarily to be attacked.

Behind him was soft noise and movement: the actors hurrying from prop table to dressing room; stage hands busy with finishing touches; "Juice" Lindenwood worrying over the newly installed, remote control box operated from the basement—all that indefinable bustle and orderly confusion that precedes the rise of the curtain.

It was eight five. In ten more minutes the first curtain would rise on the opening scene of "Too Many Crooks." Phil's heart was hammering. He had no illusions. He expected trouble. He knew he'd get it.

The large audience that was completely filling the house did not bring him the satisfaction it should. Matthews had promised he'd have a crowd, promised it twice. That rustling murmuring crowd was proof of the gangster's power in the district.

Phil was prepared for every contingency he could think of. He'd had two telephone calls after seven o'clock—one from Strang, the other from Matthews. The lawyer had merely reminded him that he'd be waiting at Izzy Martin-dale's till eight fifteen.

Matthews had jocularly assured him he'd have a good house, but something in that high, reedy voice had chilled Phil, filled him with a sharp sense of danger over and above that promised his show.

"She's sure fillin', Phil," George said softly at his shoulder. "Boy, I never expected to see a crowd like that at a first night at the old Forrest."

Phil nodded without turning. "The crowd's all right as to size. A lot of them don't look like regular show patrons to me—roughnecks, but we can't help that. Everybody set?"

"Most everybody. Dixie's missin'. Guess she'll be back in time for the curtain, though."

Phil jerked around. "Dixie?"

OLLIE DINSMORE bustled up.

"Don't worry, Phil. Dixie just went to the corner drug store to phone, and Phil—" the ample character woman stopped, hands on hips, shoulders braced defiantly—"I just wanta tell you on behalf of the whole company that we're next to this rough stuff some one's promisin', and we're with you till the bench breaks.

"We're all set to slide right over cat-calls and turnips heaved our way. If the lights go out, we're shootin' the show in the dark. If any one starts a rough-house, we're carryin' on like the theater was clothed in peace and calm. There ain't anything goin' to stop this show, big boy; get that!"

She nodded vigorously, and walked away before Phil could express his gratitude. Her loyalty cheered him.

"We'll beat them!" he muttered.

Then he started forward as Dixie Cross, breathless with hurry, darted in the back door. She stopped at sight of him. Phil frowned. It wasn't like Dixie or any other good trooper to go out in make-up. Under the delicate rouge shading her cheeks, her skin was as white as paper, her eyes were burning with excitement.

"All set, Phil," she said. "It's going to be a big night, and I'm with you, honey." She gave his hand a convulsive squeeze. "We're all with you. We'll put a crimp in Christy Matthews' style, we sure will."

Then she was gone.

The orchestra slowed, and stopped at the flashing light signal. The conversation died. The audience rustled into silence. In the back-stage dimness Phil saw the actors, wide-eyed, white under make-up.

George Jefferies, as the butler, was already on stage, Ollie was standing just outside the central entrance. Everything was set for the curtain.

Then, without warning, the lights went out!

Phil cursed savagely. Amelia French choked a scream. A startled gasp went up from the audience. There was a moment of tense silence, then some one shouted:

"Lights! Shoot the lights!"

A woman screamed.

"Lights!" another voice insisted.

A flash spattered the darkness back stage. Phil pushed through the huddling actors, jerked open a small door to the right of the stage, worked swiftly for a moment. Then a bright light flooded the scene.

"Get busy, George!" he snapped.

A burly man, derby on the back of his head, strode up. "Sorry, Farnum, they got to the light switch downstairs, jimmied it somehow. Lindenwood's knocked out."

Phil's face hardened. His cold glance flashed over the face of the operative he had hired to help protect his interests.

"How bad?" he demanded.

The man glanced away uneasily. "Can't tell. Pardner's callin' the ambulance. The bird that done it, one of the assistants, has beat it, but we'll likely get him. Any one in your outfit know anything about juice?"

"Yes—Bart." Phil motioned to a shabby, thin-faced boy in overalls.

"Beat it down and see if you can fix things. Here——" Phil yanked an automatic from his pocket and shoved it into Bart's hand—"keep that where you can reach it easy and don't hesitate to shoot. I'm claiming the right to protect myself. Get going."

The big detective from Melvin & Dickerson's shoved his derby back and scratched his chin. "Better go easy on that gat, sonny," he said.

"Use it if necessary, Bart," Phil snapped. "I've got a permit for you to carry it. This show's going on. Ready with those lights, George?"

"Yes." The old character man straightened from lighting the last of

eight brilliant gasoline lanterns. "All set. I'll get 'em out."

The confusion in the audience was growing to alarming proportions. The orchestra, carefully coached, was playing intensely. Catcalls came from the gallery. Some one was indignantly demanding the return of his money, or immediate action.

The curtain was lifted a scant two feet. George, Phil, and one of the stage hands, to the amusement of the audience, placed the lanterns in the footlight trough, jerking up previously arranged protectors to shut the light from the theater and direct it to the stage.

"All right," Phil said. "Up she goes."

The orchestra stopped, the house quieted, the curtain started up. Halfway it stuck. Phil watching anxiously, swore under his breath and dashed around right stage. The curtain man was tugging on the blocked cable and swearing loudly.

"Let her down!" Phil snapped.

The batten slapped the apron boards. Phil's eyes flew to the dimness above. Halfway up, a knot in the lifting cable explained the jam.

"Go up and get it!" he ordered. The man swarmed into the loft. Two stage hands hurried up and, under Phil's direction, the weights were released long enough to enable the man above to slip the knot.

Phil nodded savagely. One more obstacle overcome.

"Damn them!" he muttered and raced back to the group of grim-lipped actors on the other side. "On stage, George," he said quietly. "That's about all they can do for a while. Let's go!"

Slowly, noiselessly, the heavy curtain lifted. Old George pottering around unopened mail on the big desk started business as calmly as though nothing had happened.

Phil's nerves, strained to the break-

ing point, quivered with expectation of trouble from the audience.

The prop telephone shrilled. Ollie knocked preëemptorily.

George lifted the receiver. "Mr. Maynard's residence," he said in his careful stage English, and the show was on.

CHAPTER VI.

SWELLING STORM.

PHIL leaned limply against the open stage door. The show was on. How long it would continue he couldn't guess. He wasn't fool enough to think Christy Matthews' game would be so easily blocked. Then he stiffened, peering into the shadows outside.

Some one was sobbing softly. He made out a dim blur and stepped closer. Some one turned. The light caught a tear-stained face.

"Dixie!" he said softly. "Dixie, dear, what's the matter?"

Dixie Cross jerked her head up and stared at him almost defiantly. "Nothing, Phil, only I'm tired and—half sick, and I'll be—glad when the—show's over. Don't worry about me. I've got to beat it now, touch up this make-up—ashamed of myself and all that—don't worry."

She was past him with a swish of short skirts, heading for her dressing room. Phil turned at a touch on his sleeve. Uncle Toby Arnold hunched before him inside his ten-year-old dress suit, busy brows puckered over his shrewd, bright eyes.

"What's goin' on, Phil?" he demanded. "Ain't you been in the show business long enough to run your lights proper and get your curtain up without all this mess? My eye, if your father could see the start of this show, he'd disown you. What's goin' on?"

In spite of himself Phil grinned. Queer Uncle Toby. For twenty-five years he had grumbled and fumed over his brother's professional career, but

here he was sputtering like a firecracker because something went wrong.

Subconsciously Phil heard the voices of the actors on stage. All Jake so far. An occasional rough remark from the gallery, a boisterous laugh now and then, but the folks were carrying on. He looked at his uncle. He had a momentary impulse to tell the old man his troubles. Then he shrugged and half turned away.

"Nothing much," he said wearily. "Green stage hands, threatened electricians' strike—everything's all right now. Better get out front and watch it and by the way"—he grinned maliciously—"I've got a full house, Uncle Toby."

He walked away, followed by Uncle Toby's suspicious stare. He felt a savage satisfaction. Christy Matthews had builded better than he knew. No matter what happened to-night the Farnum Stock Company went on, with Toby Farnum's backing. Uncle Toby hadn't specified what kind of an audience should fill the house.

THEN from out in front came a shrill scream. Trained as they were to control, set as they were for interruptions, the people on the stage reacted. The audience jumped as one man and, with the irritating tendency of all audiences, turned as one man to discover the trouble.

"Lights!" some one yelled. "House lights--woman's fainted."

Phil jerked open the door to the theater and slipped down the box corridor toward the stairs. As he did so he heard old George Jefferies reading his big first-act speech as calmly as though nothing had happened.

Phil stopped. That speech was his entrance cue. Frantically he glanced over the seething audience. Halfway back he saw two men supporting a woman. They were talking in loud tones, making no effort at silence.

People squirmed uneasily. a child started crying.

"'And I'll leave it to you, sir,'" old George's voice droned on monotonously, "if a gentleman would act like that."

"Phil!" Ollic's frenzied whisper rose sibilantly behind him. "Phil, for heaven's sake come alive—they're stall-in'."

Phil lunged back through the door, kicked over a chair, grabbed frantically at the prop table for his brief bag, slapped on his hat and skidded to the entrance. He caught the tensed atmosphere of the players, their almost audible sighs of relief.

"'Hello, Barstow,'" he called jovially, while his troubled glance went out past the glare of the improvised footlights to the uneasy crowd.

"'Why, Mr. Fielding,'" Dixie cried running to meet him, "'I was so afraid you'd fail us.'"

He felt her trembling as she laid impulsive hands on his arm. Her eyes were wide and strained, as if she feared something.

"Shut up!" Some one said savagely from out in front and, with a sigh of relief, Phil realized that the legitimate part of the audience was resenting the unnecessary interruptions.

TWENTY minutes later the curtain dropped on the first act of "Too Many Crooks." A wave of applause surged through the house. The hateful cries of hecklers were lost in the frank appreciation of the bulk of the audience.

Phil wiped his streaming brow and sighed. "They're eating it up," he said to old George. "We're putting it over. If it wasn't for Matthews, what a swell break we'd have."

"Lights fixed, Mr. Farnum."

Phil jerked round. Bart Stone handed him his automatic. The boy's cap was missing, there was a bruise on

his left cheek, his right eye was nearly closed.

"Good night! What happened, kid?"

"Oh, nothin' much." Bart shrugged indifferently. "Coupla tough eggs tried to stop me fixin' the short out there in the alley, traced it clear outside the theater. It's fixed though, you can shoot the juice whenever you want."

Phil nodded. "Good work, Bart. I won't forget it." But he decided to keep the gasoline lanterns in place. A little extra light wouldn't hurt and what nian has done, man can do, he reflected, in regard to short-circuited light currents.

George Jefferies plucked at his sleeve. "Them two birds you hired as dicks is gone," he choked. "The back door's unguarded. There's a bunch of guys hivin' in the alley. What'll we do?"

The orchestra was double timing a well-known number out front but back stage there was ominous calm. Phil laid a quieting hand on George's arm.

"Get the back doors shut and the bars up," he said. "Don't worry about our trick detectives unless we tumble that they're working something dirty on the inside." He stepped forward. "What's wrong with the scene shift? Here, you chaps, what are you waiting for? Climb in on that shift."

Three stage hands were loafing indifferently against a pile of flats. Another sat leisurely on a stool, smoking in opposition to all back-stage rules. They regarded him in a stony silence.

He faced them. "Snap into it, you, get that scenery changed."

One man grinned sourly. "We ain't workin', boss," he said. "Ain't workin' no more to-night; strike's been called; ain't allowed to work."

Phil's hand clenched. His teeth bit into his under lip.

"You dirty double crossers!" he gritted. "I explained the lay to you, gave you double money to stand by me and now——" His hand darted to his

pocket, came out holding a snub-nosed automatic. "Get going!" he snapped. "Get going or I'll——"

The threat was not finished. He spoke language universally understood. The three men glared balefully into the muzzle of the gun and sullenly sham-bled into action.

"Lam into it!" Phi snapped, a perilous humming in his head. "Step on it! Eat it up! Get that scenery shifted in nothing flat or you'll never live to double cross another guy!"

"Phil," old George wheezed excitedly, "I found them two dicks trussed up in the property room. Wasn't even rump-led. They never put up no fight. Those guys in the alley——"

"Here!" Phil said, pushing the pistol into George's hand. "Keep these birds covered. Wing the first one that stops to sneeze. I'm behind you." Then he turned just as a bullet whirled past his head, spattering the whitewashed brick wall.

It was not his own narrow escape that set him trembling, but the sight of Dixie Cross standing by the prop table, motionless now, seemingly paralyzed. Another bullet snapped. The girl jerked round, clutching at her shoulder. She stumbled out of range.

Phil leaped to catch her. His frantic eyes flashed to a high-barred window in the back wall. He glimpsed a vanishing face. Dixie looked up dry-eyed. "Didn't get me, Phil," she said hoarsely. "Only a scratch; didn't get me."

Phil's eyes widened in sudden comprehension. "They were after *you*, Dixie," he said slowly. "Set to get you." For the first time, despair chilled him. It was more than a racket scheme. There was something deeper, more deadly, behind this persecution.

He looked up into Ollie's anxious eyes. "Beat it to a phone. Tell the police they're shootin' wild. Get 'em up here! Maybe this is definite enough."

CHAPTER VII

CURTAIN!

EIGHT minutes later the curtain rose unobstructed on the second act. It ran forty minutes and to Phil, as well as the rest of the company, it was straight torture.

All semblance of order was destroyed in the audience. The element introduced for the specific purpose of wrecking the show set about to earn its money. The legitimate part of the crowd, excited and angry, moved restlessly and quarreled openly with the disturbers. Some left, angrily demanding their money back.

White-lipped, Phil saw the members of his company smash through their lines, disregarding catcalls and insults from the gallery. For all the confusion, Phil had the grim satisfaction of knowing that given half a chance the crowd would have eaten up that show—that many were enjoying it. When the curtain dropped on the second act he had decided on a course of action.

Brushing aside the distracted actors he jerked the curtain open and stepped onto the apron. A queer hush settled over the crowd. Then a wild yell greeted his entrance. He dug his toes in, literally and figuratively. Instead of making the mistake of waiting till the noise quieted, he employed an old stage trick.

With seeming ease and assurance, apparently not at all bothered, he started speaking in a quiet conversational tone, addressing his remarks to the lower floor, putting all he could command of vitality into his face and rare gestures. It worked, as it invariably does.

The crowd quieted. Curiosity is perhaps the strongest human emotion and even the roughnecks in the gallery could not combat the desire to hear what he was saying. In less than two minutes Phil's strong, well trained voice was ringing clearly over the house.

"I'm being fought to a finish," he said, "because I refused to fall for a racket game. I've laid my case before the police. Up to now they have given me no protection. I'm finishing this show in spite of all the racketeers in Chicago."

"I'm asking the decent part of this audience to stick with me till the final curtain drops. Then any or all of you walk back to that box office and you'll get your money and a free ticket to the show to-morrow night."

"To the part of this audience that came here to wreck the show"—his head lifted boldly to the squirming, seething gallery—"the police are sending a riot squad on the double-quick to keep order in this theater. Suit yourselves about how you take that tip, but don't make the mistake of thinking you can bluff me into dropping the curtain definitely until the show is done. That's all."

"I'm sorry for the annoyance my patrons have suffered, but I've got enough confidence in you as law-abiding citizens and good sports to believe you'll stick. The third act follows promptly. Thank you."

He stepped back. His head was swimming, his hands felt like ice. The roar that followed his unconventional speech seemed literally to rock the theater.

DIMLY Phil saw the faces of his company around him. Ollie was frankly crying, tears smudging the rouge on her cheeks. Amelia French was laughing hysterically. Tommy Bradshaw was pacing up and down, cursing and jabbering defiance.

Old George Jefferies caught Phil's hand. "Go to it, kid!" he shouted over the tumult. "I'm proud of you, Phil. Wish your dad could see you fight, by jimminy."

A burly blue-coated form thrust through the crowd.

"Say, what's the idea, young feller?" what do you mean with that line about the police not givin' you no protection? What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say," Phil snapped. "I called at headquarters this afternoon and all I got was a lot of apple sauce."

"When the police force proves I'm wrong and takes care of that bunch of roughnecks out there, not to mention the thugs that have been firing through that window up there, I'll make a public apology. Until then, I'm fighting my own way."

He resisted an impulse to snap his fingers under the astonished officer's nose and turned away.

"Places for the third act," he said. "Straighten your wig, Ollie; you look like you've been in a rough and tumble. Plaster on some rouge, Miss French; you're white as Christmas cotton. All right, let's go. Curtain!"

The curtain rose on the third act of "Too Many Crooks." Breathing a deep sigh of sheer physical weariness, Phil leaned against the rear wall and lighted a cigarette. Dixie came up to him.

"Only forty minutes more, Phil," she said with a faint smile, "and the impossible has been achieved. We'll have given our show in the face of—Christy Matthews."

Phil's eyes narrowed. "You mean—he's in the house, Dixie?"

She looked away. "Oh, I don't think so really, but his men are scattered all over the place." She winced and laid a hand tenderly on her shoulder.

Phil said slowly. "Why were they shooting at you, Dixie, why really? That wasn't an accident, you know, and you were the only one in direct range."

She shrugged. "Why should they shoot at me—Christy Matthews' gang? I'll tell you, Phil." She lifted her head with a courageous little toss and looked full into his eyes. "Last summer I was doing some night-club stuff. I had to; jobs were scarce."

"A chum of mine and I got a chance doing a turn at the Golden Slipper. We didn't know it then, but it was Matthews' club. We got invited to some of his parties—only hit a few, but that's how I got to know him."

She glanced away. "Nellie and I soon got sick of it. She went on Pantages and I—went up State to visit my aunt for a time. Then Bennet's Agency wired me to join you. I forgot all about Matthews until I saw Zeb Strang this morning. Then I knew something was up.

"I saw Christy out in the car too. He was terribly surprised. He was nasty about what he intended doing to the Forrest. He wanted me to help on the inside—quit at the last moment—that sort of thing. When I told him I wouldn't he——"

Phil's cheeks were hot. "He nearly knocked you down," he said angrily.

She nodded, shadowed eyes on the stage. "I've got to hop along, Phil. You know this trick last act; I'm on nearly all the time.

"Yes, Christy was nasty—all right. You've got to believe, Phil, when we were playing around with his bunch, Nellie and I didn't know what he was. I couldn't bear to tell you—I thought you might not understand."

Phil slipped a comforting arm around her waist. "Never you mind, honey, about me understanding. I didn't dream you knew Matthews, of course, but it doesn't make any difference to me. As soon as this beastly show is over, I'll have something to say to you. How about a little supper somewhere—just the two of us—to sort o' talk things over?"

"That would be fine, Phil," she said a bit uncertainly. "I expect, after the show, we'll all have a lot of things to talk over." She raised on her toes, laid her hands on his shoulders and looked deep into his eyes. "Phil," she said so low he could scarcely catch the words,

"no matter what happens after this show is over I want you to know I've tried to help you—tried a lot. You won't let anything make any difference, will you?"

Before he could do more than nod she was gone. Phil strolled over to watch the progress of the show. The audience was quiet, rather ominously quiet, he thought, the show progressing smoothly.

At various places through the crowd loomed the blue uniforms and brass buttons of the law. The big officer still lounged indifferently back stage. Phil breathed a sigh of relief. It did look as though the battle was won for the moment at least.

He ran to his dressing room to freshen his make-up. As he hurried back to take his cue a man stopped him, one of the rebellious stage hands.

The fellow's sullen, bearded face was white, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Lissen, Mr. Farnum." He glanced swiftly around. "Matthews' guns are in that crowd, set to get you or one of your gang. I heard 'em talkin'. They'll croak me if they know I squealed, but I didn't sign on to see murder done. Better ring down the curtain and call it a day."

He turned away. Phil's fingers fastened on his collar.

"Say that again, Richards," he ordered. "Where'd you get your information?"

"Heard 'em talkin' down to the hang-out at Martindale's place. Couldn't get it all, only they're set to get you or they're——"

He wriggled from Phil's hold and was gone like a shadow. Phil stared after him with hard eyes.

Another scheme to get that curtain down—grown to be an obsession with Matthews. Then a chill ran over him. It had sounded straight: "Matthews' guns are in that crowd, set to get you or one of your gang."

CHAPTER VIII.

RETRIBUTION.

PHIL heard Dixie's high, hard laugh from the stage. His cue. He made his entrance into the big courtroom scene like a man in a dream. The company was on edge. A hushed silence held the crowd. The scene moved swiftly; the lines snapped. Where there should have been hilarious bursts of applause came only suppressed giggles, as wearing to taut nerves as a planing mill working full time.

"But, your honor," Phil parroted, "I am asking my client to tell her story in her own way."

"Matthews' guns are in the crowd, set to get you or one of your gang." The words hummed in Phil's ears. He fought to pierce the blinding curtain of footlights, to penetrate into the darkened theater, to pick out Matthews' guns. Dixie had said they were all over the house.

"I'll tell—I'll tell——" Came Amelia French's rich contralto as she leaped up according to script. The judge pounded for order.

Dixie, the hard-boiled gun moll in the play, said clearly: "Oh, my Gawd, let the skirt spill."

The police were in the crowd, Phil reflected, as he brought his brilliant plea to a close. Matthews' guns wouldn't attempt murder in the face of the law. Then he visioned that crowded theater darkened, half a dozen officers, a flash, a cry, panic——

Perspiration stood on his face, his lips were dry. He stopped in the middle of a line to order the curtain down. Then Dixie cut in with her speech—the show went on.

Phil glimpsed Uncle Toby's crabbed old face in a box to the right, leaning forward tensely, gnarled old hands on his ebony cane. The old man had been clamoring around back stage after Phil's curtain speech, but he had been

too busy to talk to him. The judge shuffled his papers noisily. Amelia French, the beautiful accused, sat rigidly silent.

Dixie's eyes caught Phil's. They seemed to hold a frantic appeal in their depths.

She came close to him. "Matthews is out there," she whispered through stiff lips and moved on.

PHIL knew the bill backward. There was only about ten minutes more. If it was himself Matthews' guns were after, he'd risk it. He thought right then he'd risk everything he had to finish that show in Christy Matthews' face, but he couldn't be sure.

He was going through business and lines automatically. The people on stage looked like animated dolls, eyes fixed, lips dry. All the time Phil marveled at the ability of the old stager to keep on under all odds.

A uniformed messenger boy entered on cue with a message for the young district attorney. Rising, Phil took the yellow envelope, and slit it while the group in the make-believe courtroom waited with bated breath.

"This, your honor," Phil said, "is the report I have waited for. If you will permit me to read it." He flipped out the prop telegram. His eyes flashed over the usually meaningless words. "It is the authority of Professor Henri Stevens," he went on automatically. Then he stopped, eyes fastened on that fluttering sheet of paper.

His lips opened but he could not speak. Something seemed clutching at his throat, choking his breath. Ollie stirred impatiently. Old George Jeffries cleared his throat.

The judge said sharply: "The court waits."

Then without conscious effort on his part Phil began talking. The words of the eminent doctor's report flowed from his lips as calmly, as naturally, as ever

while the import of the telegram ate into his brain.

Guard Dixie Cross. She has the dope on Christie Matthews for the Barscardi killing stop Matthews going to get her from the audience before the close of show stop coming as fast as I can Tony Earp.

"That, your honor, is the concluding point in my argument. I am prepared to produce the doctor to testify in person if the court so wishes." How they were staring at him. This was new business. "In the meantime I'd like"—he reached forward, seized Dixie by the shoulder, literally yanking her over the few intervening feet between them, and forced her down behind the double shelter of the judge's desk—"to insure the safety of an important witness."

His voice rang startlingly through the silent house. "Insure her safety against the guns of hired assassins." He finished just as a dull plop sounded from the darkened theater—a second, a third.

The judge rose slowly, put out one hand. "The court is adjourned," he said clearly.

The curtain shot down and the judge slumped forward, fingers clutching at a widening spot of red on his shoulder.

Phil, swayed weakly against the railing, fighting blackness. Out in front, pandemonium broke loose—screams, yells, angry commands, shrill of police whistles. Through the wings came old Toby Farnum waving his cane, stuttering in indignation and excitement. Dixie crouched motionless in the shelter of the desk, eyes closed.

"Phil!" the old man shouted, "why in thunder didn't you tell me what them dirty crooks was plannin'? How come I was left in the dark?"

Phil laid an arm around his shaking shoulder. George was helping the wounded judge from the stage.

"That's all right, Uncle Toby," Phil said gently. "I was selfish, I guess, but I didn't want to worry you. It was a dirty game all right and I don't get it all yet, but we've beat them for the present."

People were surging round them, police officers, plain-clothes men, puffing cigars, scowling, grumbling, tapping note books with stubby fingers.

Phil thought cynically of Tony Earp's words: "Oh they'll pay enough attention—to-morrow."

Then Tony Earp himself stepped onto the stage.

The little man's face was gray and lined. He glared round wildly, saw Dixie, sighed and crossed to her. Gently he helped her to her feet.

"Thank you, Miss Cross," he said. "Sorry I didn't get your message sooner. I was on my way into town when my car was held up and I was—taken for a ride. Only it wasn't done very efficiently. The boys lost their nerve at the last and I managed to get word through to Farnum from along the line.

"I got the plan they'd hatched as I went riding with them, and also tumbled to the fact that you'd consented to tell what you know. Don't know how the gang found it out."

Dixie's grave eyes looked into his. "I'm sorrier than I can say, Mr. Earp, that I didn't take advantage of the chance you gave me this noon at the restaurant and tell what I knew about the murder of Detective Barscardi.

"I was so frightened. I've been so frightened ever since it happened. I got away from Matthews' house that night by way of the fire escape after I'd seen with my own eyes——" She shivered and twisted her hands.

"That's all right," Earp said, "you don't need to go into it now. You're the girl Louie Blount told us about. We had your description, but the name fooled——"

"I used a different one at the night club," Dixie said in a low voice. "I suppose you've been hunting for June Arden." She smiled weakly.

"We have, but I thought I recognized you last Monday with young Farnum here and decided to watch you. I could have arrested you then, but wasn't dead sure. I just tried you out to-day at the restaurant." He smiled.

"I found out enough to figure you'd maybe be glad to help Farnum out and gave you your chance. I'm glad you've decided to tell, but it would have been easier and saved you all a lot of trouble if you had decided earlier."

He paused as a heavy-faced man in plain clothes stepped up.

WE got Matthews, Tony," the plain-clothes man said. "Nabbed him in the mix-up out there. That rat, Guiseppe, did the shootin' from the balcony boxes. Neat bit of work you done, young man."

His keen, kindly eyes rested on Phil. "I didn't tumble what it was all about when you jerked the lady back of the furniture, but you saved her I guess. How'd Tony here tip you off?"

Phil shook his head. "The prop telegram was just his message," he said. "Hanged if I know how he worked it."

"I didn't know how else to get it to you." Bart Stone said listlessly. "That seemed easiest. Figured it might be important"

"It was," Phil said.

"Looks like there was somethin' in that song and dance you brought to headquarters this afternoon," the plain-clothes man went on. "I heard about your hot curtain speech too. Kinda hard on the force, you was. Can't say that I blame you, but I don't think you'll be troubled any more. It oughta be clear sailin' for the Forrest after this."

"We've been tryin' for a long time to get somethin' on Matthews to put him

away. Now we got it!" His grim lips tightened.

"These gangsters can get away with murder sometimes, but when it happens to be the murder of the best-loved man in the detective bureau it ain't so easy. You're prepared to testify, young lady?"

Dixie was standing, clinging to Phil's arm.

She nodded. "Yes, I'll tell. I should have done it before. I'll be glad to tell about it. Matthews was drunk and he boasted to Nellie and me about inviting a policeman to his house. Then after he fired and turned around and saw me——"

She shivered. "Oh, I thought he'd kill me and I knew he would try sooner or later. When he called me over to the car this morning I saw it in his eyes."

"Hush, Dixie," Phil said gently. "You've gone through enough to-night. Matthews won't be able to touch you now."

"You've said a mouthful," the plain-clothes man said grimly. "Wherever you are, young lady, there'll be two full-grown cops right with you till this matter is settled."

Phil grimaced. "Oh, say now," he protested, "can't we just have a minute or two alone?"

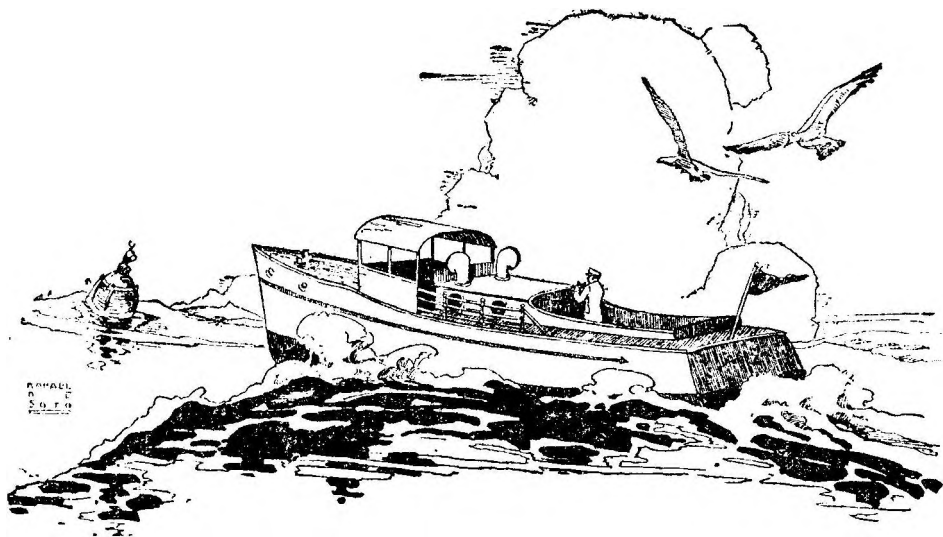
The detective shook his head stubbornly. Then a glint of humor shone in his eyes.

"Aw, well, you don't need to worry," he said. "Cops is dumb anyway and I'll give you a couple of the dumbest. How's that?"

Dixie's eyes met Phil's. The noise and confusion of the thinning crowd was lost to them—the back stage hustle, the strain of that opening bill.

"I guess it's all right," Phil said.

Dixie nodded happily. "I know it's all right," she echoed. "All all right. The bad luck's broken, Phil. The Forrest won't be a jinx house any more."



The Best Prize of All

By Kenneth Duane Whipple

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

REGATTA DAY.

THERE was nothing worthy of comment—unless one knew the circumstances—in the fact that the spray-drenched *Raggedy Ann*, *putt-putting* its way up Lake Mebago that sparkling August morning, with pursuing whitecaps running before the stiffening breeze, was the only boat going in a direction opposite to the Harbor regatta.

The daily visit of Alec Dart's general-utility craft to seventeen islands out of the lake's thirty-six was as much a fixture as the rocky steeps of Mount Mebago, gray and sheer above the shallow green of the tricky Narrows at the far end of the lake.

A close observer, however, would have noted that Alec, sitting humped in

the cockpit, vouchsafed scarcely a wave of the hand to the occupants of the plunging craft that continually cut across his bows. It was not at all like the pleasant, reliable Alec, whom a large percentage of the cottagers called by his first name.

But Alec, absorbed in his own gloomy thoughts, paid no heed to the joyous boatloads en route to Mebago Harbor. For him, indeed, each individual launch and sailboat served as a fresh reminder of his own ill fortune.

At the last two regattas, Alec Dart's *Water Witch*, that fleet, sturdy craft on which he had lavished days of labor and ingenuity, had emerged victorious from the Class A races. This year, with the big Mebago Cup practically won, he had been sparing no effort to gain permanent possession of the prize.

Now, through the bitter irony of fate, he was chugging away up the lake in the rented *Raggedy Ann* on Regatta Day, with a hot flare of resentment burning in his heart. Among his day's tasks, while others sped roaring through the blue waters or cheered from wharf and deck and rock promontory, was that of putting the *Water Witch*, that once had been his, back in commission at Wolf Island, where she lay idle, tied snugly to the Addisons' pier at the Hemlocks.

Alec Dart's cheeks flushed with anger as he stared moodily across the water at the low-riding *Sea Serpent*, the Addisons' big mahogany launch with the crimson side curtains, as it roared away in the direction of the harbor. It had passed him less than five hundred feet away—so near, in fact, that he could still hear the mirthful sounds emanating from it.

Alec scowled blackly, visualizing the personnel of the party as he knew it from his daily visits. There was Andrea Addison, once of stage fame, now merely an imperious and crotchety grand dame with a hawk-nose and iron-gray hair, famous chiefly as the owner of the noted Addison collection of sapphires.

There was her niece, Jessica, a dark-eyed, soft-voiced girl, seeming sometimes almost out of place in that gay group of celebrities and near-celebrities.

Of the remainder of the ever-changing menace Alec was less sure, except for Dal Barnard, the Miami speed-boat man, whose sudden arrival and equally sudden purchase of Dana Lull's *Gray Ghost* had caused a startling shift in the betting odds on the Class A race.

"Whole crowd must be aboard her," Alec muttered. "Gee, but that old dame has got her nerve, wanting me to come up and fix up the boat she swiped from me—and on Regatta Day, too. Wonder what's the matter with the old *Witch*. Nothing much, probably.

I don't suppose that crowd knows enough to take care of a decent boat, anyway."

THE *Raggedy Ann* pounded on up the lake. Alec, his cheeks still flushed with anger, sat brooding in the stern. Through his mind ran, as it had run all summer, the details of the whole sorry affair since the upset of the *Water Witch* that windy Memorial Day when the Addisons arrived for the summer, resulting in the loss of the big chest of new silver and linen destined for the Hemlocks.

Alec, ordered to make the trip against his better judgment, had been too busy rescuing Buddy Jordan to give a thought to his cargo.

Mrs. Addison's bitter accusations, the suit for damages, attachment of the *Water Witch*, refusal of the offer for settlement of the case at an outrageous figure—these had followed in rapid, bewildering succession.

The worst blow of all had been the acquisition of the *Water Witch* by the Addisons at the forced sale.

Alec shook his head doggedly, striving to rid his mind of its seething thoughts, and spun the wheel as the *Raggedy Ann*, rounding Spar Rock buoy, headed directly for Wolf Island, set in a shallow inlet on the east shore.

"Wonder how it seems to have as much money as old Mrs. Addison," he mused. "Wonder if it's true about that collection of sapphires. Worth thousands of dollars, they say. I sure would like to get a squint at them.

"She keeps them in a sliding drawer back of her bed—Celeste was telling me all about it at the dance over at the pavilion last night. What does a woman with money like that care whether a guy gets a prize in a boat race or not?"

Alec broke off and fell to whistling, though not exactly to keep up his courage. For, as he whistled, he was think-

ing again of Jessica Addison. He had often seen her sitting solitary on the wharf, or wandering idly along the edge of the beach, and had learned to look for the shy wave of the hand with which she had come to greet him.

He had wondered why she was so often alone; had even felt vaguely sorry for her. Alec knew nothing of the standards of Mrs. Addison's house parties where a girl must be rich in order to be attractive. Had he known, he would have snorted scornfully.

The *putt-putt* of the engine died as he turned the switch. Stepping nimbly ashore as the *Raggedy Ann* grazed the wharf, he knotted the rope loosely through the iron ring in the planking.

Then, with a longing glance at the trim lines of the *Water Witch*, rocking idly at the end of the pier, he briskly ascended the rickety wooden steps and, express parcel beneath his arm, strode forward along the winding path toward the big house half hidden by the hemlock grove.

LEANING the parcel against the casing of the front door, Alec stood for a moment, looking irresolutely about him. There was no sound save the sighing of the breeze through the hemlocks. The island, Alec felt certain, was absolutely deserted.

Extending a cautious hand, he tried the doorknob, starting a little as it yielded to his touch.

"I'm going to have a look at those sapphires before I tackle the *Water Witch*," he said with sudden decision. "I'll never have another chance to see them, probably. It won't do any harm just to look at them. Gee, wouldn't the old dame have a fit if she knew!"

He chuckled maliciously as he pushed open the door, stepped cautiously into the hall and, with a shamefaced grin, shot the bolt behind him. Despite the most convincing assurances to the contrary, he could not rid himself of the

notion that he was not alone in the house.

A moment later Alec found himself almost tiptoeing across the narrow hall at the head of the staircase, to the open door of the room of which Mrs. Addison's maid had told him. It was a long, narrow room, finished in spruce sheathing.

At the end opposite the door, a mahogany vanity with innumerable toilet articles before the large triple mirror bore witness to the persistent beauty delusion of the once-attractive actress. A chiffonette and wardrobe were farther down. At the opposite end of the room, an ancient four-poster loomed.

Upon this venerable bed Alec, prostrating himself, wormed his way cautiously to the rear and pressed eager digits upon the sheathing in the far corner.

A panel slid upward. He thrust his hand into the opening. It shook a little as he drew from the recess the jewel case which held the gems.

A moment later an involuntary gasp escaped his parted lips as he lay, staring into its interior, half dazzled by the brilliance of the sky-blue stones. All his imaginings had not prepared him for their sheer beauty.

For an instant the covetous thrill of desire gripped Alec. Over him swept the almost uncontrollable impulse to revenge himself on Andrea Addison by looting the jewel case of its sparkling treasure.

The entire collection could be hidden in a package no larger than a child's purse—could be cached for a week, a month, a year if need be, despite the vain seach and frantic accusations of the harridan owner who had wronged him.

It was only an instant that the black thought held Alec in its thrall. Then, with a shudder, he closed the lid with a snap and thrust the jewel case hastily back into its hiding place.

"Whew!" he muttered, passing one hand across his moist forehead. "Talk about temptation——"

He broke off with a start, his heart pounding madly. A board had creaked in the hall outside.

A second board creaked. Alec slammed the panel shut and with a frantic bound essayed to leap from the old bed.

Beneath him he felt the fabric of the antique affair sag and yield. Then, with a resounding crash, the bed collapsed, sending him sprawling to the floor in a flapping flutter of debris.

Floundering in the wreckage, Alec stared in helpless fascination as the door swung slowly, hesitatingly, open. On the threshold, one hand at her heart, her bright lips parted, her dark eyes wide in a stare of surprise equal to Alec's own, stood Jessica Addison.

CHAPTER II.

FEMININE DISTRESS.

OF the two, it would have been difficult to tell which was the more startled. Alec was the first to find his voice, though to no particular purpose.

"Hello!" he said inanely.

"Hello!" replied the girl. "Where—where'd you come from?"

There are minds that work at top speed under stress. Alec's was not of that class.

"I came—I came——" he stammered stupidly. "I was—was——"

Jessica Addison continued to stare at him. Alec was too badly upset to note that she held a crumpled handkerchief balled in her tanned fingers, and that traces of tears brightened her eyes.

"But what——"

Burning with shame and chagrin, Alec scrambled to his feet.

"I came—I came to fix the *Water Witch*," he mumbled. "Your aunt sent for me. And I'd heard so much about the sapphires I just thought I'd take a

look at them. I didn't mean any harm. I didn't know anybody was here."

His halting speech, his air of absolute and utter guilt, would have convicted him before any court in the land. But Jessica, to his surprise, merely nodded understandingly.

"I'd have shown them to you if I'd known you were here," she said. "Aunt Andrea would have a spasm if she knew, but I don't care! You saw them, didn't you? Oh, never mind that old bed—it's a wreck anyway."

Alec's tongue-tied condition stood him in good stead. He continued to listen dumbly as the girl chattered feverishly on.

"There isn't a single person in the whole crowd that knows a thing about electricity," she declared scornfully. "Can you imagine being as helpless as that?"

"Mr. Barnard and Mr. Tate and all the rest fussed around with it a while—the way they fussed around with the generator jigger down in the basement a couple of weeks ago when it wouldn't—wouldn't jig any more. I bet it doesn't take you ten minutes to fix it. Do you mind if I watch you do it?"

"No," said Alec with some difficulty.

"I wish I was an electrician, and knew how to make the *Water Witch* run," went on the girl rapidly, almost hysterically. "After I'd fixed it, I'd get into it and start it up—and I'd just go, and go, and go——"

By degrees the power of coherent thought had returned to Alec.

"But why didn't you go with the others?" he interrupted. "How come you're here all alone?"

Two tears suddenly welled out of the brown eyes and splashed on the rug at their feet.

"Because they're a lot of mean old p-p-pigs!" announced Miss Jessica Addison shakily, and, to Alec's horror, she dropped into the chair by the door and began to sob.

ALEC crossed the room and stood looking doubtfully down at her. How small and frail and helpless she looked, sitting there with her fuzzy-brown shingle-bobbed head burrowing into the crook of her arm! She couldn't be more than eighteen—nineteen, maybe.

"Don't cry, kid," he admonished, administering a rough pat to the shaking shoulder nearest him. "Here—tell us about it."

The girl gave her eyes a final dab with her skimpy handkerchief and looked up, her tear-flushed face breaking into a sheepish grin, which Alec found vastly appealing.

"You've always looked so nice and sympathetic and understanding when you used to come sailing in, mornings," she said, "but that's not really any reason why I should wish my troubles on you. All was, they didn't want me to go with 'em."

"I overheard Aunt Andrea and Mrs. Duncan discussing how crowded the one boat would be, and whether 'that young niece of mine' needed to go. So when Aunt Andrea came up and began hinting around, I just said I had a headache. And she didn't even offer to stay with me——"

"That's a dirty trick!" burst out Alec impulsively. "She might know you'd want to see the regatta, and root for your man, Barnard, and his——"

"He's not my man, Barnard!" broke in Jessica, her eyes flashing. "He's positively weird; even Aunt Andrea wishes now she hadn't invited him here. She didn't know him personally, you know. She's always rounding up some celebrity like that."

"And ever since the first night, when I wouldn't let him kiss me down there by the pines, he's just ignored me. Why, he's even paid more attention to Celeste! And this morning he steamed off early, all by himself, before the rest were ready. I hope—I hope——"

Under Alec's stare she halted, her face flushing a shamed pink.

"I know it's awful for me to talk this way to you," she said, "but I had to blow off steam somehow. I'll promise not to explode again if you'll let me hang around. It won't seem quite so lonesome."

ALEC, under the spell of her admiring gaze, would have tackled something of which he knew far less than the workings of the *Water Witch*. Reaching the boat, he ran his fingers rapidly over the well-remembered electrical system. A hasty wrapping of tape about a hidden wire worn bare, and the spark buzzed once more.

The heavy engine back-fired as he tried to throw it over. He dropped the crank and stood staring at a neat three-cornered well of blood on the back of his right hand.

"Too rich," he grunted. "Might have known somebody'd start monkeying with the carburetor. No wonder they've been complaining about the way she ran."

Jessica was at his side in an instant. Alec made only a half-hearted attempt to dissuade her as she sought to stanch the wound with her inadequate blue-bordered handkerchief. How soft and cool her hands were! How tanned and firm the nape of her smooth-shaven neck as she bent solicitously above his grimy hand!

"Come up and let me put some antiseptic on it," she commanded. "It won't take but a minute."

The window of Jessica's room fronted the lake, wind-swept and white-capped. Alec, after mounting the stairs at her heels, stood staring through the tips of the hemlocks to the tossing waters beyond, as Jessica busied herself with gauze and tape. Was that a boat coming up the lake? Or was it the buoy at Granite Reef Shoal?

"All ready!"

He turned. Jessica was holding the bandage. Grinning deprecatingly, he allowed it to be fastened in place and adjusted with a final deft pat. How delicious the sweep of her eyelashes as she looked up at him!

"There!" she said, with her shy smile. "Isn't that better?"

"It sure is!" agreed Alec, swallowing hard. What a perfect peach she was! What a shame to leave her alone on the island!

"Listen!" he said suddenly. "If you want to see the regatta—why don't you come along with me? I'll skip the rest of my trip—nobody's home anyway—and we'll beat it for the harbor. Are you game?"

For a moment brown eyes looked searchingly into blue eyes. How deep the brown eyes were—how dark, how still!

"I'll come!" said Jessica, a little breathlessly. "I did want to see a good race——"

"That's nothing. Didn't I want to be in one?"

"I know. I think it was perfectly hideous, the way Aunt Andrea——"

For some moments a persistent, muffled sound had been registering on Alec's subconsciousness. Now, stepping suddenly to the window, he raised it cautiously, holding up his hand for silence.

"Did you hear that?" he said in a low tone.

"What? I don't hear anything."

Alec listened intently for a moment longer before, with a shake of his head, he lowered the sash.

"Neither do I—now," he said. "Thought I did, though. Queer. Almost sure I did."

He glanced toward the wharf, where the *Raggedy Ann* all but rubbed noses with the rejuvenated *Water Witch*.

"Sounded like a boat," he said, "but there's none here. Well, let's go!"

Together they descended the stair.

Alec's foot was on the lowest tread when he checked himself suddenly, touching her arm to sign her to silence.

Footsteps were crossing the front porch—quick, furtive footsteps, as of some one in haste, yet desirous of concealment.

The next moment an unseen hand rattled the knob of the bolted front door.

CHAPTER III.

CLEVER DUPLICITY.

WHO can it be?" whispered Jessica, staring in bewilderment. "Nobody ever comes here."

"Keep still," replied Alec in the same tone. "Maybe they'll go away."

The front door was tried again, less cautiously. They could see the knob turning to and fro. Involuntarily Jessica drew closer.

"I'm scared!" she confessed. "Why don't they knock—or go away—or something? They must know there's no one here."

Alec shook his head.

"I don't know," he whispered back. "Something's fishy. You'd better——"

He broke off as steps sounded along the porch outside. The next instant, grasping her arm, he was urging her rapidly up the stairs.

For, through the window at the corner of the room, he had glimpsed a crouching figure, half creeping, half running along the porch and around the corner of the house toward the rear door. And the mysterious prowler had been masked, with a handkerchief loosely knotted across the lower part of his face.

"Quick!" he whispered, half pulling Jessica into the room they had just vacated. "Have you got a gun?"

Jessica, her face pale but her eyes steady, shook her head.

"Not here," she answered. "But there's one——"

Alec pressed her arm. Below stairs

hinges creaked. A heavy tread sounded on the kitchen floor, then halted.

An ominous silence ensued. Had the unknown visitor in some manner sensed their presence in the upper room?

Jessica leaned suddenly toward Alec, her lips brushing his ear. "There's an automatic—in Aunt Andrea's room," she breathed. "I'll get it—I know right where it is."

"Jessica!" burst from Alec in a tense whisper. "You mustn't! You——"

But Jessica had darted on noiseless, rubber-soled feet through the open door and across the narrow hall, her movements hidden from below by the turn of the stairs. And almost in the same moment the heavy footsteps, moving with sudden decision, crossed to the foot of the staircase and began to ascend.

Alec, his eyes desperately circling the bare walls of the tiny room for a weapon of any sort, heard the unknown prowler halt on the topmost stair.

For an age-long, heart-halting instant there was no sound, save for the incessant creaking of a loose shutter in the gale outside the huge, barnlike summer cottage.

Then the footsteps advanced once more. Alec, tensing himself for a sudden spring as they sounded loudly upon the floor of the room across the hall, prayed that Jessica might at least have been vouchsafed time to lay her hand on the weapon.

Mentally braced for almost any contingency, Alec found his bewilderment growing as the seconds passed, silent, deathlike, with no sudden command, no bark of a pistol, no noise of a scuffle. Had his ears deceived him? No, for the steps sounded again.

Came a slight scratching noise; a sudden low exclamation.

Spurred by consuming curiosity, Alec moved on tiptoe into the hall, where the triple mirror of Andrea Addison's dressing table afforded a tripartite view of the far end of the room.

AMID the débris of the broken bed stood the tall man who had slunk past the window below. He was still masked. Under the visor of his low-pulled cap his shadowed black eyes gleamed in triumph as they feasted upon the object which his hands caressed—the Addison jewel case.

There was something vaguely familiar about the fellow, Alec thought. Where had he seen——

Behind the thief the closet door opened noiselessly. The automatic lay level in Jessica's extended palm.

"Put up your hands!" she commanded crisply.

The mirrored burglar wheeled. One hand dropped toward his hip pocket, then raised again to join its fellow at sight of the pointing weapon.

A single low exclamation escaped him. "I thought you'd gone!"

At the sound of her captive's voice the girl started violently. When she spoke again her own voice, high and strained, broke with excitement.

"What are you doing here?" she queried sharply. "Answer me, why don't you? You—— *Who are you?*"

Alec, poised to rush to her aid, halted aghast as in the mirror he saw her, with a single swift step forward, twitch the concealing square of linen from her prisoner's face.

"Dal Barnard!"

Her voice was scarcely above a whisper. Alec, his brain whirling, tried vainly to fit the puzzle together. No wonder the chap had looked familiar! But what on earth was he doing here? More than that, what would he say if he found Alec alone with Jessica?

Within the room Dal Barnard, hands high, did not move. But into his saturnine face, still faintly pasty with fear, crept a growing confidence as he glanced about him, his shifty eyes scanning the sun-dappled room.

"Well?" he demanded, breaking the silence harshly.

Amazed, incredulous, the girl continued to stare.

"You—you aren't at the races?" she faltered.

Dal Barnard laughed, a single short syllable of malice.

"How about yourself?" he retorted. "I thought everybody was going over when I left. Had my plans all worked out——"

"Your—plans?"

"You said a mouthful. What do you suppose I'm up here for—my health?"

He tapped the jewel case significantly.

"Then you're not—the Miami speed-boat man?"

Barnard's sardonic grin grew more pronounced.

"Well, I have run in some stuff down Florida way," he said. "But this sort of work is a lot easier—and safer."

Jessica continued to stare at him, aghast as full realization dawned. How even her Aunt Andrea, despite her blind worship of celebrities, could have been hoodwinked into accepting and entertaining this soft-spoken thief, she could not imagine.

Her thoughts, racing back over the days since his arrival at Wolf Island, could now recall dozens of instances where the mask had slipped ever so little. How stupid she had been—she and all of them!

"How did you get here?" she demanded, her pistol hand steady.

The crook, facing her, smiled knowingly.

"The real Barnard never got your aunt's letter," he said. "I ran across it in the mail bags when we looted the Dixie Flyer last month. I'd heard of your aunt, of course—every one knows the Adlison sapphires—and I grabbed the chance in a minute.

"She'd never seen him, you know—just asked him on his rep. It wasn't hard to get enough on him to play the part.

"I hated to have to buy the *Gray Ghost*, but a speed-boat man doesn't look very real without any boat. Besides, it's the fastest one on the lake, they tell me. Handy thing to have around for a quick get-away."

His boastful words stopped short; his jaw fell as he pointed past her to the door. A clever actor, Barnard.

"Who's that?" he cried.

He did not see the sudden relief in Jessica's face, wiped out as she wheeled to face the empty doorway. As her eyes left him his right arm shot out, stripping the gun from her grasp. His other arm went about her as, with a stifled scream, she struggled desperately to free herself.

"Aunt Andrea may not find her sapphires here when she gets back," he said softly, "but she'll find you here, all right, if she looks long enough. But before I tie you up, you little cold-faced, stuck-up devil——"

His back was toward the door as he forced her frantic face upward to meet his. He saw her features alter and relax; felt her deep sigh of relief as she looked past him.

"Oh, Alec!" she breathed.

Dal Barnard chuckled sarcastically. "Once is enough to pull an old one like that," he said. "You must think I'm a simple——"

He slumped limply to the floor, the triumphant grin still on his face. The reek of violets filled the air as Alec, dropping the neck of the broken bottle of bath salts, caught Jessica's arm with one hand as he wrenched the gun from Barnard's fingers.

"Steady, kid!" he said reassuringly. "All right?"

The color came slowly back into Jessica's cheeks. "K. O.," she said, with an unsteady smile. "What's next?"

Pressing the automatic into her hand, Alec bent above the fallen man, lying supine beneath a liberal sprinkling of pungent crystals.

"I'm going to tie him up," he said, "and stick him into the boat and take him over to the Harbor. I think he's down and out—I hit him as hard as I dared. But you keep an eye on him. I'll skip down to the boat and get some rope."

BUT their captive, feigning unconsciousness at their feet, had no intention of being transported, trussed hand and foot, to the Harbor.

Alec was halfway through the door when, undoubling like a coiled spring, Barnard knocked the gun from Jessica's hand and was through the window in a single desperate bound, amid a crash of splintering glass.

Alec, retrieving the gun, ran to the window. Halfway to the wharf a flying figure, jewel case tucked beneath its right arm, dodged erratically through the hemlocks.

Steadying his elbow against the casement, Alec pumped the contents of the gun at the fugitive, who turned a derisive countenance and vanished. Then, dropping the useless weapon, Alec swung from the window, landing solidly on a rough stone walk, and dashed forward in hot pursuit.

He was in time to see the thief—he still thought of him as Barnard—staggering down the wharf with a heavy, jagged stone from the rockwall of the breakwater. A hoarse yell of rage burst from him as the rock hurtled downward into the cockpit of the *Raggedy Ann*. Bubbles and a film of oil rose as the scuttled craft settled rapidly beside the pier.

Snatching the jewel case from the edge of the wharf, the bogus speed-boat pilot sprinted up the narrow, rock-strewn beach.

Alec settled grimly to the chase. He found time, as he ran, to question Barnard's motive in disabling the launch. Too late, as he came blinking into the bright sunlight of the shallow cove at

the rear of the island, did he realize that he had been outmaneuvered.

The *Gray Ghost*, its high-powered motor purring smoothly, shot from the farther bank in a welter of foam. From the cockpit its pilot, crouched above the engine, turned to wave a taunting farewell.

Gasping with exhaustion and innocent rage, Alec stood ankle-deep in the icy waters of Lake Mebago, staring after the vanishing craft. Pursuit was impossible; they were marooned until such time as the Addisons returned.

In the meantime Barnard, smiling and unsuspected, was free to pass unchallenged through the holiday crowd at the Harbor—

Light, running feet broke his bitter musings. He turned as Jessica, flushed and panting, came into view.

"Where—"

"Gone," grunted Alec gruffly. "Had his boat here—on the back side of the island. If I'd had any brains—"

He stopped, as a recollection swept through his mind.

"The *Water Witch*!" he cried. "She's fixed. He didn't know I'd fixed it though!"

Alec's face burst into an irrepressible grin. Seizing Jessica's slim shoulders, he implanted a hilarious kiss upon her parted lips.

"I'm an awful boob!" he said. "Run for the wharf, kid! We're not disqualified yet!"

CHAPTER IV.

SPEEDING SPEED BOATS.

WHEN the *Water Witch*, its rehabilitated motor roaring, shot clear of the tiny harbor, Alec's eager scrutiny was rewarded by sight of the *Gray Ghost* across the far corner of the island, a feather of foam at her bow as she laid her course for Spar Rock buoy on the main channel outside.

"He hasn't spotted us yet," Alec

muttered. "Hope he takes his time, especially if he's heading for the Harbor. As soon as he rounds the buoy and opens her up——"

He narrowed his eyes in a calculating stare at the choppy surface of the lake. Then, with a whirl of the wheel, he ported the helm of the launch. The *Water Witch*, swirling into the trough of the waves, veered from the direct course to the buoy and pointed its prow on a straight line for the Harbor headland, across the shallow waters skirting the shore.

"Lake's been high this summer," Alec explained, sparing a glance over his shoulder at Jessica's startled face. "I was over here fishing last week. Guess we can make it all right."

Alec soon realized, however, that the once-high water had abated perceptibly. Jagged rocks, uncomfortably close to the surface, thrust themselves upward from the surging green billows.

Time and again, calling upon his intimate knowledge both of the launch and of the lake, he dodged hidden dangers, with only inches between the sharp granite teeth of the reefs and the boat's soft sides.

Alec wiped the moisture—not all spray—from his forehead as the darker green of safe depths showed beneath the bow. A glance to starboard revealed the *Gray Ghost*, now foaming down mid-lake on a course approximately paralleling his own.

"Will you look how he's driving her—the blamed fool!" he said. "You could tell he'd never run an eggshell like that before. Be a wonder if one of those rollers doesn't stave her in. Dana never built her for heavy going like this. We've got the inside track, thanks to the short cut. But if he hits 'em like that——"

He turned curtly to Jessica.

"Here—take the wheel!" he ordered. "Just hold her straight. If I can't pep up this engine a little, he'll beat us to

the Narrows just as sure as there's a Santa Claus.

"He's doing thirty-five an hour if he's doing an inch. But the *Witch* was good for better than forty—once. If they haven't tinkered with her too much she'll——"

Hovering about the engine, he did a variety of things, some of which took effect. The roar of the motor accelerated; the prow of the launch tilted slightly upward.

Straightening up, Alec squinted calculatingly across at the *Gray Ghost*.

"Didn't you say you wanted to see a good race?" he queried. "How do you like this one?"

"And didn't you say you wanted to be in one?" returned Jessica. "I'll tell the world you're in one now! Where's the—the finish line?"

Alec pointed.

"See that buoy down there—the big round one?" he said. "If we reach it first, we're in the channel and he's outside—and there's no crosscutting in the Narrows. If he makes it first, he'll have a straight run to the station. And there's a train leaving in ten minutes which——"

THE lines of pursuer and the pursued began to converge as the two boats roared on. They were almost neck and neck as they shot across the mouth of the harbor, foaming recklessly through the midst of the scores of craft in gala attire which lay tugging at their anchors.

An officious police launch tootled hysterical warning as Alec's craft flashed diagonally across the course, so carefully cleared for the canoe races inside the point. Alec, leaning far over the side, shouted shrill explanation without slackening speed.

Behind them sounded noises of bustle and activity. A backward glance showed a baker's dozen of launches strung out in tardy pursuit.

The courses of the two craft converged at a sharper angle as the Narrows loomed. Alec, his eyes fixed on the strategic buoy dead ahead, gave a single short exclamation of triumph as he realized that the *Water Witch* would reach it first.

A victory in the Class A races would have been utterly tame compared with the thrill of this triumph, with Jessica at his side to share it.

A flickering glint of metal drew his eyes to the *Gray Ghost*.

"Look!" he cried, pointing. "That's why he's slowing down—he's bailing! Started a seam, probably. Well, it's all off with him now."

Jessica leaned forward, her tousled bobbed hair whipping about her eager face.

"Talk about races!" she said. "Boy, this sure has been a real one! Alec, you're a perfect peach, doing all this for Aunt Andrea, after the way she's treated you!"

How slim, how straight, she sat there in the stern of the *Water Witch*! How he wished they might sail on and on together—he and she!

"I'm not doing it for your Aunt Andrea," he said, a little huskily. "I am doing——"

His fingers tightened about the wheel, his knuckles showing white as he swung slightly to starboard. The *Gray Ghost*, abandoning its course at the last moment, had shot out among the treacherous rocks bordering the Narrows, in a final desperate attempt to slip past.

"Yes, but you're heaping coals of fire on her just the same," Jessica said softly. "You're doing this——"

She broke off with a gasp at the sound of a rending crash. The *Gray Ghost* had come to a staggering halt, its nose high upon a hidden rock, its stern sagging in the foaming waters. Its pilot, still clinging to the jewel case, was scrambling up the sloping craft.

Alec drove the *Water Witch* swiftly

in upon him. He was not a stone's throw from the wave-swept rock, when Barnard, balancing precariously upon the tilted wreck, hurled the jewel case far out into the quieter waters of the deeper pool beyond.

The *Water Witch* swirled past, Alec, with a word of command to Jessica, threw the lever into reverse and dived into the wave, surging over the spot where the gems had sunk.

Down, ever down, Alec went, his staring, smarting eyes fixed upon the black box zigzagging to and fro ahead of him, a dim shape in the green, misty water. He saw it settle, at last, in a deep, rocky crevice.

His heart was beginning to pound as, clinging to the jagged projections, he wriggled his way in between the rocks, head downward. A surge of triumph swept through him as his groping fingers closed about the prize.

A vigorous downward thrust with his free hand started him surfaceward. The next instant he felt his upward progress checked. A sharp spur of rock, thrusting out from the wall of the crevice, had caught in the folds of his linen shirt, impaling the fabric in the small of his back and pulling it tightly about his already bursting chest.

Desperately Alec fought to free himself, hampered both by his inability to secure any grip on the slippery rock with his free hand and by the jewel case to which he still grimly clung. Flecks of color danced before his bloodshot eyes as he writhed helplessly between the narrow, slippery walls of his rocky prison.

He was more than half unconscious when a final frantic twist rent the stout fabric. Blind instinct alone sent him surfaceward, weighted down, as he was, by his waterlogged shoes and clothing. He thrust upward with one groping hand as, with the other, he clung with a death grip to his precious burden.

He gasped weakly as his head shot

out into the trough of a wave, in the lee of the launch. The last feeble remnant of his strength went into the thrust that toppled the jewel case over the gunwale.

As in a panoramic flash, Alec saw Barnard clinging to the tip of the wave-washed rock toward which the Harbor pursuit was speeding; saw bending above him the white, anxious face of Jessica Addison; felt her firm hand clutch his outstretched fingers as she signaled frantically for help.

Then the roaring of the waves and the humming in his ears blended and faded, and dimmed and died, and he went down into a great silence, smiling happily as he gripped those small tanned fingers in his own.

WELL, where is this young Dart, anyway?" demanded Andrea Addison late that afternoon, when the tumult and the shouting had somewhat subsided. "The doctor wouldn't let me

see him this morning. I want to tell him something. Where is he?"

Alec, found five minutes later in the couch hammock on the side porch, dropped Jessica's hand as he rose a little unsteadily to his feet.

"Sit down, young man!" ordered Andrea Addison imperiously. "Now if there's anything I hate to do it's to make an apology, so I'm not going to. I feel cheap enough already, without having to say so. You can have the *Water Witch* back, of course. I know it's too late for this year now, but I'm sure next Regatta Day you'll win a real prize with it."

Alec, again recumbent, grinned happily as he repossessed himself of Jessica's slender fingers.

"I won't have to wait till next year, Mrs. Addison," he said, with a tender glance at the girl beside him. "And if you ask me, I think I've won the best prize of all."

ALBERT M. TREYNOR, ERLE STANLEY GARDNER,

VIC WHITMAN, REG DINSMORE,

and other good story-tellers appear in the next issue of

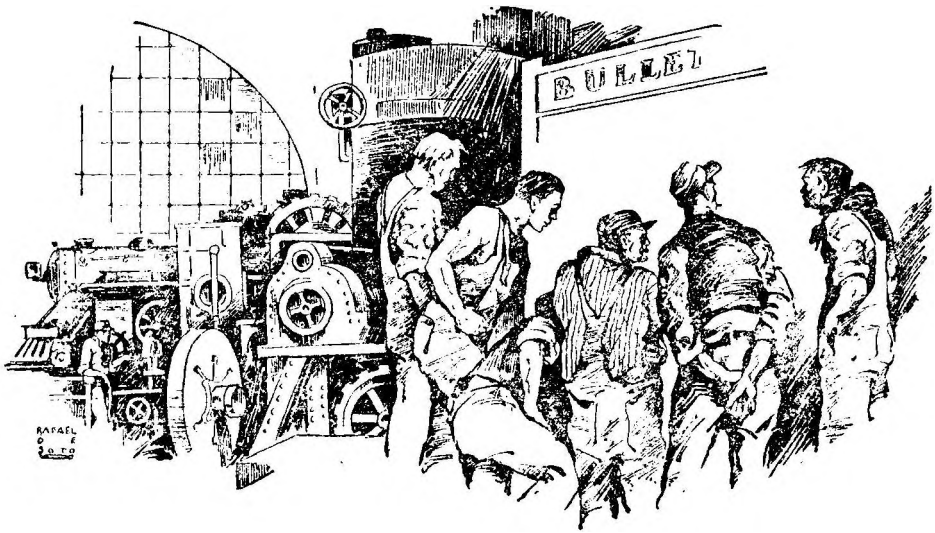
TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

THE WORLD'S LARGEST DIAMOND

A WORKER in the Premier Mine, Transvaal, South Africa, was attracted by the brilliance of a stone buried in the earth. It was a corner of the famous Cullinan diamond, which is the largest in the world.

This stone, which was found eighteen feet below the surface of the earth, weighs 3,253.7 carats, or twenty-two and a half ounces. It was purchased by the Transvaal government and presented to King Edward VII, of England. Subsequently the stone was cut into two parts, and used to ornament the crown and scepter of England. One million dollars was paid for this diamond.

The next largest diamond is the Excelsior, which weighted 970 carats. The Excelsior was cut into smaller stones, and brought two million dollars to its fortunate owners.



Efficiency

By Will King Bowen

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I. NEW ORDERS.



IT happened in a flash. Steve Spencer's arm shot out like a cylinder rod under a full head of steam. McKimm, his foreman, was lifted clear of the floor. He landed sprawling at the feet of Myers, who was working upon a faulty headlight at the mourner's bench in the electrical department of the Q. & G. Railway shops at Midland City.

With a bellow of rage McKimm struggled to his feet, snatched up a spanner wrench from the bench and whirled it to brain the man standing before him. Myers, sensing the insane fury of the foreman, jerked the wrench from the uplifted hand as Steve Spencer, white to the lips now with anger,

planted a well-directed, one-two smash on the outthrust jaw, sending the foreman to the dirt floor of the shop.

Steve jerked the bully to his feet and glared into the fishlike eyes of his boss.

"When I applied for a job in this railway shop, I was given to understand you had the swell head so bad there was no living with you. You may cuss out the other men, hut keep your dirty tongue off of me. Understand?"

McKimm ruled his gang of rough-necks with a hand of iron, covering his lack of knowledge with pure bluff. He drove his men mercilessly and, throughout the entire shops, was the most hated and feared foreman. McKimm had slipped in calling Steve a vicious name.

"I ain't got all day t' fool with yuh. Finish yuhr day out an' we'll 'tend t' yuh after th' whistle blows," the boss snarled.

Instead of rushing madly about as the men usually did when he barked, Steve Spencer grasped the foreman by the collar as he turned away, jerking him about.

Holding to his grip, Steve spoke slowly, deliberately: "McKimm, I have worked here for years, but the day will come——"

"Yeah. We knows all 'bout that," sneered the surly foreman, jerking free. "Yuh'll be th' president of th' road."

"Maybe so," Steve returned softly. "And if that day ever comes, I'll fire you so thoroughly you won't be able to hold down a shift on the chain gang."

"Yuh're fired an' right now!" roared the boss furiously. "Get th' hell out of here!"

Steve Spencer critically surveyed his boss from head to feet, as a slow, whimsical smile hovered about the corners of his mouth. "G. S. Pierson, the master mechanic, hired me and it will take G. S. Pierson to fire me," he stated coldly. "Besides, you had better take a look at the bulletin board before you blow about firing any one."

McKimm glared in the direction of the board. His fishlike eyes alighted upon the men clustered about the bulletin. Blustering toward them, he shoved the men ruthlessly aside.

"What yuh gapin' at?" he growled. "Git yuhr overalls on. Snap t' yuhr jobs. Highball!"

"Go lay an egg," a man snorted. "You're only slave driver of the chain gang now."

"Is that so?" McKimm mimicked scornfully. "Yuh'll darned soon find out if I ain't boss here."

"We done found out, ol'-timer. Read an' distress yourself," an armature winder snickered, amid a general laugh of the men.

NOTICE:

On and after above date Stephen Spencer will assume complete charge of all electrical equipment, superseding Frank McKimm. Un-

til further notice McKimm will take charge of the chain gang, taking instructions from the electrical foreman.

Signed,

G. S. PIERSON.

Steve was at the back of the fallen man. "McKimm, do you want to take the job or not? If you do, get your men together and don't stand there gaping at that notice. Highball!"

"You thought I talked big about losing my job, didn't you?" he went on. "Well—I saw that notice when I came in a short while ago."

The chain gang was a gang of hard-boiled electricians who wrecked old construction, making ready for the new work. It was a back-breaking, thankless job, calling for much night work. McKimm took the unpleasant assignment with bad grace, vowing vengeance upon the world in general, and Steve in particular.

Steve Spencer grimly tackled what he termed was a man's-sized job of keeping the gang going. He had the hard name of slave driver to live down, but he grinned and soon had the gang fighting for him instead of against him.

"Now, don't it beat all hell? Honest now, don't it?" the master mechanic snorted. "To have a punch press go down, and be running again before the flywheel has stopped turning. That gang of Steve's sure is the cat's whiskers."

STEVE sensed trouble when he came through the erecting shop and caught sight of the bulletin board close to the master-mechanic's door.

The board held numerous faded and smudgy orders which had been stuck up ages ago. A neat typewritten notice was fastened with tacks. It bore the date of the coming first of the month—two days hence. It was a general notice that all rigging tools were to be turned into the erecting-shop tool room, to be drawn by check.

Under Steve's orders, every crane in the shops was equipped with a tool box for quick repairs. In case of trouble a crane could be snaked under a chain block, rigged in the building girders and, with a complete set of tools, a man could shoot a case of trouble in nothing flat.

Steve read the notice over again. The more he looked, the madder he became. "So," he snorted to the unresponsive board, "a gang of efficiency sharks are on the job! Well, here's where they don't yank any tools from my cranes!"

He turned and entered the open doorway of the master mechanic's office, and approached the flat-top desk where a heavy-set man worked.

"Say, G. S., does that notice those efficiency sharks stuck up go for me?"

The master mechanic calmly dipped his pen in the ink, drew it out, squinted at the point, signed a typewritten shop communication and handed it to a runner. He twisted a cigar butt around in his mouth with the tip of his tongue, leaned back in his swivel chair, and surveyed the frowning foreman.

"Now, what's your main trouble, young man?" he grunted.

"I want to know if that efficiency notice takes in my department."

"That's about the size of it," grunted Pierson, slinging his No. 9s upon the desk and lolling back. "Orders are orders, my boy," he said, flipping ashes from his cigar.

Steve blew a fuse and exploded.

"What about tools on the cranes? If you sit there, allowing them to slip this over on you, where do we come in on repairs? You've become chesty about the upkeep of the shops lately. Those slip-stick mutts will crab the whole plant."

Those grim-faced, dirty men who sweat in various railway shops, men who draw blood many a time that engines may be kept in service, do not mince words. They have a habit of

talking frankly—straight from the shoulder.

"Are you going to allow those stiff necks to gum the game?" Steve demanded.

G. S. stabbed the cigar between his teeth, squinting thoughtfully at the grime-stained young man before him.

An ear-splitting *rat-a-tat* crashed through the open doorway from the noisy erecting shop, which drowned any attempt at conversation. G. S. patiently waited for the racket to subside.

"You get one complete set of tools. In plain English, the cost sheets are going sky high, and the efficiency experts are at the knot hole, my boy."

Outside a furious *rat-a-tat* of an air hammer drowned the dull roar of the hush shop. The rumbling of the cranes drifted through the doorway. A crane came toward them with a compound cylinder dangling from the huge hooks.

"You want those blocks left hanging in the girders. In view of the fact that I'm ordered to cut expenses and the tool room is howling for blocks, I don't see how I can let you get away with it."

"Suppose that crane," Steve grumbled, pointing to where they were dropping the cylinder into place on a locomotive, "suppose it was to go had now, what then? Must I trot all over hell's half acre to gather a set of rigging tools, if mine are in use on another breakdown? And how could I get up to rig? I suppose some slap-stick artist would ease out here and suggest I get an extension ladder and climb up."

Steve snorted in open disgust. "If I must be a wet nurse to erecting, boiler, engine, machine, and pattern shops, I must have tools to work with," he insisted.

G. S. stiffened in his chair. His feet hit the floor with a bang. "Let me tell you something, young man," he rumbled. "You have guts to get on, and are slated for big things in these shops, providing your determination sticks.

When I gave you a crack at McKimm's job, the super was afraid you couldn't manage men. Thought you were too young, but he is satisfied on that score now.

"You blow in here and ask for precedence over a general order. You got your nerve. I can see the importance of it. I'll put it up to the super and what he says will stick. You can——"

The auto call sounded over their heads. Three strokes—two. It was Steve Spencer's number. The auto air whistle shrilled an echo from the din outside.

Reaching for the desk phone, Steve answered. He hung up and turned to go to work.

"Don't forget to see about my tools, G. S.," he called over his shoulder.

"I'll take it on myself to see the super personally, if that will hold you," Pier-son promised.

CHAPTER II.

HARD AS NAILS.

CRANE No. 5, blacksmith shop, was down. Steve hurried to the repairs. He picked up Myers from his work and they hurried to the blacksmith shop. High up in the air, they worked and sweated amid gas fumes from the furnaces below and a thick coating of dirty grease. A field coil had gone to ground, burning up.

"Say, Myers, do you know the definition of an efficiency shark?" Steve asked without looking up from his labors.

"Yes, I have an idea, but what do you say he is?"

"He is a lame brain who has made a failure of his own business and runs around in circles telling other people how to manage theirs."

Busy stripping the motor, Steve went on: "Cutting expense sheets is logical business, but they should be cut with a sharp knife of caution, in the hands of a man who knows his knitting.

"Some time, you know," he grunted under the heavy yanking of a wrench, "a few dollars spent in the right direction will save thousands. Those big men up at general headquarters sit at mahogany desks, talk little, say less, and figure percentage."

Myers did not reply, though a whimsical smile came to his features. He watched a Bradly hammerman swing a white-hot connecting rod from the furnace door to his hammer, where he swung it between massive steel jaws. The deafening blows fell regularly.

"Remember, Steve, railroading is a man's game. The roughnecks in your gang listen to you. You obey the shop communications. They are O. K'd by the mechanical superintendent. So it goes up to the president."

"The president! He's the lad that tells 'em where to head in," snorted Steve.

"So you think the president is the king-pin, eh? What about the directors? They hold a meeting, look over the reports, find them not so good, then order efficiency experts on the job. The president must bow to their will. On the strength of the coming report, he orders shop expenses cut. The law sets the freight rates. The men higher up must show a neat profit to the stockholders or get out. Think it over."

But Steve was hardly listening. His fingers came in contact with something sharp, sticking from the burned-out field coil. With pliers, he drew out a burned horseshoe nail. The coil had been spiked!

Passing through the erecting shop, they stopped at the master mechanic's office to report the crane back in operation.

Several repairs lately had looked suspicious to Steve. Up to now he couldn't place the blame anywhere, but with this burned nail in his pocket, which had been deliberately driven into a field coil, well——

"What's the matter with that crane, Steve?"

"Field coil burned up—was spiked," laconically returned Steve.

"You're crazy," flared G. S.

Steve tossed the horseshoe nail upon the master's table. The point had been fused to a round black ball of steel.

"An accident," grunted the master.

"Yeah, I expect it was," jeered Steve. "What business has a horseshoe nail in a railway shop? Bet you couldn't find another in the entire plant."

"I'll take that bet, Steve," said Myers, tossing a good nail upon the desk before the startled men. "McKimm put his overalls on this morning and he dropped the new nail from his pocket. I picked it up for luck."

"Go back to your work, Myers. Don't mention this to any one. Understand?"

"And now don't that beat all hell? Honest now, don't it?" fumed G. S. "And to think——"

LATER in the day, Steve received a shop communication to turn all tools in. Under the typewriting was scrawled:

Steve, I done my damndest but he said nix.

It was signed by the master mechanic.

A clean, decent, and earnest desire to become one of the silent men higher up came to Steve Spencer. Far away came the deep throated rumble of the busy shops. The insistent pounding of the air hammer broke in on the confusion. In turn, it was silenced by the crushing blows of a Brady hammer which shook the ground at every thump.

Looking out his dirty office window, Steve felt his nerves relaxing, and a quiet peacefulness possess him. The huge bulk of the shop buildings, the tall power-house smokestack beyond, the rumbling, together with the dank smell of oil, cinders, and coal smoke, seemed to make it a man's grim game.

Steve began to see things as they really were, from the point of view of the silent men higher up. Myers' conversation was convincing, all right. He knew what he was talking about, but how did he know so much about the directing end of the game?

Steve's baptism of boss-hood was only beginning. He was not the hard-boiled man which time would surely bring. He was morally certain of a grim satisfaction of achievement, however. He realized he had a long, hard pull ahead of him, but grimly laid his cares aside and buckled down.

He knew where to place the blame for the spiked field coil. McKimm had done various underhanded things to cause annoyance, but they had not been sufficient for an open rupture. The day would surely come in which McKimm would think he was hit by the power-house smokestack. Give him plenty of rope to hang himself. The object of his unpleasant thoughts shot through his office doorway, planked himself on a chair and opened up with lamentations.

"D'ye know I've howled for special tools to dig concrete. My hozos are standin' meek as clothin'-store dummies. We can't cut through walls with our fingers. Do we get 'em or not?" McKimm growled.

This man was hard as nails. All right! Steve would show this piker how hard he could be.

"You do not," he grinned mirthlessly, reaching in a cubby-hole of his littered desk for a sheaf of shop orders. "Here you are," he snapped. "Cast your optics on your order and you'll see it has been gently but firmly blue-penciled. Those marks mean that you're all wet."

"How come?"

"The efficiency sharks have canceled, that's all."

"But, damn it, man, I need 'em!" McKimm protested.

"It isn't what you want, but what

you get that makes you fat." Steve snorted in derision, slamming the orders back. "I want those holes cut in the power-house wall before noon to-morrow."

"Get that?" Steve said, jabbing his finger at McKimm. "If you can't cut the mustard, I'll have a boss of the chain gang that can. Snap out of this and get busy."

Steve rapped as McKimm partly arose with a blank look of bewilderment upon his ugly face.

"Tools!" he said. "You got a fat chance of getting special tools, a helleva fat chance, I may say. If you got any howl coming, kick to G. S. and see how far you'll get. Now beat it, McKimm. If you aren't craving to get canned, let's see the holes by noon."

The chain-gang foreman glared at Steve, spat a vicious curse at the railroad in general, and stormed from the office.

CHAPTER III.

ROARING CRANE DRUMS.

ENGINE No. 1234 had left the erecting shops a few days back. She was a beautiful thing of iron and steel, freshly painted, with gold numbers standing in bold relief against the varnished background of her tender. She had side swiped a cattle train at the Midland Gap, and was strained fearfully.

G. S. snorted and looked through the dirty windows of his sheet-iron office as the disabled engine barely made it through the massive shop doorway, shoved by a fussy little yarder. He glared at the mud-caked sides and banged his huge freckled fist on the desk. Then he snatched up a rush-order pad, wrote furiously, chewing at his cigar, and stormed out on a hunt for Jenkins, the erecting-shop foreman.

The inquest showed a ripping blow the length of the boiler. The cab was partly crushed and out of alignment. A

hasty check beneath by the aid of an electric light, showed her motion gear torn and ruined. She must come down to the frame, was the final verdict.

The master mechanic stood with an unlighted cigar clamped between his teeth, grimly viewing the wreck. With a snort of scorn, he handed Jenkins his rush order.

"Get her ready for traffic. The whole blamed division is howling for motive power. Snap to it and shoot her out again."

The shop foreman was merciless but efficient in all things pertaining to erection or destruction. No excuses got by him. Far above the roar of the teaming shop, he bellowed for speed.

"I want to see action," he howled, "an' plenty of it! Highball!"

His gang of erectors suddenly turned into wreckers. They swarmed over the fallen engine with bars and wrenches. Off came the cab, handrails and jacket bands. Section after section of the battered jacket was ruthlessly ripped from the boiler.

A siren whistle brought Steve on the jump. He swung through the doorway of the vast shop, which echoed with thunderous sounds that were lost under the great roof. Huge cranes, with pilot lights glaring, pierced the gloom high up, and moved ceaselessly back and forth, picking up tons of castings, shifting about with a tremendous clatter.

Under Steve's sharp instructions, McKimm started his gang of rough-necks stripping the electrical equipment. They scrambled over the frame. Soon the engine was a thing to be pitied, stripped of her strength, a mass of twisted iron and steel.

Charlie Myers was in charge of crane No. 7 and he, with crane No. 6, rumbled down the runway at Jenkins' piercing whistle. Both operators, high up in their cages, sixty feet above the concrete floor, selected working positions. The trolley drums roared and the pon-

derous hooks dropped within an inch of the proposed drag.

Meanwhile, chains had been slapped round the boiler and snubbed into place. A piping whistle shrilled above the din and confusion. Both cranes took the slack. Men swarmed over the boiler, hammering chains from a chance grip on a rivet head. Their task completed, they scurried to safety.

Again the whistle.

Slowly—slowly, inch by inch, the huge boiler ascended; both cranes hoisting steadily. Six inches—a foot. Now both crane drums roared steadily at Jenkins' highball.

McKimm scrambled from the engine frame, turned for a final look as he stepped to a connecting rod. He slipped, grasped wildly, went under, with a foot jammed between the rod and frame.

THEN it happened!

Instantly the hoisting motor of Myers' crane burned through to a dead ground, and the armature let go with a roaring hiss. A vivid flash of greenish light illuminated the building girders, followed by an exploding crack as the fuse at Myers' back let go.

Myers whirled as the sparks rained down his neck. The pilot lights spun from white to flaming red while the alarm bell automatically clanged above the din below. The brakes clamped hard and held, a mere quarter of an inch of leather kept the boiler from crushing the imprisoned man.

The other operator hoisted steadily for a fraction of a second. His chains slipped over a rivet head with a sickening crunch which made the crane girders groan. Sensing the disaster, he instantly shut off, lowering his end to a level.

Meanwhile Steve sprang to the assistance of the struggling, frantic chain-gang boss, unmindful of the sinister boiler just above, while men stood help-

lessly looking on. Steve struggled up, reached the man's foot and tried to jerk it free. It would not give.

"Yuh big bum! Yuh damned dirty bum," McKimm screamed as the pain shot to his brain. "Leggo my foot, damn yuh!" His fear-twisted face was lifted and his dull eyes blazed with pain, while his face went ashen gray.

Sieve shot a startled, backward glance over his shoulder, up through the crane girders at the brake drum. A tiny line of grayish smoke curled lazily from the hand. The charred leather gave—the hand slipped, then caught again as the drum slackened with a spasmodic jerk, settling the boiler a couple of inches, wedging McKimm more securely. The bones in his leg crunched.

With a sobbing groan of despair, McKimm turned to Steve. "I—I got all what's comin' t' me," he panted, with a groan of agony. "If I go out, I wanta tell yuh: I plugged th' crane armature with a nail, like I did tother one, t' git back at yuh. But it got me an——"

And, though facing eternity, McKimm flung back his head and a raucous, terrible laugh rang through the shops, ending with a piercing scream of agony, that chilled the blood in Steve's veins. McKimm's head slumped over the frame, and he went out.

Myers, stricken with fear, looked down horrified at the unconscious McKimm, unable to help. One more slip of the brake and the chain-gang boss would be ground to a pulp. "What'll I do to hold her? She's slipping!"

There came a shout of fright; a sudden, swift movement of the men below, and they scattered like flies.

"Jab something into the gears—anything!" Steve bawled, scrambling to the floor and racing for a building standard. "I'm coming up!"

Myers jerked his head back. He scrambled up the iron ladder to the crane runway. He leaned over the gears, jerking his pliers out of his

pocket. For a second he hesitated, then the brakes slipped again. Before the ponderous drum turned a fraction of an inch; in went the pliers between the slow-turning teeth of the gears.

There came a deafening report. The leather lining charred clear, and an odor of burning leather assailed his nostrils. A small, grayish cloud of smoke arose, flattened out, hanging motionless above the crane.

The pliers gave an unexpected twist in Myers' hand as the gear teeth caught them. His fingers caught, crushing the bones against the guard frame.

Scrambling up the latticelike braces of the building standard, Steve gained the single track, drawing himself upright. He sighted the crane, no more than twenty feet away. To gain it he would be compelled to walk a single track above a sheer drop of sixty feet to the cement floor below. Gingerly gaining his balance, he stepped out, with arms spread wide, like a tight-rope walker, and eyes focused upon the narrow ribbon of steel ahead of him.

CHAPTER IV.

EFFICIENCY SHARKS.

THE erecting shop became silent—strangely silent, every eye watching the man above. No thought was given McKimm, lying slumped over the engine frame. No man dared go to his assistance, not knowing what minute the boiler would crash them to their deaths.

Steve's breath was coming in great sobs. His feet weighed tons, requiring an effort to lift them to push on. His every faculty was taken with the task of retaining his balance and keeping on the move. In the strange, deathlike silence, he ventured an upward glance ahead. Though the distance had shortened to a scant ten feet, he thought it miles. Careful now, lest he slip upon the shining surface, he eased a foot before the other.

Gradually a new strength pumped into his muscles. He vaguely wondered why Myers hung over the drum gear, looking steadily down. Why didn't the man straighten up? Steve laughed shortly—mirthlessly. Stepping lightly along the narrow rail, he gained courage at the short distance ahead, and lengthened his stride. His raised foot failed to alight upon the steel, slipping off.

A sinking feeling settled in the pit of his stomach as he felt himself going—going down to certain destruction. With one foot braced upon the rail, he hurled himself forward at the running board handrail. An outflung hand missed the iron rail, his fingers barely touching.

Like a shot he dropped. His fingers came in contact with the floor boards of the runway, nigh jerking his arms from their sockets, where he hung, swaying like an ungainly bird. It was a desperate struggle for his life and his breath came in short, painful gasps.

For a second he hung, gaining his wind, every nerve in his body crying out in agony, fingers clawing desperately at the board. Then Steve cautiously drew himself up, hoisting one foot upon the floor, and using it and his hands. He drew up, inch by inch to the support, where he lay panting with exertion.

Scrambling to his feet, he raced to the hoisting gear. A dawning suspicion of what had happened to Myers crossed his mind. Steve flung himself flat on the greasy drum, gazing at Myers' white, pinched face. Swiftly Steve's eyes traveled down the arm to the crimson-soaked fingers. One look was enough.

Steve bellowed for a rope. It was snatched from the floor, and the end whirled upward. Leaning far out, he barely caught the end. Under his orders, a pinch bar was attached, and was snatched to the running-board floor.

Easing the pinch bar between the gear teeth, Steve threw all his strength against the bar, and the bloody pliers

dropped to the cement floor. After jamming the bar tightly in the gears, Steve attached the rope to Myers' arm-pits and lowered him to waiting hands below.

Snubbing the end of the rope to the frame, Steve slid down, and approached G. S., who was nervously chewing at his unlighted cigar.

"Now," snapped Steve scornfully, "get some of those wise efficiency sharks to tell me how to get that boiler down without dropping it—if they can!"

"I know, Steve," the old man replied in a weary tone, "the whole damn thing of snatching the blocks and tools from the cranes was a lame idea, but what could I do? Don't it beat all hell, honest now, don't it?" he grumbled, watching the hospital attachés place Myers on a stretcher and extract McKimm.

AFTER five hours' hard work, mainly spent in securing tools, a fresh armature was installed, the brake lining was repaired, and once again the boiler arose steadily.

"Good work, my boy," grinned G. S., recovering his poise.

"Like thunder it was!" caustically replied Steve, entering the master mechanic's office. "Hunt all over hell's half acre getting tools to rig with. Bah!"

A thick cloud of tobacco smoke slowly rolled from the master mechanic's mouth. He curiously eyed the frowning man before him.

"Don't you fret yourself, sonny," he returned dryly, picking up his daily report, tossing the sheet toward Steve. "Have a look at 1234's time. I've clocked up four hours against her because of lack of tools on the crane."

"Think that'll make 'em wake up?" snarled Steve in evident derision and unbelief.

"When this sheet hits the mechanical super's desk in the morning, I think it will," said Pierson.

"I'm not sure about that," came the doubtful reply. "Jameson will crab it."

"Think so?" G. S. looked quizzically at the frowning man before him. "Suppose Jameson's own son would get jammed up on account of this efficiency business, what then?"

"What the devil you mean?" demanded Steve.

The master mechanic slammed down the cost sheet, flipping off his desk light. "I'm heading for uptown, Steve. Coming?"

They passed out the yard gate and wormed through the maze of switch lights to Main Street. Was this struggle to gain the top worth the effort? Down in his heart Steve was glad to know that McKimm was no worse off than a broken leg, and would recover in the city hospital.

"You know I feel bad about Myers. He surely got mussed up," remarked Steve. "Was he hurt seriously? Things were coming with a jump, and I didn't have time to see."

"He did get bunged considerable, but he'll pull out all right. The shop patched him up; found a few minor bones out of place and a fractured one. They sent him home.

"Why not go see him?" G. S. shot out, with a whimsical grin. "He thought a lot of you, Steve. Better climb the Pine Street hill to the big, brownstone house close to——"

"You're goofy, G. S.," Steve blurted. "That's where Jameson, the mechanical super, lives."

"Yeah," came the slow, deliberate reply, "and Charlie Myers, alias Charlie Myers Jameson, lives there also."

Steve stopped in the middle of the sidewalk staring in silent amazement at the master mechanic, sagging against a telephone pole for support. So—that was it! Little wonder Myers knew so much about the directing end of the game. He, a son of a man higher up!

"I got sick and tired of McKimm and

his bulldozing ways, and kicked to Jameson," G. S. said. "You gave the system a hundred cents on the dollar. We thought of a scheme to try you out to see if you'd stick," chuckled the master.

"A month or so ago you worked all day slinging four-inch conduit over a bank of lathes in the machine shop. Remember? A punch press went down. Though not an emergency, I made it a rush job. McKimm crabbed about doing it, said he was sick and tired of overtime work.

"Jameson bet me a box of cigars that you'd kick out of it also. I called you in and put it up to you. The press was running long before midnight and I won the smokes. That's why you're the boss now—through your own efforts.

"Jameson asked Myers what he thought of making you head at that time. Myers said you were all to the good, but wanted you to win by your own efforts, and refused to hand out a recommendation. He's like that.

"While we're on the subject—when Charlie gets well, he'll be the boss of the wire twisters."

The color left Steve's flushed face. This was the end after all the heart-breaking grind, amid smoke, grime, and cinders. If they let him out, he wouldn't accept a place with the gang again.

His pride was wounded. He was struck with a wild thought. Possibly on account of McKimm being out of the running, they figured on placing Steve as head of the chain gang. Fat chance of letting them get away with that! No job for him!

"There'll be drastic changes about the first of the month," ruminated the master mechanic thoughtfully. "I'm getting rather old to fly round much and will get an assistant. Jameson figures on Myers taking your job, and on starting you in as my assistant.

"Now, don't that beat all hell? Honest now, don't it?" The master mechanic turned at Pine, and walked slowly up the street.

Another story of railroaders

by

WILL KING BOWEN

will appear in the next issue of *TOP-NOTCH*

ABSOLUTE SILENCE

CITY dwellers, who are accustomed to noises, find the comparative quiet of the country annoying at first. So do people from out of town find the growls and grumbles of the big cities irritating.

There's a room at the University of Utrecht, in Holland, where absolute quiet can be found. The silence is more absolute than can be secured on a windless day in the desert, or on a mountaintop, or in the depths of the arctic.

This room was designed to be sound-proof, so that tests could be made which would be worthless if an accidental noise occurred. It is a room within a room, built like a thermos bottle. The air has been pumped from the space between its double walls. The walls are made of alternate layers of lead, wood, and felt.

Here, in this utter quiet, the lack of sound is said to be irritating and annoying.



Good Form in Wolf Center

By BERTON BRALEY

YOU wouldn't know the camp no more, it's altered quite a lot
Since "Red Eye" Ike began to read a certain book he got.

He won it from the agent on a final poker bet
And since that time we're livin' by the "Book of Etiquette."

Now Red Eye Ike was, more or less, as you perhaps recall,
A rarin', roarin' mountain cat, the terror of us all.

But after he had read that book, one day he came along
And said to one and all of us, "Boys, I been livin' wrong."

"I been just plum uncivilized, uncultured, raw, and crude,
By all the rules of etiquette, my ways is awful rude."

"But, boys, I've changed, I've changed a heap. I do not want to boast,
But soon my Chesterfieldian ways will tickle Mrs. Post."

"The 'Book of Etiquette's' my guide, and---darn your leathery polts,
It's also gonna be the guide of everybody else."

"I'm arbiter of elegance and sinecure of form,
And them that doesn't mend their ways will find this camp too warm."

Well, there was some discussion and perhaps a trace of strife
But after Red Eye shot a guy for eatin' with his knife,

And sort of winged a couple more for spearin' o' their bread,
It rather seemed advisable to do what Red Eye said.

And now nobody in the camp would ever dare to stoop,
To gargle with his coffee, or to tip his plate of soup;

And now it's, "Would you be so kind and toss me down the cheese?"
Or, "I will boost the ante forty cases, if you please,"

Or, "If you will forgive me, your remarks is scarcely true,
May I beg that you correct them, as I have the drop on you!"

Of course we have our arguments, but nothing coarse or rough,
We follow what old Red Eye calls the code duello stuff,

Which is challenges and seconds and a lot of proper bows,
Which is giving real distinction to what once was vulgar rows;

And the funerals that follows is in perfect taste and style,
With the bearers dressed befittingly while marchin' down the aisle.

Old Red Eye found the duel rules in other books, I bet.
For there ain't no dope on killings in the "Book of Etiquette."

So I'm sayin' things is altered. Not in Boston or New York,
Will you find a better knowledge of the way to use a fork,

Or a bunch whose social conduct has more poise or savoir-faire.
We know just the proper greeting, and the proper clothes to wear.

We don luncheon suits for luncheon, we has cutaways for tea,
And, although we had to bury some objectors—two or three—

We now dine at seven thirty and of course, as you can guess,
Both the diners and the waiters is in perfect evening dress.

Yes, the camp is etiquetted in a way to make us boast,
And we're gonna give a dinner dance—invitin' Mrs. Post!



Murder on Bad Creek

By Luther F. Addington

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

THUD! THUMP! CRASH!
 "Sock him hard, Milo!
 Mash his mug! Throw him in
 the dirt! Don't let him mess
 you up that way!"

Men and boys of the hamlet of Laurel and the hills round about it poured from the school building, where a commencement program had just ended.

They knotted about Steve Bush and Milo Branham, who were battling over the pretty little Mayo girl, "Lucky."

Lucky had been Milo's best girl before he went away to college; but it seemed that Steve Bush was to escort her home to-night.

Milo, not knowing that Steve had a "date" with her, although Steve was standing close to her just outside the school-yard fence, took her arm and said:

"Let's go, Lucky."

Whereupon Steve's rugged first connected with Milo's forehead.

"Don't let him get you down, Milo," some boy piped. "You're smaller but you can manage him."

"I—I—beg your pardon, Steve," said Milo in gasps. "I—I—didn't know you—you meant to take Lucky home."

"But—but I did," snorted Steve, a huge red-headed mountaineer, dressed in a brown suit.

"Milo! Milo!" cried little Lucky, her yellow bobbed hair touched to dark gold under the pale June moon. "I—I didn't know you were coming in from college so soon. I—I——"

"That's all right," snarled Steve Bush, socking Milo again. "I'm taking you home and I'm a-whippin' Milo."

"Sock him, Milo! Sock him!" roared the crowd.

Milo was much the smaller and younger but it was clear that he was not giving in. He was wiry and would cling on to the last. Dressed in a light-blue jersey and gray knickerbockers, he looked typically collegiate.

"What's the matter here? What's the matter?" It was Sheriff Redman, known as "Wabble Gear," who had just come from the school building. He waddled up to the fighters, tilted back his straw hat, slapped a time or two his red-striped suspenders with his pudgy thumbs. He placed his right hand on Milo's shoulder and his left on the shoulder of Steve. He tore them apart.

"Stop this right now," he stormed, "or I'll throw yuh into the lockup. Both of yuh."

For a moment, tense silence reigned. Then to disrupt it a boy piped: "Ah-ha! He whipped ye, Milo, and got yer girl."

Then Steve Bush offered his arm to Lucky and the two strode away in the moonlight. It was apparent, though, that Lucky was sorry she had dated up with Steve.

"Got yer girl and gone," shrilled the voice again. "And he whipped ye, Milo."

"I wasn't through by a long shot," said Milo and slumped away.

Whereupon the crowd dispersed.

Milo Branham was highly respected in the mountain town of Laurel. He had graduated from the local high school with honors and, although he had no parents to encourage him, had gone to college, working his own way.

SHERIFF REDMAN had no more than reached his dingy office in the drab ramshackle wooden building on the north side of the crooked, dusty main street of Laurel next morning when Jude Bush came running in. He

was Steve Bush's only brother and sole surviving relative—a tall, dark-skinned, lean-faced man, wearing overalls, a black cap and a khaki shirt.

"Sheriff," he gasped between breaths, "Steve was not in bed this morning. I went to see if he stayed at Lucky's home and—I found him dead down Bad Creek road."

"Dead!" exclaimed Wabble Gear, the sheriff, bounding to his feet. "Yuh brother, Steve—dead?"

"Yes, sheriff. And I've come for you. He—he'd been shot."

"Did yuh know he had a fight with the Branham kid last night?"

"Yes, I—I—saw it, and—and——"

Jude dropped his head and a tear splashed upon the floor. Wabble Gear beamed upon his countenance of sorrow, noticing in particular the red streak across his nose. Doubtless, in a hurry to hunt his brother, he had forgotten his glasses.

"Well, I'll rush right out to the body, Jude. I'll take Coroner Sprinkle with me."

Wabble Gear waddled from his office, jumped into his rattly old roadster outside the ramshackle wooden building and went for Coroner Sprinkle.

He found Sprinkle, a swarthy little man with a wavering black eye—he was blind in the left eye—coming into town with Ike Bond and Ira Mullins, two farmers.

Wabble Gear slammed on his brakes, thrust his head around the wind shield and in hurried words broke the news.

Sprinkle adjusted his steel-rimmed glasses, lifted his black hat, scratched his hairless pate with a crooked, gnarled finger and crawled in beside the sheriff. Sprinkle, who had for years gloried in making the appearance of being a revenue, wore a khaki shirt, yellow corduroy trousers, and boots.

As a matter of fact he was now expected to be appointed Federal prohibition officer of the extreme southwest

district of Virginia. He had been somewhat of a side kick to the political party now in power. And now that Steve was dead, only he, Sprinkle, would remain as an aspirant for the federal office.

"So Steve Bush has been murdered?" remarked Sprinkle to the sheriff as the little car in which they sat rattled down the dirt road toward Bad Creek. "Have any suspicions as to who done the deed, sheriff?"

"I'm afraid to express my opinion until I make an investigation, Sprinkle."

"Ta-ta. 'Lowed a man as noted fer runnin' down murderers as ye, would of had the thing figured out before now."

"No."

"Ye saw the fight last night, didn't ye?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell ye, sheriff, these young upstarts air plum' plantankerin' when they're in love and see their best gal ride away on another man's arm."

"But I don't believe that kid done it, Sprinkle. I have a higher opinion of him than that. He has a reputation for being straight; he worked hard to go away to school. No, Sprinkle, I don't believe he done it."

"Well, I'd bet my mountain farm against a chaw o' t'backer, if I was a bettin' man, that he done it. I tell ye the fury of ten devils was a-poppin' from his eyes last night."

"Uh-huh," grunted Wabble Gear, and lapsed into silence.

Sprinkle's jowls began to grind on a cud of tobacco. He shifted his glasses and his one keen eye beamed at the prodigious sheriff.

UPON reaching the body of Steve Bush, lying in the middle of the road beside a swinging gate at Rocky Cove, Wabble Gear slammed on his brakes and crawled from under the steering wheel.

The brakes of no less than a dozen cars began to scream behind him. Like as not, a good portion of the citizenry of Laurel would be out to witness the investigation.

Wabble Gear's eyes swiftly surveyed the surroundings. Big drab gate creaking on rusty hinges in front; a few trees above and below the road; ground covered with rough rocks. Rocky Cove was not a misnomer for this particular spot of the Cumberland.

Sprinkle squinted at the beaming June sun pouring down from its scorching heat, and shuffled over close to the body.

"Ta—ta—ta!" he clucked, bending over the dead man. "Was shot through the short rib on the right side. Bullet slanted downward. And he was shot at close range, for his coat is powder burned. Too bad, sheriff, too bad. Steve Bush was an honorable man, and respectable—even if he was opposin' me in the prohibition job."

"Uh-huh," grunted Redman absently, squinting at the powder burn on Steve's gray coat.

"What ye a-lookin' at that so durned long fer, sheriff?"

"Um—mmmmmm—see somethin' strange about that powder burnin', Sprinkle. And I see his face has been scratched with finger nails—and——"

Wabble Gear rose and beamed at Sprinkle. Sprinkle drew a long breath and crammed more tobacco into his mouth. He shifted nervously about the road.

The crowd which had poured from the cars was now pushing close to the body. Coming toward the swinging gate in the other direction were more people. In the front rank of this latter crowd was Lucky Mayo. She wore a blue-and-white-checked gingham, tan oxfords, and hose.

"Now yuh folks will have to stand back," bellowed Wabble Gear to the crowd which had come from Laurel.

"Every man except Jude Bush. I'll make an exception for him."

The crowd retreated but a step. Jude, his eyes red, tear stained, stood fast.

"Now, sheriff," said Sprinkle, "I presume I'd better assemble a jury from this crowd and hold an inquest."

"Go ahead, Sprinkle, I ain't a-holdin' ye. That's what I brought ye here fer."

Sprinkle, his hands locked behind him, sauntered through the crowd, looking the members over as a cattle buyer might look over a bunch of cattle. His eyes fell upon Milo Branham, yet in his collegiate togs, and for a moment lingered. After a while he went on.

"I want you, Joe Jenkins---and you, Lucifer Hawkins." Sprinkle began to point out his jury. Once more he looked the aggregation over before completing his investigating squad.

The jury selected, he seated them on the bank above the road and the inquest was on. Wabble Gear drove the curious spectators out of the way and then drew a line in the dust across the road. "Yuh people," he ordered, "stay back of that line." Whereupon Wabble Gear began to mosey about. He circled the lifeless body two or three times, each time moving farther away.

Coroner Sprinkle watched him and sometimes almost forgot that a witness sat on a stone jutting up from the center of the road before him and his jury.

JUDE BUSH was questioned first. Meanwhile, Milo Branham sauntered up to Lucky Mayo and talked to her in undertones. Sprinkle, attempting to keep his one eye on Milo and Sheriff Redman at the same time, failed to concentrate on the speech of the witness.

Jude Bush wiped a tear from his eyes with a big red handkerchief and rejoined the spectators. Whereupon Lucky was called. For a moment

Sprinkle beamed at her. Then he lifted his gaze to the spectators.

In this crowd he now saw a stranger, a dark man with a little stubby mustache. He was dressed in well-pressed gray tweeds. His eyes were half closed and there was an inscrutable expression on his face.

Sprinkle's mouth dropped open; he mopped his brow with his handkerchief. The crowd was electrified to silence. But after a moment he proceeded to question the witness.

"And Steve Bush tuck ye home last night, did he?"

"Not all the way," replied Lucky.

Her eyes flashed to Wabble Gear who picked up something shiny from a clump of weeds above the road. Sprinkle's head turned too; then the heads of the jury. The heads of the crowd followed suit.

"Go on with yuh're questionin', Sprinkle," said Wabble Gear. "Nothin' to be excited over. Gist found a pistol lyin' here beside the road."

Sprinkle squirmed; Lucky blushed.

"Whose gun is it, or do ye know?" asked Sprinkle.

Wabble Gear sauntered toward the jury and held the gun aloft.

"Belonged to Steve," some one in the crowd piped out.

Sprinkle took the gun and inspected it; he swung the cylinder out.

"Two empty shells," he commented and handed the revolver back to the sheriff. "The murderer must of jerked it from Steve's holster and shot 'im with it."

Sprinkle beamed at Lucky and then at Milo.

"That powder burning shows that he was shot at close range," Sprinkle continued.

"Must of missed one shot, too."

"But thar's somethin' funny about that powder burn, Sprinkle," remarked Wabble Gear, waddling away toward the body again.

Sprinkle followed, tapped the sheriff's shoulder and whispered in his ear: "That Milo Branham is the guilty criminal culprit, sheriff. I know from his actions that he's the one. Saw him and Lucky talkin' a few minutes ago. Now that boy follered down here and bumped Steve off. And I believe Lucky knows somethin' about it."

"Well," snapped Wabble Gear, "go on back to yuh'r inquest. If yuh can show that the kid is guilty, do it. I'm not a-sayin' who done it. But I'm figurin' out a few things. When I comes to the pint of bein' able to put 'em together, I'll tell ye-all who is the murderer. I have a sneakin' idea now. But I ain't a-sayin' as yet."

Sprinkle flinched; he shrugged his shoulders; he walked back to his jury.

"Ta—ta—ye say Steve didn't take ye all the way home last night, Lucky?"

"I said that, yes, sir."

"Any particular reason why he didn't take ye?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the jury about it."

Members of the jury craned their necks.

"Because—because," faltered Lucky, "he tried to kiss me and I slapped him. Slapped him and run away from him."

"Ta—ta—so ye slapped him?"

"Yes, sir."

Now the crowd trespassed over the mark the sheriff had made. Slowly, silently, they pushed closer in, hanging intently onto every word Lucky uttered.

"Sheriff," called Sprinkle, "make this crowd git back. I can't do nothin', all scrouged up."

WABBLE GEAR, dropping to his knees beside a rock above the road, apparently failed to hear. When Sprinkle saw him pick up some tiny shiny objects he closed his mouth, stopped his grinding jowls, and watched.

The witness, the jury and the spectators also watched. They saw the sher-

iff put several bits of shiny objects in his shirt pocket. Then he glanced up into a tree above.

"I say, sheriff," called Sprinkle again, "I can't go ahead with this inquest unless these people get outa the way."

Wabble Gear pursed his lips and dropped back into the road. He said not a word, but the crowd fell back.

"I gist want to ask the witness one question," said the sheriff. "Miss Mayo, it is plain to be seen that the face of Steve Bush has been scratched. Can you throw any light upon this?"

"I scratched his face, sheriff," confessed Lucky. "He tried to kiss me contrary to my wishes."

"Uh-huh! Gist wanted to know. I'd kinder figured yuh'd done the scratchin'. Anything else yuh want to tell the jury?"

"No, sir."

"Then stand aside."

"Sheriff," snapped Sprinkle, setting his jowls to grinding again, "I'm conductin' this inquest and ye have no right to dismiss one of my witnesses."

"Waal, I dismissed her all the same, Sprinkle. Dismissed her because I want to ask ye a few questions."

"Me?" ejaculated the coroner, his hands beginning to tremble.

"Yes, yuh. Take the witness rock."

"I guess I don't have to take any witness seat, gist now, sheriff. This is my affair."

Wabble Gear clenched his big right fist and shook it under the dwarfy coroner's nose. And thereupon the coroner fell back upon the rock in the road.

"I want all facts pertainin' to this case to come out," began Wabble Gear, flapping his suspenders with his big thumbs. "Now, Sprinkle, tell this jury if ye wasn't a-wantin' the office of prohibition agent for this district—the same office that Steve Bush aspired to."

"I—I—did want it," said Sprinkle.

beads of perspiration bursting out on his forehead.

"And whar did yuh go a'ter the commencement at the school house closed last night?"

"That's none of yer business, sheriff." Sprinkle rose and began to stamp about.

These spectators began to talk in undertones. The immaculately dressed stranger smiled. Milo Branham, however, appeared glum.

"Personally, it's not, Sprinkle. But I thought the jury might like to know."

"Well—er—ta—ta—ta—" faltered Sprinkle, dropping his head and digging a toe into the dust. "I went home."

"Yuh'r folks heard you go in, I suppose?"

"Well, I don't know. My wife might of; didn't ask her. She sleeps with our girl, Judy, in Judy's room."

"Well, I guess that's all. Go on with the inquest, Sprinkle. I gist wanted to see that no facts pertainin' to this case was kept in the dark. The jury ought to know them all."

The sheriff walked away; he squinted at the body again, and then raised his eyes to the oak tree above the road.

"See the murderer up in that tree, Wabble?" taunted a small boy in the crowd.

Another voice yelled: "Ye're purty smart sometimes, Wabble, but ye couldn't show nothin' up on Mr. Sprinkle. He's too sharp fer ye."

Sprinkle seemed to rejoice at this outburst and did not call upon the sheriff to bring quiet. With more zest than ever he proceeded with the inquest.

"Milo Branham, come to the rock," he ordered, as though he were vested with new authority.

Milo silently obeyed the call.

"Now, young man," snapped the coroner, "tell this jury all about the fight last night, and then what ye done when the fight was over."

Milo told about the fight and there his tongue stopped.

"And what did ye do next?" asked Sprinkle.

"Well," drawled Milo, "if I may do as you did a few minutes ago, I'll say that that's none of yer business."

"Ta—ta." Sprinkle beamed at the youth; he jerked off his steel-rimmed glasses and polished them with the tail of his coat. "But I guess this jury would like to know."

"Well," resumed young Branham, "I went home—that is, I went to Uncle Dave Maggard's."

"Ta—ta, and what was ye and Lucky talkin' about a few minutes ago?"

"We were merely talking about this murder case."

"Ta—ta." The coroner slammed his glasses back in place.

"Now I want to ask you a question, Mr. Sprinkler," said Milo.

"Go ahead, young man."

"Well, suppose you were a young man, and were deeply in love with a fine young woman. Suppose a bully kind of a fellow should sneak in a date with that young woman and you knew she didn't want him to take her home if you were around—even if you had dropped in unexpectedly.

"Suppose you knew also that the bully knew it likely would be his last time to take her home and that he was the kind that would get fresh. You knew that they were to go through a strip of woods, alone. If you loved her very much you'd see that she was protected—even if you had to sneak along behind.

"Then if he should get fresh you, if you were a man, would run to her aid. And you likely would do what was necessary to protect yourself and her. You'd—"

His voice trailed away like a dying echo.

Members of the jury sighed; the eyes of a few were moist.

"And—and—" faltered the coro-

ner, "ye wish to imply that ye had a hand in this—this—killin'?"

The youth hung his head and failed to reply.

SPRINKLE shuffled away from the jury and called to the sheriff. But the sheriff was not to be seen.

"Sheriff Redman!" he called a second time.

"What ye want, Sprinkle?" came a guttural question from the tree into whose branches the sheriff had been squinting.

"He's up in that tree," yelled some one. "Trced a squirrel, Wabble?"

Slowly Wabble Gear descended.

"I've got this killin' figured out, sheriff," boomed Sprinkle. "But I don't believe he was murdered intentionally. Killed, I think, in self-defense."

"No self-defense to it," replied the sheriff, waddling down into the road. "He was murdered in cold blood. And I'm now ready to prove who killed him."

"Oh! we know that," informed Sprinkle. "This Branham kid has practically confessed to killin' him."

"Then the Branham kid will have another confession comin'," said Wabble Gear, toying with the revolver which he had found by the roadside. "He's no more the murderer than I am."

Milo Branham rose. He ran to Lucky and slipped his arm through hers, protectingly. Sprinkle grew fidgety.

"Then ye mean that the girl killed him?" asked Sprinkle, observing Milo's actions.

"No," snapped Wabble Gear. "Can't yuh read the meanin' of the actions of them two kids? They're both innocent. But each one thinks that maybe the other is guilty, and each one is about willin' to bear the crime in order to lift it from the other. But Sprinkle, they ain't guilty--neither one of them. Not by a long shot."

Milo and Lucky looked into each others eyes and smiled. It was apparent that they felt relieved. But there was no relief showing on the face of Coroner Sprinkle.

"Now ye folks give me yuhr attention and I'll explain who is the murderer," Wabble Gear said. "Don't a one move from his tracks or my old .45 will be barkin'."

The sheriff glanced at Sprinkle and half closed his eyes. Then he pointed to two shells, which he had taken from the revolver he had found by the roadside.

"A shot fired from this shell," he began his explanation, "killed Steve Bush." He indicated the shell, then presented the other.

"Now this second shell," the sheriff went on, "has been crimped with pliers. I judge that the bullet was took out, and that paper was crammed in. It was a blank load. And it was this load that done the powder burnin'."

"And what was peculiar about that powder burnin', sheriff?" interrupted a shrill voice.

"Now yuh people gist hold yer 'taters," replied Wabble Gear. "I'll explain this matter gist as fast as I can."

"Now, as to the powder burnin', it was done in order to give the impression that the shootin' was done at close range.

"But the shootin' wasn't done at close range. It was done from up in that oak tree. Bark has been knocked off up thar by some one a-climbin'. And I saw whar a bullet had gone through two leaves. The leaf bearin' the bullet hole closest the tree trunk is powder-smoked also."

"Well, what's quare about that powder burnin' on Steve's coat?" demanded a chorus of voices.

"Ummm--mmmm—I was gist a-goin' to explain that. Ain't yuh folks noticed that that burnin' is fully two and a half inches below the bullet hole?"

Eh? Ain't yuh? Waal, gist yuh go and look at it.

"If the shot that killed Steve had of been fired so close to him that his clothes would of been powder burned, the burnin' would have been right around the bullet hole. But the man who wanted it to appear that the shoot-in' was done at close range didn't do as good a job of his powder burnin' as he did with his bullet shootin'.

"I'm of the opinion that he wanted it to appear that Steve was killed in a fit of passion, that the gun was flung to the ground, and that the murderer ran. But he made a mess of it.

"People, the murderer, knowed that Steve had gone down this road with Lucky. He set up in the fork of that oak and waited fer him to come back this way. And when Steve opened the gate, and then paused to shut it, the man up in the oak tree fired."

Wabble Gear paused and glanced slowly over the crowd. Silence. Coroner Sprinkle squirmed; heads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Now don't any one dare take to the bushes," ordered the sheriff, mounting the witness rock. He put the pistol he had found into his hip pocket and slipped his .45 from its holster.

"Ye ain't explained what it was ye picked up out thar on that big rock under the oak, yet," barked a slender youth in tattered clothes.

"No, I ain't," grunted the sheriff, "and I was about to fergit that. What I picked up is of the utmost importance, even though I got gist a few tiny pieces."

He fished some bits of glass from his shirt pocket.

"See these," he went on. "They are pieces of spectacle lenses. The man who was up in the tree made the mistake of not takin' care to see that no limb snatched off his glasses. They must of fallen down through the branches of the tree and hit on that

rock. They broke. And that man was so farsighted that he failed to find some of the broken pieces.

"Yuh folks know who is the most farsighted man in these parts. Bein' farsighted and without the use of his glasses, he made a perfect fizzle of gettin' that powder burnin' at the right place."

WABBLE GEAR took a pair of handcuffs from a hip pocket and stepped down from the rock. He walked up to Jude Bush, whose eyes were glassy and whose face was drawn into a sardonic leer. He snapped the manacles about Jude's wrists.

"Now ye think ye've done somethin', don't ye?" snarled Jude, grinding his teeth in anger.

The sheriff fingered in Jude's front coat pocket. He brought out a spectacle case, which he opened. In it was a pair of glasses, the lenses broken.

Next the sheriff jerked out Jude's big red handkerchief.

"Phew!" He snarled his nose. "This kerchief is full enough of red pepper to make a brass monkey shed tears."

"But, sheriff," the crowd yelled again, "why would Jude kill his own brother?"

"Now that's somewhat of a mystery to me," replied the sheriff. "But I have a sneakin' idea. A few days ago I saw Jude and a stranger, who is now in this crowd, goin' over Jude and Steve's land. This stranger, I understand, is a geologist. I'm of the opinion he found somethin' on this land and Jude was too greedy to have it divided with his brother. Mister—er—stranger—come here."

All eyes flashed upon the neatly dressed man with the little mustache.

"Dolphus E. Cunningham is my name," he introduced himself. "And gentlemen," he explained, "I'm astounded at what has been done here,

but now I must tell what I know relative to this matter. I am a geologist. Came here to do a bit of work for this man now handcuffed.

"He had been digging on his land for coal. Found some! I estimated the worth of it close onto a half million dollars. I promised to keep the matter up my sleeve, but I will shield no murderer by keeping such a secret. I was preparing to go back to Pittsburgh when I heard of this affair this morning. Fearing some foul doings, I came right out."

"Thank yuh, Mr. Cunningham, thank yuh," said Wabble Gear.

Then he took charge of the prisoner,

and trudged toward his roadster, leaving the crowd to attend to the body.

"Keen eye ye've got fer business, sheriff," said Coroner Sprinkle, walking beside Redman. "And let me tell ye, I shore did have some quare feelin's while I was conductin' that inquest."

"As me and Steve was a-competin' fer the same office, I felt that that whole crowd was a-thinkin' that I had done the killin'. And I thought ye believed the same thing, too."

"Uh-huh! Well, I didn't think yuh'd done the deed, but I was takin' no chances."

The three crowded into the roadster and went back to Laurel.

Action—Mystery—Suspense!

"SPEED" DASH, the Human-Fly Detective

struggles with a ferocious enemy, as an airplane thunders
toward the clouds in

HAWKS OF THE MIDNIGHT SKY

By **ERLE STANLEY GARDNER**

Complete in our next issue.

FAR FROM STEAM HEAT

CIVILIZATION, with its many comforts, is a necessity to most people, but others prefer hardships to all the luxury that present-day life offers.

For the first time in fifteen years, a trapper who lived in a snow hut many hundred miles north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, recently came from the wilderness. He discarded his Eskimo clothes and wore an ordinary business suit. He wore "store-bought" shoes and even buttoned on a pair of spats!

The trapper declared he preferred the wilderness. His hut is four hundred miles from the nearest fur-trading post. Annually he carries his catch there for supplies. Tea costs him three dollars a pound; sugar, two dollars a pound; tobacco, eight dollars a pound; he pays one hundred dollars for a ninety-eight-pound bag of flour. These he considers luxuries. Like the Eskimos, he lives principally upon reindeer meat and frozen fish.

Automobiles and moving pictures, steam heat and theaters, fresh fruit and candy—these things are unimportant to him. He plans to return to his isolated home. Why?

"Because I enjoy living there," is his reply to this question.



Flaming Sands

By Albert M. Treynor

A SERIAL—PART V

The Story So Far:

RAINY CAVERLY, an American held a slave by Ras Tagar Kreddache, a marauding sheik of the Sahara Desert, escaped to a near-by caravan.

There Rainy Caverly found a girl, Boadecea Treves, and Carl Lontzen, the man who, by cowardice, had been responsible for Caverly's capture by the tribesmen. Lontzen had with him the son of Ras Tagar, who had been in Europe since childhood.

Ras Tagar and his men raided and destroyed Lontzen's caravan and unknowingly killed Tagar's son. Lontzen escaped on a fast camel.

Caverly and the girl, Bo Treves, escaped capture by hiding. They were in the desert, miles from an oasis. Caverly decided their only hope was to join Tagar's forces in disguise. He donned

the garments of Tagar's dead son and the girl dressed as a boy slave.

Ras Tagar accepted Caverly as Sidi Sassi, his princely son, and the girl as his son's slave. Caverly reentered the walled town of Gazim, ruled by Tagar, where he had been formerly a slave. He found that Lontzen had escaped to Tagar's hereditary enemy, Zaad. Tagar declared war on Zaad because he thought Lontzen to be his former slave, Caverly.

Nakhla, Tagar's favorite beauty, penetrated Caverly's disguise. She promised silence if Caverly would kill Tagar. But she reported to Tagar, in a fit of jealousy, that Caverly's boy slave was a white girl.

Tagar and Caverly fought a desperate sword battle in the dais chamber, with Bo Treves watching. Caverly killed

Tagar with a rapier thrust through the roof of the mouth. But, to save his life, Caverly must conceal his action from the Gazimites.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WARRIORS GATHER.



CHRONOMETER was ticking somewhere with alert beats. Otherwise, not a sound was heard within the stone walls of the judgment chamber of the Zouais chieftains.

Caverly's head had dropped forward for a minute, his chin on his chest. One hand pressed the ribs below his heart, as though it were trying to quiet his breathing. The grip of the rapier lay in his other hand, its point resting on the rug.

At his feet, that which had been another man lay in lustrous clothing, half shadowed by the border of the hanging lamp. Caverly looked down at the spreading smear on the rug, and quickly looked away. Then he tossed up his head, gripped himself.

"Oh, well!" he sighed.

Something touched him. His hand went down and found a small hand reaching its way to his. Bo Treves! This was the girl who had left home recently—left a quiet, dull, friendly place where nothing much ever happened. The girl who wished to see things.

His left arm went around her and held her very closely. She seemed like some one who had just come in out of a cold night.

"He was absolutely all wrong—useless, devilish, an affront upon other people—and yet—I don't know— He was so tremendously alive! I wish now——"

Caverly caught himself sharply. "No, I don't. It's all right, Bo. Steady! Every minute you live will take you farther away from this."

"Rainy!" she whispered. "It was—you were—— Rainy!"

"Quite all right!" he insisted.

Bo stirred against his shoulder and raised her lucid, glowing eyes. "I never knew before," she gasped, "what it meant to be brave!"

He laughed queerly and dropped his arm. Stooping, he turned back the corner of the rug and drew the point of the rapier between the folds on the underside. Then he handed the weapon, hilt first, to Bo.

"Put it back where you found it."

He dropped on one knee over the Kreddache. The aversion that he had felt at first was gone. His hand was quite steady as he turned up the bearded face.

The sinister, red-stained lips still yawned apart. In the roof of the mouth, precisely in the center of the hard palate, he saw a small, bluish dent. Just that, and nothing else. It was there that the slim point of steel had crunched through, to enter the brain like a thunderbolt.

Somberly he nodded and stood up. There were no surgeons or pathological men in Gazim to pry officiously and needlessly into the affairs of yesterday. It was ended. Nobody need ever know.

Bo had replaced the rapier in its wall clips. Caverly picked up the cut bell cord and beckoned to her.

"Here!" he said. "We've got to splice this to its hanging end up there. Suppose you could stand on my shoulders and do it?"

"I can try," she answered.

He gave a hand to a hare foot, and hoisted her so that her knees might plant themselves on either side of his head. Then he balanced her while she lifted herself. She was only a feather-weight. He supported her while she was tying the two severed ends in a neat knot.

"All right," he said. "It looks the same as ever." He caught her hands and dropped her lightly to the rug.

There was no time to be lost. It might be fatal if anybody tried to open the door before he was ready.

His keen glance swept the room. The broken vase—he pushed the pieces underneath a divan. He righted the overturned phonograph, and shut the lid. Bo's turban was rewound, adjusted tightly once more to hide her disheveled head. Caverly resumed his *kufiya*, arranging the drapes to shadow his gaunt face.

For the first time he looked at the place where Tagar's point had slashed the silk of his jebalai. The tip of the blade had just grazed the flesh, leaving a scraped streak down the ribs from the armpit to the hip bone.

Bo drew an audible breath when she saw that long, inflamed mark. By this margin they had missed destruction.

She had herself in hand now. She found pins somewhere, and folded and fastened the rent in Caverly's coat.

"I guess that's all," he said. "Wait just——"

He had forgotten Tagar's yataghan. The razor edge was scarred and nicked—the effects of deadly usage. There was a deep, metal urn behind him, like an umbrella stand, holding half a dozen of Tagar's spare yataghans. He slipped one of the weapons from its scabbard and exchanged the blades. The unused one he quietly sheathed at the dead man's sword belt.

Again his glance searched the room. He could think of nothing else.

"Now!" he said grimly to Bo. "As we were before. The slave again—master and slave."

He walked to the door and quietly shot back the draw bar.

A DIM light was burning in the area-way outside. There was nobody in sight. He waited a moment, listening. A sleepy quiet pervaded the dingy corridors beyond.

Suddenly he clapped his hands. "In

Allah's name!" he shouted. "Come! Come quickly!"

One of the negro slaves came hurrying down the passage. Caverly shouted at the man before he could finish his obeisance.

"Something has happened to your master. Fetch Ali Mabih, or anybody you can find. Make haste! Run!"

As the slave fled down the corridor, Caverly turned back into the dais chamber; and stopped dead.

Bo was standing in the middle of the rug where he had left her, staring across the room. Along the farther wall hung a tapestry which, heretofore, he supposed was merely a mural decoration. But evidently it served as a concealing curtain.

It had been drawn aside, revealing a narrow stone slab which swung on pivots, like a door. This had been moved silently ajar, and in the dark opening stood a slender, veiled figure in a green barracan.

It was Nakhla.

The woman saw Caverly looking at her. She dropped the drapery behind her and moved casually toward him with a light and graceful step. Once, she glanced at the sprawled shape on the floor, and then lifted her head without a quiver of feeling.

The eyes that peeped at Caverly above the green veiling were blacker and brighter than he remembered them. Without seeing her lower face he was not quite certain, but he had a feeling that she was smiling at him.

"You have kept your promise," she said coolly.

"I?" Caverly lifted his brows. "I do not understand. What promise?"

"This one." The girl nodded indolently toward Tagar. "You have done as you said. I knew you would. I knew you would not be afraid. You are fearless—and efficient."

She spoke quietly and pleasantly, yet there was something in her voice that

sent a chill creeping into Caverly's blood.

"You've lost your mind, Nakhla!" he declared sharply. "I had nothing to do with this. He was afflicted with a stroke, that was all, and fell down as you see him."

She gave a little, tinkling laugh. "Ah, Rainece—why should you and I pretend with each other? I know the truth. Am I less guilty than you? Need you be afraid of me? I shall not tell. Why should I, now that all is to be as we have desired it?"

Caverly said nothing further then. He was still watching the girl's eyes, but half of his attention was given to sounds that came suddenly in the outer corridor—voices and feet on the stones.

He looked around to see the doorway darkened by a number of men, who had arrived at his summons and hesitated to enter. Among the number were Ali Mabib, Barouch, Hamd, and three or four of the more important warriors. Caverly soberly beckoned to them to come in.

With a pretty air of modesty, Nakhla bowed her head and retired to the shadows. The women of Gazim are not allowed to group themselves with the fighting men.

Caverly did not speak for a moment. He merely stood aside and permitted the newcomers to see the fallen shape upon the floor.

There was a straining silence, while the men crowded forward and peered over one another's shoulders. And then every bearded face was turned solemnly toward Caverly, every eye sought the answer in his.

"What has happened, sidi?" asked Ali Mabib.

"You see. . . I was here with the Ras Tagar, discussing matters. He was on his feet, moving restlessly about, as was his custom when his thoughts were engrossed. Without warning he fell,

with blood gushing from his mouth and nose."

Caverly heard the excited, awe-stricken whispers, and waited quietly, his eyes somberly screened by half-shut eyelids.

"It is a divine sending!" muttered Hamd.

"A bursted blood vessel, no doubt," said Caverly. "That which is called a hemorrhage of the brain. A stroke which felled him as suddenly as the blow of a sword."

Ali Mabib was crouching on one knee, bent close above Tagar's body, touching pulse and temples, gravely listening for heart beats. Then he stood up and pulled grimly at his beard. "The fatal stroke of Allah's sword!" he declared. "He is dead."

"A fate which might easily overtake any of us," said Caverly, "if we were to live as splendidly as Tagar lived."

Ali Mabib turned sternly to Caverly and brought his heels together. Then his yataghan came from its scabbard to flash above him, point upward, in the high salute.

"The Ras Tagar Kreddache is dead!" he thundered in his mighty voice. "*Asclamu, Alaikum, Marhaba, Marhaba!* The Ras Sassi Kreddache!"

Every other sword leaped forth to glitter for a moment above Caverly's head, and Mabib's fierce cry was caught up by his comrades in a crashing echo of sound. The next instant every point was reversed, and the hilts of the weapons were held forward in the touching gesture of submission—the fealty of the *sof*.

Then all fell upon their knees and their foreheads found the rug at Caverly's feet.

Bo Treves had taken her cue from the men, and dropped lightly to hide her face between her hands.

Also Nakhla. The Bedouin girl stole out from the shadows. For an instant her dusky eyes measured

Caverly with a bright, mocking impudence; and then she prostrated herself, her little, jeweled fingers twitching on the floor, almost touching his boots.

Caverly alone stood erect, left a bit breathless by the sudden turn of events. To him the scene was gruesome: the bowed backs of the living; the upstaring face of the dead man—the man whom he had killed. He had forgotten for a while: now the realization came to him like a numbing shock. Tagar Kreddache was no more. He, Rainy Caverly, had made himself the overlord of Gazim.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DESERT POMP.

THE dead of the mid-desert tribes are buried in haste. When a man has turned his face from life it is assumed that he is impatient to seek the ultimate happiness. The faithful believe that release is granted only when the disowned body has been returned to its place in the desert soil.

Tagar Kreddache lay in state that night upon the judgment dais, the banner of the five asps' heads spread over him, with tapers gleaming, and an armed guard of ten marching all night long around the couch of the dead.

At the moment the morning star peeped over the horizon, the musicians of Gazim blew the wild, wailing dirge. The courtyard was crowded with camels and horses and men in the full panoply of war. Behind the men, giving way to them, were the deep ranks of women and children, shrilling lamentations.

From the parapet of the castle, overhead, the outcries had been ceaseless through the night.

Nakhla, alone, was admitted to the courtyard. As the favored of the inner *sahns*, she was the only woman who was to be permitted to ride into the desert with Tagar's fighting *harka*.

She and Caverly both had scored their foreheads with their finger nails, and torn their garments, and thrown dust and dirt upon their heads. Bo, as the chief mourner's slave, had rent her *jerd* and smeared her turban with mud, but was spared the lacerations.

After the first trumpet call, the preparations were carried forward in a fever of excitement.

Tagar's body, clad in gayest silks, was mounted in the saddle on the back of the white stallion that he had usually ridden in life. The horse would be killed later and buried with him. The *agil* ropes were lashed in place to keep the rider to his seat. The dancing horse was held by three men.

Caverly, on a coal-black Arab stallion, pushed his way through the waiting lines. Bo was mounted just behind him, curbing her pony. Farther back Nakhla also sat in the saddle.

For a moment Caverly half turned in his high stirrups to glance grimly back over the restless, trampling ranks. Then, just as dawn was beginning to break, he shouted the command.

The trumpets blared the signal and the gates of the citadel were flung wide.

"Ulla-la-ccn! Ulla-la-ccn—la-cen-la-ccn!" The cries rose to a wild, sobbing chorus.

It was a stage setting worthy of the last ride of the desert hawk. Off in the distance the first pallid streaks of dawn were beginning to tinge the battlements of the hills. In the courtyard the red flambeaus tossed and flared, revealing excited faces and screaming mouths.

Horses, camels and people were all jammed in together between the inclosing barrier. Human figures milled back to the walls. Long, snaky necks bobbed and twined among the torches.

The beasts were half maddened by the noise and the lights, needing but little more to start them stampeding.

THE sudden opening of the gates relieved the pressure. The two mounted trumpeters dashed through the passage, blowing long, weird blasts to summon the angels of the dead.

Ali Mabib spurred his horse after the trumpeters, his sheathed sword clanking at the stirrup, the silken banner of the five asps' heads snapping above him on his brandished lance.

Next, followed Tagar's white charger led between two mounted grooms. The one-time lord of Gazim was clad in flowing garments of yellow and green and primrose, with a gold chain around his neck, as though he were on his way to a festival. His booted feet were bound to the stirrups. The lifeless body lay forward upon the pommel of the saddle, held so by tight hitches of cord.

The moment the gates were passed the white stallion was whipped into a gallop, and at this furious headlong pace, as though he were leading a charge, Tagar Kreddache was borne to his grave.

Caverly, Bo, Nakhla, Tagar's tongueless slave, the chamberlain of the court, and three or four others of the immediate household, came in the next group behind the funeral horse.

Then the full *harka* of fighting men poured out of the gates in column of fours, lances couched, shouting as they came. The camels stretched out in breakneck, racing trot, crowding the horses in front of them.

Up from the valley, up the long, rocky slopes, galloped the funeral procession. The morning star was dimming as the shades of dawn gave way to a faint, pink haze spreading up across the eastward horizon.

It did not need an overactive imagination to feel that the guardian angels, Mouker and Nakêr, had swooped down from the air and were now hovering invisible on either side of the dead man's cantering horse.

Caverly was riding so close to the white stallion that pebbles and grit were thrown up at him by the clattering hoofs. It gave him a creepy sensation to watch the dead horseman, lolling grotesquely over the saddle horn.

Nor was it comforting to look back at Nakhla in her funereal veils; to hear the mounted horde, like the thunder of vengeance, rolling after him. His own life would end horribly if Nakhla were to tell these men even half of what she knew.

The first squad of camelmen carried entrenching shovels across their saddle bows. On top of the highest dune fronting Gazim, and overlooking the wide desert, Tagar, long ago, had chosen the site of his grave. This place lay near the fork of the two ancient caravan routes where the highroads gibbet stood.

Soon the slaves would be lugging red stone from the quarries and erecting a memorial shrine above the spot where Tagar Kreddache was interred.

Into the hills rode the mournful cavalcade. As they ascended the last high slope before reaching the sand country, Ali Mabib and the two trumpeters began to spur and lash their horses, the three racing neck and neck, each seeking the honor of breaking first ground at the place of the obsequies.

Galloping abreast, the trio of fore-riders shoved up to the top of the hill. For a moment their bold silhouettes loomed magnificently against the sky line. Then, the most astonishing things began to happen.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AMBUSCADE!

THE three looked down on the other side of the ridge—and nearly tumbled backward, hauling and sawing at the bridle reins. Horses checked in mid-stride, rearing and pawing the air. The three riders tried frantically to

pull up and turn tail in a single movement.

Both of the trumpeters lost their trumpets. One of them crumpled out of the saddle and crashed upon the rocks. From somewhere in the dusk on the other side of the ridge there echoed the violent concussion of a musket shot.

And then the flanking shadows flickered and flared with fire. Heavy reports broke out in rattling volleys up and down the hill-sides. Bullets whistled and crackled through the ranks of the funeral procession.

One of Tagar's grooms went down in the first discharge, spread-eagled under the trampling hoofs. The second of the pair loosened his hold on the hackamore rope. Unrestrained, and maddened with fright, the white stallion wheeled and headed for home, bucking as he went.

His burden stayed with him. The dispersing funeral cortège saw the horse plunge down the hill, hearing a melancholy thing that shied and lurched in its lashings and fluttered in the wind like the rags of a scarecrow.

Caverly reined in his horse and glanced dourly behind him. The fighting *harka* had scattered in confusion. Two thirds of the camelmen had turned in flight.

Nakhla had been caught up in the helter-skelter of retreat and was on her way down the slope with the shattered ranks of the procession.

Bo Treves still lingered, a drab, mud-died little horsewoman, but more dauntless than the majority of the warriors in their bravest trappings of war.

"Beat it!" Caverly snapped at her as she sat among the bullets, curbing her prancing pony. "Go on! Before you're killed! Get back to Gazim! The obsequies are off——"

He turned at the clatter of hoofs coming down the higher slope. Ali Mabib and the surviving trumpeter ap-

proached. The musician dashed past, whipping his horse. But the standard bearer pulled up for a word with the commander.

"It's Zaad," said Ali Mabib fiercely. "Every fighting man out of Khadrim. An ambushade!"

Caverly nodded grimly. He did not need to be told the name. Obviously it was Zaad who had planned the surprise attack. The raiders from Khadrim must have hidden themselves at the crossroads, to pick off stray detachments of Gazimites who wandered out of the walled town.

And Zaad's notorious luck had brought the entire male populace into his trap—nothing less than the ras' funeral parade.

It was unlikely that the sheriff of Khadrim had heard of Tagar's death. He merely was out on a ravaging expedition with his men. And the fates had permitted him to come up in time to break up the last march of his ancient enemy.

"You might tell the trumpeter to sound the retreat," said Caverly, and laughed.

"Salaam, my lord!" Ali Mabib grinned fondly at the younger man. "He who jests amid bullets is worthy of being followed, and of being spared for another day. Let us go, magnificence. Ride!"

There was no shame in the route of Tagar's stately cortège. The men were armed only with the ancient ceremonial weapons, the lances and the swords. Not one carried a musket or carbine or pistol.

Inasmuch as nobody could return the fire that was spitting forth from every rock, up and down the flanking hillsides, what else would sensible men do but retire behind the citadel walls?

That they dispersed and fled in disorder, in nowise hindered the promptness and success of the maneuver of extrication. Here and there a tumbled

shape was left among the rocks; but the majority got away with their skins entire, and streamed down the slopes to Gazim.

Tagar's runaway charger led the fugitives back to the citadel, bearing the corpse upon his back. At the heels of the white stallions, the shattered cavalcade poured back into the walls, men and horses and camels all jammed together in milling confusion. Ali Mabib and Caverly were the last to pass through the clanging gates.

Caverly had lost sight of Nakhla and Bo. He assumed that both had arrived in the press ahead of him. He commanded Ali Mabib to take charge of the garrison and see that the walls were properly defended.

It was only a precautionary measure. There was no great danger of a serious attack being pressed against the gates. A couple of old culverins, loaded with shot and fragments of iron, guarded the front embrasures. Zaad would know that any attempt to carry the bastions would end in the loss of half of his men in the opening assault.

The raiders from Khadrim had mounted their camels and chased the fugitives into the city. They were discreet enough to halt just outside the danger zone. Now they were spreading out in skirmish lines across the slopes, as though they intended to besiege the town.

This was merely a gesture of impudence. No casual band of marauders would be able to take the stronghold of Gazim. If Zaad were not driven off, he probably would camp where he was for a while, watching the walls. Within three or four days the lack of provisions and water would force him to saddle his camels and ride away.

These little desert flare-ups always squib out before a decision is reached. One side or the other inevitably grows too hot or hungry or thirsty, or simply too bored, to keep up the fighting.

CAVERLY pushed his way through the crowd in the courtyard and dismounted at the inner gate. He had inherited all of the left wing of the palace, judgment chamber, armory, wardrobe, slaves, and even the right of admittance to the inner sahn if he ever cared to press his claims.

He went into the big, cool, downstairs apartment and had a slave bring him water and clean clothes, and platters of meat and bread, and an urn of hot mint tea. It was pleasant to get away from the noisy mob outside, to rid himself of the ashes of mourning, to put on fresh garments.

Ali Mabib found him a while later, seated cross-legged on the judgment dais, curiously turning the vellum pages of an old tome that he had picked at random from Tagar's library.

"How is it with the defender's fortress?" Caverly asked the venerable scout.

"There will be no frontal attack," said Mabib. "Zaad is but loitering for a while to prove to us how brave he is to flaunt his banners in the sight of the town."

"The funeral will be postponed until another day," said Caverly.

"Is it needful?"

"Perhaps not. We might arm the *harka* and fight our way back to the grave. But would it not be foolish to throw away living men just to rid ourselves more quickly of a dead comrade?"

Ali Mabib bowed gravely to the superior judgment.

"The body should be taken from the horse and placed in state in the tower of the minaret, to stay there until we are able to hold a peaceful burial," suggested Caverly.

"That has been done, my lord."

"Then there is nothing more for the present, except to keep an eye on events."

"It is a pity," Ali Mabib ventured,

"to permit Zaad to think that he has bested us."

"Let him think what he pleases." Caverly flashed a murky smile upon his right-hand man. "Let us wait for another moon—until the *harka* is hardened into a fighting unit. Then Zaad shall see what he shall see."

Ali Mabib's bearded mouth twisted in ferocious humor. "When that hour strikes, then Zaad shall find out."

"Have you seen my slave?" asked Caverly abruptly.

"Not since he rode behind you out of the gates."

"I ordered him to ride back with the men when they fled down the hill. He undoubtedly is outside in the court-yards. If you should see him, will you send him to me?"

Ali Mabib bowed and spread out his hands. "At once, my lord," he promised, and took his departure.

Caverly still sat in regal state among the cushions of the judgment dais. He forgot to pick up the volume that had interested him a moment ago. He was watching the door, waiting for Bo's small knock. It had been a good many hours since he had had a chance to talk with her. Perfectly stupendous things had happened since then.

Last night they were driven at bay, desperately fighting for their lives, and for more than life. To-day Caverly was the absolute ruler of the tribe. He could offer Bo protection, security, escape—he could make her the queen of Gazim, if she wished it.

That was a fantastic notion, as curiously enticing as a fairy tale. He was smiling whimsically at the thought, when he heard a slight sound across the room. It was not Bo's expected knock, but a faint rustling which sounded like silken movement.

He turned his head slowly, to see the mural drapes parted before the narrow passage of stone that led to the inner chambers of the dar. A small figure

stood by the curtains, pertly watching him.

Caverly's quizzical eyes hardened to alertness as he recognized Nakhla.

"Ah, Rainee!" Nakhla had left off her veil, and the dimples beside her mouth were puckishly alive as she moved forward under the dim light of one of the window slits. "I had hoped that the ras would be wishing to see the most faithful one of all his people."

Like Caverly, Nakhla had hastened to divest herself of her funereal robes. She was dressed in shimmering taffeta, with a silver filigree band caught flexibly at the waist, and the plainest of silver anklets and bracclets.

As she came forward beneath the colored lamps, she made him think somehow of a little wisp of flame that had escaped willfully from its parent fire. She kicked one of the floor cushions before him, and dropped her knees softly upon it.

"Emir of the middle desert, I am at thy feet."

She smiled at him, not as the dangerous, calculating woman he knew her to be, but like an artless, delighted child with a new game of make-believe which she had just invented for their private amusement.

"Am I welcome to be here?" she asked, as Caverly continued to regard her with his cynical squint. Her dark-tipped eyelashes flickered up beseechingly. "Do you not like Nakhla a little also?"

"Who could help but be charmed by Nakhla?" he said punctiliously.

She sat down on the cushion and crossed her hands demurely. "Perhaps it will be easier when there is no one else to distract. The *Rumi* slave made it difficult for Nakhla. The slave whom you guarded so jealously, whom you wished others to think a boy. She was—she is, pretty. I think—you loved her a little, did you not?"

Caverly's mouth twisted as though

he were about to laugh; but the impulse died, leaving his face very still and thoughtful as his glance sought the door.

"You will forget soon," said Nakhla.

"You think so?" he said absently.

"For a man like you, it will be easy to forget—now that she is gone."

"Gone?" He blinked, and suddenly gave Nakhla his undivided attention. "Gone? I don't understand."

"Did you not know?" Nakhla was all cooing softness. "When we were attacked by Zaad's forces, your slave took advantage of the confusion to escape. I, myself, saw her on her pony, running through the camels and on up the hillside to throw in her fortunes with Gazim's enemies. You have lost your slave, my lord."

Nakhla's hand groped across the cushions of the dais to touch Caverly's listless fingers.

"Raine, *aziz*," she whispered. "Is it not better to enslave the woman who comes willingly, and willingly stays?"

"Is it not better to remember that one, and forget the other—she who chafes in her bonds, and breaks them when she can, and leaves you alone and comfortless?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DUNGEON.

CAVERLY'S face suddenly looked tired and dull. He stared at the door which he had momentarily expected to open, and which he now knew would never open to admit Bo Treves. It did not occur to him to question Nakhla's story.

In his heart he knew that it must be true. If Bo were in Gazim she would have come to him long before this. She must have broken away in the excitement of the ambushade.

He had neglected to watch her for a few moments. It had been easy for her to slip off unnoticed and throw in her

lot with Zaad—just as she had always threatened to do. She had left Caverly to find Carl Lontzen.

As far as Caverly was concerned, there was nothing with which to reproach her. From the very first she had warned him of her intentions. No promise or parole had been given. She had dealt with him scrupulously and frankly.

Nobody could blame her for having preferences. Her choice was made, and she seized the first opportunity to abandon her comradeship with Caverly and go to the other man.

It was an insane thing to do—to give up the safety he had won for her, and cast in her future with Lontzen's dubious fortunes. But Bo was given to reckless moods and impulses. It was like her to carry out a desperate resolve just to show him that she was not to be browbeaten.

Caverly forgot there was such a person as Nakhla while he sat staring drearily into blank space. For days and weeks he and Bo had been inseparable. They had shared hardship and appalling dangers, and precious, stolen moments of laughter.

He had fought and lied and cheated and killed. All that he had gained seemed lost again, now that Bo was lost. It was like turning around in the bright sunlight to find that his own shadow was missing.

He had never felt a more devastating sense of loneliness, not even on the day that he, a solitary, despairing white man, had been flung into the slave *tukels* of Gazim.

He shook the feeling off, or tried to, and turned to Nakhla with his most sparkling smile. "Slaves can be purchased whenever one wishes," he said.

Caverly stood up, but Nakhla remained crouching on the floor. For once there was no hint of acting in her glowing eyes.

"I have never known such a man as

you!" she declared fervently. "Whatever it is you wish to do, you do. If it is love to be killed, the love for a girl——"

She clenched her tiny hand in pantomime, as though she were crushing out the life of some small, struggling thing. "Like so! It is done. As easily as you killed Tagar Kreddache."

He stood over her with his chin drawn in, looking down at her coldly. "You have said that before—that I killed Tagar. It might prove dangerous to make such remarks."

"Nevertheless, it is a true remark. Because I was there, and saw it."

"You—you saw?"

"So I have said." Nakhla nodded. "I stood in the stone door behind the curtain, watching. I saw!" She rose from her cross-legged posture on the cushion in one lithe, effortless movement.

"It was the most magnificent sight I have ever seen!" She faced him erect, thrilled with the recollection. "You fought without anger, laughing and adroit—and unafraid."

He shifted his glance uneasily, liking neither the scene she visualized nor the cruel pleasure with which she relived it. She made him feel like a co-conspirator as wicked as she.

"It is ended," he said crisply. "Let us not remember."

She shook her dark head. "I wish to remember. And I could have wished further that it was I for whom you fought."

She drew a long, sighing breath. "But you used Nakhla's name only to taunt Tagar. It was for the other woman that you killed your man. The slave—the deceiving, bleached-out little fool, who did not know enough to know that such a man as you is found but once in a woman's lifetime."

Caverly rounded upon her sharply. "I have said that I do not wish to talk about it."

She made him a graceful obeisance. "Your wish is the law, my lord."

Caverly started to turn away, but Nakhla took two short steps and gently touched his sleeve.

"What is it you are to do now?" she asked. Her comprehensive glance swept across the richly furnished dais chamber of the Kreddaches. "Shall you accept the inheritance, or shall you foolishly throw it all away?"

He checked at the touch and his musing scrutiny encountered her deeply searching eyes.

"It is all yours for the taking," she reminded him. "You, the slave, who have gained a kingdom with your naked hands."

She reached up to his shoulders, an impassioned eloquence in her voice, in her gaze, in the touch of her soft and tremulous fingers.

"All is yours that Tagar Kreddache held," she said, "and more—ininitely more. Because he was the lord by birth and name alone, but you, my lord, by the right of lordliness."

"All yours," she whispered. "Will you take it?"

Caverly stood with his arms rigid at his sides. He did not move nor try to release himself. The thrall of her eyes held him more closely even than Nakhla's clinging hands.

Dreamily he looked into Nakhla's face, and there found the mirroring of a strangely disturbing vision. Always, his fixed idea had been to escape from Gazini. But why escape? It was a tantalizing, breath-taking thought.

MEN strive and contrive all their lives for a fractional part of the winnings that Caverly had been given without even asking. The sweepstakes of fortune. Power and wealth and luxury and the adulation of men. Indolence, if he desired it, or furious action, in sunlight and starlight, off on the open trail, with the banners fluttering

and the full *harka* pounding after him, wherever he led the way. The despot of the middle desert, and Nakhla, the light-o'-love.

There was no woman anywhere more beautiful than Nakhla. A wild sweetness, colored by the stain of original wickedness, she was no less alluring because of that. She never would cease to be interesting.

"Why do you wish it?" he said soberly.

"Need you ask?" she breathed.

"And you would have your share?"

The up-fluttering of her long, crooked eyelashes said more than words could have said.

He smiled down at her grimly. "You would be satisfied to sit in the inner *sahns* and watch for the ras' home-coming?"

"No! Never!" Nakhla's eyes took flame. "I would ride with my lord and fight by his side!"

Caverly's elbows bent upward and his hands locked over the two hands that still clutched his shoulders. "Would that be womanly, Nakhla?"

"As if I care to be womanly!" she declared passionately. "To sit with women behind the lattices! Always seeing the same pasty faces! The same things to be said, the same things to be done, days and days and days alike. I would go with you, Rainee, into all dangers, wherever you pitched your tent."

The girl's cry of appeal had a familiar sound in Caverly's ears. As he stared at her he suddenly remembered.

Bo Treves had said almost the same thing to him, in another language, on the first night he had met her. Bo, too, had wanted to strike out into the world, seeking life and adventure and high romance. She had been tired of the sameness and tameness of things as women must grow tired. Bo——

His hands dropped away as though something had stung them. Nakhla's

arms stretched to him, but he stepped backward with a surge of repugnance—Tagar's widow, who was willing to marry Tagar's killer.

He did not look at her again. He turned and strode the length of the long room, and back; and after that there was no more doubt or hesitation or uncertainty. All was clear and definite; he knew what he was to do.

Nobody mattered except Bo. She must be saved from her own folly, rescued at any cost or sacrifice. He'd launch a battle for her if need be. She had left him, but he would bring her back if he used up a *harka* of fighting men doing it.

Nothing had happened to change his earliest plans. He and Bo had started this affair together, and they would survive or perish together, whether she liked it or not. They would get away together from this evil and sinister country, if they could.

Caverly halted at the far end of the room and pulled open the entrance door. A slave answered when he clapped his hands. He spoke in a tone too low for Nakhla to hear.

"There is a dungeon somewhere beneath this dar, an oubliette, for those whom Tagar did not wish to be seen or heard or remembered. Do you know it?"

"Yes, master." The slave salaamed, and then silently nodded at one of the flagstones in the floor.

Caverly saw that this one slab was provided with an iron ring, and that it fitted between the adjoining segments without being mortared into place.

"One of the entrances is there," said the slave.

"Where is the key to the lower gratings?" asked Caverly.

"It is kept by the mute servant of him who was Tagar."

"Send me that man," commanded Caverly. As the slave started to withdraw, he added the further order:

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"Find Ali Mabib and tell him that I would talk to him."

Caverly turned back to Nakhla, and his face under its shrouding headcloth was molded in flinty hardness. "You told Tagar that my slave was not a boy," he said.

Nakhla's answering smile was suddenly edged with defiance. "Yes. It was I who told."

"Why?"

"So that Tagar might die more quickly." The wisdom of the serpent gleamed in the eyes that measured him, cool and unwavering.

"I knew that if Tagar tried to take your slave, you would kill him."

"Was that your only reason?"

"Or had you refused to fight Tagar for her possession, then he would have kept her, and she need not have troubled you or me thereafter."

Nakhla shrugged a careless shoulder. "Whatever the result, we should have gained."

"But why should we concern ourselves with matters that are finished?" she pursued indifferently. "Tagar is dead and your slave has run away."

"She is with Zaad," he said quietly. "I can make a sallying attack from the gates, and bring her back."

Nakhla's smile vanished. "You mean to fight a battle for a slave!"

"She need not remain a slave. I can liberate her if I chose, or if it suits my will to do so, I can make her the queen of Gazim."

The woman recoiled as though from a blow in the face. "You—you never would dare!"

Caverly heard a movement of garments behind him, and glanced casually across his shoulder to see the earless, tongueless slave bowing in the doorway. He beckoned the man, with a crooking forefinger.

"Have you known me ever to lack in daring?" he said lightly to the Bedouin girl.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

OMINOUS ELOQUENCE.

WHEN he looked at her, as she stood in the ruddy lamplight, he might have wondered what had become of the woman who had whispered to him so softly a moment or two before.

The bewitching curve of her mouth had changed to savage sneering. The eyes that had looked upon him with sweetness and gentleness, were suddenly tinged with the cold greenish glow of corrosive fires.

"You fool! Have you forgotten the tattoo mark of the Kreddaches, which you cannot show? Have you forgotten how Tagar died? Do you not know that his body lies in the minaret, with a sword wound in its mouth?"

Nakhla faced him with an ominous, deadly scrutiny. "How long would you live, my *Rumi*, if the people of Gazim were told the truth? Until the sun crosses the ridges this morning, perhaps, but not longer—not after that!"

"You would betray me, Nakhla?" he inquired in his mildest, silkiest voice.

"If you should bring that unbelieving wretch of a slave woman," Nakhla told him through her teeth, "it would be the end for you and her. You think you may trifle with Nakhla! Do so, and the muezzin hour to-day shall sound the knell for traitors!"

Caverly made no answer. He turned a careless back upon Nakhla, and addressed himself in the language of signs to the waiting, black mute. With his hand and fingers he made a movement as though he were turning a lock, and then nodded at the stone trap in the floor.

The slave answered the interrogation with an understanding grimace. Fumbling beneath the draperies of his clothing, he produced a huge iron key. His gleaming, red-shot eyes rolled queerly in their sockets while he stood watching for further commands.

Caverly indicated that the slave was to lift the slab by its ringed handle. Then he swung about with a soldierly stiffness to confront Nakhla.

"You were wrong," he said, all trace of human feeling suddenly frozen out of his voice. "I have no thought of trifling with you."

Nakhla stared at the straining back of the dumb man as he heaved up the great flagstone. She understood at last, and bitterness and resentment and outraged pride seethed through her blood in a sudden frenzy of hatred.

As sinuous and silent as the leopard strikes, she sprang at Caverly, her hand gliding from her girdle. But his wary eyes had caught the warning of her intention, even before she came.

A shade quicker than she, he caught her wrist in a paralyzing grip. Nakhla checked with a broken cry. The knife slipped from her numbed fingers and dropped softly upon the rug.

She clenched with him in a flash and tried to sink her gleaming teeth through the silk of his caftan. But he blocked that maneuver with a sharp elbow, and at the same time pinned her free arm and tied her up in his locking grasp.

Nakhla strained and twisted impotently. "Serpent from hell!" she panted, her breath hot in his face. "I'll have you plucked apart and strewn across the sands like *asheh* seeds. Accursed be you!"

"May your eyes wither and your mouth mummify! May you crawl on your stomach around sweet water that you cannot drink, dying of thirst for a million summers. Infidel—renegade dog!"

"If I were Tagar Kreddache," said Caverly thoughtfully. "I'd simply have you strangled and put away in quicklime. And no one would ever know or care."

"As it is——" He glanced at the lipped masonry opening in the floor, where the flag had been lifted, and saw

a top step of stone that led downward somewhere into dark gloom. "There is left me the oubliette, from whence no mischief can creep up to the light. It is to save myself, Nakhla."

He suddenly released the girl and gave her into the hands of the mute. In stolid obedience the slave seized both of her wrists. Evidently he had had experience in other dark affairs.

The instant his sinewy fingers closed upon her, Nakhla's resistance wilted. The instinct of submission is deeply ingrained through generations of desert women. Nakhla, the fatalist, would not beat herself hopelessly and futilely against the inexorability of fate.

The mute slave twined his arm around the girl's arm, stolidly gripping her wrist, and started down through the trap, taking her with him. Caverly took a lighted lamp from its bracket, snatched up a camel's hair robe, and followed down the stairway into the depths below.

AT the bottom he found himself in a ribbed passageway of moldering rock, so narrow that his shoulders scraped on either side. The speechless slave led the way through the tunneled gallery that turned right, then left, and finally descended into deeper obscurity.

Cobwebs and shadows, the absolute silence of death; the imagination was appalled by thoughts of the darksome, mysterious deeds which these pits undoubtedly had hidden through long and horrible years.

Caverly held the lamp before him, watching the girl's shrinking figure as the slave dragged her along. He would not feel safe until she were immured beyond the possibility of communication with the world above.

And even then Nakhla's undying enmity would remain a menace, always haunting him. It was war between them now, to the finish.

At the lowest level of the passage

the solid rock had been excavated to form a series of dungeons, guarded by rusty iron gratings, with bars as thick as a man's wrist. As they halted in that limbo of unhappiness they heard the rattling of a chain and shuffling footsteps in the darkness.

Caverly swung his lamp in that direction and saw a pair of feverishly shining eyes peering at him from the dusk. He brought the light closer, and made out a gaunt, black-skinned face pressed against the slits. This man he knew.

Not many weeks ago Caverly and the prisoner of Tagar's dungeon had been fellow slaves, underfed and maltreated, but at least permitted to live in sight of the sun.

It was Zanzan, the Bonga, who had tried to recapture Caverly, the night he escaped from the Zouais' encampment. Thus Tagar had repaid the slave for his unauthorized man-hunting.

The remaining cells in the row appeared to be unoccupied. Caverly unlocked one of the heavy gratings and swung it on its creaking hinges. Without a word of protest Nakhla allowed herself to be thrust through the opening. The wool robe was spread for her on a stone bench. Then the barrier was shut and the key turned in its lock.

Caverly gave the key back to the mute and signed to him that he was to keep the prisoner supplied with food and drink. Then he turned for his final speech with Nakhla.

"I am leaving Gazim at the first possible moment," he told her. "Before I go I shall entrust Ali Mabib with the knowledge that you are here. As soon as I am on my way to safety, you will be released.

"Meanwhile, try to be grateful that you are dealing only with a *Rumi*, not the real ras of Gazim. It is better to be rendered harmless for a little while than to be silenced forever. Had we

been of the same race, Nakhla, we might have been much to each other. But as it is—good-by."

The girl stared at him through the grating, but her mouth was bloodlessly clenched and she refused him a word at parting.

At the door of Zanzan's cell Caverly halted again. In dumb show he commanded his companion to unbar the grating and strike off the prisoner's gyves.

A few minutes later, the blinking Bonga emerged with his rescuers through the entrance trap into the chamber of judgment. Caverly handed Zanzan to the foyer attendant, with instructions to send the prisoner of the dungeons back to the open-air pens. It was the least, and at the same time, the most, that he was able to do for a fellow sufferer.

AS soon as he dismissed the mute and shut the door, Caverly turned back in idleness to his seat on the silken judgment dais.

Ali Mabib had not yet put in an appearance, and it was not dignified for the ras to go out hunting for any man. There was nothing to do but wait.

Meanwhile, he packed cushions under his head and stretched at full length upon the seat of authority. He had spent a sleepless, nerve-racking night and his eyes were beginning to feel a trifle heavy-lidded. With a sigh of comfort he closed them, and must have dozed.

He awakened suddenly in a shivering sweat, like a man escaping the throes of a horrible nightmare. Evidently he had not been asleep for any length of time. The morning sun had not yet reached the embrasure slits.

He raised himself abruptly, his every sense keyed up in a strange, unreasoning instinct of alarm. He looked sharply around him. His mouth fell open as he listened.

Outside he caught a rumbling chorus of voices. Then, all at once, the massed sounds died away and only one voice was heard. It was a woman's treble, shrill and impassioned, crying out in the dawn.

Caverly stumbled to his feet and dragged a taboret across the floor to the east wall of the chamber. The piece of furniture was tall enough to enable him to reach the window embrasure. He looked down from the opening into the courtyard below.

There were a hundred or more men jammed in the inclosed area under the dar walls. The fierce, bearded faces were all turned in one direction, looking at a figure that sat on the back of a camel before the tower of the minaret.

For a moment Caverly forgot the crowding men as he stared at the camel rider. It was a woman. An inconceivable and astounding spectacle: a woman fastidiously clad in orange-and-bronze silks, riding unveiled into a public place, raising her voice to the men of Gazim, holding them by the fiery power of eloquence!

The woman brandished her bare, braceleted arms above her head as she addressed the breathless audience in tones of wild appeal.

As Caverly stared at her she half turned in the saddle, and he saw her face. He felt suddenly as though his heart had turned over in his chest.

The oratress was Nakhla.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT BAY!

EVEN in his moment of dismay, Caverly was held spellbound, as breathlessly gripped as were the warriors of Gazim by the thrilling, terrible magnetism of Nakhla's voice and speech. A woman born to sway the destinies of men!

She sat sidewise on a caparisoned racing camel, leaning down toward the

gaping, fascinated crowd. Passionate, audacious, envenomed, she swept her hearers by the inciting magic of her own emotion, crying out to them bitter and appalling truths.

How she got out of her dungeon, Caverly did not know. But he might have guessed. He remembered that the hallway attendant had spoken of the flagstone trap as "one of the entrances" to the galleries below—which implied there were others.

"Blinded, credulous fools!" Nakhla was lashing the men of Gazim with her stinging scorn.

"Know you how your Ras Tagar died? You were told that a blood passage in his head burst open and let out his living blood. And you believed! *Blinded—blinded!*

"Not one of you suspected—not one of you guessed. It is time that you knew. Tagar's spilled blood calls aloud to you for the payment of the blood debt! Your lord died by mortal hand—at the point of the sword!

"In the minaret behind me, Tagar Kreddache lies lifeless," Nakhla reminded them tragically.

She swept her braceleted arm toward the entrance of the tower. "Let your lord's dead mouth accuse his murderer. Look in Tagar's mouth and know the truth, oh warriors who have lived with him and fought beside him. The arch of Tagar's mouth that was pierced by the deadly steel!

"Look for that wound, you who were loyal men. And when you have seen, would you know the devil's spawn who slew him? Then come back to Nakhla and ask that the name of him be named!"

It was too late to stop Nakhla's fatal talk. The mischief was out. Caverly was clinging aghast to the window ledge. What an imbecile he had been to trust the deaf-and-dumb slave—or any one else who served the inner *sahns!*

It must have been the mute who had

unlocked the dungeon door. The man must have gone back by some secret passage and let the girl loose, even while Caverly dozed in the comforting assurance that she was safely out of the way.

Caverly saw a dozen men detach themselves from the group crowding about Nakhla's camel, and file through the doorway of the minaret.

Tagar's bier stood at the foot of the circular stone stairway within the tower. The ugly truth was easy to verify. In a couple of minutes the warriors would be coming out again, clamoring for vengeance.

This all might have been forestalled if Caverly had been granted the wisdom of aftersight. He should have locked the tongueless slave in a second dungeon and kept the key himself. But he had taken it for granted that the ras of Gazim owned the fealty of his own goalers.

Evidently not. Nakhla, a born intriguante, probably held half the palace attendants as her secret liegemen. And so, in a thoughtless moment, Caverly had flung away his life, simply because he had overhastily assumed that the Ras Sassi Kreddache was the absolute boss of his own household.

THERE was a commotion in the entrance of the minaret. The committee of investigation suddenly elbowed their way forth.

"It is true!" shouted one. "The Ras Tagar has been stabbed—slain by the blade!"

Nakhla had been waiting in silence, a little, cruel smile hovering at the edge of her mouth.

Now she swung in triumph to the staring throng. "You have seen!" she cried. "Would you know the assassin?"

"Tell us, Nakhla!" "Tagar's murderer!" "Hunt him down!" "Send his singed soul limping to *Jahannum*! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

The men of Gazim responded to the challenge with ferocious shouts. Nakhla stilled them for a moment with an upraised hand.

"Hunt for him who would profit most greatly by Tagar Kreddache's death," Nakhla commanded coolly. "He who has inherited the glory of the Kreddache is your man to render the accounting."

A sudden silence of consternation fell upon the crowded courtyard. Nakhla had openly accused the liege lord of them all. Blasphemy! The crowd stood horror-stricken, surrounding the gayly clad woman on the racing camel.

Then they rounded furiously upon her. "Liar!" "Daughter of *Shaitan*!" "Hell hag!" "Sassi will have out your black heart for your lies! Back to the harem, madwoman!"

Nakhla faced the menacing babel contemptuously.

"Do you think I would dare bear witness against this man if I were not sure whereof I speak?" she asked them in high disdain. "Or if the man whom you call Sassi were Sassi, then I might be afraid to whisper out the truth of the manner of Tagar's dying.

"But he is *not* Sassi!" Nakhla hurled at them in her ringing, defiant voice. "Trickster, impostor, falsifier! I accuse him who calls himself the Ras of Gazim.

"He has stupefied you with his glib talk and bold posturing. He has smothered your eyes with your own headcloths, and turned you all into fools.

"The one who rules Gazim is not Tagar's son! Not even a believer! Not even of the Zonnis blood!"

Nakhla recklessly confronted the warriors, her breast heaving, her clenched fists shaking above her head.

"He was Tagar's one-time slave—the slave who escaped from Tagar the night of the last full moon. He to whom you have salaamed in the fealty of the *sof* is not your lord, but the

white-curdled runaway *Rumi* who murdered Kreddache!"

For the next few seconds the shocked multitude stood motionless, a close-packed ring about the camel. Then an ominous mutter of voices began to swell out from the silence. It rose slowly to a roar.

"Prove it!" shouted some one in the rearward ranks. Others fiercely took up the cry.

"The truth!"

"It is either you or the man you accuse!"

"If you have lied——"

Nakhla laughed brazenly in their bearded faces. "If you will not believe my word, then ask the muezzin. Ask him the mark that was placed beneath the left armpit of the real Sidi Sassi at the time when he was but a little child. That mark indelible——"

"Who speaks of the muezzin?" interrupted a slow, self-contained voice from the open doorway of the minaret.

Every eye in the crowd shifted un- easily toward the tall, white-shrouded figure that faced them in cold aloofness from the entrance of the tower of prayer.

It was the patriarch of Islam, Tagar's dour old priest.

The woman did not seem to be the least bit abashed by the grim apparition. The priest, after all, was only a man, and she was Nakhla, the priestess of men's hearts.

"It was you, father, who branded the Sidi Sassi with the tattoo mark of his own person and princeliness," she stated dauntlessly.

"It was I," admitted the muezzin, observing this bold-faced woman from under lowering, frosty eyebrows.

"The insignia is the likeness of *el agab*, the brown eagle of the desert," declared Nakhla.

"That is true." The priest nodded soberly. "I myself tattooed the mark

of the eagle upon the body of the infant Sassi. The imperishable brand!"

"As the sidi bore that mark as a child, he should bear it now as the man whom we recognize as the Ras of Gazim."

"And if he does not bear it"—Nakhla's exultant cry cut through the muezzin's speech, abrupt almost to rudeness—"then he is not the man he pretends to be!" she shrilled at the warriors.

"And he does not bear it! He *does not*! Strip him of his robes of deception. You will see underneath only the pale, unbranded hide of the *Rumi* mongrel that he is!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

KINDRED WARRIORS.

CAVERLY, still clinging to the window ledge, observed the sullen restlessness of the crowd, and heard the rumble of their voices growing uglier. It was the beginning of that blinded, direful fury that changes sane men into destroying mobs.

For the present the townsmen seemed to be of two minds, not quite decided whether to turn upon Nakhla, or to storm off in the other direction instead, and hale the accused man from out of the castle of the Kreddaches.

They would swing one way or the other, in a moment. Nothing could hold them much longer in check. Yet the muezzin was able to restrain them briefly by a gesture of his hand.

"If this woman has spoken falsely," the priest declared sternly, "then she knows the penalty of maliciousness and perfidy and disloyalty. On the other hand, if the man has sinfully and fraudulently attained to the high succession, then his fate is written clearly. The indictment of the deadly offense had been charged against him.

"And if he be the Ras Sassi Kreddache, or whoever he be, he dare not deny you the right of knowing. If he

bears the mark of the eagle, he is your lawful lord; if that mark is not to be found upon his skin, then he is your lawful prey. Demand to know the truth, men of Gazim. Go!"

Caverly waited to hear no further. He kicked the taboret from under him as he jumped to the floor. It was ended.

He might as well have spared himself the tribulations and anxieties of the last few weeks, and submitted to the inevitableness of fate. His valiant masquerading had gained him nothing. The toss was made and he had lost. All his brave scheming had turned back upon him ruinously.

He heard the rush of feet across the courtyard as the massed phalanx of Gazim's fighters headed to the entrance of the *selamlık*. They would be storming into the judgment chambers to demand his disrobing, in a moment or two.

Caverly ran to the door and dropped the iron bar in place. His harried glance swept across the room.

There were two exits beside that of the main corridor which, even now, was cut off by the charging crowd. The secret stone panel, opening into Tagar's harem; the flagged hatchway leading to the dungeons below; he decided haphazard to risk the trapdoor.

Not that it mattered particularly which way he ran. Like Tagar's mice, helplessly inclosed by four walls, he was penned in by the desert. Wherever he tried to dodge and scurry they would soon stand him at bay.

But he'd put off the moment as long as he could. He'd give them a sporting finish.

His yataghan and *flissa* were still girded in his belt. He lingered only to grab a pistol from one of the arms racks and to take a lighted lamp from the wall. Then he lifted the flagging stone, descended the rock steps, and dropped the trap above him.

In the gloom of the underground

passage he groped his way in silent haste. Down the sloping floor, he went past the dungeon where Nakhla had been confined. He noticed that the grating hung partly open, with a key in the lock. It was as he had suspected. Nakhla had received outside help.

Beyond the cells, the vaulted gallery ascended again. He followed the upslant, and presently arrived before a massive log door, standing slightly ajar. The morning light came through the opening. He saw that he had crossed to the rear of the dar, which looked out upon the lemon grove and the lake.

He paused just a moment to reconnoiter. Then he pushed the door wider open. With a simultaneous movement, his right hand dropped to his pistol butt. A figure in striped garments emerged stealthily from a near-by clump of shrubbery—Ali Mabib.

There was no one else in sight. The old warrior held up an empty hand, and Caverly's weapon remained in his belt.

"I thought you might leave by this passage," said Ali Mabib. "The others were less wise. Briefly, we are alone." He measured Caverly with his formidable eyes.

"Are you, or are you not Sassi Kredache?" he asked quietly.

"You may as well know it now as later—I am not the Kredache."

A strange look of sadness crossed the veteran's hard-lined face as he grimly shook his head. "Whoever you be, let there be peace between you and me," he grumbled. "We have fought together."

"Amen," Caverly smiled gently and a bit wistfully at the old man.

"Do not misunderstand," said Ali Mabib. "I shall neither hinder nor help. This much only would I offer: if my own life were forfeit to the tribe I should climb the wall, while there is yet time, and attempt to steal a *hajin* from Zaad's encampment, and fly into the *igidi*."

"Such is my intention," said Caverly.

"You will not succeed," prophesied the gloomy Mabib. "Only it behooves a brave man to hold to that which has been his life, until the last grain of sand has trickled through the glass."

He studied Caverly's gaunt face for a moment with steadfast eyes.

"Now and then," he said, "here or there, a man is born who is all in all. Whether he be slave or sheik, whether he belongs to *Aissa* or Islam, he holds the pride and strength and usefulness that makes him kindred with all tribes and creeds, and sets him a little above them. Such a one will die as wholeheartedly as he has lived."

Ali Mabib stepped back and stiffened into a soldier's bearing. "Farewell, warrior!"

"Farewell, warrior!" Caverly returned the salute, and stole away through the shrubbery. He never again saw Ali Mabib.

AROUND on the other side of the dar Caverly heard high voices and the sounds of heavy blows, as though men were attempting to batter down a door. His one-time comrades were searching for him. They would break into the judgment chamber in a minute, find him missing, and turn back to hunt in the streets.

He passed the fountain, where he had first met Nakhla's messenger, and headed toward the north wall. At the edge of the compound he halted, and drew back. Men's figures were pacing up and down the parapet.

Evidently the authority of the Kredache still held some weight in Gazim. He remembered that he himself had given the order to post sentries at the walls.

There might be a chance for him in

the remoter part of the town. He turned off to the left, thinking to shield himself for a moment behind the gray tower of the minaret.

Evidently the door of the judgment chamber had given way. Through the slits of open windows he heard baffled, excited shouts. They had discovered that he was gone.

Caverly started to cross the unsheltered stretch of pavement along the camel lines. But he was a moment too late. From the castle entrance, and through the *loggia* in the direction of the lake, men came running.

A half dozen of them caught sight of him, and yelled the warning to the disorderly crowds behind. They cried to him to stand and streamed across the streets, cutting off his last hope of escape.


Above the easterly hills, the fresh, pink glow of the morning sun had begun to creep across the sky—the beginning of another shining day. He edged around the circular tower, and for an instant stood at bay with the open door behind him.

His attempted escape was a full confession of guilt. There was no mistaking the temper of these men who were rushing upon him.

He was no longer their chief, but a despised *Rumi* to be hunted down in fanatical hatred. They came at him howling, with drawn weapons in their hands.

For just a moment Caverly faced them, reckless, insolent, ironic. Then he stepped backward into the tower, and slammed fast the door.

The final installment of this Sahara Desert serial will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, on the news stands August 15th.



You—and Your Career

By John Hampton

A Department of Interviews with Successful Men, and Information and Advice for Ambitious Men.

A. C. GILBERT, Manufacturer

DO you go to work in the morning joyfully, anticipating with pleasure the hours ahead of you? Or do you gloomily start out for work, dreading the drudgery that awaits you?

Your attitude toward your work is important. Most people work eight hours a day; half of their waking hours is spent in gainful occupations. That these hours should be interesting as well as profitable is vital to every one.

A man who dislikes his work is seldom a great success at it. Few people excel in an occupation they detest. Men who thoroughly enjoy their work find themselves not only happy but successful. Promotion and better pay come to the cheerful worker.

Psychologists say that our attitude toward our work affects our ability. If we really enjoy our work, we can do more, with less strain and stress, than if we hate it. Also, it has been discovered that if we decide we're going to enjoy our work, we'll begin to like it.

In other words, a man can "kid" himself into believing that work is fun. By continually telling himself that it's a pleasure to work for his employer, that the work is interesting, that it's worth doing, he can get joy from the day's work.

Try this for a month, if you find your daily work monotonous drudgery. Say

to yourself that you're going to get a kick out of the quantity and quality of the work you're going to do that day. Approach the task with zest and enthusiasm. Snap into it!

After a month, notice the results. See if, then, you enjoy your work more. Notice the effect of this deliberate effort to take some of the "work" out of work.

Then drop me a line, saying, "I gave that idea a try-out," and mention its effect.

A. C. Gilbert is a man who enjoys his work. He is the head of the largest toy factory in the United States. He's young, good-humored, and as keenly enthusiastic about his business as the day he started it.

"You've got to till the soil before you can grow a valuable crop," Gilbert remarked. "You have to earn what you get. To earn more than the ordinary man, you must study, plan, scheme, work, sweat and plod more than he does."

In his office are mechanical toys, electrical toys, many playthings that he has developed. He demonstrated a miniature golf set, as he pointed out how these small golf clubs develop a child's muscles. As he was weak physically when a child, Gilbert is much interested in playthings that help children become strong and healthy.

At forty, Mr. Gilbert is a millionaire, wealthy enough to retire from

business if he felt inclined. The secret of his success?

"My father taught me 'do things best,'" he said. "I was not a husky youngster, not as strong as other fellows my age."

He became interested in riding a bicycle. He determined to be the best bicycle rider in his town. Before school, and after lessons, he practiced, hour after hour, being careful not to demand too much from his comparatively frail body. Before he was eleven years old, he had won much local fame as a bicycle racer, stunt and trick rider.

Then young Gilbert turned his father's barn into a gymnasium. Trapeze, flying rings, and bars were installed. "Some of the apparatus was pretty crude, just makeshifts," he remarked, "but they served their purpose."

Persistently, and intelligently, he exercised, day after day, week after week. He had falls, bumps bruises many failures but he continued.

Eventually the schoolboy weakling won victories at wrestling, boxing, jumping and pole vaulting.

At Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon, Gilbert continued his academic studies—and also his athletic activities. He was the champion sprinter of his college, the best vaulter and all-round gymnast, and was the captain of the track team. He played football, though he weighed only one hundred and twenty-five pounds, and was chosen all-Northwestern quarter back. Also, he was the amateur wrestling champion of the entire Northwest.

These athletic activities gave him stamina, strength, the ability to think quickly, qualities that are invaluable in the business world. A man in good physical condition can work longer, with less fatigue than a man who is weak, or sickly.

When his course at Pacific Uni-

versity was nearly over, Gilbert decided to finish his studies at Yale. Money for the trip and tuition was lacking. So young Gilbert worked that summer in the wheat fields. He earned enough to pay his fare East and to take care of the major portion of his first year's expenses.

At Yale, he worked his way throughout. He waited on tables, tended furnaces, and studied. He was an amateur magician, also, and he taught other students sleight-of-hand tricks. His motto—"do things best"—kept him practicing passes shifts, and vanishes—and soon he began giving public performances as a magician.

Gilbert continued his athletic triumphs, winning his letter at the inter-collegiate pole vault in Philadelphia. He was chosen a member of the Olympic team and in London, in July, 1908, A. C. Gilbert shattered the then world's record for a pole vault—twelve feet, two inches.

The one-time weakling has won over three hundred cups, medals and other trophies.

During his last two years at Yale, Gilbert began making and selling simple magic tricks and appliances. The demand increased. He began peddling his products around to toy shops whenever he could arrange to be absent from his classes.

His business developed. He hired an old frame shack in one of the suburbs of New Haven. He employed one man in this venture. Also he kept up with his classes, and in addition spent several hours each day with his workman.

"Those were busy days," said Mr. Gilbert. "They were happy days, too."

He graduated from Yale in 1909 with a doctor's degree, but decided not to enter the medical profession. He had become so interested in making disappearing boxes and balls as well as planning magic outfits that he wanted to keep on with his business. He knew that his

products brought happiness to children. He liked to see the smiles on the youngster's faces when they mystified their little friends.

Young Gilbert broke the news of his decision to his father when he came on to New Haven for the commencement exercises.

"Go in and do it best," said Gilbert, Sr. Later on he confessed that the son's decision was a bitter disappointment to him, but he was determined not to discourage his son.

"For five years," said A. C. Gilbert, "I worked hard—which means I *worked hard!* My wife kept the books. We lived on sixty dollars a month. Nearly every evening I spent reading so as to fit myself to run the business and to develop new ideas. We were too busy to take any part at all in social life. I not only met all the obstacles a man starting in business usually encounters, but, because I was blazing a new trail, I had to design and make every piece of machinery and tool needed."

Besides all these duties, for the first two years Gilbert was his own salesman. That may have been an advantage on account of his enthusiasm, but selling took much of his time. He personally called at all the toy shops in the Eastern States, showing his tricks, taking orders and slowly building up his business.

His best seller was an outfit of magic tricks and appliances in a single container. He had carefully assembled a set that enabled the owner, by using all the paraphernalia, to give a mystifying thirty-minute performance. Toy shops liked the idea and from that came his big success.

He realized that both children and adults liked to do things for themselves. He watched children playing and noticed how much they enjoyed the toys that they built themselves. There was a big field for a new toy, a plaything

that would amuse, educate and satisfy at the same time.

The erector toy was born. This put the young manufacturer well on the road to success. To-day, the erector is known everywhere. This toy is a unique arrangement of perforated steel bars, wheels and other parts. With them, one can build derricks, towers, bridges and what not.

Some of the outfits have as many as seven hundred pieces with an unlimited number of designs into which they can be erected, embracing everything that is done with structural steel, et cetera.

The idea went over big from the first. Gilbert saw a still greater future for this new plaything. After the first few months of success, he scraped and pinched and sacrificed and managed to spend twelve thousand dollars on advertising. This was in 1913. That first year justified his faith in his product—he did a business of one hundred and forty-one thousand dollars!

In 1914 he spent forty-two thousand dollars on advertising with a gross turnover of three hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. Now the business has developed beyond three million dollars a year. Mr. Gilbert believes that he has just begun to develop his business. His faith in educational toys is limitless.

Constantly he is expanding the scope of his educational toys. To-day they cover the field of physics, chemistry, wireless and radio, hydraulic and civil engineering, light and sound experiments, weather forecasting and recording, mineralogy and electricity. Most of the toys in this group, of course, are for children of advanced years, while the famous erector is for boys and girls of every age.

With every set of these toys is a simple book of instructions which explains the manner in which the various experiments are made. Most of these books were written by Mr. Gilbert, and sandwiched in between the legitimate

experiments are "stunt" tricks which increase the charm of the books and the unending fascination of the experiments.

Gilbert is a man of limitless nervous energy. His enthusiasm is as keen to-day as when he first started in business. He gets a thrill from his work: it is a pleasure, good fun, as fascinating as any sport.

"Watching children play," Mr. Gilbert states, "gives me many ideas for toys. I see what they like to do and how they like to build in their play."

Besides toys, the A. C. Gilbert Co. to-day manufactures a number of electrical novelties. This line was developed through the success of the electrical toys, and now the Gilbert fans, heaters, chafing dishes, grills and a dozen other household conveniences are in daily use throughout the country.

A. C. Gilbert does not attribute his success to good luck. He has had hard times, he has had to make sacrifices and he has had to work tirelessly, but through it all he has kept the ideal of excelling, of doing everything that he did better than any one else could do it.

"To the young man of to-day I'd like to say that he can accomplish his aim, reach his goal if he will apply all his energies to the task." Mr. Gilbert's face grew serious. "And let him remember that success does not come overnight. He must not become impatient if he finds the harvest late. And always he must remember that to accomplish more he must do more. The man who succeeds is the man who puts all he has into his work!"

A glance at Mr. Gilbert's record is sufficient to show that he believes in what he says. He has succeeded, not only financially, but in a larger way. One only needs to see the expression of contentment in his good-humored ruddy face and the interest in his keen eyes to know the pride he feels in his

factory whose products have brought happiness to thousands of children all over the world.

That's the story of a man who finds his work a pleasure, a delight, and a fascinating sport. He gets joy from working, and enjoyment from the tremendous financial income that comes to him from a successful business. These two things often come hand in hand to the enthusiastic worker.

If you find your work a dreary occupation, hunt around for something that you believe you'll like enormously. Mr. Gilbert has a doctor's degree, yet he is a business man. He found more satisfaction in the business world, so decided not to be a physician. His years of study were not wasted, but were part of his equipment in business.

An authority has said that most men are not engaged in the business for which they are best fitted. Are you in that class? No matter what your age or occupation, you can make a change. Get information concerning the line of work that really interests you. Consult people engaged in that business. Talk over your problems with them.

Estimate your own qualifications for success in this new line. Analyze yourself. Find out your faults, as well as your good points. Take your body into consideration as well as your mind. If you are frail physically, do not plunge into hard manual labor until you have built up a strong physique.

Most important are your mental qualities, your instinctive likes and dislikes. Does close supervision annoy you? Then get into an occupation where you are somewhat your own boss. Are you good at bargaining? Then put this quality to work.

Circumstances may make it impossible for you to change your occupation. In that case, start earnestly about the business of changing yourself. The really intelligent man adapts himself to his environment, succeeds in spite of the

circumstances surrounding him. Visualize these circumstances, discuss them with a trustworthy friend, write down the obstacles that can be changed or overcome. Make a note of those that seem unsurmountable. Then change what you can, and change yourself so that the unsurmountable obstacles are avoided.

Your comments are invited upon the letters that follow, the advice given to the writers. If you have met similar problems in your own life and have conquered them, give these people the benefit of your own experiences. Should you have problems that puzzle you, write fully, freely, and frankly. Often the opinion of some one detached, but interested, will solve a problem that baffles you.

Address all letters to John Hampton, care of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

DEAR MR. HAMPTON: I am seventeen years old and clerking in my father's drug store. I have been working with him for over two years, and my father wants me to learn the drug business. I have tried to tell him I do not want to be a druggist and cannot get interested in it, but he still insists that I stay with him. I have always wanted to work in a bank or with some railroad. What would you advise me to do?
L. J. P.
Georgia.

You are right in considering your future while still a young man. The question is whether your dislike of the drug business is caused by your two years' work in the store, or by a real interest in banking or railroading.

Here's what the owner of a successful drug store has to say about your problem: "There's a splendid future in this business. A good clerk makes about fifty dollars a week in New York, and good ones can always find jobs. I have been working in this line since I was fourteen, am now twenty-seven, and will have a bank official's income in another year.

"I have a friend who is assistant manager of one of the chain drug stores. He makes seventy-five dollars a week. That is not a bad income. This particular man, however, never has any money—not even a dollar—so he'll probably not be the success he might be.

"If my friend would save his money, and start a business of his own, he would have a chance to become financially independent. Tell that young man in Georgia to work with his father until he learns the business."

This advice is disinterested, given by a successful man. He knows the hours of work, the opportunities for advancement, the salary, the situations that arise in the retail drug business.

Returning to your letter: At your age, you can afford to take the time to learn the drug business thoroughly. Then you'll have knowledge to sell, experience that's marketable. After your majority, when you've managed to save enough money to experiment, you will have plenty of time to get a position in a bank, or with a railroad, and find out which of these you like the best.

Certainly many young men would be delighted to have the opportunity that is offered you by your father. Take advantage of it, and be glad of the chance.

DEAR MR. HAMPTON: Would you please advise me what to do in the following matter:

I have been working for a broker's firm for the past two years, and I have just resigned. I used to work from six in the morning until four or five at night to try and get ahead, but I only had more work pasted on me and I was the goat. I have had two or three jobs besides this, but have not kept them very long.

Would you keep on in the stock-brokerage business, or try something else?

I like this game very well, but why work hard when you are not noticed or praised for your good work? Every one needs encouragement.
J. T.

British Columbia.

You seem to like the stock brokerage business, but were dissatisfied by the treatment given you by your employers. You make no mention of the salary paid, which may have been their way of expressing their satisfaction with your work.

You should not expect your employer to spend much of his time patting you on the back, if concrete evidence of his appreciation appears in the pay envelope. True, men work for praise as well as for money—I think a man is entitled to both—but an employee is unreasonable if he expects to be greeted with loud cheers at short intervals.

Try working in the same line for a while, and determine to do your work well, so competently, so thoroughly, so efficiently, that ignoring it will be found impossible.

Additional information is being sent to you direct.

W. W. J., Illinois. Since all communications are considered confidential, it is impossible for me to furnish you with the name and address of the inquirer in a recent issue of this magazine. If you will send me the information you wish forwarded to this reader, I will have it on file when other similar letters come in.

C. W. H., New Jersey. An immediate reply to questions cannot be given in these columns, as this material is written far in advance of the time this publication appears on the news stands. An answer will be forwarded by mail, when the name and address of the inquirer are given.

K. Q. S., California. You can increase your vocabulary by consulting

the dictionary every time you come across a new word while reading. Make this new word yours by using it five times that day in conversation. By learning three new words a day, at the end of a year you'll have increased your vocabulary by over a thousand words. Soon, you'll notice an improvement in your speech, a most remarkable improvement.

Read "Martin Eden," by Jack London, a book which seems autobiographical at times. In that story, Jack London writes of a man who was determined to be an author.

Take a course in public speaking to get poise and confidence. Vocal training will improve your speaking voice, even though you do not plan to be a singer.

The other questions in your letter have been answered in a reply sent to you.

H. S. D., New Hampshire. Yes, there is a great future in radio for men qualified to take advantages of the opportunities that will present themselves. According to an interview with General James G. Harbord, president of the Radio Corporation of America, television will supplement sound broadcasting soon. He prophesies, among other things, home talking movies, a vast expansion in radio circuits and traffic volume, radiogram service to all parts of the world, photographs, drawings, finger prints and commercial documents radioed across oceans and continents, et cetera.

The same qualities that make for success in other lines will be rewarded in radio. Since the rewards are there, competition will be keen. Begin preparing for future developments now.

Address letters to John Hampton, care of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

A Talk With You

News and Views by the
Editor and Readers

AUGUST 1, 1929

Glance below, to the announcement of the contents of our next issue. Wise readers are having their news dealers put aside a copy of each number of this magazine for them. Are you a wise one? If not, start being a wise one right now.

AS long as men admire the splendid qualities called courage and perseverance, just so long will they be interested in stories about real heroes. A lone eagle swoops across the Atlantic, and a nation gives him honors and glory. In the quiet of a laboratory, a young man patiently searches until he makes a great discovery that benefits mankind, and his name is upon every lip.

Some men are so situated that an opportunity to display all their admirable qualities are remote. Life has cast them in minor rôles, almost as spectators in the colorful pageantry of our time.

To them, the heady adulation of the public is unknown. The fierce glare of the world's attention has never been focused upon them. They go about their own affairs, playing the small parts assigned them with modest charm, content for others to secure honors and acclaim.

They know that within them are the souls of adventurers unafraid. They know that they possess the splendid qualities called courage and perseverance. They know that, should fortune thrust them into the fierce glare of the world's attention, their name and fame would be upon every one's lips.

FOR these unknown and modest heroes—and for men whom life has tested in the crucible of danger—the bright flag of adventure is always unfurled in our pages. We print stories of adventurers unafraid whose feats of valor are worthy of the world's admiration. Brave and gallant, smiling nonchalantly at the leering face of danger, they go about their honorable tasks, and receive the praise that they deserve.

And we print stories of real heroes who are so situated that an opportunity to display all their admirable qualities are remote. Small rôles in the gorgeous drama of our times are theirs. Yet when caught in the web of circumstance, they display truly heroic qualities. Disaster may swoop upon them, destroying the hard-won gains of long labor, but they never despair. With grim determination, they set about anew upon their honorable tasks, making sport of peril, smiling at the thought of defeat.

Every man who admires courage and perseverance has within him the makings of a real hero. For all real heroes—whether basking in the world's adulation, or unknown to fame—the bright flag of adventure will always be unfurled in our pages.

IN the next issue, Erle Stanley Gardner contributes a Speed Dash story called "Hawks of the Midnight Sky." It's chock-full of baffling mystery. It's burning up with action and adventure. It's going to make a lot of people stay up till past midnight, because they won't be able to stop reading that yarn!

Vic Whitman will tell another story about the radio cop, Dave Cates, who broadcasts an unusual event, giving listeners-in a word picture of what's happening. This is an up-to-the-minute

story, that couldn't have been published twenty years ago, for no one would have believed it possible.

We've an adventure story of a real canine, by Reg Dinsmore, the Maine woods guide, scheduled for our next number. It's called "Dog Sense," and

will appeal to every man or boy who has ever owned a dog. Will King Bowen is represented by a story of railroaders, titled "The Engine Tamers." John Hampton's articles continue. There'll be other good stories by other good authors.

In the next issue of

TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

On the news stands August 15th

Hawks of the Midnight Sky

By Erle Stanley Gardner

A long, exciting story of Speed Dash, the Human-fly Detective, and of a menace to the peace of the world.

Black Hand

By Vic Whitman

Dave Cates, radio cop, broadcasts a big surprise.

The Engine Tamers

By Will King Bowen

Real railroaders and breath-taking moments on the rails.

Dog Sense

By Reg Dinsmore

A story of a lovable dog, by a man who loves dogs and can write about 'em.

*Exclusively in TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE—John Hampton's Articles—
Exclusively in TOP-NOTCH*

Say "Top-Notch Magazine" to your news dealer.



Outdoors adored...indoors ignored

OUTDOORS they adored this gay Philadelphia girl. She was continually surrounded with admirers. But indoors it was another story. She was hopelessly out of things.

The truth is that her trouble which went unnoticed in the open, became instantly apparent in the drawing room.

No intelligent person dares to assume complete freedom from halitosis (unpleasant breath).

Surveys show one person out of three is an occasional or habitual offender. This is due to the fact that odor-producing conditions (often caused by germs) arise constantly in even normal mouths.

The one way of keeping your breath always beyond suspicion is to rinse the mouth with full strength Listerine every morning and night and before meeting others.

Being a germicide capable of killing even the *Staphylococcus Aureus* (pus) germ in 15 seconds, full strength Listerine first strikes at the cause of odors, and then, being a powerful deodorant, destroys the odors themselves. Yet it is entirely safe to use. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

THE SAFE ANTISEPTIC
LISTERINE

*It's all the same to
me—just so I get a*

CAMEL

