

TWICE-A-MONTH

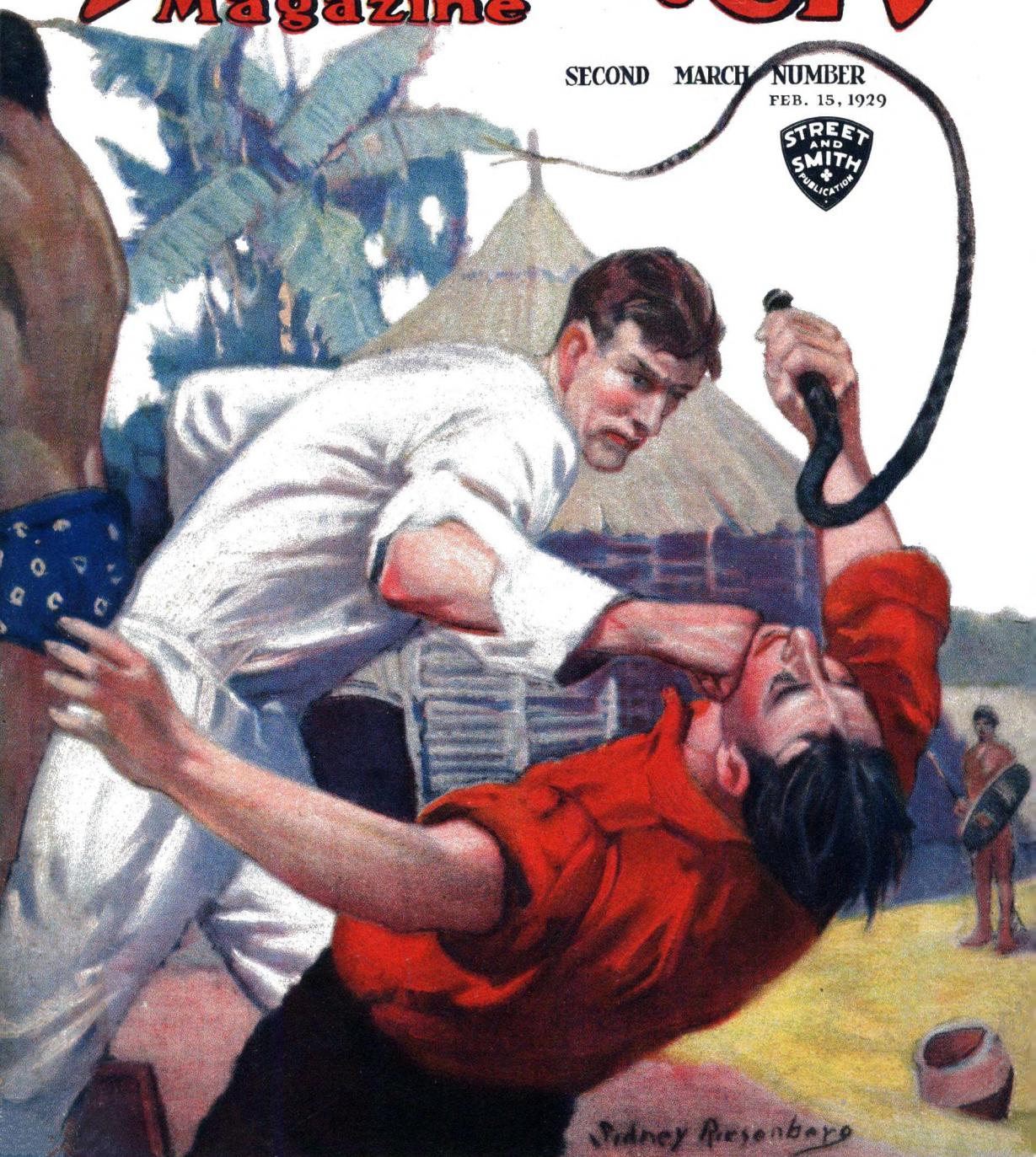
# Top-Notch

15 CENTS  
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CANADA

Magazine

SECOND MARCH NUMBER

FEB. 15, 1929



JUNGLE MAGIC *by J. ALLAN DUNN*  
An African Adventure Story

In the next issue of

# **TOP-NOTCH**

**MAGAZINE**

**On the News Stands March 1st**

## **The Roundup at Fishtrap**

**By EDWARD PARRISH WARE**

An Action-Adventure Story in the Wilds of Arkansas

## **What Price Justice?**

**By REG DINSMORE**

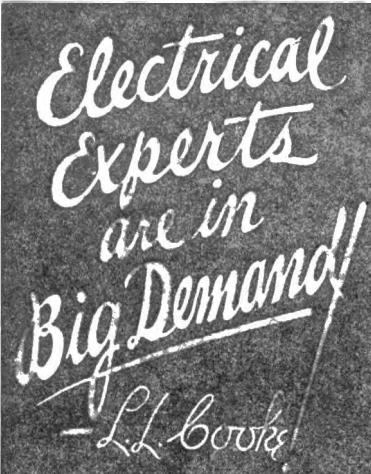
Herb Hood, the Maine guide, takes a city man to unexpected adventures in the woods

## **Officer Hogan, Homicide Squad**

**By VIC WHITMAN**

Big-city gangsters battle with a cop who likes to fight

***Other Good Stories by Other Good Authors***



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# TOP - NOTCH

T W I C E - A - M O N T H  
Vol. LXXVII

# MAGAZINE

Number 2

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## CONTENTS FOR SECOND MARCH NUMBER

## **Complete Novel**

**JUNGLE MAGIC . . . . . J. Allan Dunn . . . . .**  
*Tom-tom-tom-tom. Boom! The throbbing, secret voice of Africa! This tropical story is permeated with the lure and savagery of barbaric jungle life—and death.*

## *Newsletter*

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In Three Parts—Part II  
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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, \$4.40. This issue dated March 15, 1929.

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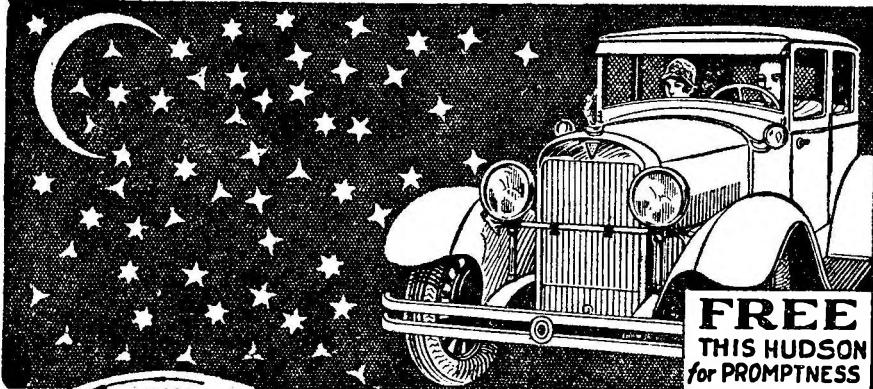
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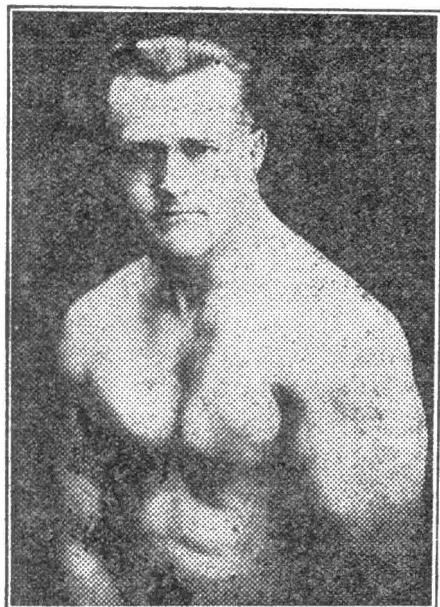
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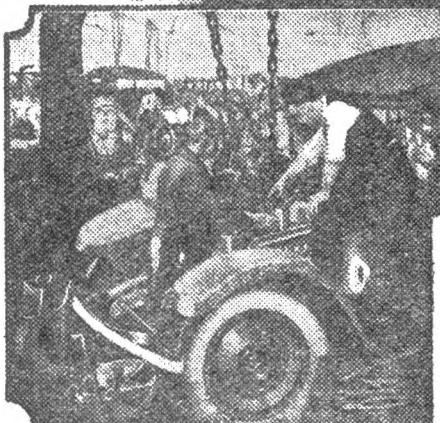
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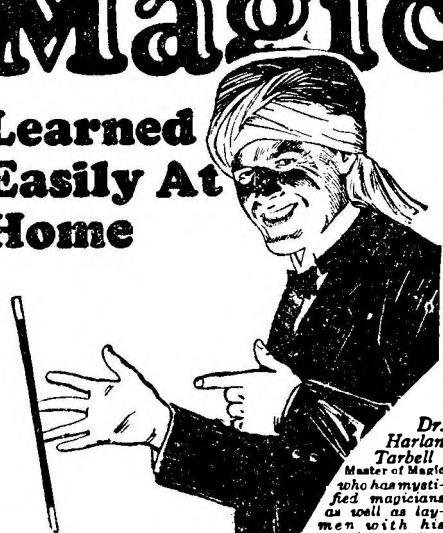
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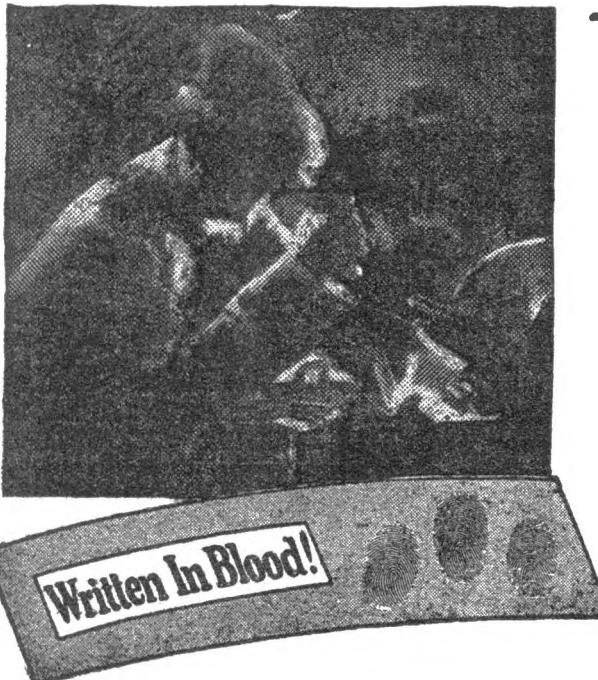
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## but my revenge was sweet!

**N**OW that everyone is here, let's tune in on a good station and get some snappy dance music."

Olive Murray was full of pep as she adjusted the dials of her radio. "Shucks," she said as she discovered someone making a speech. "Let's try another station."

But there wasn't a note of dance music on the air. "Something like this would happen the night of my party," she moaned. "Never mind, there'll be a good orchestra on at 10:30."

You could see disappointment written all over the guests' faces. Suddenly I bucked up my courage and took Olive aside.

"What's the piano closed for?" I asked.

"Why not? No one here plays. I only wish somebody could play, though."

"I'll try to fill in for a while, Olive."

"You're joshing, Dick! You never played before at parties."

"That's right, Olive, but I'll play to-night," I assured her.

I could tell she didn't believe me. And what a roar the crowd let out when I sat down.

"He can't play," called out a voice good-naturedly from the rear. "Let's turn on the radio and listen to the speeches."

"Sure," added one of my friends, "I know that he can't tell one

note from another. It's all a lot of Greek to him."

I said nothing. But my fingers were itching to play.

"Give him a chance," said Olive. "maybe he can play."

### Dramatic Moment

That settled it. There was no maybe about it. I played through the first bars of Strauss' Immortal Blue Danube Waltz. A silence fell on the guests as I continued. Suddenly I switched from classical music to the syncopated tunes from "Good News." Everyone started to dance. They forgot all about the radio. But soon, of course, they insisted that I tell them all about my new accomplishment. Where I had learned . . . when I had learned . . . how?

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"Have you ever heard of the U. S. School of Music?" I asked.

A few of my friends nodded. "That's a correspondence school, isn't it?" they exclaimed.

"Exactly," I replied. "They have a surprisingly easy method through which you can learn to play any instrument without a teacher."

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Then I told them how I had always lunged to sit down at the piano and play some old sweet song—or perhaps a beautiful classic, a bit from an opera or the latest syncopation—how when I heard others playing I envied them so that it almost spoiled the pleasure of the music for me.

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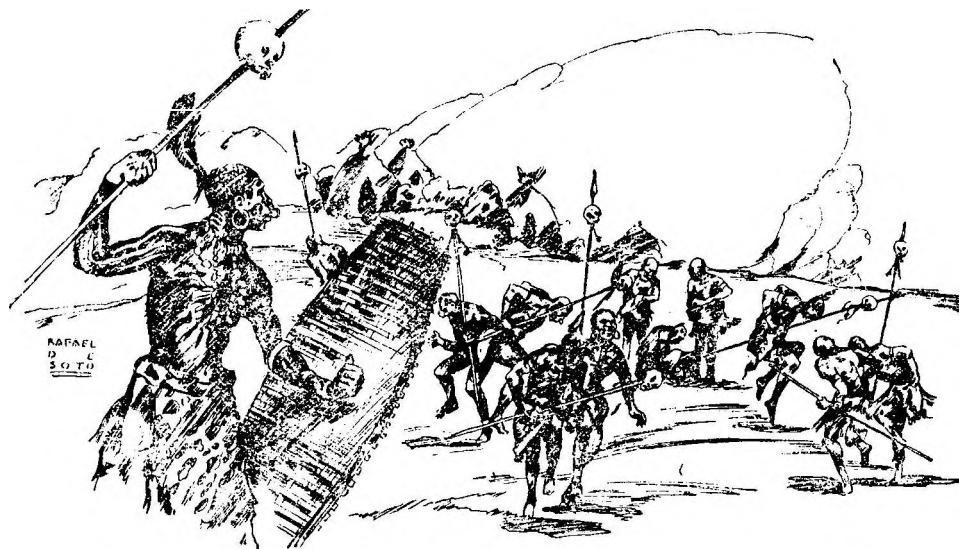
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# TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

VOL. LXXVII

Second March Number

NO. 2



## Jungle Magic *by J. Allan Dunn*

A COMPLETE NOVEL

### CHAPTER I.

SECRET VOICE OF AFRICA.

**T**HE yacht *Nautilus*, of New York, Paul Collamore owner, steamed south along the western shore of equatorial Africa beneath the light of fiercely burning stars that were reflected in the long heave of the oily sea. Two miles to port lay the dark loom of the shore, black against the purple of the sky, vague and mysterious.

The land where the Congo rolled down to the ocean. The land of savagery, of elephants and gorillas. The land of Munibo Jumbo, where the witch doctors smelled out their victims, and the dwarfs shot their poisoned arrows. The land of human sacrifice and cannibalism.

The sea ran shoreward in long, broad undulations, the ground swell of a recent gale or seismic disturbance. The swell was unbroken where the *Nautilus* sped smoothly, lights blazing.

Music blended with gay voices and light laughter from the main saloon, where Collamore and his guests played bridge, danced a little to far-fetched radio music, jested and drank champagne.

On board was a rich, carefree, and reckless crowd of the owner's set, including his fiancée Claire Fordyce. The men were in tropic linen with white mess jackets, the women in light, daringly designed gowns.

Nearer land, the sea swell climbed a swiftly shallowing and irregular slope to the mangrove-fringed beach. There it charged the shore in rank upon rank of combers—curving, curling, breaking rollers.

Long lines of creaming surf, shot with sea fire, glimmered on the dark water. It was surf that even expert Kroo boys would hesitate to tackle. It set up a low thunder. To Waring, leaning on the rail, the roar seemed to be increasing in sound and momentum.

The service pantry had a door that opened on deck. Waring could hear any summons. Meantime, he watched the star blooms of the swarming protozoans, glowworms of the deep, myriads of them, bursting into phosphorescent flame.

Waring wondered why the passengers preferred to stay inside, doing things they could do anywhere, ashore.

They were missing the magic of the night, a curious emanation that seemed to be borne on the light land breeze. It was a whisper—a call in which Waring fancied he could hear the muttering throb of drums—the secret voice of Africa.

Suddenly the deck lifted, tilted under Waring's feet. The bow of the *Nautilus* lifted high with a jarring, staggering crash as the yacht flung itself upon a newborn reef, uncharted, upflung by the seaquake that had left the ocean still disturbed.

There was instant confusion—barked orders, the running of the crew, the

passenger's crowding out on the slanting planks, the shuddering shift of the engines as the churning screws reversed. Steam and the heavy smell of hot oil came up from the engine room, the machinery was racketing. Collamore, bleating, vanished as the *Nautilus* listed more sharply, groaning like a wounded creature.

Now the tremendous force of the sea, through which the yacht had glided under power, made itself manifest. It was as if some slumbering monster, disturbed by an insect crawling on its hide, had lifted a lazy, but malevolent, paw to strike.

The radio operator sent out his plea for help, vibrant on the ether.

*S-O-S! S-O-S! S-O-S! Yacht Nautilus on reef!*

He added the position given him by the haggard first officer. The captain was on the bridge.

Reports told of their desperate condition. Engines shifted, plates buckled. Loanda, the nearest port, far away. No ships spoken with since noon. No answer to the call of distress. Water glowing with phosphorescence began to boil about the yacht.

The swell lifted her slightly and slammed her down again. Now it was the frame that buckled. Plates carried away as the water rushed in.

Titanic, relentless blows forced the doomed ship, listing and lurching, across the treacherous ridge to deep water, while the rock fangs tore and ripped her bottom apart.

The lights went out, steam hissed as the fires died. The radio call faltered, failed. Once more the boat was lifted, flung down, grating and grinding, her back broken. The surf roared, women trembled, men were silent or shouting, fighting off panic in the serene twilight of the stars.

A girl broke her hold on a stanchion and came sliding, falling to Waring's side. Claire Fordyce, half frantic with

fear, clutched at him as he checked and held her, with one arm about her slender, supple waist. She moaned in terror.

"Paul! I couldn't find you. Why don't they launch the boats? They say we're going down. Paul! Save me. I don't want to die!"

It was the strength of Waring's arm that enlightened her. Collamore's was flabby. But the two men were curiously alike in general feature and build. The resemblance had caused comment, suggested trouble.

Collamore had bought the yacht but had not seen his employees till he came aboard. He had not liked the looks of his second steward. Perhaps Waring reminded him of what he might have been if he had not gone his own way about living. He may have resented the occasional looks he had seen Claire give Waring, and then himself—comparisons.

Waring, in whites, though his jacket was of cut less swagger than that of Collamore, looked enough like the owner in the starlight to be mistaken for him by a frightened woman.

Waring told her who he was. She gazed at him blankly for a moment before she broke away. He was at his boat station. He did not know much about such matters but the surf seemed sinister. Again, Waring thought he heard the throb of drums.

Now water seethed along the port rail, so far had the yacht slanted over. It was almost impossible to launch the boats on the starboard side. The *Nautilus* still ground shoreward. They were swinging out the gasoline tender, under the revolvers of the officers, holding off the black crew.

Collamore was dragged along between two men, limp, nerveless, whimpering. The ray of an electric torch showed his craven face. The girl was with them, but Collamore did not notice her.

Waring's boat was almost ready. There was a surge of firemen, armed with metal bars, one of them down, shot, the rest swarming on the falls, leaping into the boat. A fall rope snarled, the other ran out, tipping them into the sea in the smother of foam.

A mass of water rammed the ship, pitched it forward free of the reef. The sinking ship crushed the launch and the boats. The struggling men, thrashed about and some sank, with bubbling cries.

Waring dived clear and deep and came up at last on the crest of a giant comber that rushed him forward. Driving overhand through the smother, he was flung farther on as another seething roller caught up with him.

Waring could swim! He should make shore if the surf gave him a chance. It was sporting with him, slapping beneath the surface, rolling him, giving him small chance to strip, though he managed, at last, to get rid of coat and shirt and trousers, down to his B. V. Ds.

Forced to constant battle, Waring could not get at his shoes, canvas with rubber soles, and was glad of it later. Sometimes he rode on a crest, but it took furious energy to gain the right position. He saw that he was going to need all his strength.

Waring could see nothing of any survivors. There was only the suck and tug and fling of the combers, the savage roar of it all with, now and then, a glimpse of the dark, distant shore. A strong current was bearing him down, but the tide was with him. If it had been ebbing, he could never have made it. He was not sure now, but he hung on grimly. He feared the tremendous pull of the undertow when he finally hit bottom and started to wade ashore.

If he ever did.

Waring saw a V-shaped trail of sea fire back of the dorsal fin of a shark in the trough ahead of him. He could

see the great body of the brute, vaguely outlined, shrouded in a veil of phosphorescence. The sea wolves were gathering to the feast, brought by instinct, as buzzards come to carrion.

The tepid waves seemed suddenly to change to ice water. Waring's blood ran cold, his limbs were leaden. He was being swept down toward the hungry devil, who waited for him, poised. Something rapped his shoulder. This was the end—

It was a pontoon raft, part of the yacht's life-saving equipment, riding buoyantly, untenanted, undamaged.

He snatched at the nearer cylinder, but failed to get a hold on the rounded surface. Then, as it passed him, Waring put all he had into a desperate crawl down the sloping hill of water. He caught at the platform, kicked down hard as he saw the shark rising, turning, with shovel nose, cold eyes and open maw.

Half-vaulting, hauling on a rope cleat, Waring slid aboard, almost exhausted. The light raft reeled with a blow. The shark, baffled, darted off in a green glow that vanished in the depths. Waring clung to the rope loops along the coaming of his bucking craft.

Now he looked back and saw nothing but the raging ranks of water. There was no sign of the yacht, of any boat or other raft. Waring saw one swimmer as he lifted on a swell. Even as he gazed, the man flung up his arms as he was dragged under, his shrieks coming faintly to Waring.

There were other fins now, scything the surface as the beasts ranged for more food, but Waring was safe—for the present. Each successive surge hurled the raft shoreward. What he might find on that savage shore where the drums had muttered, Waring could not guess, hardly dared imagine.

He was going to stick it out to the last. There was no light showing, nothing but a mass of dense, dark bush and

trees. Beyond was the indistinct suggestion of a mountain range.

A strip of beach showed in a long crescent. A great wave came rearing, lambent gleams in its crest. It curled above the raft and came crashing down.

Waring was swept from his hold, whirled about so that he lost all direction. He struck out and hit the bottom, fought on until his lungs seemed on fire, weakening, striving not to take the gulp that would fill them with water, drown him.

Spent, Waring found the surface, gasped, and got air before he was battered under again. He was in the shallows now, the water boiling with sand and grit. He was rolled like a log in rapids, finding bottom, only to be swept off his feet, drawn back by the terrific force of the undertow.

He struggled on hands and knees, fingers and toes deep in the sliding shingle, until a frightful blow between the shoulders pounded him flat. At last, Waring was spewed up, senseless, to lie on the verge of the tide that was changing to slack.

The steady stars burned on, the constellations wheeling. Then, without warning, the sky seemed to shake like a curtain and the stars vanished as the sudden tropic dawn flamed from behind the distant range. The jungle took on color and life. Doves cooed and parrots screamed with sudden flights, their vivid plumage gleaming like scraps of rainbows.

Waring lay, half-naked, on his back, arms upflung, sole survivor of the wreck.

## CHAPTER II.

### JETSAM.

FIVE men came along the beach, four of them with skins plum-black, scarred with tribal wheals; wearing kilts of trade cloth, their hair frizzy, their teeth filed to points between blubbery lips.

The fifth was saddle-colored. He wore a turban and a short jacket. There was a sheathed knife at his belt, sandals on his feet. His features were not flat, like the others, but suggested Arabic blood. He was the leader of the party, looking for wreckage and loot, their eyes greedy, their faces ghoulish.

So far they had found nothing but broken planks. The scavengers of the sea, the sharks, had gleaned their harvest. The sunken yacht still held its stores. The leader indicated the promontory as the turning point of their search. One of the black men gabbled, his hand pointing to the limp body lying between low hummocks of sand, half-hidden.

The saddle-colored man stirred Waring with his foot, contemptuously, believing him dead. There was nothing on him to take. The leader covertly hated all whites, though he feared them. Then Waring stirred, groaned, and opened his eyes, to close them again, worn out with his fight against the surf.

His dull senses refused to register the sight of the faces staring down as anything but the phantoms of a nightmare. His flesh was bruised and torn, scraped badly in places by the grit, but his heart beat strongly. He was coming back.

The leader hesitated and then gave an order. Two of the black men picked up Waring and carried him, unceremoniously, by his legs and arms, as if he were a bundle of no particular value. They had hoped to pilfer on their own account, and they were sullen.

A mile down the beach, they turned off into a trail between the mangroves that lined the oozy banks of a sluggish, creek. Soon, the blacks came into a clearing, where there were several buildings all covered with corrugated iron, a dwelling, cabins, two warehouses and, back of a stout, high palisade, behind heavy gates, a barracoon.

It was the trading station of Pedro Gomez, Portuguese, dealer in ivory, slaves, and tusks; in ivory nuts and rubber. Gomez had, also, a rubber plantation. The rows of rubber trees showed in the background of the clearing.

From the barracoon came the sound of droning song, the smell of cooking. Laborers were busy on the plantation. A group of Bantu in skin karusses squatted beside their canoe at the landing, spears in the hollows of their arms, long knives at their sides. Their chief wore a leopard skin across his shoulders, and carried a carved club of authority, a sort of scimitar, across his knees.

The Bantu stared curiously at the little procession that went on to the trader's house, where women hunkered down on the veranda, clad in sleeveless cotton prints. The women were of all shades from light coffee to black; of all ages, from fourteen to forty. They rose, jabbering, as Waring was borne up the steps. Gomez came to the door, a sjambok of rhinoceros hide in his hand with which he threatened them. They became silent.

Gomez was in creased and grimy pajamas, native sandals on his feet, his upper garment open to show a shock of black hair. He was squat, swarthy, corpulent, and double-chinned. The crisp and tightly curling fringe of hair about his bald skull top, hinted of blood darker than Moorish in his veins. His eyes were small, piggish, and blood-shot from overnight drinking.

Gomez listened to the leader's tale, scowling. He ordered Waring taken inside, and sent the men back again for a more extended search. Then he sat down again to his breakfast, waited on by two Bantus in ragged shorts of striped canvas.

He paid no attention to the half-drowned, half-senseless man, who lay on a cot in a back room, without even

a mosquito net over him. Bolting and gulping his food, his low forehead wrinkled, Gomez considered the one thing worth while to him: What could he make out of this stranger, cast up on the beach?

Waring came to, weary, thirsty and hungry. He turned his eyes toward Gomez as the latter entered. Gomez spoke in a language Waring could not understand, though he fancied it might be Spanish.

Waring managed a faint—"No sabe. Agua!" His tongue was swollen, his throat parched.

Gomez grunted. "Ingles?" he asked.

Waring shook his head. "Americano. Yacht wrecked last night. *Nautilus*."

Waring saw a gleam in Gomez's eyes at the last word. The trader nodded, went out. Soon a Bantu boy came in, grinning, with a tray of food and a gourd of water. Another followed with some clothing, extra pajamas of Gomez. The Bantu boys were both good-natured, like trained apes, their eyes rolling, shifting, their mouths ready for loose laughter.

Waring made them understand, pointing to his wounded places, that he wanted more water. One of them fetched a jug and basin, and a rough towel. They watched Waring as he washed and ate and put on the pajamas that were grotesque on his tall body. They slapped their thighs and roared with guffaws, at the lack of fit.

There was no further sign of Gomez. Apparently, Waring was going to be fairly well treated, but he did not trust the trader. The man was at once furtive and possessive. Waring sensed that he was regarded as something to be made use of. There was a certain cruelty of calculation in the trader's gaze that suggested that he would not be very hospitable if he saw no signs of gain.

Waring felt refreshed and strengthened. He began to conjure up what he

knew of the west coast of Africa from more or less desultory reading. This must be Angola, south of the Kongo, thinly populated along the coast by Portuguese.

It was a wild region, inhabited by savage natives, and nominally under control of Portugal. But in reality, it was ruled by native chiefs of warlike tendencies, who were placated by trade. The natives were a fierce and primitive race sunk in the ancient superstition of the jungle.

Waring had learned aboard the *Nautilus* that there was no American consul at Loanda, no representatives of the United States in Africa except at Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth, Johannesburg and Nairobi, all far away. The party on the yacht had intended to stop at the first and last, going up to Nairobi and the big-game country by railroad from Mombasa in British East Africa.

Waring was a stranger in a strange land, penniless, dependent upon the aid of what white men he might meet who would help him out. He did not think that Gomez was white. There was a stroke of the tarbrush in his ancestry, unless Waring was much mistaken. Here, Gomez was a despot, and the position had developed the worst traits in his nature.

Waring had nothing to offer him. No funds upon which he could draw, none to whom he could apply for money, unless it was a consul, a long and doubtful process.

It did not take Waring long to take stock of the assets of his position and the result was not encouraging. In the end he shrugged his shoulders. Gomez might be better than he seemed. Or the trader might find some work for him, and let him pay his way out of the situation.

After all it was adventure. One must not expect adventure to always wear a bright face. Dangers beckoned, but there were unpleasant things to be

encountered, made part of the reckoning. It was adventure that caused him to answer the advertisement and persuade the head steward of the *Nautilus* to take him on as second for the long voyage contemplated. A chance to see the world—not entirely through a port-hole—a trip to be limited only by the whims of Collamore and, less likely, the wishes of his guests.

Waring had been at loose ends. While there were other methods of making a living, this had appealed to him. There had been the somewhat unpleasant incidents arising from his likeness to Collamore. It had begun to look as if he might not last the trip.

Collamore was spoiled, by circumstance and a certain unpleasant ferment in his own make-up. Waring had sensed that he was not in favor, though he had given no cause for fault. Collamore was dead now, with all his guests and employees—save Waring—and here was Waring surely upon the threshold of adventure.

Even as he had felt the call of the savage coast from the yacht's rail, the lure of its mystery, so he still felt something of it in the present atmosphere, despite the untidy room in the trader's house.

If he was in present peril, it was surely a minor one. He was a person of slight importance, but, after all, he was a white man, young and healthy and not weak of will. It would be hard if he could not make something out of it all.

Waring went through the front room, littered with samples of trade, with saddles, guns on trophies of horn, canoe paddles, simple furniture offset with skins on the floor and walls, hides of lions, zebras, spotted cats, bucks, the stuffed head of a two-horned white rhinoceros, native weapons, shields, a carved drum with a hideous fetish god in one corner.

Collections gathered idly, no doubt,

tribute from native chiefs. All little side lights on the Dark Continent, that gave Waring a thrill as he examined them. Through the dirty window he could see the women goggling and giggling at him, suddenly silent as he went out on the veranda.

The compound was vacant save for chickens, a goat, and two dogs, like German police hounds, that snarled at him and would not come to him, both stoutly chained. There was a post in the middle of the place that had cross arms to which straps were attached, a block at its foot—a pillory or whipping post. Flies buzzed about it. It was a white man's fetish of power and cruelty.

The droning chants still came from the barracoon. A great baobab sprawled over the ground opposite the house, and lean pigs lay in the shade. In the rubber plantation the laborers were watched by men with whips. The place was neither orderly nor disorderly.

Waring considered it probably profitable. The hand of the white man had reached out and gripped produce and people, with fingers cased in iron, with no glove of velvet to mask the gauntlet.

### CHAPTER III.

#### WAR DRUMS.

GOMEZ came out of the biggest warehouse, walking with a strut, carrying his inevitable sjambok. A pickaninny ran too close to him and he snapped the lash at the child who ran off yelling, crimson streaming from his bare buttocks where the tip of the terrible rhinoceros whip had flicked out flesh.

Waring's dislike of the man changed to hatred. His fists clenched, but he restrained himself. He had taken in the fact that he was a prisoner, if Gomez so chose. Beyond the belt of trees lay the ocean, all about was the jungle

and the barbaric natives—the wild brutes, dangerous as sharks to an unarmed man.

Waring was between the devil and the deep sea, literally. And he believed that, if Gomez was not in league with the former, he was not far from it.

Gomez grinned as he saw Waring swaddled in his pajamas. It was a derisive grin yet his manner was, if still calculating, distinctly more pleasant.

"Soon *Ingles* come," Gomez said. "I send. Soon, I get somethoeng for you not so bad." He pointed at the ill-fitting garments.

Waring did not want anything from Gomez. He was beginning to feel an abhorrence for him, as he might feel toward a venomous reptile. He did not even want a pipe and tobacco, though he craved a smoke as Gomez rolled himself a *cigarito* of black weed, without offering any to Waring.

Not even food. Waring might earn these things but he did not want to be under obligations to Gomez. He would rather have stayed on the beach, save for the announcement that an Englishman was coming, though what sort of an Englishman would be living, by choice apparently, in that Portuguese colony, was a question.

A horn blared somewhere and Gomez turned abruptly, striking at a native gong that hung in the veranda. Men came hurrying, overseers, from their extra clothing, their belts and weapons. The horn blew again. A melancholy procession filed out of the jungle trail at the back of the clearing.

From collar to collar stretched the links of a lengthy chain of bondage—men, women and children, many babes in arms, a forlorn collection of limping, half-starved humanity, fettered of wrist and ankle and neck. Their eyes were dull as the line came to a halt under the shouts of their drivers and sellers, one or two black, the rest typical Arabs of full or partial blood, car-

rying guns. Great Soudanese cracked sjamboks and wheals already showed on backs, where shoulder blades and spinal verterbrae matched the protruding ribs.

Gomez joined an Arab, others gathered round. Boys came running with palm toddy. The slave caravan stood jaded, panting for the water that was denied them. Two benches were brought. The boys held big umbrellas over the heads of the principals of the informal market. The slaves were marched past for Gomez's inspection, the whips forcing them to some semblance of sprightliness.

Waring went inside, sick at the spectacle. He could do nothing. He heard the rising voices of the chafferers, proclaiming their wares.

The dealing took three hours. The victims of the traffic broiled and drooped in the sun. At last they were marched into the barracoon, their neck chains taken off, manacles loosened. They were fed a mess of mealies and Kaffir corn.

The Arabs took up quarters under the baobab, dispersing the pigs. A fire was lighted, and the hind-quarters of a bullock brought to them with other food, and more of the palm toddy, which their faith did not make them forswear.

Gomez came into the house without noticing Waring, bringing the two dogs with him, unleashed. They did not snarl this time at Waring, but they watched him. He felt that if he tried to leave the room they would be at his throat.

Gomez took a bottle from a cupboard, set it down with a glass which he rapidly filled and emptied, twice. The reek of brandy came to Waring as the trader rolled a *cigarito* and sat down, seemingly well satisfied with his bargain.

Presently, Gomez began to droop and snore, his mouth open. The two dogs

watched Waring. The tropic day was closing. A red glare showed through the seaward trees and flooded the sky over the ocean. Laborers came in to their quarters wearily, many striped with blows.

Two men with rifles walked sentry outside the gate of the barracoon. On top of the palisade, iron baskets flared, with pitchwood for fuel. A central fire illuminated the compound. The women had gone. Twice, Bantu boys looked in the door and tiptoed off as the dogs growled deep in their throats.

A big man, bearded, in white clothes, with a solar helmet, came riding in on a mule, a Kaffir trotting behind in the dust like a hound. This, thought, Waring, should be the Englishman, and either his servant or the messenger Gomez had dispatched.

The man dismounted heavily—glanced at the Arabs and came up the steps, filling a pipe. The Kaffir vanished.

It was dark in the room. The Englishman stopped in the doorway, looking in. The dogs set up a furious barking, but made no effort to attack the man, acting as if the hatred they held for him was tempered by a fear of Gomez' rhinoceros whip.

Gomez awakened instantly, and sprang to his feet with wonderful agility for his bulk, a gun coming into his hand from a shoulder holster. Here was a man, Waring thought, who, for all his mastery, lived in constant dread of attack. It explained the two dogs, carefully trained to tell Gomez's friends and foes apart.

Gomez shouted. The Bantu boys who had been waiting his pleasure came cringing in. They dodged his kicks as they lighted lamps, and scurried about to other orders given in their own language.

The Englishman laughed, and lighted his pipe. Waring stood up, feeling ridiculous in Gomez's clothes. The

bearded man gave him a nod and then ignored him, talking to Gomez in Portuguese with a pronounced British accent. Once more Waring felt himself a chattel.

The Englishman took off his helmet and lay it on the war drum. He was not as bald as Gomez, but his reddish hair was thinning out above a high forehead. His nose was well shaped, aggressive: his eyes, faded blue. As he stood profiled to a lamp, Waring saw that his chin beneath the beard was weak, receding. The lips were full and indulgent. There were hags under his eyes. Through the deep tan of his skin, broken veins of red and blue showed like the thread inserts in currency notes.

A man of good breeding, of education, fallen farther than Gomez. A man who drank his liquor slowly, as if he loved the taste of it, his hands trembling a little. A man debased, the black sheep of a family that had shipped him to South Africa as a remittance man. A man who had been rejected by his own race and found final refuge on foreign soil, consorting with comparatively ignorant traders of Gomez's type.

Yet, with advancing years, though deteriorating in body and morals, he had acquired a blend of shiftiness and cleverness that was the belated fruit of his abused brain. Gomez deferred to him in a measure, respecting certain qualities in him he lacked himself, not quite able to use him as a tool.

There was some strand of fine fiber about the Britisher that had not rot, as yet, which Gomez recognized. It showed in the attitude of the two men. Gomez was coarse and cunning, the other retained some show of breeding and, while unscrupulous, was clever. They were well-mated rogues, Waring thought. Come together because of him, though he could not understand their interest.

Gomez addressed his visitor as *Senhor Hawtrey*, a little irony stressed in

the title, asking him why he had not been able to come earlier.

"That Kassir of yours, Jim," said Hawtrey, in easy, slipshod Portuguese, "found a juju on the trail and went the long way round. Swore it was set for him. I made him come back past it. Just a chicken bone tied up in a rag, but you know what those beggars are."

"I'll have that nonsense thrashed out of him to-morrow," said Gomez. "Did you bring the paper?"

"I've got it. Get him out of here, what? Does he talk Portuguese?"

"I'm not sure how much he sabes," said Gomez. "He spoke a few words of Spanish."

"Ah!" Hawtrey turned to Waring. "Look here, my dear chap, Gomez and I want to talk a few things over. Undisturbed, and all that, while they're getting chow. You don't mind?"

His clipped syllables and broad A's were, to Waring, like those of the conventional stage Englishman, but he sensed that this was the real article. This man who might have been a gentleman, but was a blackguard in all but education and manners. He was shallow, unscrupulous, and insincere, his politeness a pose.

"Name's Hawtrey," he said. "Geoffrey Hawtrey. Glad to meet you." He held out a nervous, puffy hand that still had some grip in it. Waring took it, on his guard. He could not place his danger, but mind and body joined in the warning, the hunch, that these two were plotting something against him.

If Gomez had an idea of selling him as a slave—and Waring believed him quite capable of it—he would hardly have consulted Hawtrey, who would surely claim his share in any deal in which he shared.

Waring said nothing as he released Hawtrey's hand. He went into the back room, which was quite dark, since there was no fire at the rear of the house where the jungle came up closely.

The place was used partly as a store-room. There were bales and boxes against the walls, probably trading goods, and the window was barred against pilferers.

It made a good prison as well. Hawtrey closed the door after Waring, turning the key in the lock.

Waring sat on the cot, resentment simmering within him, offset by the necessity of keeping cool. Mosquitoes buzzed viciously. He had no matches, no means of light. The window was unscreened. He slapped at the pests, wishing he had a smoke.

Now, once more, Waring heard the throb of drums, deep in the bush. Their pounding rhythm, distant but emphatic, seemed gradually to fill the room with vibrations that began to possess him, to dominate his pulse beats to rouse within him a latent savagery, to heat his growing anger to boiling point, beyond control.

He felt an urge to batter at the closed door, to get through, snatch a weapon, demand freedom. It was ridiculous, barabric, and impractical, as his reason whispered, but the emotional demand was insistent.

It was the voice of Africa—calling—calling!

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### A WARRIOR.

THE door opened and Hawtrey entered, bland, carrying a lamp he set down. Waring caught a glimpse of Gomez, glancing in, of the busy Batu boys setting the table for a meal. Then Hawtrey closed the door.

Hawtrey seated himself on a box, drew out a cigar case, offering it.

"Cheroots. A bit rank but the best available. Have to get you some togs. I've got a native woman who is handy with a machine. Makes up mine. Soon fix you up. Gomez isn't much on conventions. He's a bit of a hard case. You've probably seen that. But I'll see

you're treated decently while things are arranged. Not much like your yacht. Rotten luck that. Gomez thinks it's good luck for him. I'm afraid you'll have to make the best of it. I'll ameliorate conditions all I can, Collamore."

Collamore! There was the answer. They took him for Collamore. How did they know the name? Boat wreckage might have borne the name of the yacht. But Hawtrey's smile showed hidden knowledge they meant to use. Collamore—millionaire—was very different from John Waring, second steward. He might gain decent treatment if he posed as Collamore, get clear, perhaps—but not without payment. He was not going to pretend that he was any one else but himself.

"You're making a mistake," he said. "My name's Waring. I don't know how you heard about Collamore. But I was second steward on the yacht. I am afraid I am the only survivor."

Hawtrey took it smiling. A sly look came into his eyes. Clearly he believed that Waring had lied. He had guessed Gomez's plan, in which Hawtrey was now a partner, called in, not merely as interpreter, but because he could better carry on the necessary negotiations.

Gomez needed also his brain. The trader could handle blacks but not high-class whites. This chap who pretended he was only a steward was a keen beggar. He probably understood Portuguese, or Spanish, enough to guess what they were up to. Listened at the door, probably. It was stout but the climate had warped it. There was space by the hinges.

"We're not so benighted here," Hawtrey said. "I get a few papers. Here's one of them. I keep them, you see, to mull over."

Waring looked at the sheet. There was an account of the proposed voyage, a list of the passengers, a picture of Collamore and of his fiancée. And the

photograph looked exactly as Waring would look if he was shaved, dressed properly. The resemblance was undeniable. To Hawtrey and Gomez it was convincing. No explanation was available. He was Collamore, so far as they were concerned.

"You see, my dear chap," Hawtrey went on, "we have inside information. And it really won't pay you to make out you're a second steward by some other name. It won't wash."

"A second steward would be a horse of quite another color—quite—a sorry crock, at that. Gomez has taken you in, what? He's not an hospitable chap at any time, a bit of a grinder. You twig? He'd cut up rough if he thought you'd taken *him* in. Apt to be nasty.

"You're really in a tight hole. As Collamore, he would treat you well enough, you have my word on that. Naturally, he would expect remuneration for his trouble. He's not running an inn, you know. Just a trading station, with slave quarters and all that, recognized by the Portuguese government, quite in favor with the local powers-that-be. In with the chiefs.

"You'll find it a bit hard to get away, rigged as you are, no weapons. You may be kept *incommunicado* as Warner, or whatever name you mentioned just now. No chance in the world of getting out of it. There's the jungle and the Kongo natives, not to mention the dwarfs. Cannibals and all that. Respect a white man when he's top dog only.

"No use rubbin' it in or I'd remind you of the wild beasts. There's the sea. No boats call here except trade friends of Gomez. You wouldn't get to them. If you got away on land you'd either jolly well perish or be brought back by the natives.

"In fact, Collamore, you're in a deuce of a hole, old chap. You're worth plenty. The loss of your yacht won't scratch you, financially, outside of the

insurance: It was a terrible calamity, of course, but you're saved and we're talking business now.

"Every man for himself, what? Gomez is putting it at a reasonable figure. A hundred thousand dollars. That's the price—at present. I'll handle it, with you. Draft on your bankers and no questions asked. Of course, I shall get my commission out of it—from Gomez. Otherwise—" He tamped down his pipe, applied another match.

"Better think it over, Collamore."

"I'll tell you what I think now," said Waring evenly, restraining a desire to punch the Englishman on the jaw, watching the point below the beard even now, his eyes blazing. "If I were Collamore, which I am not, I wouldn't give either of you a red cent. You're white—as to skin. Gomez is a mongrel. You are a pair of unprincipled scoundrels. I think you use the word 'blackguard' in your country, or rather, what *was* your country."

Hawtrey laughed.

"I'll use one of your own native colloquialisms, Collamore. I had a ranch in the States once. Them is harsh words, Collamore. You're not going to come it over us that you are a second steward. You don't look like one and you don't act like one. Too much choice of language and too much spunk. I'll give you that."

"But don't let it get you into trouble, Collamore, don't let it get you into trouble. Gomez is a nasty devil when he's crossed. As for me—I've been called a blackguard before. The price of your freedom goes up ten thousand dollars a day. Think it over, my dear chap, think it over."

There was nothing much to think about along the line Hawtrey suggested. Waring was in the toils. There must be some way out of them. Some way!

They were not going to starve him, it seemed. After an hour the door

opened and Hawtrey came back with the same Kaffir behind him, this time bearing dishes that gave out a savory smell.

"Jim here is going to be your valet," said Hawtrey. "Gomez is inclined to be unpleasant, but I smoothed him down a bit. I'll send you some togs and smoking. Jim here talks a little English. I wouldn't call him your jailer. You are to have the run of the place. But I wouldn't try to bolt. I really wouldn't. I fancy the extra ten thousand a day smoothed Gomez's hackles down. I'll run over every day or so. Good night, old chap."

Waring looked longingly at Hawtrey's jaw again. But it wouldn't do. He caught a gleam in the Kaffir's eyes that suggested he was in much the same frame of mind. He might make an ally of Jim. If he were a Kaffir, he did not belong this far north. He was probably a slave of Gomez. He was deft enough as he set the dishes out.

"I bring muskita net," he said. "Bring sheet."

"Thanks, Jim." The Kaffir looked at him, surprised at the friendly tone. He was well built, emaciated but well-muscled. There were scars on his body, which was clad in a kaross, an apron of mangy lionskin. He was deferential but not humble.

Waring could imagine him a good man in his own right. A warrior. But he was not going to press things too far. The ten thousand a day might mount up without his concern while he planned escape, by sea or through the jungle. He was not going to be cooped up.

Eventually Gomez might try to make a plantation hand out of him, when he found there was no money coming. He might do worse than that. Gomez was capable of anything.

Waring ate with appetite. Now he had no compunctions about accepting foods, cheroots, clothing. There

was a score against these amateur bandits seeking to make capital of misfortune. He managed to sleep well enough under the netting, though now and then he woke to hear the drums, throbbing in the night. They might deepen Hawtrey's warning but there was invitation in them, a challenge. He was in desperate straits but his spirit was roused. Better the jungle than the barracoon.

The door had not been locked, but once Waring heard the deep growl of a dog. Gomez would rely on the dogs to guard him, trail him, aside from his native allies. But they were not going to hold him.

Gomez was at a late breakfast after Waring finished his and went into the outer room. The Portuguese glowered at him, but said nothing, even when Waring strolled on to the veranda. The two dogs got up and followed him. When he halted, they did. If he sat down, they lay watching him with red tongues sliding in and out over white fangs, dripping moisture in the damp heat. They were eyed like wolves.

Otherwise Waring was not interfered with. He walked about, watching the life on the plantation, seeing a canoe load of ivory nuts arrive with Kongo paddlers. Gomez bartered with them but he did not bully them. They were free men and fighters, amiable now but fierce of aspect. Outside of them Gomez ruled, with the lash, with fetters.

An hour before noon Gomez mounted a mule and rode off, leaving the dogs.

Waring fancied he had gone to see Hawtrey. Jim brought him a meal, served in the back room with the barred window. The dogs barred the door. While he was in the outer room they watched his every move, hostile. He looked longingly at the native weapons, the guns. But he dared not try to take one—yet.

Jim seemed troubled. He held his head high but his eyes showed it.

"Anything wrong?" Waring asked

him. The Kaffir once more eyed him earnestly.

"You *buccra*, you white man," he said. "Some *buccra* good, some bad. Hawtrey bad. Gomez no proper *buccra*. I am black but I am a man." He stood up proudly swelling his chest. "I think you and me all same this place. Not belong here."

"How did you happen to get here, Jim?"

The Kaffir squatted with a glance out of the window, into the outer room through the open door where the dogs lay on the threshold, watching with evil eyes. He spoke in a low tone.

"I am Mpondo. My name Seole. In my kraal I am free man, son of chief. I am fighting man"—he touched the ring of hair on his scalp, gummed and solid, looking like ebony. "I have killed. This also I killed—with a spear"—he fingered the lion skin of his apron. "And I am hunter. I go with white man who talked as you talk. From Meriki, beyond the wide water. Elephants and lions we killed; we sought ivory.

"His name is Tilimani in your tongue. We had another name for him for he was brave and wise. Monzemahemke. 'He who thinks as he fights.' We went through Tanganyika to Katanga and there we become sick. Black-water fever. I was his chief of safari. While we are ill the bearers go. Another white man comes and takes Tilimani. Me, he leaves because they think I will die. Tilimani does not know this. He is close to death.

"If he lives he will come back for me but he will not find me. I was still ill when slavers come. They sell me to Gomez, who treats me like a dog. Today I am to be whipped like a dog because these Kongo people hate me. They make magic against me and I go round it, so that Hawtrey comes late."

"They won't whip you if I can help it, Jim," said Waring.

"I know that," he said simply. "But you cannot help. I—if I had a knife—I would slay or be slain. Some day Tilimani will come and we will show these dogs!"

Tilimani's showing up looked like a long shot to Waring but he did not say so. Unless long shots turned up for him he was up against the wall—the jungle wall and the well of the sea.

"I go now," said Seole, whose white name was Jim.

## CHAPTER V.

### JUNGLE PUNISHMENT.

A HALF-CASTE overseer stood in the doorway. The same man who had ordered the blacks to pick up Waring. Behind him were the same four, used as a sort of police by Gomez, official punishers. They did not offer to come through the door. The dogs faced them. Outside they would not bother them, unless so ordered by Gomez.

Seole went out with his head up and the four seized him, marched him off. Waring followed and the dogs trailed him. The Kaffir was mounted on the block, his wrists strapped to the cross piece. The half-caste swung his whip and brought it down.

A gray wheal rose instantly and he leaped to the other side of the low block, his face lit with malicious delight and crossed the second lash so that the skin broke. Seole did not even quiver. Waring stood impotent, the dogs at his heels.

At the tenth lash, Waring broke restraint. The overseer was deliberately making the worst of the whipping, trying to cut Seole's flesh to ribbons. He showed no signs of stopping.

Words were wasted, not to be understood. Waring sprang and grasped the uplifted arm of the half-caste, setting one hand behind the elbow and just above it, twisting the forearm back. The overseer let out a yell of surprise

as he twisted his slippery arm loose and launched a whistling slash at the white man. Waring got in under the slash with a jolt to the liver and another over the heart that sent the man staggering back.

Waring expected the dogs upon him, but they did not offer to touch him. Their positive orders seemed to fill their limit of understanding. They did not like the blacks or the overseer. The blacks stood with slack jaws, perhaps with some concealed enjoyment at seeing their overseer in trouble. Their eyes rolled as he swung the lash again. Waring grabbed it close to the handle, wrenched it loose and flung it away.

The half-caste's knife came out, curving, double-edged and murderous. He meant to kill. Waring ducked and jarred him with a chop to his injured elbow, side-stepped a rush, and got home to the place where the ribs part, fair on the plexus. There were tough muscles there but it left the Arab gasping. The next smash did the trick, a hard, short blow to the jaw.

The overseer fell like a length of dropped chain. Waring got his knife and retrieved the whip, then ordering the blacks with imperative gestures to free Seole. It was the white man's will, the white man's conquering spirit, and they obeyed automatically.

Seole's face was gray with pain. The end of the lash had wound about him and cut into his chest.

"I thank," he gasped. "Not forget. But I think no good."

Gomez and Hawtrey were riding in. They spurred their mules and came up, the features of the Portuguese livid with rage.

"Tell him," said Waring to the Englishman, "that this chap is a butcher. Look at that man's back."

Hawtrey inspected it coolly enough, but his eyes warmed as they traveled from the prostrate half-caste, still out, to Waring, knife and whip in hand.

"You knocked him out? With your bare fists? I thought you were fairly fit, if you are a millionaire. By Jove, Collamore, I'd give ten quid not to have missed it!"

"Tell him," said Waring, watching Gomez's gun hand hovering near his breast, "that if Jim gets whipped again you'll not get a cent."

Hawtrey grinned, his stained teeth showing through his beard. The inbred sportsman in him favored Waring for the moment. But the grin was from another source. He thought the American had given himself away, shown that he was Collamore.

He did not play much poker, did not see that Waring had run a bluff, for the sake of Seole, whom he had been careful to call Jim. Hawtrey spoke swiftly to Gomez and the Portuguese nodded, greed in his eyes now.

"He won't be whipped, unless he misbehaves," said Hawtrey. "Whip's the only thing these beggars understand. You ready to fix things up, Collamore? I've brought you some duds, by the way. You look like a fighting scarecrow."

Waring made a mask of his face.

"No," he replied curtly.

"Suits us, in a way. I could use some ready, but the price is ten thousand better than it was last night. And still risin'. What? Here." He tossed a bundle of clothing to Seole who took them and went to the veranda. Gomez and Hawtrey bent over the fallen half-caste, Gomez kicking him in the ribs heavily.

"We'll have to ask for the lethal weapons, Collamore," said Hawtrey. "You are jolly well too dangerous. Sorry. I could have given you a few rounds once," he added. "Too many fleshpots—too much liquor—too long in the tropics. But I should like to have seen that fight."

Waring walked off, the dogs with him.

"*Baas!*" said Seole. "*Unkosi!* I shall not forget."

"Better let me fix up those cuts, Seole."

"They are nothing, *unkosi*. See where the claws of the lion went. I can heal these easier. My blood is strong."

There was a mark like a brand on his left shoulder, where claws had scored deep. They went inside together.

"I will be your blood brother," said Seole, when they were alone. "I take your name and I give you mine, Waringi. Only to call me Jim, as Tili-mani called me, whom I loved."

"Jim and John, then. But we must fix up those cuts a bit. Turn round."

IT was the fourth day, forty thousand dollars more of ransom that could not be paid added to the set price of release. Seole had disappeared. Hawtrey could, or would give no information. He hinted that Seole had been sent somewhere, for the sake of discipline. But he had not been whipped. A half-witted Bantu boy took his place to wait on Waring.

Waring missed the Kaffir more than he had ever imagined he could miss a black man. Seole was all a real man. Waring had planned that, somehow, they would get away together. Now he would have to go, alone.

Catastrophe had come that afternoon. Waring had tried to make friends with the dogs, to no avail. He had been watched closely, he knew, ever since the fight. There were many there who would be glad of a chance to put him out of the way. Hawtrey had warned him. And now, Hawtrey had told him where he stood.

The launch had got ashore, after all, flung up like a broken crate. In it was found what was left of Collamore. Enough to establish his identity.

"Not your fault, Waring," said the Englishman, his face serious, not un-

friendly. "You told the truth except when you fooled us over Jim. But you're not Collamore, you see. And Gomez has you. I don't know what he has in mind but, if I were you, I'd knuckle down.

"I know you're not the sort to do it, but this is a friendly tip. I've done what I can. I'm deep in to Gomez. He could get me chucked out of Angola. Blackguard, you called me. I took it. I've taken it before. I don't amount to much. I funked my last chance, in the war.

"You tackled that overseer—I'd like to have seen that—you've got what you Americans call guts. I haven't. But guts won't help you with Gomez, only to stick it out.

"Easier you take it, the easier you'll get by. Maybe, you'll get your chance. If you do, if I can help you, I will. Not now. Gomez is too up wind. I'm stayin' here to-night and I'll talk it over with him.

"To-morrow don't give him any lip and don't try to use your fists. He'll set the dogs on you, and what's left of you he'll think up things to do to. He's talented along that line. Got to go now. Here're some more cheroots. Better hide 'em if you can. So long."

He was gone and the door locked. Dusk was coming. Waring had not been fed since morning, but he had been saving some scraps for emergency, for a chance to get away. There was no light. The mutter of drums came from the jungle. He sat by the window, listening, throwing aside thoughts of to-morrow. He had to get away. Had to!

Seole was gone. A picture of ant heaps with a writhing man tied nearby, to become a skeleton after frightful torment, came to him, and he dismissed it.

"You've got to get away, got to. Got to!"

The drumbeats had got into him.

Unconsciously he set the words to their rhythm, clenching the bars, hauling on them.

There was a soft crush of wood. An iron loosened slightly.

## CHAPTER VI.

### WEIRD WORSHIP.

**A**FRICA was working for him. Stone was scarce, the bars had been set deep, socketed in hard wood that had looked solid. But the termites, the great white ants, had been at work. The sill was like a honeycomb. Upper and lower!

Waring got the lower end of one bar loose, enough to squeeze through. He worked it free at the top. It was the only weapon available. He might manage to grind down the end to a point. Meantime, it was a club.

The opening was a close fit, and he feared to make a noise. Gomez and Hawtrey were disputing in the next room. Gomez might come in at any moment. But Waring was out, in the black night, close to the jungle where the drums still throbbed. There was death there, perhaps, but worse in remaining. Gomez would be a fiend, sure of his power, devilish of invention to revenge himself for his lost dream of a fortune.

There was a sound of chanting from the barracoon. A glow shone in front of the house where the nightly fire burned in the compound, and the crescents on the palisade. Waring kept to the shadow and plunged into the dense bush.

Great twining cables, tripped him. Heavy webs of spiders swept across his face. There were thorny vines that tore his clothes and flesh. Waring blundered into trees, fell over roots. He came to a swamp and waded, chest-deep, blundering into pits of slimy water, leeches clinging to him. There was a creek beyond and he plunged into

it, swimming upstream to throw off scent. Gomez would set the dogs after him, and expert bushmen.

Waring hauled out among reeds close to a bank on which were rotten logs. One came to life, lifting on squat legs, flailing a great tail, its jaws open, coming at Waring through the reeds as he thrashed to land. A crocodile!

The creek had cooled and washed the sweat from him but it broke out again, cold. Then he saw he had risked in vain. Beyond the mud bank there was a dugout, a line reeved across the stream, a ferry. It meant a trail. Waring took to it for a time, moonlight splotching down. The narrow path, its dirt hard packed by countless caravans of slaves led beneath the spreading roots of a baobab. Panting, almost done in, Waring thought of climbing into the great mass when he heard the excited bark of a dog.

The dog was after him, hot on his trail. Gomez would put the dogs across the creek in the ferry, half a mile back. Waring would be treed, brought down, likely enough like a shot monkey striking the boughs tumbling at Gomez's feet.

Desperate, out of breath, he grasped his bar and set his back against one of the root pillars. The high-riding moon lit up the path. The dogs would be ahead. Gomez was none too fast. The blacks! It was the only thing to do.

If he got away from the dogs he could strike the bush again. There was little time to plan. He saw the first of the slavering brutes racing along the trail.

Now Waring could hear Gomez, far off, shouting at his men, his voice enraged. They would not be keen for night work afraid of juju. He had a little leeway.

The brute came on direct, leaping for his throat. Waring met the charge with his knee, sending the dog sprawling. Before it could regain its feet, Waring

crushed in its skull with his iron bar, bent it with the blow against the bone.

The second dog was on him. He had to drop the bar and seize it by its throat. Even then the jaws clashed within an inch of his face, its hot breath on Waring. But he swung the dog off the ground and held on, sinking his fingers into its neck, finding the windpipe, compressing it with desperate strength.

Gomez had got his men going again. Waring could see the flare of their torches.

The dog writhed convulsively, but it was choking. Its struggles lessened and its eyes glazed.

Waring cast it from him, a limp, twitching bundle, as a rifle roared. He felt the wind of the shot, the bullet striking the root bough back of him. He whirled and fled, through tangle and briars, almost exhausted, seeing by a moon ray, a bough stretched horizontally out, at which he sprang.

With his last strength he swung up, his knees over it, clambering up like a spent ape, crawling to the main trunk, hiding in the hollow of the crotch, while the torches came bobbing along, praying that the shaking leaves would not give him away.

Waring saw Gomez in his white clothes, his face like that of a furious devil. Behind him came the blacks, scared of the jungle night, Hawtrey back of them, carrying a shotgun under his arm.

Waring did not believe that he would shoot. There were remnants of decency, driblets of sporting blood in Hawtrey. But Gomez would kill. Waring crouched low. The scattered moonbeams did not reveal him. His tracks must be plain to the native trackers, where he had leaped.

*Tom-tom-tom-tom. Boom!*

The drums! The drums of Africa. They struck terror into the Bantus who read their rhythm aright. Their arms hung down, their eyes rolled, showing

the whites, their knees shook and they bolted, back along the trail, with Gomez cursing at them. Hawtrey shook with silent laughter.

Gomez stamped his foot and Hawtrey spoke to him in Portuguese. The trader shook a baffled fist at the jungle and turned back, his dogs slain, his trackers terrified. Hawtrey followed him down the trail and Waring, peering from his nest, saw his broad shoulders shaking.

To Hawtrey it had been a sporting event. For once, the Englishman's wishes were with the quarry. Waring did not believe he would have given him away if he suspected where he was—and Hawtrey had given a sharp glance at the tree, the still slightly-moving bough.

Hawtrey would go his own way, to the devil, but chained though he was by his faults—hy Gomez—he had some good left in him.

When he got back his wind, Waring went onward. The trees, fighting toward the sun, had their boughs interlocked, woven with giant lianas. He meant to keep above ground as long as he could. He had lost his weapon, but it had served him well. He dared not go back for it.

He could not entirely choose his way, and he found himself working closer to the drums. Their vibration throbbed through the forest and stilled all other night noises, sent prowling beasts from their beats, afraid of the man thunder. There was a clearing ahead. Fire leaping!

Excitement gripped Waring—Africa stirred his blood. He forgot his claw wounds and crawled out on the limb of a baobab, inch by inch. There was a strange sight beneath and beyond him.

A building, a shrine or temple, formed of great tusks set into the ground, which supported a conical roof of thatch. Inside was a hideous idol, painted bright red with black eyes and hair, outside of which black men

pranced. Around the image crooked sticks were thrust into the soil, each one topped by a skull.

Waring could not see the drummers, booming away somewhere in a grove of trees, but he marked the jumping men, striped and smeared with paint. They were in a circle, roaring, lifting alternate legs and stamping three times.

A weird figure danced inside the circle, plumed with white ostrich feathers, jingling with metal anklets and armlets, clicking with bones, spotted with paint, shaking a rattle in one hand and waving the stuffed head of some animal in the other. The men had spears which they thrust upward in unison, shouting with each thrust. It was barbaric, hypnotic, but it was lacking in imagination.

A reed pipe shrieked out a shrill series of notes, and the natives leaped higher. The witch doctor danced like a Russian Cossack, kneeling, flinging out his legs to front and rear, to either side. He turned somersaults in the air, sprang upright, and yelled in a frenzy. The drums boomed on, and the pipe split the air beneath the moon.

The dance ended with astounding abruptness. A shooting star rushed down the sky, flaming atoms in its wake. The witch doctor gave a cry that topped the howls. The drums and pipe, the music and shouting ceased instantly. The fires were stamped out.

They were gone, banished by evil portent, only a few smoldering sparks remaining, that soon died out.

Waring, utterly tired, snuggled down in the hollow between four branches, and slept. Slumber took him, wrapped him in veils of merciful unconsciousness, sank him in oblivion.

THE sky above him was like an opening flower of pink-and-orange petals. The jungle was awake. Monkeys chattered and swung through the treetops, birds whirled and wheeled

and screamed. Flamingos and pelicans flapped across the airy void. High up, a vulture planed.

Waring looked out across the open glade where the frenzied blacks had danced about the juju shrine, leaving a ring of dirt where they had stamped out grass and herbage. Beyond was the dense, primeval forest, purplish blue of foliage through blue mists and, vaguely seen, cones and flat tops of the distant range, tipped by clouds.

Waring was in the upper boughs of a giant fig. About were acacias, mapanis, baobabs and fronded palms. He was stiff from claw strokes on breast and outer thighs. He had some scraps left, and ate them. In his breast pocket were the cheroots Hawtrey had given him, shredded by the claws of the dog he had strangled.

Waring's brain cleared as he ate, and recollection came back. He was clear of Gomez, clear of the trading post, but he did not know where to go. All about was virgin wilderness, inhabited by wild tribes. His bar was gone, he had no matches. He was bare handed and alone.

Yet Waring felt confident. He had fought and won. He could fight and win again. Something in him, remote and ancestral, kindled. He was a white man and he would survive, win through.

His lore to fit such a situation was scattered, vicarious, born of traveler's tales, but he had his white man's brains and courage. He would get through. There was food, if he could get it. Ripe fruits to hand—purple figs, refreshing and palatable, and luscious-looking grapes.

He ate, and climbed down. His tracks were far behind. He circled the clearing, going south. Loanda was a city, Portuguese, but there might be men there of kindlier trend than Gomez. He might make himself useful to them, hoard funds for a steamer passage.

But there was something that, fearsome as his experience had been, severely as he had been buffeted, linked Waring to this savage land. It was wildly beautiful, abundant.

He worked on, past trees overgrown with wild pepper, with the enormous leaves of the Elephant's Ear flourishing on the great boughs, colossal vines embracing the mighty boles, bowers of festoons inclosing spots dark as night, flowers flame-red, bells of brilliant orange. The plenitude and glory of it entered into him, used to canyoned streets. This was life, redundant and magnificent, overflowing.

Waring passed high ant hills, the insects issuing like armies on their mysterious missions. He saw francolin and guinea fowl and pondered how he might snare them. He thought of nets and lime, of snares, and realized how much he had to learn, how far he was removed from the time and ways of primitive man.

Little by little he realized his helplessness but did not let it sap his courage. He could not make fire, though he had read of savage ways. But his brain, inheritance of ancestors who had climbed their way up, should hold the source of these things.

Troops of monkeys followed him overhead, chattering, scolding, peering down with bright eyes. He saw frisking lizards, big enough for a meal. In an open space, where yellow grass waved in the wind, Waring saw deer leaping from his scent, tiny antelopes and big boks. With a catch in his breath, Waring glimpsed the chocolate-and-orange necks of giraffes, browsing high. Life in plenty!

Once more he was following a trail. It kept him on the alert, in case there should be natives traveling it, but it was much faster going and the hard-packed ground retained no sign of his tracks. He still considered it imperative to put all the distance he possibly

could between him and the vindictive Gomez.

Waring came to a quaggy place like an enormous sponge, such as he had crossed the night before. It seemed strange that a path should be made to end at such a spot.

He saw no way out of crossing the morass. It stretched far in either direction, black muck from which saw-tooth edges rose stiff and thick. He sank to his knees in the sticky slime and, unable to see the way, tumbled neck deep into a series of pools that were like pits dug purposely, in their regularity. In some places the edges seemed to have been trampled down, but he was too busy getting through to pay much attention. He began to lose his newly-born complacency.

## CHAPTER VII.

### PRIMITIVE COMBAT.

TRAILS were, after all, Waring's best bet. They led somewhere. They had to be traveled with caution, especially where they wound between densely set trees where the undergrowth and vines wattled the jungle together like a wall on either side. But eventually, he might find a village where the natives were not altogether unfriendly. He might even meet a caravan that would look on his plight with sympathy.

But if the trails were going to be barred by swamps like these, he was not going to go either far or fast. Waring was beginning to get hungry again. Sweat broke out all over him, showing in big, salty patches on his clothes, getting into his eyes. Clouds of insects buzzed all about him, stinging and biting. Mosquitoes were so thick in the middle of the swamp that they practically blinded him. Already he could feel fever mounting in his veins.

Waring got through at last and crawled out to find the broad-and-beaten

trail again, thankful for it. He broke off a green branch as some protection against the mosquitoes that had followed him from the quagmire. He walked in a green twilight, the atmosphere like that of an overworked steam laundry.

It suddenly struck Waring that the path had been made by elephants, not by man. That would account for the crossing of the swamp. The holes into which he had fallen, had been made by the herd.

Waring was thirsty, aside from his hunger. He saw fruit on vines and in the trees, some as large as his head, but it meant a stiff climb he did not feel quite up to.

Waring could assemble a motor yet he could not kill enough meat to keep him alive. He saw a pool but dared not drink. There were some growths of fruit on a dwarf tree beside the elephant trail, like small scarlet pears, or loquats. He tested them, found them slightly acid and refreshing, easing both his thirst and hunger at the same time.

Then the path ended, opening to a parklike space with trees here and there, grass growing in bunches, and bushes. And Waring saw his first wild elephants.

The wind was blowing faintly toward him and the elephants did not sense his presence. They were browsing on the leaves, pulling up the grass, rapping it against their feet to get rid of the soil, leisurely munching, while their enormous ears flapped slowly but continuously.

Tick birds rode on their backs, but gave no alarm as Waring hid back of a tree. Waring knew these mammoth creatures, pacific now, could charge with wild fury, faster than he could run or dodge, but they fascinated him.

They seemed twice his height, with humped backs and gleaming tusks. They looked like enormous pigs and

gave off curious sounds, squeaks of pleasure, not the trumpetings he had expected. He saw one bull send its trunk curving down into the mouth and throat, deeply, withdrawing it to squirt water from its stomach supply over its back. Others satisfied themselves with dust. They moved silently. Now and then one passed its trunk caressingly over another.

There was no alarm. The elephants did not see Waring as he slipped from tree to tree for a closer view, and saw a gleaming lake between a broken screen of giant bamboos.

A great bull wandered toward the shore, through an opening in the grove. Out of the bamboos came a creature that belonged to past ages—eighteen feet long on legs ridiculously short, armored, hairless save for a tuft on its tail and the bristles on its big, upstanding ears.

It was the fighting keitloa, the square-nosed, white rhinoceros, two horns set into the tough hide between eyes and muzzle, the foremost curving, sharp, a formidable weapon. It had little more clearance than an armored tank as it stood there, disputing the way, ready to charge, enraged at the bull, who curled up his trunk, then extended it and stood still, too proud to retreat.

The rhino made up its mind speedily. The short, ungainly legs got into action. It raced with incredible speed, swerving slightly, lowering its head and massive tusks, coming in full tilt. The elephant wheeled, trumpeting loudly. The herd turned to see the combat.

The elephant was too slow. The rhinoceros hit the elephant well back. Both horns went in. The massive mammoth groaned, leaning to the impact of the terrific shock. The rhino heaved, striving to withdraw its horns, but could not.

The elephant, struggling to get free, trumpeted again and again. The herd began to move toward the combatants,

slowly at first, then shuffling fast at neither a trot, run, nor gallop, the bulls ahead.

The rhino strove desperately to get free. The great bull began to keel over, mortally hurt. Waring gazed with awe as the enormous brute toppled and fell, pinning down its adversary, crushing the rhino with its mighty weight.

The elephant's great bulk heaved as the rhino struggled and was still. The bull elephant lay panting, its trunk whipping to and fro, stirring the dust. One great ear lifted slowly, fell with a nerveless flop. The bulls of the herd came and stood over their leader, passing their trunks over him, grunting.

A cow squealed, and suddenly the band broke into flight, making for the lake, plunging in, swimming, with only the tops of their heads showing. Best swimmers of all brutes. They crossed the water, and plunged into the forest on the opposite side.

Waring went on, aimlessly enough, across the parklike place. The fruit he had eaten was beginning to give him cramps. He chewed the shreds of Hawtrey's black cheroots to try and relieve the pain. He was hardly able to get along. At last, he flung himself down among some ferns.

Fever mounted. Waring saw great azure butterflies flitting from bloom to bloom of orchids that were beautiful. He saw monkeys staring down at him like wise old gnomes. Parrots flitted between the boughs, a ray of sun lit up a bird that gleamed with metallic plumage.

Waring felt himself lost, abandoned, a modern man thrust into a setting of thousands of years ago. Big beetles nipped at him, ants found him.

The spasms passed. Waring got up, half delirious, seeing phantoms in the aisles of the forest, jibbering figures that threatened. But he did not care. It was afternoon, as he judged it. He passed a colony of ant hills, and came

to a rocky terraced ridge, which thrust itself abruptly through the jungle. Caves showed dark mouths on the ledges.

Waring essayed to reach one of them. A flock of baboons, barking, fanged like dogs, swarmed out on all fours. Highly excited, they danced up and down, pig-faced, maned like lions. Waring hurled a rock fragment at one. Instantly, a shower of stones came hurtling at him, and he had to run for cover while the baboons made bedlam that sounded like laughter.

Night came swiftly. Waring picked his tree, too far gone to try much of a climb. He dragged himself up to where he could huddle in a nook. Three close-set boughs and festooned vines hid him.

There were no drums but he heard the night sounds of the jungle—coughs, grunts, squeals as some weaker creature was caught and killed. There were mysterious rustlings, howls, the hideous, jeering laughter of hyenas. He peered through his vines and saw eyes, lambent, searching. To-morrow, he told himself, he would be stronger and go on. To-morrow he would wrest sustenance from the wilderness, demand and obtain the means of strength, carry through.

But to-night—dizzy from fever, his body smarting and swollen, stiff and sore—to-night, he was done up utterly.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MAGIC.

**U**NKOSI! *Unkosi! Unkosi!*"

Waring woke but fancied himself dreaming. That was the voice of Jim, of Seole, but Seole had been sent away by Gomez.

"*Unkosi! John Waringi!*"

Waring parted the vines and looked down into the face of Seole, the chief's son, smiling up at him. Seole wore his kaross and there was a knife in his belt,

a spear in his hand. It was Seole, in the flesh, lifting an arm in salute to his blood brother.

Waring had never been so glad to see any one in his life. He swung down the tree with new strength, cutting a pitiful figure enough with his tattered clothes, his bites, his out-thrusting whiskers.

Seole boomed a salute. "I found the two dogs, *unkosi!*" he said. "They were still warm. Gomez kicked them as I watched, for I was close behind. Hawtrey was laughing. I think he was glad you got away."

"That was my notion," answered Waring. "How did you get here?"

"You are not hurt? The dogs did not bite you?"

"Only a few scratches."

"Then come first, and eat."

It seemed to Waring as if the bells of a dozen boarding houses were suddenly chiming joyfully for meals. His mouth watered. Seole had killed four small partridges with a knobkerrie he had fashioned with his knife, using the club as a missile.

He had skinned them, drawn and halved them, wrapping them in leaves and burying them from the ants. He broiled them over a fire he kindled with two sticks. The meat was tender, revivifying. There were custard apples and small bananas in the larder the Kafir had collected with ease.

"I knew I was near you, *unkosi*, by the way you walked, so I left the food here, to hurry, lest you might be gone."

They squatted by the little fire, gnawing the bones, Seole breaking them with his teeth to get at the marrow. Then he told his tale.

Gomez had put him in the barracoon, intending to sell Seole with the rest of the slaves when the next shipment was arranged. Gossip filtered in even to that dismal place. The guards purveyed it as taunts.

The half-caste overseer made it his

special business to jeer at Seole. He was not permitted to whip him.

He jubilantly brought the news that Waring had pretended to be some one else, deceiving Gomez, who was going to have him bound to an ant hill.

"As for you, you Kaffir dog," the overseer said to Seole gloatingly, "tomorrow I am to give you forty lashes. If you live—but I do not think you will live, after I am through, so I will not tell you what then is planned for you."

"I did not believe all that he said, for the man is a liar," Seole told Waring. "Gomez would not dare to kill a white man with ants. It would get out. Secrets travel far, even in the jungle. Hawtrey would not permit it. He is in debt to Gomez, but Gomez listens to him. If you escaped, that would be different. Gomez would try then to kill you. And I knew you would go. Even as I knew that I would."

"It was not easy for me. They light small fires for cooking inside the fence and they sit there and sing. Any who saw me would tell the guard, to find favor. Those men were born to be slaves. I waited.

"When I heard the dogs barking and Gomez shouting I knew you had gone and my heart was glad. I knew they would never take you and, when I saw those dogs, then I knew truly of what breed and what kind of a man you were.

"It was not in my mind to go without arms. You would need them as well as I, in the jungle. I climbed the posts when the shouting started, when all were excited, inside and out. He who was to flog me stood by the gate, but his men had run to where Gomez had called them. They had gone with him.

"I dropped on his back and I killed him as the lion kills. I bent back his head until his spine snapped and the life went out of him. He died easily.

Then I took his knife and the spear that stood against the gate and kept in the shadows.

"I was behind Gomez all the way. It was in my mind to kill him, if he had hurt thee, *unkosi*. I would not have given him an easy death.

"It was not easy to trace you on the elephant path, but I found where you had plucked the red *nadas*. They are not good to eat, Waring!"

Waring grinned ruefully. "I found that out," he said. "Also, that it is not a good idea to chuck rocks at baboons. If you hadn't come along, Seole, I wouldn't have lasted much longer."

"You would have learned. I would not wish to be in the jungle without weapons."

"What's our best move?" asked Waring. "I thought of going to Loanda."

Seole shook his head. "It is not a good place for strangers," he said. "*Unkosi*, I was brought here in a slave train. I meant to come back, some day, so I watched. We are not far from the trail they took. We will find it.

"Toward the sun is the Kwango River. Beyond that lies Kassandu. There is a chief named Manenka and a juju man named Nsamamonze. These I know, though they may not remember me. It was there that Tilimani was taken ill. It is on a trade road.

"Manenka trades with Gomez, but he is not friendly with him. Some Kassandu men were caught out hunting and taken by the slave train. They were sold to Gomez and he sold them again.

"This I know, for I was there. Word of it passed to Manenka. Gomez denied it but Nsamamonze cast the bones and showed that he lied. Yet Manenka could not prove it, for the slavers backed Gomez.

"It was a thing done for greed and not a wise or friendly thing to do. It would have been better for Gomez to return the men and win Manenka's friendship.

"Yet Manenka trades with him, because Gomez has goods that he wants. If we can make friends with Manenka—and Nsamamonze, which is harder—he will let us stay there until some trader comes, or a hunter. It may even be that Tilimani will come, unless he has already come and gone.

"It may be that word will pass to Gomez that we are there. It may be that word will pass to Kassandu that we have fled from Gomez, and Nsamamonze will counsel handing us over for many goods, heads and cloth, wire and powder and tobacco. That is as may be, and as we fashion it.

"We shall come to Kassandu, not as most white men come, with bearers and guns. Nsamamonze fears the white man, and he hates them. You, *unkosi*, will make magic against him and it will be better than guns."

"I'm not much on magic, Seole. I can do this." Waring palmed a pebble, made a pass and showed an empty hand where the stone had seemed to go.

Seole nodded wisely. "It is a good trick. Much magic is all tricks. You will match Nsamamonze and see how he makes *his* magic. Then show him stronger." Again Seole nodded, confidently. "It must be so," the Kaffir went on earnestly, "since we bring no gifts."

It was a long journey but, with a companion trained to the wilderness, it was not so bad. Waring learned many things about jungle ways. Seole taught him how to use a spear, made one for him out of hard wood, with the end charred in fire, and made a club of a smooth oval stone.

It was Waring who got them across the river. He fashioned a craft from two logs with a sufficient platform lashed between them. Seole made the paddles. So they made progress. Waring grew expert with the knob-kerrie, made a sling of bark string and

scored hits off francolin and guinea fowl.

Seole stalked a small deer on a grassy plain and killed it with the overseer's spear. He showed Waring how to catch monkeys.

They came to a place where a troop of monkeys scampered up palms, whose ripe and fallen fruit they had been eating, too indolent, perhaps, to pick from the trees, or copying the whim of their leader.

The monkeys watched, chattering, while Waring and Seole collected a quantity of the fruit. Seole took gourds from a vine, cut holes in them, just sufficiently large to admit a monkey's hand and arm, cleaned out the pulp and seeds, and took them back to the grove. Once more, the simians fled, and watched intently as Seole put fruit in the gourds and left them in plain view. Seole and Waring hid behind some brush and waited.

One monkey ventured down, then another, imitative and greedy, the rest coming fast, inquisitively thrusting in their arms and drawing out the fruit. Suddenly Seole yelled and they raced off. But five of them remained, their fists clenched tight on the fruit, too frightened to go, not realizing what held them, squealing as Seole rushed out and got three of them.

Waring got the fourth. The last, either by luck or superior intelligence, banged the gourd against a palm trunk it sought to climb, broke it, and escaped.

Waring's clung to him pitifully, whimpering, its little face puckered up, not offering to bite. Waring had not understood that Seole wanted food which he said was better than chicken or any fish. The monkeys seemed too close to human to be killed and used for food.

Waring kept his from the pot and ate deer meat instead, making friends with his pet which he meant to make a mas-

cot of. Seole laughed at him, enjoying his meal.

"They look too much like babies to me," said Waring.

"You will find people who eat babies," said Seole seriously. "The Nghombo, the little people with beards. I hope we do not meet them. Also, the Kongo fighters eat the flesh of those they kill, part of it."

## CHAPTER IX.

### ALL MEN ARE ENEMIES!

THREE days afterward, Seole halted abruptly in the trail they were following and pointed to a footprint, off the path on soft dirt. "Nghombo," he whispered. "Up, *unkosi!*"

Seole swung himself onto a bough, and took the weapons Waring handed him. Then Waring climbed up beside Seole.

"I fear none but the Nghombo," the Kaffir said.

Waring saw that sweat had started on his forehead. He was to see why before long. Seole had said they were close to the fringe of the forest, near a great plain, beyond which was Kassandu.

Presently, at a touch from Seole, Waring looked down and saw an antelope bounding down the trail. In its rump, two small arrows stuck, neither deeply buried. The antelope went jerkily, bucking now and then, its legs stiff. Almost under the tree, it suddenly turned a somersault and lay still. Seole's hand gripped Waring's elbow.

Down the trail, running swiftly, came seven dwarfs, hardly over four feet high. They had wispy beards, one was partly albino, his skin piebald, his hair nearly white. The first to arrive slashed the antelope's throat.

Jabbering, the dwarfs skinned the antelope with almost incredible speed, quartered it, cutting out the meat where the arrows had struck and throwing it

away. Then they went back at a jog trot, their little bows across their shoulders.

"You saw, *unkosi!* That was poison. They can shoot elephants in the trunk and kill them. A man will not live a hundred beats of his heart. That is why I fear them. They are sly. They hide in bushes and in trees behind the vines and shoot their enemies. All men are enemies to the Nghombo. We must go carefully."

"How can they eat the meat?" asked Waring, still a little inclined to goose flesh. This sort of thing was not fighting.

"I do not know. There are many things I do not know. None knows the ways of the Nghombo."

"Personally I'm not curious," said Waring. "Let's give them a wide berth."

"If we wait a little, they will be eating. We shall see the smoke," said Seole.

They picked up the blue reek of vapor as they started across the tawny plain, reaching the farther side at nightfall. Seole counseled not arriving at Kassandu until well after dawn. They spent the night in a tree.

WARING felt that he looked like a scarecrow, as they came in sight of the conical grass roofs of the village. Seole had far more dignity, Waring told himself, but he put on the best front he could, shouldering his spear, carrying the knobkerrie.

Seole had wanted him to take the knife but he felt that it was the spoils of war and refused. He had held it once but Seole had killed its owner, and it was his rightful possession. Such, he believed, would be the custom of the land, and Seole had not insisted. Now the Kaffir stalked beside him, haughty and assured.

The houses were in a circle, each with a mud wall ringing it. There was

one principal building almost forty feet long. Women were pounding meal in mortars, staring at them curiously. A few men lounged about. Others came out of the big house, carrying weapons, flourishing them.

Waring stood his ground. After all, he was a white man. His was the superior will, the better brain. Seole was indifferent. The straggling charge came to an end a few feet in front of them.

Seole spoke to them, asking for Manenka. "It is Seole, friend of Tili-mani," he said. "This is Waringi, a wise and mighty white man. Our cowardly bearers have run from the Nghombo. Soon, another white man will come. We wish to wait for him here."

A man darted for the chief's house, distinguished by double walls. "It was a lie, *unkosi*," Seole said, as he explained what he had spoken. "The truth would not serve us. And a white man will come soon. It is certain. I, Seole, feel it in the marrow of my bones."

Jocko, the monkey mascot, came out from Waring's tattered coat and perched on his shoulder, chattering in his ear. Dogs roamed about. There were fowls and goats in a pen.

"There are not many men here," commented Seole. "They may be on a hunt or fighting with the Miange. They are old enemies."

The messenger returned, his air insolent. "Manenka says you may come," he said.

Waring interpreted his look and instinctively drew himself up, resenting insult. Seole suddenly turned savage, his look so blighting and ferocious that the other quailed.

"Did you tell Manenka there was a white man here?" Seole demanded. "Then go back and tell him that Waringi goes not to Manenka. Does he think we are children, or slaves? Tell

him that, before I take your place." His hand was on the haft of his knife and the messenger shrank away, turned and ran back.

"It is because we bring no gifts," said Seole. "We must show that we are strong."

It was not going to be an easy matter to impress Kassandu, Waring fancied. First appearances counted. They looked as if they needed protection. Manenka could see no gifts. The prestige of the white man might bluff them through if he bore himself properly.

Manenka was coming out of his house, sulkily. He wore a native kilt, and a uniform jacket of scarlet, spotted with spilled food, its gold lace and buttons tarnished.

Manenka was an old man, peevish, a little uncertain, his gray hair built into a cone. His spindling, bowed legs seemed inadequate to support him. He leaned on the shoulders of one of his women, buxom and young, who might have been comely had not her upper lip been pierced and stretched over a ring of bone so that it looked like a duck's bill.

"Now we make palaver," Seole said to Waring. "I shall tell more lies. I do not see Nsamamonze. There may be trouble. Manenka does not know his own mind. He is too old to play at brains with Nsamamonze."

Waring's opinion of Seole had risen steadily. Now he saw another phase of him. He was plainly a diplomat. He said something that made Manenka give a twisted smile, while the effect of his consort was extraordinary. Evidently she intended to laugh out loud. As she started the cachinnation her distended front lip flapped back as if on a hinge.

Waring could see between her filed-apart-and-pointed teeth. He could see the end of her flat nose through the ivory ring, her eyes looking at him. He laughed involuntarily, but she evi-

dently thought he was laughing with her rather than at her.

So they all laughed, more or less, together; while the lady got the protruding lip, that made her a belle, back in place.

Things went smoothly, on the surface. Waring and Seole were shown to a hut and meat was brought them, with corn and *mwenge*—the sour and intoxicating ferment of bananas. The hut was not bad with its hard floor of clay.

It had apparently been occupied quite recently.

There were personal possessions still in it, a few spears, most of them blunted or with splintered shafts. On the wall was a hideous mask, carved of wood, hollow, with open eyes and mouth, and strings by which it could be fastened to a man's head.

Seole thought it had been brought in as a trophy from a raid, preserved to insure the spirit of its last owner, strengthening that of the man who now had the mask.

Seole explained what had been said between him and Manenka. There was war with the Miange, there was always war with the Miange and always would be. There was an age-old grudge between them. Nsamamonze had gone out with the warriors to make charms and insure victory.

There had been a fight. According to runners sent in by the witch doctor, it had been a fairly even thing. Men killed on both sides, a mutual retreat with the agreement that there had been enough. Seole discounted the dispatch of Nsamamonze. He would make the most of it.

In Seole's opinion, the charms had failed to work as well as they might. Manenka's men had got licked, but had put up enough resistance to be let alone when they withdrew.

Nsamamonze had to save his own face. They would pretend they had

won. Undoubtedly, they had a prisoner or two. Some of the local warriors would have killed for the first time. There would be ceremonies to go through.

This accounted in part for Manenka's peevishness. He was so old now that he had to stay home with the women and the village guard and he resented the loss of his strength, his prestige as a fighting man. He was only the shadow of a king.

Manenka was waiting for the verdict of Nsamamonze to decide whether he would shelter Waring and Seole or send them off. Evidently there had been no word from Gomez as yet, but he might be on his way. Every once in a while Gomez paid a formal visit of ceremony to the chiefs, to secure their trade and friendship. He would be anxious to clean the slate with Manenka and this was about his usual time for the trip.

Moreover, Seole was very sure, and Waring agreed with him, that Gomez would be more than merely vindictive over the escape of the two, the loss of his dogs and the death of his pet overseer, to say nothing of his chagrin about the money he had hoped to collect.

Hawtrey had taken it as a joke on Gomez, but Gomez would not see the humor of it. It would eat into him like a cancer. Waring figured that he would take advantage of his tribal visits to request that the chiefs looked out for the runaways and turned them over.

That would be a ticklish subject to take up with Manenka. Gomez had not yet squared himself with the chief. But the fact that Waring was white, Seole a Kaffir and an outlander, might alter the circumstances. If Manenka and Nsamamonze knew they had been captives it would surely lower their standing.

Seole had stressed the fact to Manenka that, to have Waringi as a guest would be something to brag about, would help him with other white men.

Guessing that the fight had not gone as well as it might, Seole had hinted that Waringi would undoubtedly fight for his host upon occasion and that, with Seole also along, the chief's enemies would melt away.

"But," Seole told Waring, "Manenka pretended he did not remember me. He said that he remembered Tilimani, but not me. That was a lie. A lie is a small thing but it is like a blade of dry grass tossed in the air. It shows which way the wind is blowing. He is waiting for Nsamamonze. They will be making ready for the feast.

"We will stay inside. It will give us dignity. Later, when Nsamamonze comes, we will go out, lest he think we are afraid of him. The tale of the Nghombo went well. All men are afraid of them. You will watch Nsamamonze and show him magic to-morrow. Much is about to happen. I told you before, I feel it in the marrow of my bones."

That was the Kaffir equivalent of having a hunch, Waring supposed. It was not a bad description. He had hunches himself, though they were generally based on a certain amount of reasoning.

Waring had slight doubt that much was going to happen, but Seole evidently held to a blind faith that Tillman, whom he called Tilimani, was going to arrive on the scene, coming back for him. It seemed a slim chance but, in Africa, men seemed to pin their hopes to strange things. That the town was on a trade path was encouraging.

## CHAPTER X.

### BARBARIC CEREMONY.

THE preparations went on outside. Waring and Seole heard the squawking of fowls, the bleating of goats, the clack of women's voices. Toward the end of the afternoon, horns blared harshly, to announce the return

of the warriors. They stood in the shadowed doorway of the hut assigned to them and watched.

Waring had speculated whether they would have their quarters changed or whether the owner had died, leaving it vacant, and he hoped the illness had not been a contagious one.

"It is in my mind," Seole said, "that the man may have gone out to fight, and word was brought that he was killed. I do not think we shall be moved." It turned out later that he was right.

There was a sound of distant chanting. More horns were blown and now they were answered from the village. The vanguard appeared, men smeared with paint, prancing along. Back of them came litters that bore wounded and the dead they had been able to bring. The women ran to meet the warriors, shouting with them.

The sound of wailing broke out as the names of the dead and missing were passed, but the lamentation was a minor matter. Nsamamonze was resolved upon celebrating a victory and the warriors were of the same mind.

"They are all boasters and liars, these Bantu," said Seole scornfully.

Manenka came out to greet them. Nsamamonze was tall and lean, hawk-faced under black plumes, decked out with snakes' bladders, with necklaces of knuckle bones, dangling amulets, carrying an idol stick, the head of which was hollow and filled with pebbles for a rattle.

He went apart with Manenka, discussing the fight, talking of the two strangers. He glanced once toward the hut.

Great fires were lit though it was not yet dark. The women stirred at the cooking pots but the feast, if ready was deferred. The men squatted in a circle about a springy sapling, stripped of boughs, that was near by a contrivance that looked as if it might be a

combination of footstool and chair, the former without top, the latter without seat.

A seat of teakwood had been brought for Manenka. There was another for Nsamamonze. Two wives stood back of Manenka whisking away flies and fanning him.

The witch doctor was unattended, his chair apart. He was stern and aloof and had made a special toilet. Manenka was still in his red coat, with the addition now of a cavalry saber in a dinted scabbard.

But Nsamamonze was by far the more impressive. He still wore his headdress of black feathers, but his face had been painted white with red spots. His eyelids were red. There was a white stripe down the outside of each arm, and one hand was entirely white.

He sat with his fetish stick resting on one knee, like a scepter. It was he who ruled Kassandu.

Drums began to beat, and stirred Waring's blood with their rhythm as he gazed at the barbaric spectacle. The warriors who had killed came forward, telling their stories with boastful words and gestures. Each gave to Nsamamonze a morsel of flesh from their dead opponents, without which there was no score.

This Nsamamonze set aside while he took a stabbing spear and made a slash in the accepted claimant's thigh. Ashes were rubbed into the streaming cut. The piece of flesh was put on a hot ember and devoured.

The warriors took the slash proudly, never wincing when the ashes were ground into the wound. Some had several scars of former victories, tallied on their thighs for all men to see.

The night darkened as the feast started. Part of it was brought to Waring and Seole. It was a sign, so far, that was favorable.

The eating lasted for hours and then the repleted men formed in a phalanx

to dance. Again the drums boomed and reed-pipes shrilled while two men played marimbas, primitive xylophones. Women stood in single file, shuffling their feet, clapping their hands, using wooden clackers to the rhythm.

The men chanted monotonously, stamped, advanced and retreated in mock combat, brandishing their weapons. They broke and formed in the same circle that Waring had seen from the tree in the forest, stamping, thrice with alternate feet, dust rising.

The guardians of the village joined in, making an outer circle, leaping, with knees thrown high, howling like wolves, each man carrying a stick fantastically shaped by nature, topped with a skull.

Waring and Seole stood to one side. Nsamamonze showed no sign of their presence. Against the tribal functions they were of slight moment and it was not a time to insist upon recognition. The witch doctor's fierce face was alternately lit up and cast in shadow as the whirling dancers passed him. Now and then the light caught his eyes and they glowed like crimson spangles. He sat immobile, as if carved, or in a trance, the fetish scepter on his knee.

Manenka snored. His wives forgot to attend to him, lured by the dance. The king's head sank on his breast. He was past these things. He was a tired old man.

**N**SAMAMONZE raised his fetish stick and rattled it. It seemed as if they had been watching for this signal. Instantly the music ended, the dancers flung themselves down. The fire was growing low. There was wood ready but it was not replenished. All eyes of the panting warriors, of all the village, rested on the witch doctor. The silence was as intense as it was sudden. Waring felt as if a caterpillar was walking up his spine.

Seole whispered. "He make magic now. Then talk."

The silence held, second after second, the atmosphere was charged with mystery. No one moved a muscle. Then something appeared back of Nsamamonze. A terrible head, phosphorescent, horrible with all that savage ingenuity could contrive to that idea. The body was vague, clad in whitish bark cloth, but there was motion to it. It climbed, lengthened, high above the wizard.

A hideous groan seemed to issue from the fanged mouth that was smeared with crimson. Then came words, a short sentence—an oracle. Every one, except Waring, Seole and the slumbering Manenka, bowed their heads to the dust.

Waring saw the apparition subside, disappear back of the witch-doctor's seat. He would have given a good deal to be able to see what happened there, whether any assistant moved in the shadows, slinking off with an unwieldy bundle.

Nsamamonze began to speak in a sonorous voice. He was a fine orator. He played on them as if they were the strings to his harp. Even Seole acknowledged that, as he gave a translation, later, to Waring. He flattered them and, with them, himself. He vaunted their deeds and promised them the favor of the gods.

At last, he threw up his arm on his final sentence, shaking the fetish rattle and, with one accord, they flung up theirs, baying out a salute that roused Manenka, blinking, to gaze stupidly around and fall asleep again.

Wood was thrown on the fire, the drums beat again, and the dance was resumed. But the ceremony was over. Nsamamonze left, Manenka's wives prodded him awake and towed him off, to come back later for their fun.

"That was strong magic," said Seole to Waring in their hut. "Yet I thought you did not think much of it."

"I don't know for sure how he did

it," said Waring, but I know how it could be done."

Seole nodded. He had been sure of his white man right along. Waring showed him how lazy tongs could be made, a mask attached to them with cloth beneath.

The Kaffir softly clapped his hands and laughed. "I said there were many tricks in magic. Now, if it is needed, we can show our magic equal to that of Nsamamonze."

"He might get angry if we stole his thunder," said Waring. "And I haven't got the trick of throwing the voice, as he has. He can make his own stage settings and we can't. But I have thought of one thing we might work out together."

Seole listened and chuckled. "It is simple, *unkosi*, but it is very strong magic. It will be easy. In the morning they will all sleep deep and long. If the fighters of Miange were wise they would come now and kill the whole village. But they too danced and ate last night and claimed they had won. They also sleep. These people are stupid. They are not real fighters, like we are, Waringi."

Waring wondered how Seole would rate him if he knew how little fighting he had actually done. Yet deep in himself, aroused by the boom of the tom-toms and all the savage ritual, he felt capacity, not free from desire. The savage land had got its grip on him.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE FETISH STICK.

THEY got some sleep. In the morning Seole went out scouting and scavenging. He came back with blood in a gourd and a selection of rounded pebbles. Waring took the pebbles, choosing two about the size of pheasants' eggs. He showed them to Seole, who surveyed them carefully, nodded and went on with his task.

Waring, meanwhile, practiced passing and palming. When he was satisfied, Seole made a small bag of a part of a goat's bladder. It was filled with blood, tied tightly, a loop of sennit attached that would fit over Waring's middle finger.

"Handle it carefully, *unkosi*," Seole said, "or it will burst."

They had food left over from the night before. At noon, sleepy women brought them more. A man came who stated that Nsamamonze wished to speak with them.

"Then let it be when the sun sends the shadow of that tree to the foot of the pole," said Seole curtly. "We will be there, if the people are all assembled." The man stared, left with a doubtful look. He did not return.

Seole chuckled. "Nsamamonze wished to see if we could come to him," he said. "He is careful, because you are a white man and he does not know what a white man may do. I have seen Tilimani draw a line in the sand and dare the Ngasaki warriors to step across it. They did not. Now you can show your magic before all the people."

It would have seemed child's play to Waring, if he had not seen how easily the natives were impressed. When the shadow touched the sapling, the folks of Kassandu were gathered, except the women and children. Manenka was there, an empty shell of authority, now that the witch doctor had returned.

Nsamamonze meant to keep them waiting. But Waring was not going to be the first to arrive, and wait. He did not doubt his own courage. His pulses beat evenly, though now he had a hunch that almost equaled that of Seole. Something was going to break.

Waring and Seole saw the witch doctor slowly advancing, bearing his fetish stick, and they left the hut. The loop of sennit was over Waring's middle finger, the bladder of blood in the

palm of his right hand, two pebbles in his left pocket. The natives hunkered down in uneven ranks.

Manenka blinked at them. He seemed half drunk with some form of hemp, or with *mwenge*. Seole was interpreter.

"I am told you seek a refuge," said Nsamamonze.

Seole discounted that. He might lack the flowing language of the witch doctor but he put things plainly and broadly, with jests that brought laughter, at which Nsamamonze frowned.

"Waringi did Kassandu honor," Seole declared, as he recited again the imaginary tale of deserting bearers, the poisoned arrows of the Ngombos. Waringi was a mighty warrior and a great magician. He hooked the wizard on that, as he had hoped to.

With a smile that was half a sneer on his thin lips, Nsamamonze suggested that the white man give them a sample of his magic. It was daylight and he knew that darkness was a great asset to a conjurer. He was ready and eager to expose any tricks this Waringi might show. He knew a great many. He threw out the challenge confidently.

Waring became an actor. Ragged though he was, he knew that, for a moment, he held the center of the stage, that the white man's preeminence cloaked him. If he could convince them, impress Nsamamonze, they were comparatively safe. Seole had said positively that, once he gave his word, Nsamamonze could be depended upon. It was one of his assets. He would not give it unless his mind was made up that the white man could boost his own game.

Waring took the two pebbles out with his left hand, clinked them together, offered them to the witch doctor. Seole asked Nsamamonze to choose one. Waring tossed the other away and stood before the crowd. Manenka was wide awake for the moment. Waring held

the stone between thumb and forefinger of his left hand, made the pass slowly but dexterously, retaining the pebble, though they were sure it was in his right palm.

He closed his right hand carefully, as if exerting tremendous force, burst the bladder and the blood spurted through his fingers, staining the hand that he exhibited while he dropped the palmed pebble back into his pocket. He had squeezed blood from stone.

It was absurd, but it was unknown, even to the wizard. Therefore it was magic. Their eyes bulged. Nsamamonze examined the hand Waring extended. The others crowded in. It was real blood. He had got rid of the loop and the skin of the bladder. They were convinced, utterly. For all his rags he stood preëminent among them.

Nsamamonze raised his fetish rattle aloft and shook it. "Here is a white wizard who wishes to dwell among us until other white men come," he said. "He will work his magic for us and will fight with us. Last night I cast the bones and they were in his favor. He stays."

The crowd rose, sent out their baying salute. Waring winked at Seole, but got no response. Men were entering the village. There was Gomez, on a mule, his face livid as he saw the two men who had bested him.

"*Unkosi*," said Seole, "there is going to be a fight. We have no weapons. They are in the hut."

"Then let's get them," said Waring. "But tell Nsamamonze these are enemies of ours. I don't want him to think we are running away."

"He has no love for Gomez," said Seole. They raced for the hut.

The sharp report of a rifle sounded. Gomez had fired at Waring. But a native had got in his way and the bullet sent him sprawling. Instantly the fight started.

The men of Kassandu had come to

the conference with Waring armed, not knowing how it might end. They had no rifles, but one of them had been killed, and, as Seole said, there was scant love for Gomez in Kassandu, none when he came shooting.

Spears flew. Men fell. Gomez emptied his rifle. He snatched out his automatic and fired one shot from it. Then Nsamamonze flung an assagi and it crunched through the ribs of the Portuguese, seeking his heart. His gun fell from his hand. He was dragged from his mule, the center of rising and falling weapons as Waring and Seole, finding theirs, came out to the combat.

Nsamamonze, his arm scored with a bullet, pointed to them, accusing them of treachery. In that moment all white men were to him anathema. As for the magic, it had been a trick that he had meant to have the white man show him. A trick that was not magic against naked steel.

Waring had his spear and the knob-kerrie. Seole had snatched up another wide blade, the stabbing spear of a fallen man, the homemade club in his other hand. Gomez's men were falling back, fighting desperately.

Waring parried, bludgeoned, thrust. The lust of combat came to him. He was strong, a fair boxer and he had excellent coordination. He lunged and swung and dodged his opponents. One spear he held between arm and side as it grazed his ribs, and brought down the club, full swing, crumpling his man.

There were no arrows. Two men charged Waring and he side-stepped, without panic, thrilled, as he evaded a thrust and plunged with his spear. It stuck in the man's ribs and could not be dislodged. Now he had only the knob-kerrie and he retreated, thinking of the cast-off weapons in the hut, looking for others that might be handy.

The natives were driving Gomez's men off. They had forgotten Waring's magic. They believed him leagued

against them and they fought without reason, eager to slay.

It looked pretty shady, Waring told himself. Too many odds entirely. Where was Seole? Waring could not see him. Then he heard his shout. The Kaffir came up behind him, exultant, swinging his club—ambidextrous—his spear dripping crimson.

"Here, *unkosi*," he said, gutting a man who thrust at him. He handed Waring an automatic, the gun of Gomez that he had picked up. Waring gripped it, let it loose.

Nsamamonze came leaping on him, a short sword in his hand. Waring fired as the blade went up. He saw where the bullet entered, smashing an amulet.

The witch doctor straightened, then fell forward on his face.

There came a rush of men. Waring emptied his clip. He and Seole were near their hut now but they could not hope to survive.

A mob of warriors was on them. He saw Seole striking, heard him chanting his death song. Waring could not reload and he hurled the pistol in the face of the man who stabbed at him, saw him go down.

**T**HREE was the crisp sound of firing. The Kassandu men seemed to melt away. Waring saw a line of men, firing in the air. A white man commanded them. He came forward, cool and confident. Seole, almost out, but on his feet, let out a glad cry.

"Tilimani! Tilimani!"

The impossible, if there is anything impossible in Africa, had happened. Seole's hunch had come true. Here was Tillman.

"No use in killing off the beggars," said Tillman, grasping Waring's hand. "Manenka isn't a bad sport. I see you've done for Nsamamonze, a good riddance. We heard the racket and hurried. You can tell me all about it. I never had any use for that witch doctor, nor for

Gomez, either. Manenka isn't a bad sort. He knows I am his friend."

Manenka proved it. Waring figured he was glad to see Nsamamonze gone. It gave him a new lease on his kingdom.

Seole came up to Waring. In his hand was the fetish rattle.

"You killed him, *unkosi*," he said. "It is yours."

Spoils of war! Waring looked at it curiously, shook it.

Tillman nodded his head. "Fetish stick," he said. "Luck for Nsamamonze. May be luck for you, Seole, I never expected to find you. There was talk you had been sold."

"I was," Seole replied. "To Gomez. It is a long tale. What are you going to do, Tilimani?"

"Do? I guess we'll go back, Seole, and dig up a grubstake. I owe these bearers almost everything I own. But I found you."

Waring was examining the fetish stick. The carved handles fitted into the head. He twisted it and suddenly it gave way. The pebbles rattled out of the hollow of the head. They were dull gray, semitransparent. Tillman picked one of them up.

"Luck!" he exclaimed. "I'd call it that! Know what you've got there, man? Diamonds! All of five thousand dollars there in the rough, maybe ten."

"Can you sell them?" asked Waring.

"Can I sell them? Easiest thing you know."

Waring laughed at the American phrasing.

"Then let's do it," he said. "We'll go partners. You're after ivory, aren't you? Maybe we can find more of these. I'm staking the three of us. You and Seole and myself."

"You mean it?" asked Tillman.

"Never meant anything more. Africa's got under my hide."

"It has a way of doing that," said Tillman. "Shake."



# The Trout Cure

by Reg Dinsmore

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

## CHAPTER I.

UPSTREAM.

**S**TEP on it, Hood! Step on it! We've been half an hour getting past that point there. Your agility is snaillike! D'ye

think I came up to this forsaken country to be cramped-up and bounced around in a canoe every day?"

Such was the brand of conversation that Herb Hood had listened to for the past three days. Although a patient and long-suffering soul, the guide was getting pretty well fed up on it.

When a man has swung a six-foot paddle steadily for three days against a vicious head wind, as Hood had done, and then be obliged to absorb a slap of that kind of dirt at twenty-minute intervals, it's very liable to get beneath his sun-browned hide.

Especially is this true when the gazinko that's doing all the hurry-up talk is lolling comfortably in the bow of the canoe with his broad back against a nice, soft blanket roll, and never offering to put his capable-looking hands to a paddle.

Herb Hood bore a high-tension glare into the back of Mr. Clemment's thick neck. With a deft twist of his paddle blade, he swung the bow of the canoe shoreward.

Mr. Clemment's unshaven jaw jerked around over his shoulder. "What's the big idea?" he yapped.

"Good place ter camp—in back of the point there," the guide told him quietly.

"Camp! What the devil are you talking about, man? Great Scott, it's only five o'clock! We ought to do another five miles before we think of

camping! What's the matter with you, Hood—are you sick, or just plain lazy?"

Herb Hood gritted his teeth and said nothing. They had eaten their noonday lunch at the lower end of Mud Pond. Carry and were now halfway down Telos Lake. Ten miles against such a wind as he had been driving the canoe into all afternoon was enough, Hood reckoned.

The prow of the graceful craft grated in the gravel on the lee side of the point. Hood steadied it grimly, silently, while the grumbling Mr. Clement clambered ashore.

Once again on land and seated comfortably on a near-by rock, Mr. Clement raised a querulous voice in an imperious demand for a quick supper, a soft bed, and a mosquito smudge. All these things he wanted—and at once!

Now a guide has to "take 'em as they come." He can't always pick his parties. If he draws an egg, like this Clement, he's got to see the deal through some way—though it may gravel him like blazes to do it.

In this case, Herb Hood was doubly bound to give this Clement a good time for the man had been sent to him by one of his former patrons, a Mr. Walter Morton. Mr. Morton was a regular scout. There was nothing the guide wouldn't do for him.

The day previous to Clement's arrival at Spruceville, Hood had received a letter from Mr. Morton, telling him to expect the man. In the letter Mr. Morton said that Clement was one of the most trusted and efficient employees in the big Morton office in Boston. Mr. Morton was sending Mr. Clement down to Maine for a well-earned vacation, and was placing him in Hood's care. Mr. Morton hoped the guide would give Mr. Clement the best he had.

The letter also informed Hood that Mr. Clement was one of the most

skillful fly fishermen that ever switched a split bamboo.

Well, "the best he had," was what Herb Hood had been trying to give Mr. Clement, but so far it had been rather a thankless task.

Coffeeloss Pond. Yes sir, that's where Hood finally landed with this uncomfortable party. Now Coffeeloss Pond is almost off the map. Far from the seldom-traveled East Branch canoe route, lying in a country of dense fir and spruce swamps, and reached by a long carry across a great forested ridge, it is a spot that is seldom visited by even the most adventurous of fishermen.

The trout in this beautiful little sheet of water are many and freaky—mighty freaky! Some days you'll catch your limit in an hour. Other days you'll fish your head off and get nary a rise. You've seen places like that?

Well, when Hood got the canoe and camp duffel across the ridge, got the tent pitched and everything in readiness for a long stay, it was nearly dark. The guide was weary, ready for a big supper, his pipe and blankets.

Not so this Clement person. He must fish.

Hood was sore, and with good reason. Was there not another day coming, and another, and another, and so on for two weeks?

But the guide was out to please. He pulled his belt a couple of holes tighter across his yearning stomach, and began unpacking Clement's fishing tackle.

The guide's estimation of Clement as a fly fisherman dropped several points when he discovered that there was not a fly rod in the man's outfit—or any other rod for that matter that cost over three bucks.

Unless he is hungry and simply wants meat, no real sportsman ever thinks of using anything but a fly in Coffeeloss waters. Hood thought of Mr. Morton's letter, saying that Clem-

ment was a crack fly fisherman, and concluded that his genial, joke-loving, former employer was simply trying to put one over on him. He was mad, nevertheless, and nearly bit his pipestem in half as he jointed up one of Clement's cheap bait rods.

No old bear ever nursed a bigger grouch than did the guide as he turned over stones, and dug rotten stumps to pieces in search of bait. He kept his mouth shut, however, found some worms, and shoved out onto the quiet bosom of the little pond with Clement in the bow of the canoe.

It was an off night for the Coffeeloss trout. The man tried in a couple of places with no success.

Clement immediately became disagreeable. "Thought you told me this was a sure-fire bet—this pond," he snapped.

"Waal, I did tell yer we'd get some trout here, an' good ones too," drawled Hood, pleasantly.

"Where are they?" said Clement sarcastically.

"Oh, they're here all right," the guide assured him. "Most likely right under the canoe."

"Uh-huh! If they're so mighty plentiful, why don't we catch 'em?"

"Mainly 'cause we can't erblige 'em ter bite," soothed Hood, with a suspicion of a grin. Then, as he pointed the canoe toward the white blur of the tent, he suddenly found pity for the man because of his ignorance, and patiently explained.

"Yer see, Mr. Clement, these trout have spells that they feed an' other spells that yer couldn't catch one now-how—unless yer used dynamite. Tonight's one of th' nights they ain't feedin', that's all."

"I suppose that explanation is part of your stock in trade," sneered Clement as he clambered up the bank. "Hood, I'm beginning to think you're some hot guide!"

The guide did not answer. He was too hungry and tired to argue with this unreasonable person.

Next morning it was the same story. They fished all over the pond, without a nibble. When they went in for lunch, Clement was nearly frantic. Hood had to bite his tongue to refrain from advising the gentleman to take a hurried trip to a certain torrid region.

While the guide was preparing lunch, Clement wandered away up the shore. When he returned there was the light of a new idea in his sullen eye. He sprang the thing on Hood as they were eating.

"I've just found an old raft, up around the point there. After lunch I want you to anchor it out in the pond and put me onto it. I'll fish by myself this afternoon. Your company irks me, Hood. I'd use the canoe but I'm unused to handling the craft."

## CHAPTER II.

### FLY FISHERMAN.

CLEMENT'S plan suited Hood to perfection. He towed the old raft out and anchored it by rousing a pole down between its water-soaked logs and into the mud of the pond bottom. Then he went ashore and got Clement, and marooned him on the raft with his three-dollar rod and a generous supply of worms.

As the guide rounded the point on his way back to the tent, he glanced back over his shoulder. Mr. Walter Morton's much-vaunted fly fisherman was complacently lowering a thumb-sized gob of squirming angleworms into the crystal depths of Coffeeloss.

As long as Clement was amused and satisfied there was nothing much for Hood to do, so the guide fanned the canoe down to the outlet of the pond to look along the banks of the stream for mink sign. A good guide always keeps a sharp lookout for fur sign the

year around. It means dollars to him when trapping time comes in the fall.

Hood beached the canoe and wandered along the bank of the little stream, watching the muddy banks for tracks, peering under stumps and stones for the runways of the little fur bearers. Time slipped rapidly away. An hour had passed before the guide realized it.

Suddenly he was halted by a wild yell. Hood leaned against a tree and listened. It came again, followed by many more. High-pitched, vibrant with intense excitement, the strident bellowing filled the surrounding woodland with a bedlam of noise.

"Guess that son-of-a-muskrat must want ter git ashore," soliloquized the guide. "Perhaps that ole raft has busted up an' he's fell in. Waal, mebbe he can swim." He grinned, and, turning away climbed a ridge to fix up a trap, "cuddy," where he planned to place a fisher trap at some time later in the season.

It was another hour before Hood rounded the point and came again within sight of Clemment. As soon as Clemment saw the guide he began waving his arms and dancing about on the raft with all the reckless abandon of an insane man.

Wonderingly Hood paddled to the raft. Then, under his breath, he said things about Mr. Clemment that were far from complimentary.

Scattered about on the old raft were thirty beautiful trout.

Not a fish of the lot weighed less than two pounds, and many of them twice that.

The jinx had taken a vacation and the trout of Coffeeloss had had a biting streak.

While Clemment raved about his prowess as a trout fisherman, Hood sat in the canoe and stared glumly at the murdered fish. Any real woodsman despises a waster. This needless

slaughter had riled Herb Hood to the depths of his simple soul.

This piker, Clemment, needed a lesson. A severe lesson! Something he wouldn't forget for a long, long time. Hood was seized upon by the firm conviction that he had an unpleasant, yet necessary, duty to perform. His mild, blue eyes narrowed in thought.

Clemment saw the guide suddenly turn his head in the direction of the tent. He saw him poise in a tense, listening attitude, and heard him mutter something that sounded like: "What th' blazes is goin' on there at th' tent?" Then Hood spun the canoe about with a couple of mighty paddle sweeps and sent it foaming away around the point.

Wonderingly, the man on the raft heard vague yells in the vicinity of the tent, a shot from Hood's big belt gun. Then, for the next thirty minutes, all was silence.

Finally, around the point, paddling slowly, dispiritedly, came Hood. As the guide laid the canoe alongside the raft, Clemment fairly bubbled questions.

"What's wrong? What's all the shooting and shouting? Who was it?"

Hood, busy loading the big trout into the canoe, looked up sorrowfully.

"Guess we're up against it, Mr. Clemment."

"Up against it? Explain yourself, Hood!"

"Sum'buddy's trimmed us proper! Cleaned th' camp of everything in the grub line—even to th' salt in th' shaker!"

"Stolen our supplies! What are we to do?" asked the alarmed Clemment.

"Waal," drawled Hood, very softly, "looks like we could stave off starvation till we can get out to th' settlement. Here's nigh onto a hundredweight of perfectly good trout."

"That's so!" agreed Clemment, relieved. "We can't starve, can we?"

"No-o-o, not exactly," murmured

Herb Hood. And Clemment, the fish hog, failed to note the blue ice in the guide's eyes.

**L**EAVING Clemment on the raft, Hood made fast to the shaky structure and leisurely towed it shoreward. He ran the bow of the canoe rather high on the shingle, stepped carefully out, and steadied the frail craft so that Clemment could step from the raft into it and make his way to shore.

As Clemment poised for the short step into the canoe something happened. It might have been a slight puff of wind—or it might have been because the cablelike cords in Hood's wrists suddenly twitched.

Whatever the cause, the result was the same. The space between canoe and raft suddenly widened, and Clemment, overbalanced, had to change from a step to a leap or souse ludicrously into the water. He leaped.

Clemment landed in the canoe all right, but, when his sharp-cornered boot heel touched the light planking of the craft, his two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of grossness drove his leg through cedar and canvas clear to his thigh.

"Hey, crippled cats an' blue vitriol!" roared Hood. "Look what yer've gorn an' done now! That means we're booked ter stay right in here ter Coffeeloss till sum'buddy comes along that'll take us out!"

Any one real well acquainted with Herb Hood might have detected a shade of satisfaction in his voice, but Clemment was too busy trying to extricate his leg from the jagged hole in the canoe to notice it.

For the first time on the trip, Clemment became more or less contrite. "Can't it be fixed?" he inquired anxiously.

"Fixed!" yelled Hood. "Fixed! D'y'e think I'm a walkin' shipyard? Th' patchin' kit that was in my pack has

gorn where our grub went. Marine glue an' canvas ain't growin' on any of these spruces as I can notice. No, sir, it can't be fixed! We're bushed—good and plenty!"

### CHAPTER III.

FED UP!

**F**RIED trout!

Roasted trout!

Boiled trout!

Trout that finally became not so fresh.

And always unsalted trout.

For four weary, sickening days they ate it. That is, that's what Mr. Clemment ate. As for Herb Hood—well, it was surprising how little trout he could eat and still manage to live.

On the morning of the fifth day, when Hood called his patron to breakfast, Clemment revolted openly. He'd be damned if he'd eat trout any longer!

Patiently and at great length, Hood explained to him that there were yet several of the big catch left, and that it was considered a crime by all well-meaning sportsmen to waste the resources of the woods and waters.

There was no reasoning with Clemment, however. He cursed violently when his nostrils caught the odor of the mess cooking on the camp fire. He swore by all the gods of the universe that, rather than taste the stale trout, he would drown himself. Hood grudgingly consented to the catching of more trout.

Finding more worms, the guide took Clemment on the raft and poled him out to the fishing grounds. At the first cast a four-pounder was hooked and duly landed. Hood started baiting the hook again but Clemment demurred. He was taking no further chances of eating stale trout.

Mildly, Hood reminded him that the trout of Coffeeloss fed only in streaks, and that it might be a day, two days,

perhaps a week, before they could take another fish. Clemment's refusal to do more fishing was loud and emphatic. One trout at a time for him, henceforth and forevermore.

Hood was secretly pleased. The cure was working. Three or four days more, and perhaps it might be complete and permanent.

**FORT KENT**—Herb Hood pondered much concerning this little town on the Maine-Canadian border and the peculiar schedule that Clemment had mapped out for his trip.

From their taking-off place, Spruceville, to Fort Kent was a matter of a hundred and seventy miles—a long canoe trip in itself.

To be sure many sportsmen made the trip. It was a journey long to be remembered, taking one, as it did, through miles of beautiful virgin forest.

But this Clemment person had insisted that before going to Fort Kent, he be taken away off here to out-of-the-way Coffeefloss for a stay of two weeks. In all his experience as a guide, Herb Hood had never dealt with a man just like Clemment.

The guide had noticed that, of late, Clemment's interest in the Fort Kent country had increased. The man spoke of the place often, seemed anxious to get there and have the trip at an end. Of course, a straight trout diet might have something to do with Clemment's yearning for different scenery, but still Hood wondered.

Clemment, idling about camp and dreading the next meal, suddenly conceived the idea that there might be growing near at hand, wild roots with which they might supplement their monotonous menu. He'd read of such things. He would ask Hood about the matter at once.

Hood was not to be found, however. Neither did Clemment's authoritative yells elicit a reply from the guide.

"Sneaked off into the woods again—probably to have a sleep, the lazy bush rat!" gritted Clemment to himself. "Oh, well, I'll see what I can find by myself."

He went to the camp fire. Taking Hood's long-handled cooking fork as a digging tool he started exploring the ridge that sloped back from the little pond. With all the industry of a grubbing bear, he dug at the root of each different plant he found. Most were stringy, unpalatable. He cast them away in disgust.

After a time Clemment came upon a succulent-looking plant with a peculiar striped blossom. He turned it from the black leaf mold with his fork, and smiled with satisfaction as he contemplated the thick, bulbous growth of its root. His mouth watered with anticipation as he crunched the crisp growth.

Then, over Mr. Clemment, came a swift and terrible transformation. He suddenly straightened to his full height. For an instant he stood immovable, pop-eyed.

In that instant he felt his tonsils become twin balls of molten metal, his tongue a cushion full of long, white-hot needles, his throat the flue of a blast furnace. Dropping his fork he clawed wildly at his mouth and ran.

The innocent-looking plant upon which Clemment had so trustingly clamped his molars was the vitriolic, but more or less harmless Jack-in-the-pulpit, or Indian turnip.

Water! Holy cats, water! He must find it to quench that paralyzing fire in his throat and mouth. In his fright and pain, visions of a horrible death by poisoning flashed through Clemment's mind. Tearing through brush, hurling himself over blow-downs, Clemment made for the pond.

Soon he realized that he had covered enough distance to be at the shore, and knew that he must have come the wrong direction, but he kept on. Surely at

the foot of the slope down which he ran he would find water.

At full speed Mr. Clemment entered a little open glade—and dug his boot heels into the earth in a sudden stop.

Seated with his back comfortably against the hole of a big spruce, a hunk of rich cheese in one fist, a thick slab of flaky bread in the other, a can of juicy peaches between his knees was Herb Hood. The guide's jaws never missed a clip as the wild-eyed Mr. Clemment plunged to a stop before him.

For an instant Clemment stared. Then the significance of the thing burst upon him and the torture in his mouth only added to his rage.

"Ha-r-r, you sneak!" he gibbered. "So you stole the supplies, did you? You've been living like a prince while I've starved on stale trout, hey? What's the idea, Hood?"

"Too bad t' waste good fish," mumbled Hood taking a tasty mouthful. "Mebbe yer won't kill so many next time," he concluded, spearing a peach from the can with a sharpened twig.

"Ah, so that's your idea of a joke is it?" gritted Clemment advancing threateningly. "Well, here's a sample of your own brand of humor!"

Saying this, he launched a terrific kick straight at Hood's face.

The guide's head snapped aside and Clemment's foot slammed painfully into the tree trunk.

**C**LEMMENT hopped about and held his injured foot in both hands. The mixed expression of pain and anger on his heavy face was ludicrous. Herb Hood laughed softly and got to his feet.

"In just a minute," Clemment informed the guide in deadly tones. "I'm going to wipe that sickly grin off your face, Hood. You're going to take the worst beating of your life. You've carried things too far."

"Yeah?" inquired Hood, mildly, and

leaned to place the can of peaches close against the tree, out of harm's way.

For a man of his size, Clemment was a flash. As Hood lifted the peaches, Clemment's knee nearly stove in every rib on one side of the guide's body. Hood and the peaches catapulted headlong into the dead top of a fallen fir. Clemment was upon him instantly.

Now Herb Hood loved his canned peaches. Red, red rage burned in the guide's normally peaceful brain. A bony fist shot up from the tangle of crashing brush where the guide squirmed beneath the larger man. It caught the surprised Mr. Clemment under his big nose with the force of a hammer blow, and drove that tender organ nearly up into his hair roots. Taking advantage of the distracting effect of the wallop, Hood turned his man and regained his feet.

Clemment was not lacking in grit. Instantly, he was up and at it again. When a wicked right hook landed solidly on the guide's jaw, Hood realized that he was up against a man of considerable science.

For all of the guide's long reach, he couldn't lay a hand on Clemment. The man's defense was well-nigh perfect. And all the while that menacing left of Clemment's was stabbing, stabbing at Hood's face.

Three times it landed. Once with enough force to blur Hood's eyes and make his knees suddenly weak. Clemment, sensing his superior skill, suddenly found much pleasure in the conflict. He bored steadily in, a mean grin on his scowling face.

When a stream is too swift for Herb Hood to paddle, he poles. If there's too much current to pole, he drags. If dragging is out of the question, he carries. The guide nearly always has a shift up his sleeve.

This, Clemment discovered to his sorrow.

Instead of continuing to back away

from the big man's attack. Hood suddenly closed with him. He gripped Clemment by the right wrist and left shoulder and jerked him forward into a run.

Running backward with his man in tow until he had attained sufficient speed for his purpose, Hood suddenly fell flat on his back. When Clemment pitched over him by the impetus of the rush, both of Hood's feet lifted to the geometrical center of his patron's ample paunch.

The wiry muscles of the guide's back and thighs tensed, thrust, and Mr. Clemment sailed on, high and far, into a thicket beyond the guide's head.

When the breath came back to the laboring lungs of Mr. Clemment and he had raised himself painfully to his feet, one arm hung limp and useless at his side. He stared vacuously about him.

On the far side of the glade, where the scrimmage had first started, Herb Hood was sorrowfully contemplating an empty tin can. The large, red letters of its label proclaimed it to be a one-time container of canned peaches.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### REVELATION.

**T**HREE!" gruffed Doctor Hunt, as he finished adjusting the plaster cast on Mr. Clemment's arm. "The minute that fool comes out of the anesthesia you can take him and start for Fort Kent for all I care. But mind you, Herb, I'm not taking the responsibility. A fracture like that ought to be under observance for a couple of weeks at least.

"Say, by the way, you must have paddled night and day, to get him out here from Coffeeless in the time you did."

"Yeah," sighed Hood wearily, "all night an' all day yesterday. I'm hungry as a spring bear. Guess I'll go feed myself, if I can't help here any more."

Hood made his way down the single street of Spruceville and entered the only restaurant of the place. Without taking any notice of the two men who were seated at a table in a far corner of the room, he dropped into a chair at the table nearest the door. The capable-looking waitress came to take his order.

At the sound of the guide's voice, as he gave his order, one of the men at the corner table raised his head and stared at Hood.

The waitress noticed the man's sudden interest and wondered at it. She was even more surprised when the man caught her eye, laid a warning finger on his lips, winking broadly as he did so.

The quick-witted girl tumbled instantly. The man wished her to say nothing of his presence to Hood. Perhaps he expected her to talk with the guide. So, as she arranged the silverware and filled Hood's water glass, she inquired innocently:

"Just out, Herb?"

"Yeah."

"Where'd you go this trip?"

"Coffeeless."

"Who's your party?"

"A critter by th' name of Clemment."

"Have good luck?"

Hood looked up in surprise. It was unusual for Jenny Patterson to pry into any one's affairs, but, gosh, he'd rather tell Jenny his business than any other girl he knew.

"Yeah," he told her. "Too danged good luck! Clemment butchered a canoe load of big trout when I wa'n't lookin' an' I felt erbliged ter give th' galoot th' trout cure. He got a busted arm outa it an' is up at Doctor Hunt's now—jest erabout comin' outa th' ether, I s'pose."

"Soon's he's able ter travel I gotta start fer Fort Kent with him. Son-of-a-turtle's dead set on gettin' there. An' now, Jenny, please fetch me them ham 'n' aigs."

The big man at the other table arose

and came up behind Hood. He slammed a hand onto the guide's shoulder. "Hello, you old wood rat!"

Hood was on his feet instantly, reaching delightedly for the other's outstretched hand.

"Why, how are yer, Mr. Morton! Gosh! I didn't expect you was down in this country!"

"So you got my letter about Clement all right, did you, Herb?" inquired Mr. Morton.

"Yeah, got yer letter—an' th' next day I got yer *fly fisherman*. He came along a day 'before yer said he'd get here."

"Now, Herb"—Mr. Morton fixed the guide with a penetrating eye—"Now, Herb, I want you to think real hard for a moment. Did you notice anything peculiar about Mr. Clement's neck?"

The woodsman showed surprise.

"Neck?" countered Hood, grinning warily. Doubtless Mr. Morton was about to spring one of his frequent jokes. The guide didn't intend to bite if he could help it.

"Neck? Yeah, he got it in th' neck, if that's what yer comin' at."

But Mr. Morton was not joking this time. He was very much in earnest.

"No, no, Herb! I mean it! Was there anything about this man's neck that you happen to remember as being odd—unusual?"

Hood sensed Morton's seriousness, realized that joking was the last thing in the man's mind. He did not know what it was all about, nor care, for he was tired and hungry. But he knew that if Walter Morton asked a question in that tone he expected a straight answer.

"Waal," drawled Hood, "seein' as how I looked at th' back of Clement's neck fer nigh onto seventy miles of paddling, an' ain't what yer'd call

totally blind, I couldn't help noticin' that little birthmark jest in th' aidge of his hair. Looks like sum'buddy had mashed a ripe blueberry there."

Mr. Walter Morton gave vent to a suppressed whoop and beckoned to the other man at his table. "Come over here, Len!" he called. "This is rich!"

Morton turned again to the wondering guide. "You got my letter, Herb, but you *didn't* get my *fly fisherman*! This is the gentleman I wrote you about. Shake hands with the *real* Mr. Clement, Herb."

The two men shook and Mr. Morton continued:

"Who you did get, and who you've still got, Herb, is a crooked clerk of mine—man by the name of Benson. He saw the letter I sent you before it was sealed and, as he had planned a little clean-up on his own account, he saw the chance to impersonate Mr. Clement and make a nice unobtrusive get-away into Canada with the twenty-odd thousand of cash and negotiable paper he took with him."

"Yeah," mused Hood, unsurprised. "I did notice th' money belt th' doctor took off'n him, when he stripped him ter work on that busted wing. It sure was nice an' fat!"

"Come on, Len!" called Mr. Morton, as he hurried grimly toward the street. "I guess you and I had better make a little call at Doctor Hunt's office."

With a huge sigh of content, Herb Hood seated himself before the mammoth order of ham and eggs. He sliced off a hunk of ham, impaled it with his fork, and started it on its way to his mouth. With a sudden, wicked grin he poised the ham in mid-air, turned his head, and yelled after the two men:

"Hey, you gents might ask that Benson feller how he'll have his trout cooked fer dinner!"

**More stories of Herb Hood, the Maine woods guide, have been promised us by Reg Dinsmore. You'll find them in this magazine exclusively.**



# Battle of Music

*by Vic Whitman* *A Syncopatin' Kid Story*

A NOVELETTE

## CHAPTER I.

### A SMOOTH GUY.

**T**HOSE who did not know the "Syncopatin' Kid" intimately would have said that there was not a thought in his head save the business at hand. They could very easily be pardoned for this opinion.

Debonair, immaculate, attractive, the Kid sat at the piano, smiling out over the floor at the throng of dancers and carrying the Blue Room dance band along on the swing of his matchless rhythm.

Those who knew him well, however, would have noticed that his level blue eyes frequently sought the wide entrance to the hall in a look half-expectant, half-thoughtful. And they could have told you that when the Kid looked

that way it meant that something was in the wind.

The comments on the floor were various and flattering:

"I'll tell the world that boy can play a piano! There's nobody in these parts can touch him."

"Yeah, and he's not a bit puffed over it, either. Everybody likes the Kid. He's got a head on him, too. Helped Plaining build his halls up to where they are now."

"My dear, look at that smile! Isn't he perfectly adorable!"

There was music on the piano rack before the Kid, but he didn't glance at it once. He never went by the music, anyhow. They didn't write enough into it to suit him.

When he cut loose on a chorus, a hundred different musical patterns raced through his brain, patterns which his

nimble fingers must execute on the keys. There were thousands of pianists, but only one Syncopatin' Kid. He was colorful and original; he was a genius of jazz.

Though the Kid was watching the entrance, he was listening to the band behind him. Smoothly flowing saxaphones, twanging banjo, crisply flaring trumpets, softly booming bass drum—all blending into throbbing harmony with perfect tempo, made the Blue Room band one of the best the Kid had ever played with in the course of his roving life.

"Ooh, mamma, ain't that mean!" he called, exhorting them to greater effort. "Shake it up in there, and pour it hot! Ow-www! Get rollin', my brave laddies!"

With a vim, the men responded. The alto sax went from straight playing to "dirt," hitting a fly chorus and spreading it all over the atmosphere. The first trumpet stuffed a warm mute in the bell of his instrument and cut loose with a curdling blast that shook the rafters. The drummer rolled his eyes joyously to heaven and got to work on his cymbal, punctuating each stroke with little doglike yelps.

"Hey! Hey!" yelled the Kid, grinning from ear to ear. "Now you're makin' plenty of whoopee! Yipooo!"

Laughing, joking, swept through life on a current of hot music—that was the Syncopatin' Kid and he loved his work. Rocking, swaying, bouncing, the very picture of youthful vitality and grace, he caught the fancy of the crowd and held it.

As the number drew to a close, the Kid saw Warren Plaining, dance-hall magnate, emerge from his private office and hurry toward the band platform.

"Out!" called the Kid, and the music softened and died away at the end of the measure.

The Kid arose, and sauntered to meet

his employer. "What's up, chief?" he wanted to know. "You look worried."

Plaining nodded. "Perhaps I am, Larry," he answered. "I've just received word that the Castle Garden Hall is to open next week."

The Kid didn't seem particularly impressed. "Yeah? What of it, chief? We've got to expect competition."

"I know that," assented the dance-hall magnate, "but this competition is dangerous in a number of ways. In the first place Jennings, who is back of the Castle Garden proposition, would throw money away if he thought he could get the best of me."

"In the second place I understand that some of New York's finest musicians are to play at Castle Garden under the direction of"—Plaining paused to give his forthcoming statement full effect—"under the direction of Roy Dumfreys."

The Kid nodded coolly. "I know that," he said.

Plaining stared. "You do! Why, I just heard it a minute ago myself over the phone!"

"Sure. But, chief, you don't s'pose that any place like Castle Garden is gettin' set to open without my knowin' just about who's to play there, do you? I got a bunch of friends scattered around here and there, and they keep me posted on what breaks in this game."

Plaining shook his head wonderingly. "You take the cake, Larry. You always seem to be about two jumps ahead of everybody else. Tell me, do you know this Dumfreys?"

"No."

"Do you know of him?"

"Yeah."

Plaining studied the Syncopatin' Kid. Behind that youth's guileless face worked a brain that seized and comprehended all things. Many times had Warren Plaining depended upon the Kid, and never yet had the Kid failed him.

But Plaining had learned not to interfere with "the working of the brain. The Kid had to solve things in his own nonchalant, easy-going way.

"Do you know that Dumfreys is in town to-night?" resumed the dance-hall magnate.

The Kid jingled some coins in his pocket and winked at a friend on the floor. "Yeah, I know that," he replied. "I'm expectin' him in here any minute."

He patted his employer on the shoulder. "Don't look so much like you'd lost your last friend, chief. I know it's a tough break to have this Castle Garden open with a line of competition like that, but I kinda think we'll all keep on eatin' three meals a day and three darn good ones, too."

"Oh, I'm not worrying," said Plaining hastily. "Only I understand that this Dumfreys is a slippery sort of a chap, apt to try some funny stunts."

"Yeah? Well, in that case we'll try some funnier ones." The Kid glanced again toward the entrance. "Speakin' of angels, chief," he murmured, "there's your little cherub now, and I'll bet dollars to sardines on it."

A man who would be noticeable anywhere had just come into the Blue Room. In appearance he was tall, well-proportioned, and strikingly handsome as to features, with olive complexion, glossy black hair, and dark, flashing eyes. A certain bearing characterized him, a bearing that was a shade past dignity in the direction of arrogance. In age, he was probably six or seven years the Kid's senior.

"That's Dumfrey's, all right," nodded the Kid. "See the way he gives the band the once-over the minute he gets inside the door? Nobody but a musician would do that." He sighed. "All I hope is that he puts a little kick in things around here. It's been pretty dead lately."

"He will." Plaining prophesied grimly. "And if you ask me, he'll

probably put too blamed much kick in things."

The Kid laughed. Then, as a suggestive scrape came from the violin of Bradley, the apple-cheeked leader, he strolled back to the piano. He looked toward the tall figure by the entrance, and his eyes met Dumfrey's. Dumfrey's lip curled in a scornful smile, but the Kid's face didn't move a muscle.

"Tryin' to get my goat, is he?" the Kid reflected. "Well! Well!" He cast a sweeping, comprehensive glance over his musicians. "All right, brother, we'll see what we'll see."

"What d'you want to play, Larry?" asked Bradley, looking over his list of folio numbers.

"Oh, take anything, Brad. It don't make any difference to me."

## CHAPTER II.

### YOU'RE MY WEAKNESS NOW!

FOR once in his life the Syncopatin' Kid seemed to have lost his pep. As the band swung into the introduction, he leaned over the piano, playing the accompaniment as it was written, making no effort to improvise. He was steady enough, but he no longer struck fire from the keys.

The others immediately sensed his lapse and unconsciously shared it. That indefinable something that marks a great dance band apart from a merely good one had gone.

The dancers on the floor became vaguely aware that the music had undergone a change. From the table near the band platform where she sat with a gay party of six, Stella Plaining, small, vicious, stunningly pretty, looked up in puzzled wonder.

The Kid grinned down at her. After a moment her red lips parted in an answering smile. The life of the dance hall is hard and does not make for constancy of emotion, but there was complete understanding between the

slimly graceful Kid and the blue-eyed daughter of Warren Plaining.

As he looked at her, the words of the song hit that the hand was playing, went through the Kid's head, jingling to the tempo of the music:

Look at that baby there,  
Those blue eyes and golden hair,  
Lovely, gorgeous—

"And that's straight goods," the Kid told himself. "Stel's got 'em backed off the map."

The Kid's grin died away as he saw Dumfreys walking over to Stella's table, led by a chance acquaintance. Introduced. Stella rose, glanced mischievously at the Kid, and started to circle the hall in Dumfreys' arms.

Straightway the music became more dispirited, which was very strange, considering the Kid's broad-mindedness and geniality. Stella Plaining, for one, couldn't understand what had gotten into him.

At the end of the number she beckoned the Kid down to her table.

"Larry. I want you to meet Mr. Dumfreys," she said sweetly. "Mr. Dumfreys, Mr. McCall."

"Glad to know you, Dumfreys," said the Kid coolly, extending his hand.

Dumfrey's smile of acknowledgment was mocking. "How d'you do," he drawled. "So you're the famous Syncopatin' Kid that I've heard so much about."

"That's what they call me."

The hostility between the two was instant, even though sheathed in the presence of the girl.

Yet the Kid was calm, poised. From his pocket he drew a package of cigarettes. "Smoke?" he asked.

Dumfrey's looked at the package and sniffed. "Thanks, they're not my brand."

He turned away from the Kid and addressed himself to Stella: "That was a wonderful dance, Miss Plaining, the best I ever had. I must admit that I

had expected to hear better music, but certainly your dancing makes up for the lack of it."

The Kid lighted his cigarette and dragged deeply at it. In his nonchalance, Stella saw the first sign of danger signals.

"Mr. Dumfreys is the pianist and orchestra director of the new Castle Garden that is to open next week," she said quickly. "You have probably heard of him, Larry."

The Kid nodded. "Yeah, I've heard of him," he said negligently. "I expect to hear more about him, too." He looked directly at Dumfreys.

Something was in the Kid's mind but no one could fathom it. "Care to sit in a number?" he asked casually.

Dumfreys shrugged. "I'm not so keen on it," he responded. "It's a terrible job to try to drag one of these small-town teams through a number."

Reflectively the Kid flipped the ashes from his cigarette into a container. "Yeah, course that's a bad part of it," he agreed gravely. "But you've just got to take into allowance the fact that we can't be expected to know as much about music as you. I know the boys would all consider it a favor if you played a number with 'em."

Dumfreys peered suspiciously, but the Kid's face was bland and innocent. After all, it might be a good chance to show this much overrated Syncopatin' Kid where he got off.

"Well," Dumfreys condescended, "I'll play one, but only one."

"Fair enough," nodded the Kid. "Come up and I'll knock you down to the boys."

Introductions completed, the Kid turned to Bradley.

"Mr. Dumfreys is from New York, Brad," he told the apple-cheeked leader. "He knows the latest wrinkles, so you'll have to be on your toes."

"And I'll take the second chorus of whatever you play, alone," supple-

mented Dumfreys in bored fashion. "Kindly quiet all the instruments."

Bradley looked uncertainly from Dumfreys to the Kid.

"Say, what the——" he began, but the Kid was already sauntering back to Stella Plaining.

"It's a long time since we had a dance together, Stel," the Kid said, blowing a speck of ash from the spotless bosom of his shirt. "How's to step this one—unless you've got it with somebody else."

"Why, of course, Larry!" She smiled at him, and he fairly tingled at her beauty. Hundreds of girls had smiled at the Syncopatin' Kid, but none of them affected him as did Stella Plaining.

She went on: "How do you like Mr. Dumfreys?"

"I haven't thought much about him, O star of my life."

"But why did you ask him to sit in and play? You never do things like that."

The Kid considered. "Well, you see I thought he needed the exercise, Stel, and——"

"Silly!" she said in exasperation. "Just the same, he's marvelous looking and a lovely dancer."

"There you go again, fallin' for this bozo or that," sighed the Kid. "Lady, you're my main worry."

"Fancy that!" marveled Stella. "Nobody would ever guess it."

"Nobody ever tries to."

They talked lightly, these two, sparring and countering in the way of the young who are sophisticated and yet have their ideals.

The Kid grinned down at Stella. "Let me call you sweetheart," he sang softly, teasingly.

The girl promptly tossed her dainty head and hummed in return: "'Oh, listen to the mocking bird'——"

The Kid laughed and looked toward the band platform. Bradley raised his

bow, tapped twice with his foot, and swung the team into a fast fox trot.

"Listen to 'em tear!" exclaimed the Kid, snapping his fingers. "Hot zig-zaggy! Let's go, Stel—you're my weakness now."

Out over the floor they moved, a couple faultless in grace and smoothness. People looked at them and turned to look again. Warren Plaining watched approvingly from his office door.

But the dance-hall magnate was slightly puzzled, nevertheless. He couldn't quite get the Kid's idea in allowing Dumfreys, a man obviously destined to be the Kid's bitterest rival, to sit in and play with the Blue Room band.

And Dumfreys was a crack pianist—there was no denying that. He had reached the second chorus and was going through it like a streak, both hands working the upper range of the piano. He was attracting attention, too.

Half a dozen couples had stopped dancing to stand and watch him. The Syncopatin' Kid listened intently as he glided by the platform, then grinned pleasantly. Envy was not in the Kid's make-up.

Stella regarded him doubtfully, a trifle worried. "He's a wonderful player, isn't he, Larry?" she asked.

"I'll say he is," nodded the Kid. "One of the best."

"If he brings down an orchestra of men all as good as himself, it's liable to draw all the Blue Room crowd to Castle Garden," she continued. "Not that I think he could bring a better team than we have here," she added loyally, "but you seem to have hit a slump, Larry. And everybody knows that you're the whole orchestra."

The Kid reddened. "Thanks, Stel, but there's a couple other men in the team, you know. As for Dumfreys gettin' all our crowd—well, I got a hunch that after the first few nights

we'll have our old gang back and a few more besides."

"How?"

"Who knows?" He grinned and changed the subject with characteristic suddenness. "No foolin', honey, the way you dance is just too bad. What is it they say about two people dancin' their way through life together?"

She fell into his mood. "Why, I never heard anything about that," she answered demurely. "What does it mean?"

"That's what I was wonderin'," said the Kid. "I thought maybe you could explain it to me."

"Well—"

"Well?"

They both laughed. But a faint shade of rose crept into Stella Plaining's soft checks. She had certain ideas in regard to the Syncopatin' Kid, but rules governed every game, and she must go by the rules.

"It's a funny life, isn't it, Larry?" she said.

"It's a wonderful life," said the Kid. And as he looked down at her he spoke with conviction.

After he had taken Stella to her table, the Kid went up on the band platform.

Easily he congratulated Dumfreys. "That was great work," he said. "Guess I'd better take some lessons from you in how to crawl over those keys."

Dumfreys shrugged. "Oh, I wasn't really playing to-night," he answered. "Wait till my band gets started at Castle Garden. Then come over and I'll show you some real harmony."

Bradley snorted as Dumfrey swaggered off the platform.

"There goes a modest violet," he remarked. "Listen, Larry! Where do you get that stuff about takin' lessons from him? You could outplay that bird with one arm tied to the chair. Let's take something hot now, so you can show him up."

## CHAPTER III.

### MY ERROR.

BUT the apple-cheeked leader frowned as the band swung into the "St. Louis Blues." It was a cinch that something was wrong with the Kid. Perhaps he had been playing too steadily of late, and needed a rest. Musicians frequently did go stale. And, reflected Bradley, it was a poor time to go stale, with a man like Dumfreys around.

Out in the hall the dancers were talking, comparing the Kid and the stranger. Had they, after all, been mistaken in thinking that the Syncopatin' Kid was a piano player without a peer? Certainly he wasn't playing his best now, or else his best was a poor second to the playing of the stranger.

Perhaps that was it, perhaps he wasn't as good as Dumfreys. They didn't like to think that, for they all liked the Syncopatin' Kid, but they couldn't doubt their own ears.

And Stella Plaining bit her red lips as she dabbed hastily with a tiny handkerchief at blue eyes that had suddenly become bright with tears. Then with the lightning adaptability of a woman she smiled up into the dark, admiring eyes of Roy Dumfreys.

"Certainly you may have this dance," she exclaimed, and any other woman would have instantly noted the unsteadiness of her voice. "And as many as you like, Mr. Dumfreys."

When the evening was over the Kid folded his music into a neat pile, and put it in his folio. Then he lighted a cigarette and strolled down to where Stella Plaining was talking animatedly with Dumfreys.

"All set to go, Stel?" he asked.

Dumfreys' lip curled. "Sure she is," he cut in, "but she happens to be going with me."

The Kid glanced swiftly at Stella Plaining. She was looking steadily at

him, her small head thrown back defiantly.

The Kid added two and two, and his eyes became very level. "Oh, I see," he murmured. "Seems to be my error. Good luck." He turned and went to Plaining's office, while a sob came in Stella Plaining's throat as she gazed after him.

"Chief," said the Kid, "I'm goin' to make a funny request. I'd like to take a couple weeks off. All right?"

Plaining looked up quickly. "Now, Larry?"

"Yes."

"Hm." With things as they were Plaining was tempted to refuse instantly. Still, if his crack pianist wanted time off even at such a crucial period, he had good reason for wanting it. Experience had taught Plaining that.

"Do you think it's wise?"

The Kid nodded. Never had Plaining seen him so grim.

"I sure do, chief. I know just exactly what I'm doin'. You can put in a sub to carry the team along. And just tell anybody that asks that you don't know where I am or what I'm doin'."

"Which will be the truth," sighed Warren Plaining. "I never do."

"Now about this Jennings, who is back of the Castle Garden proposition," went on the Kid. "Gimme the low-down on him;—what he's like, where he lives, and whether he wants to have a hand in the management of his halls."

Plaining studied the Kid for a moment, beginning to see system behind the Kid's apparently foolish request. Then without reserve he told all he knew about the new owner of Castle Garden.

"Have you said anything to Stella?" Plaining asked in finishing. "She won't understand your leaving, will she?"

The Kid laughed shortly. "Prob-

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ably not," he answered. "but that just makes us even."

The opening of the Castle Garden ballroom was announced with blazers and ballyhooers, with huge lighted signs, and great newspaper notices. It was only natural that curiosity should move a tremendous crowd to seek the box office on the first night.

The Syncopatin' Kid was there, too, seated in an inconspicuous spot in one of the many small balconies.

"Some dump," he criticized, looking from the shining dance space to the great silken draperies and comfortable lounges. "Yes, it's a mean shack. But it takes more'n that to build up a dance business. These dancers may be fickle as the deuce, but they know their oats."

But the Syncopatin' Kid, too, knew his oats. Bred to the dance halls since boyhood he knew the psychology of the game as did no one else. It was going to be a tough proposition, bucking a place like this, but the Kid was holding one or two aces in reserve.

He wondered how the old gang at the Blue Room was making out. It had been an effort to keep away, but keep away he had. He hadn't seen one of the musicians since his last talk with Plaining, and he didn't intend to.

Stella Plaining! A hurt look crept into the Kid's blue eyes as he thought of her. There was no reason for her to have done what she did. Wise in the ways of all things was the Syncopatin' Kid, but he couldn't fathom the actions of the piquant daughter of his employer.

He looked toward the lavishly decorated stage. The curtain was still down, but from behind it came the sounds of instruments tuning, the slur of a sax, the rumble of a bass horn, the steely twanging of banjo strings.

Then, suddenly, the music started with a thundering of kettledrums. Slowly the curtain arose to disclose Roy Dumfreys and his eleven musicians.

The Castle Garden was officially open for dancing.

For perhaps an hour the Kid remained, studying every phase of the band, its intonations, its phrasings, its style of playing different numbers. The music was smooth, steady, almost faultless, but it lacked one thing.

The Kid grinned as he looked at his watch. "Thought so," he murmured, and glanced to where Dumfreys sat, handsome and arrogant, at the piano. "Sweet dreams, buddy, till I get back. Sorry I gotta leave, but the rattler is due in ten minutes."

It was several days later when the Syncopatin' Kid got back to town, arriving a little before noon. As fresh and immaculate as if he had not had a long train ride, he swung to the station platform and headed for the Blue Room hall.

Plaining was there, and he had a caller in the person of the tall, strikingly handsome Roy Dumfreys. The Castle Garden pianist was disposed to be suave and agreeable.

"So you see, Mr. Plaining," he was saying, "I think it would be of mutual benefit to us both to have this battle of music between your band and the Castle Garden team.

"We will, of course, stage the first one in a neutral hall with the understanding that whichever team wins will have the privilege of entertaining the losing band in its own hall. In other words, if your band wins, we'll have to play the second battle in your hall. And naturally you can see the publicity value of such a scheme."

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### RUMORS.

PLAINING could see it easily enough—as publicity for Dumfreys. With the Blue Room team going poorly, and handicapped by the absence of the Syncopatin' Kid, the result must inevitably

be in favor of the Castle Garden outfit.

Plaining was about to shake his head, when he happened to glance toward the door. There stood the Syncopatin' Kid nodding vigorously with one finger held warningly to his lips.

The dance-magnate's face would have done credit to a lifelong poker player. "Who will decide the winner?" he asked.

Dumfreys laughed. "The crowd, of course," he answered. "Four judges can be appointed who will estimate the applause received by each team. Your team, for example, will play a number and one encore, with a minute after the encore for the applause. Then my team will do the same. At the end of the evening the judges can check up on each round, so to speak."

Plaining flashed a glance over Dumfreys' shoulder. The Kid nodded again.

"Well—" Plaining seemed to hesitate. "I may be foolish, but the proposition sounds interesting. I have a large hall—The Oaks—that is not being used now. It is, I believe, the only vacant hall around here. Will that do for the first battle?"

"Sure." Dumfreys rose. He was grinning broadly. "Suppose, then, that we stage this a week from to-night?"

"That's all right."

"Fine," grinned Dumfreys. "Tell your daughter I hope she'll stop being moody soon." Laughing to himself he went out of the office, and hurried down the lobby.

"Back again, are you, Larry?" said Plaining interestedly as the Kid emerged from his stairway retreat and entered the office. "Mighty glad to see you. What's the news?"

The Kid pushed his hat to the back of his head and grinned. He seemed very content with life in general. "Nothin' special, chief. How goes it with you?"

Plaining frowned. "Not very well, Larry. I think I was foolish to agree to this battle."

"I don't," said the Kid placidly. "Did I understand him to say that—that Stel was a little moody?"

Plaining rubbed at his jaw. "She's been moping around the house for a week," he said. "Why don't you take a run up to see her?"

The Kid smiled wryly. "I don't figure she wants me to."

"Rubbish!" snorted Plaining. "You two are worse than a couple of kids. However, that's your affair." He pounded on the desk with his fist. "What I want to know is this: when are you going back with the team? It's getting worse and worse without you. No wonder Dumfreys grinned."

Slowly the Syncopatin' Kid lighted a cigarette. "Chief," he said, and his level blue eyes were humorous, "you know that the guy who grins last grins the loudest."

THE scheduled battle of music between the famous, if crippled, Blue Room band, and the new, highly paid outfit from the Castle Garden created immediate, immense interest. Plenty of advertising was done but it was almost needless. The news spread like wildfire by word of mouth.

And everybody was talking about the Syncopatin' Kid. Where was he? Nobody had seen him of late. Was he going to play with the Blue Room band or wasn't he? Rumors flew thick and fast. The Kid had had a quarrel with Plaining, and had quit him cold; he had gone to New York to direct a big theater team; a relative had died and left him two million dollars provided he would retire from the dance-band business.

To all the questions that came pouring in, the harassed Warren Plaining gave the same answer: "I don't know any more about it than you do." Which

only served to increase the interest and mystery.

But the Syncopatin' Kid remained aloof. Only one person did he seek out and that was Roy Dumfreys. Every time he met him, the Kid grinned aggravatingly without saying a word, and at length the superior smile left Dumfreys' lips and he became very thoughtful.

Came the night of the battle of music. Half an hour before the Syncopatin' Kid left his room, he made a phone call. Then he finished dressing and calmly sauntered forth into the night.

He had not gone far before a taxi wheeled to the curb beside him. Simultaneously with its stop, three men jumped from the shadows of a group of trees across the sidewalk, seized the Kid, and hustled him roughly into the cab. Gears clashed as the taxi shot away.

The Kid didn't struggle. He knew it would be useless. "Well, this is sorta interestin'," he remarked, unperturbed. "Are you guys takin' a movie or something?"

"Aw, shut up!" growled one of the trio, as thickset and hard-boiled-looking an egg as the Kid had ever laid eyes on. "Another word an' I'll take a paste at yuh, yuh cake-eater."

"Yeah?" drawled the Kid, his eyes narrowing.

"Yuh heard me." The man sat up in the confines of the cab, one big fist raised threateningly.

"Can't say I did. You'll have to talk louder when you talk to me." Angrily the man started his swing. But his companions restrained him.

"Easy, 'Butch,'" warned one. "This don't call for no rough stuff now. Lay off!"

The man subsided grumbling, and the cab proceeded on. Presently it stopped, and the Kid was hustled into a house.

One of the men lighted a flickering

gas lamp. "You might's well sit down there," he told the Kid, pointing to a chair. "Yuh gotta long wait ahead o' yuh."

"Thanks." Calmly the Kid took the chair indicated. "Nice little place you got here. Mind if I smoke?"

Butch started to growl, but the other two men regarded their immaculate prisoner in doubtful silence.

"You're a cool customer," one of them said at length.

"Yeah?" The Kid got his cigarette going well, and glanced idly toward the curtained window. "Maybe. You see, I'm not plannin' to stay here very long."

"You ain't!" Butch rose from his chair, his face like a storm cloud. "One more word out o' you and——"

*Crash!* With a sudden, splintering, tearing sound the door gave, and four men entered precipitately. The leader looked at the Kid's three captors.

"I know these bums, Kid," he said. "We'll take 'em in and prefer charges against 'em for you."

Butch backed away, his heavy face paling. "Aw, go easy, sergeant!" he rasped. "This is just a joke—honest!"

"It's goin' to be more of a joke," affirmed the Syncopatin' Kid. As usual he was thinking far ahead. He looked narrowly at Butch and his companions. "Now if you guys want to stay out of the cooler and make five bucks apiece, listen to me!" he commanded.

**W**ARREN PLAINING was on the verge of lunacy. Four numbers had been played and the Syncopatin' Kid had not yet shown up. Bradley, the apple-cheeked violin lead, was playing the piano for the Blue Room band. He was doing a good job, but not good enough.

The team couldn't compete with the Castle Garden band that was seated on the platform at the other end of the huge hall. The saxophones of Dum-

freys' team were like silk, trumpets were perfect in tonal quality, the piano was as steady and unshakable as a metronome.

"Ruined!" groaned Plaining, as he hurried across the floor to consult with Bradley. "That Larry McCall! I never thought he'd do this, and I don't believe it yet."

The Castle Garden band came to the finish of their encore and stopped in perfect precision. Applause burst out, applause that caused Plaining to grit his teeth and swear more fervently.

A howl from Bradley rounded out the applause and stopped Plaining in his tracks.

Bradley was pointing excitedly toward the door. "Oh, boy! Oh, boy!" he chanted. "Look what's comin' in! I knew he wouldn't throw us down! I knew it. I knew it! Wow! Climb up here, you wandering lamb, and get playin'! And how we're going to knock 'em loose now! Mother, mother, pin a rose on me!"

Across the floor came the Syncopatin' Kid. Not possibly could his entrance have been more dramatic. He was colorful and popular, and there had been much uncertainty as to whether he was going to play or not. Now he was here and his friends in the vast throng rose to give him acclaim.

The Kid blushed and scurried for his band platform. "Sorry I was late, Brad," he panted. "I'll explain later. Just now I'm rarin' to go. Let's take something at stage tempo—fast and hot. 'Mississippi Mud'—that's the baby. Rip it to pieces! Let's go!"

The whole team was grinning now. The Syncopatin' Kid was back. That was enough.

"Oh, man!"

"Gangway, Castle Garden, we're off!"

"Gimme that mute! I feel like nobody's business now!"

It was a different sounding band that ripped its way into the introduction.

In the snappy, clean-cut bite of the banjo; in the joyous flare of the trombone; in the husky, hissing crackle of the cymbal catch beat—there was a new note, the note of inspiration.

And the inspiration had been provided by the level-eyed youth who sat at the piano, swaying and rocking and grinning at the dancers.

## CHAPTER V.

### NOBODY'S BUSINESS.

OLD people who had come merely to look on and listen began to tap their feet on the floor. The shoulders of the dancers began to shake. Down at the other end of the hall, Dumfreys scowled and bit his lip.

Contentment returned to the face of Warren Plaining. "What a boy!" he murmured, his eyes shining. "A born showman if I ever saw one."

The Kid was laughing now. "Break!" he yelled, and took a blue piano run that made the drummer's hair stand on end.

"Crawlin' calliope!" barked the drummer as he took a wild swing at his cymbal. "Did you hear that? Did you hear it!"

At the second chorus the Kid held up a warning hand. Then his clear tenor voice swept out over the floor, rollicking, appealing, accompanied by an odd beat that would make the Sphinx quiver.

"When the sun goes down, and the tide goes out,  
The darkies gather 'round and they all begin to shout,  
Hey, hey—"

It was the Kid's custom to sing to Stella Plaining. But to-night she wasn't on the floor—at least he couldn't see her. He wondered if she cared for Dumfreys.

Laughing, joking, swept through life on a current of hot music was the Syn-

copatin' Kid, but he couldn't understand the heart of a blue-eyed girl. He didn't like to sing from the platform when Stella wasn't there to listen, but it had to be done. They'd have to put everything they had into it to beat Dumfreys.

"They don't need no bands—  
They keep time by clappin' their hands."

As he played the Kid noticed things. Two microphones were in the hall. So they were broadcasting. Probably Dumfreys, sure of victory, had arranged for them.

The hum of voices out there on the floor, the sliding scuff of dancing feet, the dusty odor from the floor, the dull boom of the bass drum setting the tempo and spurring the emotions—these were old, old things to the Syncopatin' Kid, but they struck him with renewed force now that he had been away from them for two weeks. It was a great life, a glorious life and the only one for him.

With a swing of his arm, the Kid brought the number to a close, grinning as thunderous applause, punctuated with whistles and shouts, broke out. As if jealous of the time allotment Dumfreys' band got under way smoothly, effectively. For the encore, Dumfreys took a piano solo and played that most difficult, intriguing number "Kitten on The Keys."

Promptly the Syncopatin' Kid accepted the challenge. No sooner had Dumfreys stopped and received his meed of applause than the Kid started in on "Kitten On The Keys." Dumfreys had played it to the point of mechanical perfection, but the dynamic Syncopatin' Kid put in his own variations and tore it all to pieces.

The crowd listened eagerly, aware that it was nearing a battle between two great dance-band pianists. The Syncopatin' Kid dared to be original.

He sat sidewise in his chair, grin-

ning out over the floor as he played. He was spontaneous, attractive, magnetic. He swept over the keys with a spirited touch and a rhythm that Dumfreys could not match. He was the greater of the two.

The Castle Garden team played a difficult symphonic arrangement and played it superbly. The Blue Room band floated melodiously into "Song of India" and worked it up to a pitch of inspired height. Then, for the encore, the Syncopatin' Kid turned his men loose on a slow-drag number called "Slow-steppin' Mandy Brown," and the crowd went crazy.

There could be no doubt of the result from the moment the Kid played his first piece. He was outplaying Roy Dumfreys in every department. Toward the end of the evening the judges got together, and they were unanimous for the Blue Room band.

As soon as Dumfreys heard the verdict he came rushing over to the Syncopatin' Kid, his dark eyes flashing with anger.

"It's a put-up job," he declared hotly. "You were supposed to start with one team and finish that way."

The Syncopatin' Kid looked surprised. "Well, didn't we?" he asked mildly.

"You came in after the thing had started," howled Dumfreys. "I refuse to play the second battle in the Blue Room."

"Oh, no, you don't, either," said the Kid softly. "You know why I was late gettin' here, Dumfreys. Look!" He pointed to the back of the platform where sat three rough-looking men, grinning out at the crowd and having the time of their lives generally.

"I knew you'd try to pull a stunt like that, Dumfreys," the Kid continued. "You did it once before in Kansas City, didn't you, when Jennings was bucking a hall there."

"Oh, I know because I took the

trouble to hunt up your record. I met your boss, too. I went away, and had a friend introduce me. Told him I was an admirer of his system, and said I was here at the opening of Castle Garden.

"I got him to wire you to stage this battle of music. Laugh that off. So you'd better not say anything more about not playin' in the Blue Room, Dumfreys.

"It'll be great publicity for us to have you there, and if you refuse to come as you agreed, these three musketeers may have something to say in court about how they were hired to hold me till after this contest was over. I let 'em take me, Dumfreys, just so I could have men follow and get something on 'em."

Dumfreys' jaw dropped. He looked like a balloon that has suddenly been punctured. Abruptly he turned and went back to his own platform.

A hand touched the Kid's arm, and he turned to look into the gleeful face of Warren Plaining.

"Larry, you're one continual surprise!" exclaimed Plaining. "Also you're my life-saver! Arranged a battle of music over Jennings' head, did you?" He burst into hearty laughter. "Lord, that's rich!"

"It was on the level, though, chief," declared the Kid earnestly.

"Sure it was on the level. It was great!" Plaining sobered. "But how about your slump, Larry, the night Dumfreys showed up? Too, why did you keep away from the team until tonight?"

The Kid grinned. "My slump was put on," he answered. "You know, chief, that when a piano lets down the whole team lets down, and I didn't want Dumfreys to hear us at our best. If he had he might not have been so ready to stage this battle."

"I got him to play because I wanted to know how much piano he could play.

He's good, all right, but some little thing was missin'. His playing didn't have any individuality; it was like a machine.

"And the chances were that the team behind him wouldn't have any more individuality. After all, chief, the crowd wants life and pep and go in their music, and not something that's wound up.

"As to keepin' away from the boys, well——" The Kid hesitated, then continued: "Just this. When I stay away from the old keys for very long I'm itchin' to get back at 'em. I knew I'd play over my head to-night after the lay-off. And I hoped the boys would be as glad to see me back as I would be to see any of them under the same circumstances."

"They were," nodded Plaining. "You saw what a reception you got. It's evident to me now, Larry. It was using psychology and mighty good psychology, too." He eyed his pianist quizzically. "By the way, I've a message for you."

"That so?" said the Kid curiously. "Who sent it?"

"My daughter. She's still moody, and wouldn't come here to-night. But she told me to give you her love. Frankly, I told her I wasn't sure that you'd be here and she almost bit my head off. She has utter faith in you, my boy."

The Kid's heart bounded, then his face fell. "But, chief," he said slowly, "she gave me the razz that night when she walked out of the hall with Dumfreys."

Plaining smiled broadly. "Of course, she did," he chuckled. "She was worried about your slump and couldn't see any reason for it. She thought you

might come to yourself if she made you the least bit jealous. Anybody could see that, anybody who wasn't head over heels in love."

Chuckling, Plaining started away. But the Syncopatin' Kid grabbed him by the arm.

"Will she be listenin' in, chief?" the Kid demanded breathlessly. "Can I see her after the dance?"

"Yes, to both questions," nodded Plaining.

Joyous light gleamed in the eyes of the Syncopatin' Kid. What a dumb apple he'd turned out to be! He looked toward the Castle Garden outfit. They seemed to be quarreling among themselves. Apparently they weren't going to play.

The Kid called to an announcer. "Hey, brother, bring that mike up here by the piano, will you please? I've got a special number. I'll play it while that other outfit gets ready."

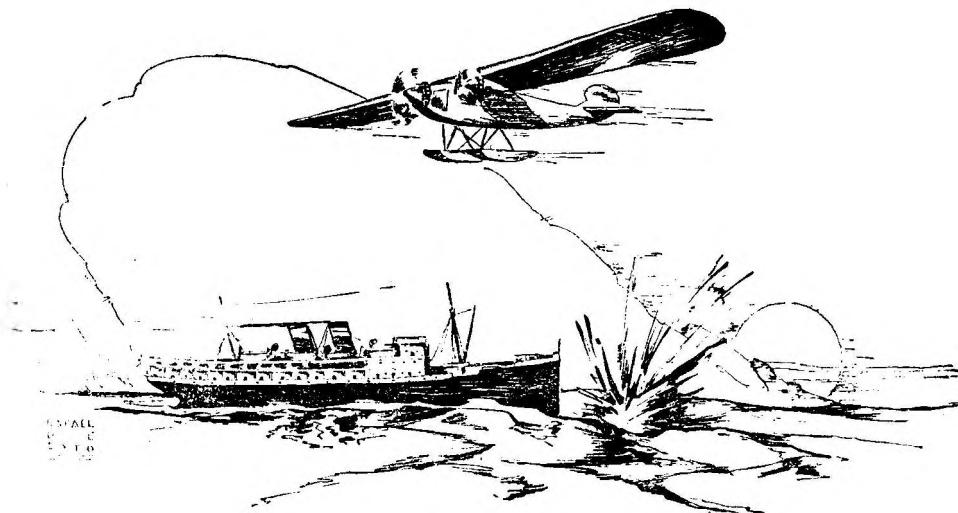
The Kid seated himself at the piano and leaned toward the microphone. "This selection is being played at the request of Miss Stella Plaining," he announced happily, "and being sung by the Syncopatin' Kid."

Stella would understand perfectly, as she always did. He'd acted like a mutt. The poor kid. He'd try to make it up to her as soon as he saw her, and that couldn't be any too soon for him. His fingers trailed over the keys in a tantalizing trot.

Debonair, graceful, appealing, the Syncopatin' Kid raised his clear voice in characteristic song, sending a message to the blue-eyed daughter of Warren Plaining:

"I'll be down to get you in a taxi, honey,  
You'd better be ready 'bout half past  
twelve——"

**More stories by Vic Whitman will appear in this magazine. How do you like his yarns? Write to the editors about 'em.**



# Zooming Ghosts

by Bernard Lee Penrose

An Aerial Hobos Story

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

## CHAPTER I.

### OVER THE DEATH SPOT.

**T**HE roaring Hispano drowned Ken Woolbert's warning shout, but Brooks, at the controls of the dilapidated *Standard*, saw him twist around in the forward cockpit and point frantically above and behind.

With a start the pilot turned his head. A silver-winged monoplane was dropping toward them like a plummet from the low-hanging ceiling of fluffy white clouds.

Brooks snapped the stick over hard. Obediently, the *Standard*'s left wing came down. Wind blasted against Brooks' cheek, as the plane slipped swiftly. Brooks fancied he cou'd feel the rush of air as the charging monoplane shot past, barely missing his tail surfaces.

In a vertical bank, the strange monoplane whipped around and came hurtling back at them. Brooks felt a wild urge to dive, zoom, loop, roll—anything to avoid a collision.

But Lieutenants Gifford, Scott, and Shaner had probably done that, Brooks reasoned, and their mangled bodies had been found buried in the wreckage of their ships, below this same, uncanny death spot.

So, with the split-second decision that was his heritage of World War air fighting, Brooks did the opposite thing.

He inched the stick over and kicked rudder in the same direction. The *Standard* banked around with its crimson nose pointed straight at the rushing death ship.

In the forward cockpit of the *Standard*, Woolbert stared fixedly ahead. Whatever emotion he felt was masked by the stoical, almost indifferent, facial

expression which characterized his daily gamble with fate while walking the wings.

Ever since the war, Woolbert and Brooks had been barnstorming about the country under the self-styled trade mark, "Aérial Hobos." Brooks did most of the piloting, while Woolbert thrilled the public with his stunts and parachute jumps, at so much a thrill.

Brooks' dark eyes were blazing, his jaw set hard, as the two ships roared at each other. Instinctively, he knew the monoplane was responsible for the mysterious deaths of the three Kelly Field pilots. On successive days it had crashed them to horrible deaths, just as it was about to crash Woolbert and him.

After hearing conflicting accounts of the "accidents" at Kelly Field that morning, and listening to the vague suspicions of other pilots, the Hobos had decided to investigate the matter, although they were civilian flyers.

Two hundred yards separated the planes now—a hundred. At the last split second, Brooks jammed his stick to the dashboard. Then, as the monoplane countered with a dive, he pulled the control back against his stomach.

The *Standard* stood on its tail and screamed for altitude. Yet so swift had been the monoplane's rush that the tail sections of the two ships grazed each other.

Woolbert leaned back over the coaming, his face livid with rage. "All I want is one crack at— Here he comes back, Bill. Dive!"

With throttle wide open, Brooks nosed over into a crash dive. Wind, rushing through wires and struts, added its shrill scream to the swelling roar of the motor. Glancing behind, Brooks caught a fleeting glimpse of the monoplane, riding hot on his tail. Its silver wings and fuselage were flashing brilliantly in the sunlight; its pilot sitting bolt upright in his seat.

The hazy, far-flung earth was rushing up to meet the Hobos. Brooks couldn't snap out of his dive now. Under such a terrific strain, the *Standard's* wings would tear loose. He inched the stick back and got her nose up gradually. Then, less than three hundred feet above the ground, he zoomed into a loop.

Another hasty glance told him the monoplane was still riding his tail, following him into the vertical circle. With a sudden inspiration he kicked into an Immelmann and rolled, right side up, as the narrow belly of the monoplane flashed past below. Not a strut nor piece of linen was visible on the ship. It was apparently of all-metal construction, yet, strangely enough, it had the flashing quality of steel rather than dur-aluminum.

Brooks' wizardry at the controls had gained him a precious second. Quick to take advantage of it, he nosed up to his maximum climbing angle and streaked for the clouds.

The monoplane seemed to flounder uncertainly after completing its loop. Then, as though suddenly spotting its quarry, it lifted its silver nose skyward and soared up like an albatross in pursuit.

"It's coming," Woolbert shouted, "climbing like an elevator!"

Brooks pushed on the wide-open throttle and, with all the wealth of flying skill at his command, lifted the red bird toward the fluffy white clouds which seemed to beckon like a haven of safety.

Behind them roared the monoplane, gaining every second. It was almost upon them now, its undercarriage aimed straight at the *Standard's* control surfaces, where a single thrust would send the Hobos plunging helplessly to the distant earth. Closer—closer—

When a crash seemed inevitable, Brooks fairly pulled his ship into the engulfing white mist and changed his

course in a vertical bank. Holding the plane with top rudder, he searched the dense, opaque fog which whipped about them for any sign of the monoplane. Seeing none, he straightened out into what he thought was a level flying position and closed the throttle.

"Let's go down and have a look, Ken," he shouted. "If he's still hanging around we can quickly duck back in the clouds."

Before Woolbert had time to answer, Brooks felt the wind pressure lessen ominously. The plane trembled on the verge of a stall. It was not equipped with turn and bank indicator, nor level, and the impenetrable murk through which they were flying blotted out the sky, earth, and every staple object which would indicate the ship's relative position.

Brooks averted a spin, however, with the highly developed "feel" that some veteran pilots possess. He nosed cautiously down out of the clouds, while Woolbert wiped the moisture from his goggles with the old inscrutable expression on his face.

"There he goes, Bill," the wing-walker shouted, as they glided into the sunlight, "way down there to the right."

Hanging just below the clouds, they watched the monoplane spiral earthward. Woolbert reached into the fore part of his cockpit and brought out a pair of binoculars.

He studied the plane below for a moment and his strong voice trembled with anger, as he leaned back toward Brooks. "The darn murderer's going to land. He's circling down there over that long flat stretch."

Again wind screamed through wires and struts, as the crimson biplane hurtled out of the blue. Five hundred feet above the monoplane, which had landed, Brooks leveled off.

Woolbert focused his glasses again. "He's sitting in the cockpit," the stunt man yelled, "staring up at us."

Brooks waited for no more. He lost altitude in a slipping turn, which brought his nose into the wind. Then straightened out and landed, not twenty yards from the other ship.

Woolbert's usually mild blue eyes were flashing sparks. While the plane was still rolling, he vaulted out of the cockpit. His partner was scarcely a jump behind. Together they ran toward the monoplane pilot, who was making no effort to escape. "You crazy fiend!" Woolbert rasped. "You utter—"

Woolbert's jaw sagged in amazement as the pilot pulled off goggles and helmet, allowing her dark bobbed hair to tumble down about her ears. She was rather slight of build, and a healthy, outdoor tan seemed to enhance her pretty features.

"What do you mean by talking to me like that?" she demanded.

"He means just what he says," Brooks replied, eying the girl coldly. "I suppose you're going to tell us you lost control of your ship up there."

A puzzled expression crept over the girl's face. Her large, amber-colored eyes surveyed Brooks' stocky, well-knit form, then swept to Woolbert. Before Woolbert discovered the pilot was a girl, the wing-walker had pulled off his helmet and goggles, anticipating a fight. He stood nearly a head taller than Brooks, with his blond hair tugging in the gentle breeze of the monoplane's idling propeller. The girl noticed a suggestion of supple grace about his loose-jointed frame—an asset most aerial acrobats acquire.

"Lost control of my ship?" she queried. "Not that I know of. I simply landed here because my motor was missing."

Woolbert studied the monoplane for a second. "You mean to say you weren't chasing us around the sky in this plane?"

The girl glanced above uneasily, as

though trying to catch sight of another ship to vindicate herself. "Of course I wasn't. I—"

A thunderous roar drowned her voice, as she suddenly jammed her throttle open, and blasted the monoplane's tail off the ground with a forward shove of the stick. Before either of the birdmen could restrain it, the silver-winged ship fairly leaped out of their reach, grazing Brooks' leg with its vertical stabilizer.

Woolbert darted toward the *Standard*. "Come on, Bill. Let's follow her and maybe we can get at the bottom of this whole business. Her motor's not so fast now; it still has that miss."

## CHAPTER II.

### INTO A TRAP.

BROOKS rubbed his shins reflectively as he settled into the *Standard's* rear cockpit. "I can understand how that crate could smash another ship and hardly show a scratch," he mused. "It seems to be made of steel."

He shot the juice to the idling Hiso. Five seconds later the Hobos were climbing in pursuit of the monoplane.

Straight for the Mexican border the silver-winged ship headed. Flying with full gun, Brooks was barely able to keep it in sight. "That thing has some motor," he shouted, as Woolbert leaned back over the coaming. "Look at the speed it's making, with a dead can!"

"The whole crate is radical in design," Woolbert supplemented. "What do you think of the girl?"

The pilot's wind-darkened features knitted in a frown. "I hardly know what to think," he yelled. "She doesn't look capable of murder, yet she certainly tried to wash us out of the picture."

The Hobos fell silent, each busy with his thoughts.

Miles flew by with the minutes. Within an hour the Rio Grande, a tiny,

gleaming ribbon, was winding its snake-like course below. Between Del Rio and Spofford the two ships crossed into Mexico and turned southeast over the desolate, sparsely settled mesa stretching across northern Coahuila.

"I don't think she knows we're following," Woolbert cried. "Why not use Old Sol for a screen? If she doesn't get wise, she may lead us right to her airport."

Brooks acted on the suggestion. He climbed until the *Standard* was as nearly as possible in a direct line between the sun and the monoplane, a distant speck in the blue. It was a trick he had learned in the war, based on the knowledge that planes so placed are almost invisible.

A little later Woolbert twisted around in his seat and pointed. "She's going down, Bill, right between those two mountains." He clamped the binoculars back to his eyes. "Can't see where she's going to land—must be a hidden plateau or something."

So that his motor would not be heard from the ground, Brooks mounted to the *Standard's* ceiling—the highest altitude it could reach—and glided cautiously over the peaks of the two mountains. They were the tail end of a range which towered with increasing height and grandeur as it stretched southward.

"I called the turn all right," Woolbert yelled, using his binoculars. "There's a wide plateau down there. Looks as safe as a graded landing field. She's just hitting the dirt now and—Holy mackerel! There's a hangar and a line of ships outside. Must be a dozen of them! Shall we go down?"

Brooks hesitated. He was the more calculating of the two birdmen. It was this quality, coupled with Woolbert's reckless audacity, that had carried the Hobos through innumerable tight squeezes in the past. The pilot glanced apprehensively at his gasoline gauge and

saw that there was insufficient fuel to fly back to the United States.

"We might as well go through with it now," Brooks decided, "but we'd better not put up a fight if they grab us. The idea is to keep our eyes and ears open and find out who's at the head of this outfit. I'm pretty sure whoever's running this field is responsible for Shaner, Gifford, and Scott being washed out. The girl coming here, after trying to crack up, proves it."

Woolbert nodded in assent. Brooks shoved the stick over and forward, kicking rudder at the same time. The next instant they were whistling down toward the secret landing field.

It appeared to be deserted as they swept low over the short grass. But no sooner had wheels and tail-skid touched, than a gang of Mexicans, evidently mechanics who had been watching their approach, came running out of the hangar and surrounded the *Standard*.

"Get out, gringos," one of them commanded.

Woolbert jumped to the ground ahead of his partner, passed Brooks a cigarette and lighted one himself. "Say," he drawled, "can any of you birds tell us where that girl——"

"March!" rasped the Mexican spokesman, apparently the only one of the five who spoke English. "March! Or we give you a taste of these." He prodded the flyers, alternately, with his pistol. They were led to a rambling adobe dwelling which adjoined the hangar.

As they reached the porch a man suddenly appeared in the screened doorway, and stood with his hands on his hips, regarding them fixedly. His build was similar to Woolbert's—tall and loose-jointed—and it set off well the faultlessly tailored gray suit he was wearing. A carefully waxed mustache lent a severe expression to his ruddy face—a face, Brooks thought, which had recently been exposed to a strong

wind, perhaps the wind created by an airplane's propeller.

It was the man's eyes, however, which claimed the pilot's attention, as well as Woolbert's. His eyes appeared almost green as he stood there, and a strange, wild light shone in their depths.

At last the man spoke, in a crisp, well-modulated voice. "It is unfortunate, gentlemen, you deemed it necessary to follow my ward here, but since you did you must accept the consequences."

He glanced at the Mexican guards. "Bring them in."

The guard divided itself with a semblance of military training. Sandwiched between the two groups, the Hobos silently entered the house.

A surprised whistle escaped Woolbert as he glimpsed the magnificent furnishings within. Statues, great ornamental vases, and works of art, brought apparently from the far corners of the world, were tastefully arranged about the spacious reception room into which they stepped.

Silken rugs were strewn with a careless elegance about the parquet floor. In a far corner Woolbert noticed a grand piano, draped with a brilliant Spanish shawl. A wide hallway extended the entire length of the one-story structure. Opening into it were many doors, after the manner of a hotel corridor.

Before one of these doors the ruddy-face man halted, and the mechanics came to an alert stop behind. It was evident they were very much afraid of displeasing their employer.

"You will stay in here for the present," the man informed the flyers. "Food will be sent to you. In the meanwhile, get as much rest as possible for soon"—he glanced at the Mexicans with a sardonic smile—"very soon, in fact, you fly."

The door slammed, a lock clicked, and the Hobos found themselves in a

prison of a room, which was as plain as the rest of the house was ornate. Its single window was heavily barred, while the thick adobe walls offered no possible means of escape.

Brooks lighted a cigarette thoughtfully and squinted at the smoke through half-closed lids. Finally he strode to the barred window and glanced out. The afternoon sun had almost disappeared behind bleak, scudding clouds. The very atmosphere seemed depressing.

Suddenly Brooks stiffened. "Ken," he breathed, "come here quick."

The wing-walker reached the window in time to see two mechanics lifting an inert form from one of the odd-looking monoplanes, which was resting near the hangar door. "It's that girl," he snapped, "the girl who tried to smash us. Wonder what's happened to her?"

Before Brooks could reply a soft, yet imperative knocking sounded at the base of the left wall of their cell. The pilot dropped flat on his stomach and discovered a tiny crack, separating the adobe structure from the wooden floor. He tapped cautiously, and in response to the tap, a girl's voice reached their ears, faintly.

"Can you hear me?" it inquired.

"Yes," the pilot replied. "Who are you?"

There was a moment's hesitancy. Then the faint voice again. "I'm Jean Compton, the girl you talked to this morning."

The Hobos stared at each other incredulously. They had just seen the girl pilot being lifted from her ship. She could not possibly have reached the adjoining room in time to be talking to them now.

"You probably don't believe me," the girl continued, as though divining their thoughts, "but I'm trying to help you. If you've seen them working about that plane in front of the hangar, look again. I think you'll understand better then."

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE FALCON STRIKES.

BROOKS jumped to his feet and joined his partner at the window. "She's still out there," the wing-walker averred, "but look at the way she's lying —on her neck with the rest of her body rigid, and her hair hanging down in her eyes. Look! Nothing human could hold that pose. It's not a girl. Bill, it's a—"

Woolbert hesitated, as though doubting his sight. "You're right, partner," Brooks said slowly. "It's a dummy, an effigy of the girl who tried to kill us." He flung himself back on the floor and Woolbert joined him.

Brooks tapped against the wall, then said: "If you're the girl who was flying that monoplane south of Pearsall this morning, the dummy pilot they have out there is a dead ringer for you. But an effigy couldn't chase us around the sky and it couldn't crash and murder those three Kelly Field pilots."

A gasping sound reached their ears. "I'm only beginning to realize what is going on here," Jean Compton whispered. "It's awful—horrible. But you must believe what I tell you, because they're planning a flight this afternoon, with the entire squadron. I've been told it is a test flight, but now I'm ready to believe anything. I'm afraid—"

The droning of a motor on the field suddenly swelled into a roar. For several minutes further conversation was impossible. Then, abruptly, the noise dwindled to a throttled rumble. Again the Hobos heard the excited voice in the adjoining room.

"They're getting ready now," Jean whispered. "Oh, we must do something. This willful murder can't go on!"

"But what's their object in crashing ships?" Woolbert inquired. "And what does that dummy mean? Tell us all you know while there's time—that big

guy said he was going to take us for a hop pretty soon."

Words fairly tumbled from the unseen speaker's lips. "The tall man who met you at the door is Wilson Demming. He and my father were collaborating on a radio-impulse device for controlling airplanes.

"Dad was fatally injured in a crash. Before he died, he asked Demming to take care of me. That was when I was ten years old, and in justice to Demming—Uncle Will I call him—I must admit he has honored father's request.

"But as the years passed he became more and more obsessed with the control device. He is a brilliant man and succeeded not only in perfecting it, but also improving on duraluminum until he developed an alloy which is practically indestructible, and yet weighs only a little more than the airplane metal in common use.

"Demming believed his invention would revolutionize aviation, and rightly so. But unfortunately he couldn't appreciate the fact that the United States government is constantly besieged by would-be inventors.

"When Demming went to Washington to offer his patent, he was shunted from one bored subordinate clerk to another. In a rage he finally struck one of them.

"Demming was given the maximum sentence for assault. When he was finally released he was so embittered he seemed like a different man. He liquidated all his assets, brought me to Mexico with him, and taught me to fly.

"Demming continued to work on the radio-control device. Now he, as well as the pilots he has brought here and instructed, can fly a ship from the cockpit of another, which may be as far as a mile away. That's what he was doing this morning, controlling a dummy ship from his own plane, which was almost hidden in the clouds.

"When he spotted your *Standard* he

tried to crash the dummy plane into yours, although I didn't see that, as I was on my way back here when my motor began to miss."

"But why?" Brooks queried.

"Because Wilson Demming is a maniac. When he insisted on having this effigy of me made, I suspected that constant mental strain and brooding might have unbalanced him. Now I am certain.

"For the past week he has been asking me to fly alongside of the plane containing my effigy, while he controlled it from a third plane. He said he was experimenting, but always when another ship was sighted he signaled me to return. I—Get up, quick! Some one's coming!"

The Hobos jumped to their feet. An instant later the door of their cell opened, revealing two armed guards in the corridor. A clean-looking Mexican entered. He was dressed in white and carried an ample tray of food, which he set on the solitary table.

"Señors are to eat queek," he informed them in laborious English, then stepped out of the room. He left the door open, however, so that the guards had an unobstructed view.

Woolbert picked up a fork. "It may be poisoned," he reflected, "but here goes anyhow."

When the Hobos had almost finished the meal, Demming entered. He was immaculately dressed for the air, in shining boots, well-cut breeches and a leather flying coat. Two more guards joined the watchful two behind him.

"Search them," he ordered curtly, without removing his odd-colored eyes from the Hobos. Two Mexicans examined every pocket and crevice of the flyers' clothing.

When they had finished, Demming ordered the searchers away. "You're probably wondering what this is all about," he observed, addressing Brooks and Woolbert. "In fact, it was that

curiosity of yours which brought you here in the first place. Well, I'll tell you. It can't make much difference now."

The inference of Demming's last assertion was not lost on either of the birdmen.

"Ever hear of the *City of Galveston*?" he inquired. "No? Well, ordinarily she's a fruit steamer, plying between Central America and the town she's named after, but this afternoon she's due to dock at Galveston with a shipment of silver.

"We're going to loot that ship. If there's any interference, either from the air or sea, I'm going to demonstrate what an offensive aerial patrol can accomplish in the hands of an inventive genius."

Woolbert's eyes narrowed. "No doubt this same genius is responsible for the death of three Kelly Field pilots."

Demming threw back his head and laughed, mirthlessly. "Oh, those poor fools were merely experiments in a great cause—a service you two might have performed this morning, if it hadn't been for that low cloud ceiling."

Woolbert could restrain himself no longer. "You damned murderer!" he cried, lunging at Demming. His fist flashed up in a vicious right hook which crashed on the point of Demming's jaw.

Demming staggered back against the wall. Woolbert wheeled on the guards, as a bullet whistled past his head, and a deafening explosion filled the room with the acrid smell of burnt powder.

Brooks had saved his partner's life. Sensing what was about to happen, he had dived for the first Mexican and managed to knock his gun upward an instant before the shot. Brooks was grappling for the rifle now. His clenched fist rose and fell, and the guard dropped like a log.

But before Brooks could lift the gun the others were upon him, clubbing him. He battled desperately, and with

the heartening knowledge that Woolbert, as ever, was fighting by his side.

Together the Hobos crowded the four Mexicans back, carrying the fight to them and making the use of rifles impossible. Brooks felt the joy of combat as his fist again smashed into yielding flesh and another guard stumbled back unconscious. Hoarse shouts came from the corridor, accompanied by the sound of running feet.

Suddenly Woolbert dropped. Brooks glanced around to see Demming leering over his prostrate form, gripping a broken chair. In a blind fury, the pilot lunged at Demming, but hands gripped him on all sides and yanked him back. He was hurled against the wall with a force that dazed him, and held pinioned.

Demming's voice rose commandingly above the clamor. "Don't kill him, I'll attend to that later. Get him out in number four."

He glanced down at Woolbert's inert figure and kicked it cruelly. "We'll have to leave this one behind, I guess. If he comes to, keep him tied up until we get back. If he doesn't, dig a hole somewhere away from the field."

Brooks was dragged helplessly through the long hall. The three men holding him halted near the outer door of the smoke-filled reception room, at an order from Demming. As Brooks waited, not knowing what to expect, an insufferable agony stabbed through his brain. His darting glance traveled about the room, searching for any possible means of saving Woolbert, or at least facing the end with him.

Young men were moving nervously to and fro about Brooks. There were perhaps twenty of them and, like Demming, they were dressed for the air. Here and there, Brooks distinguished an American, but the majority were Mexicans. Studying their faces, he noticed the hard, devil-may-care expression which experience had taught him to associate with black sheep.

Occasionally the men regarded Brooks with curious looks, between drags on long black cigarettes, but for the most part they ignored him. They were apparently engrossed in their own thoughts.

In the center of the room Demming raised his hand for silence. When he spoke his voice was like the crack of a whip. "I don't want any slip-up to-day, and I don't want to see any of you take another drink before we hop. It's our first money venture and it'll probably repay many times for expenditures.

"Then, in a few months, we'll all be millionaires and can disband according to the agreement. But until that time the man who violates orders—"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### ROARING DEATH.

DEMMING'S shrug was more expressive than words. "There's no necessity of going into that again," he continued. "We've all agreed on the penalty. Now is there any question before we start?"

One of the pilots jerked his thumb toward Brooks. "Are we taking him?"

"That," Demming said, an odd glint in his greenish eyes, "is the coup de grâce. Rivas will fly him in the point ship of the lower flight. If there's any trouble, if any military or commercial planes get curious about our squadron, he'll be seen in the cockpit, moving, trying to get his hands on the controls. Naturally they'll think all the lower flight planes have men rather than dummies in their cockpits. When they realize their mistake our ships will be crashing into them!"

Demming glanced at his wrist watch. "There's not much sun," he concluded, "but the visibility's fairly good. We'll hit straight for the coast at five thousand, and follow it as far as Corpus Christi Bay before heading out to sea. All right, to your ships!"

Brooks was hauled roughly out on the field and lifted into the single cockpit of one of the monoplanes. Handcuffs, attached to the seat, were snapped around his wrists. While the mechanics were securing his feet in the same manner, so Brooks could not reach the rudder bar, he glanced down the long line of planes on his right. There were ten of them, identical in appearance. In the cockpits he saw the dummy pilots, sitting bolt upright in their seats.

A cold horror clutched at Brooks' heart, as the joy stick before him moved, uncannily. Then the rudder bar. He could detect nothing unusual in the appearance of the controls, except a metallic glint from the stick as it swung back and forth. Rivas, the pilot who was to fly Brooks' ship from a plane above, was evidently testing the controls.

Glancing behind, Brooks saw ten other planes, spread in a line formation and spaced directly behind those of the first flight. Suddenly, the roar of a ship taking off sounded above the whirring rumble of idling motors. A giant, tri-motored amphibian went streaking across the field. It lifted a foot into the air, then dropped back as one of its motors faltered.

Demming climbed from the amphibian's cabin, followed by a full crew of fourteen men. Mechanics hurried to work on the conked engine, but it was more than an hour later when it was running to Demming's liking.

A mechanic reached into Brooks' cockpit and snapped on the ignition. The motor, which had been warmed at intervals, caught at his first pull on the propeller. He moved quickly away.

Brooks faintly heard the familiar *tak-a-tak-a-tak-a-tak* of a machine gun, above the roar of his motor. With a sudden start he realized it was the gun on his ship. The Vickers mounted on the fuselage in front of him was firing without a hand having touched it!

Guns on the other monoplanes were tested. Then Demming disappeared into the cabin of his amphibian and Brooks watched it streak across the field and take off.

The throttle of Brooks' plane moved slowly forward, as though pushed by an unseen hand. Brooks felt the monoplane tremble and begin to move forward, dragging the tail-skid. The peculiar drone of its motor shut out all other sound. It picked up speed rapidly. He felt the tail-skid lift, and looked behind.

About fifty yards in the rear, another silver-winged ship was racing across the plateau, with Rivas at the stick. As Brooks watched, its nose tilted up. It left the ground, and at the same instant he felt the trundling progress of his own ship change to a smooth, even glide.

After a moment's level flight, its nose again tilted upward and Brooks' plane duplicated the maneuver. Climbing at an angle that would have stalled most ships, the two monoplanes screamed for altitude, in pursuit of Demming's amphibian. Then, in groups of two, the eighteen others followed.

Brooks glanced down at the rapidly receding earth. With a practiced eye he located the adobe building where Woolbert was lying, either dead or badly injured. As he watched it fade into the ground mist his sight became blurred. Something moist trickled down from beneath his goggles.

"Good-by, old pal," he murmured. "I'm sorry we couldn't go—together."

THE strange squadron headed due east, toward the Gulf of Mexico. As it climbed, it swung quickly into formation. Brooks found himself at the point of the lower V flight, leading a group of lifeless pilots—clothed dummies that sat bolt upright in their cockpits and stared fixedly ahead. Five hundred feet above them, and about half that distance behind, flew the con-

trol ships, spaced at corresponding intervals.

At five thousand feet, Demming leveled off and the monoplanes followed suit. Whisps of leaden clouds swept past below them. On and on they pounded, at terrific speed. In less than three hours an infinite expanse of water loomed on the eastern horizon.

The amphibian's wings waggled. Brooks felt his ship being banked gracefully to the left. The entire squadron swung north along the Gulf of Mexico.

Texas, a far-flung smudge in the ground mist, glided past below. Finally Corpus Christi Bay, a sizeable indentation in the coast, glinted up at them. Demming banked eastward, over the gulf. Obediently the raiders followed.

Brooks felt his throat muscles contracting as he spotted a ship far below and saw Demming signal with his wings and dive. But in a few minutes the flight commander came climbing back to his position at the head of the circling planes. The ship was not the *City of Galveston*.

Another half-hour's flying and a second steamer was sighted. Again Demming dived to inspect it. When he regained the squadron this time his wing signaling was more prolonged. Brooks sensed a tense expectancy on the part of his pilot, by the swift, certain manipulation of the controls.

The upper flight pilots swung their puppets in a circle above the unsuspecting ship. The amphibian glided low, with its motors throttled.

Suddenly a dark object detached itself from the big plane and Brooks held his breath. Down it shot, in an even parabola. A geyser of white water heaved up in front of the vessel. It was followed by a terrific concussion which rocked the circling monoplanes.

Brooks winced as the angry detonation burst against his eardrums. A torturing vision of helpless women and children—as helpless as himself—

scurrying about the deck in a panic flashed through his mind.

At the controls of the big plane, Wilson Denning barked an order to his wireless operator, through the mouth-piece before him. "Tell the captain to stand by—to offer no resistance—or the next egg'll land on his deck."

Before the *City of Galveston* had time to answer, Denning pulled a lever at his side and released another bomb. Again Brooks felt his plane rock from the concussion. He glanced below and noticed the white wake behind the steamer widen and lose shape. The ship stopped and stood by helplessly while Denning swooped down and landed beside it. His pirate crew swarmed out of the cabin in readiness to board the prize.

Brooks' ship banked around sharply, and suddenly he saw the reason. Streaking down out of the western sky came a flight of fast-flying planes. As they drew nearer he recognized them as Vought seaplanes—U. S. navy ships, powered by Wasp motors.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE RECKONING.

A WILD hope leaped into Brooks' dark eyes. Perhaps there was yet a way of thwarting this diabolical brood. Then, suddenly, he remembered. The ten, high-flying monoplanes had been carefully trained for such an emergency, and they went about their work with precision.

Brooks' ship swung around in a vertical bank, with its nose aimed straight for the point plane of the onrushing Voughts. On either side of him the monoplanes, with their dummy pilots, widened the V formation and under full throttles they crept steadily ahead of the control ships. Their silvery noses never wavered from the mark.

With the speed of the wind the two squadrons rushed at each other. Now

Brooks could see the helmeted heads of the navy pilots, above the coaming of their cockpits. He could visualize their faces—grim—unswerving. Not an inch would they give to the air raiders. On they came, never dreaming they were matching their courage against inanimate things. Closer—closer—

Suddenly, as though by signal, the Voughts zoomed, clearing the monoplanes by inches. Brooks felt his ship flying on uncertainly, and he knew that Rivas was no longer controlling it. The heaven above was rent with the din of a vicious dog fight, as the navy ships zoomed straight for the monoplanes, their Brownings spewing a leaden shower of death—all but one.

The lagging Vought reversed direction in a beautifully executed wing-over and came streaking back toward Brooks' plane, which, due to its inherent stability, was still holding a comparatively level course.

Something on the undercarriage of the Vought moved. It was a man climbing down. Brooks felt a new hope as the figure on the landing gear dropped the length of his body and hung on with his hands. Abruptly the two planes struck a bump in the hitherto smooth air.

The Vought pilot instantly recovered, but Brooks, helpless to control his ship, felt the left wing dropping. He leaned as far as possible in the opposite direction and glanced down at the sea, five thousand feet below.

On both sides of Brooks, the dummy ships were rapidly losing altitude.

The Vought banked recklessly to match his position. Seconds meant life or death now. The dangling feet dropped still lower. Just as the monoplane was slipping into an inevitable spin, the feet bobbed against the fuselage behind Brooks and with a thud Ken Woolbert landed flat on his stomach, with his arms entwined about his partner's neck.

Woolbert's giant biceps swelled and dragged his body into the narrow cockpit. Before he had gained a seat on Brooks' lap and got his feet and hands on the controls, the plane was in the throes of a tail-spin, at less than eight hundred feet.

There was no time for holding the controls in a neutral position and waiting for the monoplane to straighten out. Woolbert's right foot shot forward on the rudder bar. He pulled the stick back. As the plane snapped out of its spin, he shoved her nose down under full gun. Then, in a mighty zoom, Woolbert climbed back toward the dog fight.

Brooks couldn't see the tears in his partner's eyes. All he heard was the familiar bantering voice, faintly above the roar of the motor. "That dark-haired girl was O. K. She held up the guards and brought me around. Then we hopped off in the *Standard* while Demming had the boys playing with his amphib.

"There was only one way to save you. We made Port Arthur in time to get help from Uncle Sam—and maybe those navy pilots are not showing this gang where it gets off! But they won't bother us—I hope. I told them this ship is the only one that had a red undercarriage, and besides they can see two men in the cockpit."

Woolbert was at a disadvantage in the cramped quarters, but he never hesitated. With the radio impulse snatched away, the controls responded normally to his touch. He climbed a thousand feet above the fight and came streaking down on the swirling planes.

A banking monoplane hovered before the Vickers' sights and his anxious thumb leaped to the trip. A leaden thunderbolt hurtled into the silver ship's cockpit. It went spinning down with the pilot dead in his seat.

Woolbert, his eyes agleam, darted after another one. The white wake of

his first tracer told him he was riddling the ship's tail surfaces. He inched the stick back and a blast of hot lead crept upward along the raider's fuselage.

In desperation, the enemy pilot dived and zoomed into a loop, and Woolbert smiled wryly. It was an old game for him. He zoomed with the monoplane, his eyes glued on the circle sight. Again his thumb darted to the trip; held it down until the muzzle of the Vickers glowed red-hot under the sustained fire.

Suddenly, where the monoplane had been there was nothing but a shapeless ball of junk falling through the sky, without the semblance of an airplane about the entire mass. One of the tracer bullets exploded the gas tank.

Woolbert heard an unintelligible cry from Brooks, then a fast-moving object, shooting down at them, caught his eyes. Instinctively he slipped swiftly to one side, just as a Vought and a monoplane dropped past, with white-faced pilots staring at the rising sea.

A dry sob was in Woolbert's throat. He shook off a frantic enemy rush and counted noses. There were only four of the monoplanes left in the air. The dummy ships had crashed almost immediately and six of the pilot-controlled ships had been shot down or crashed, at a price of half that many navy ships. Skilled as the raiders were in formation flying, they had met their masters in aerial combat.

Brooks was shouting again and pounding Woolbert on the back. Ken caught the word "amphibian." Suddenly remembering, he glanced down to see Demming's big ship streaking across the water for a take-off. Woolbert jammed the stick forward and dived down under full throttle.

Woolbert realized that Demming must not escape. He represented a frightful threat to humanity. Carefully, the wing-walker sighted his ship and thumbed the trip, emitting a flaming stream of death from the Vickers. Un-

til the last second he held the plane head on, then yanked it up in a lightning zoom, whipped around in a vertical bank and came streaking back.

A shower of lead greeted him, but still he kept his thumb pressed on the trip, as Brooks cheered him encouragingly. Suddenly, a sheath of yellow flame shot back from the amphibian's center motor. It spread like wildfire when Demming nosed up and tried to slip away from the scorching heat. Woolbert met him with a barrage of bullets and the amphibian lurched drunkenly.

A weird, sirenlike scream filled the air as its motors wailed in protest to the revving propellers. Down—down—a terrific impact—a shooting geyser. Then merely a scattered trail of flotsam, drifting on with the tide.

You'll find a humorous war story, "Marblehead to the Rescue," by Davis Jones, in our next issue. It's a story of doughboys in the front-line trenches, of courage and daring, and of a balky mule who surprises the whole enemy army!

The two remaining monoplanes were fleeing south across the sky, pursued by three fast-flying Voughts. At a signal from their flight commander the other navy ships fell into formation. Gas was getting low and oil pressure going down.

A leather-sleeved arm beckoned from the flight commander's ship. "He wants us to fly back with him," Woolbert shouted, pulling on the stick, "and I guess we'd better tag along. Maybe they have a blacksmith at the base who can get you out of this thing."

Brooks looked down as they climbed. The white wake aft of the *City of Galveston* told him the ship was under way again. He noticed a column of steam rising from her whistle. Brooks couldn't hear it, but he knew she was blowing a salute.

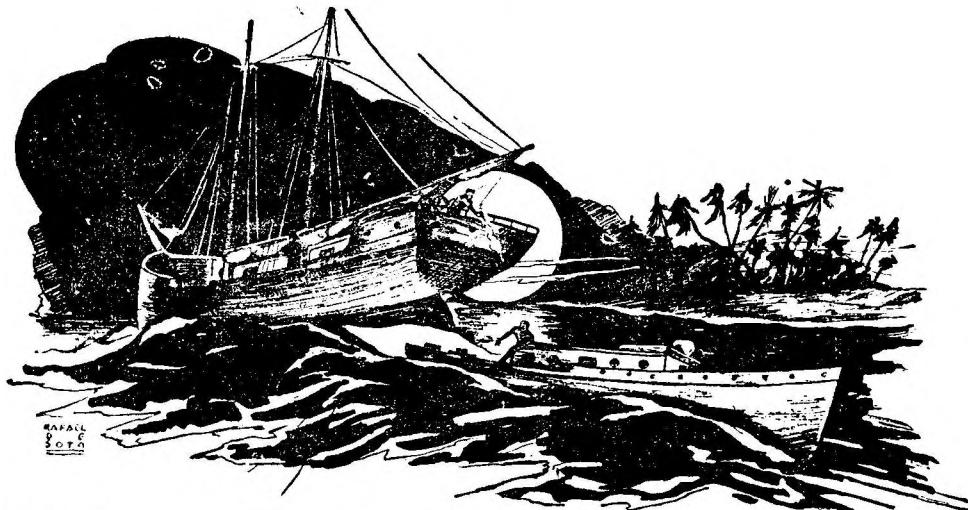
### LION FARMING

TWENTY miles out of Los Angeles, in El Monte, California, there is a real lion farm, the only one of its kind in the world. About eight years ago Mr. and Mrs. Charles Gay came to this country from England with three lions who were to be put through their paces for the movies. The movie contract completed, Mr. and Mrs. Gay were debating plans for the future when one of the lionesses presented them with three rollicking baby cubs. They decided to buy a farm, create it into a jungle, and go into the lion-raising business.

The first step in the Gays' plan was to change the farm into a miniature jungle. Posts the size of telegraph poles and heavy steel netting were used to encompass the area. Old-time animal trainers and zoo men did not believe that lions could be raised successfully. The Gays decided to create a natural environment for their beasts.

The roof of the large, low-spread, main building is thatched with palms and grass like a native hut of Central Africa. A stockade, covered and camouflaged by huge palms, completely surrounds the whole farm. The inclosed jungle is divided into arenas and runways so that the lions can exercise and be moved around.

Now there are one hundred and fifty lions on the farm, ranging all the way from baby cubs to King Sol, the ten-year-old king of the farm. The farm has been a financial success. One lion is a popular movie actor and has brought in more than fifty thousand dollars in the last five years. But the principal source of revenue is the public.



# The Tangle at Tulai

by G.A.Wells

Part II

JOHN CRANE, the lone survivor of a shipwreck, fought his way through the dense jungle growth of a tropical island in search of succor. He found a deserted schooner floating at anchor in a land-locked harbor.

Searching the schooner, Crane found a girl's diary—and the body of a murdered man.

Katherine Broughton's diary revealed to Crane that the murdered man was her brother, and the owner of the schooner. It revealed that Frank Welton, Bert Hendren, Tom Delano, and a Mr. Thax had been aboard. These four conspirators had killed the owner and the crew of the schooner in an attempt to gain possession of some emeralds that the girl possessed.

Welton, Hendren and Thax returned to the schooner to search for the emeralds. John Crane hid, awaiting developments. He was determined to help the girl if he could find her whereabouts.

The three men quarreled. Welton and Hendren killed Thax. Crane saw Hendren find the stones, but he couldn't see where Hendren hid them. Welton didn't know that Hendren had found the emeralds.

Welton and Hendren went ashore and discovered Crane's footprints on the beach. Assuming that the stranger must have found

the emeralds, Welton returned to the schooner to search for him. Hendren accompanied Welton. Both men knew that the stranger must know of their murders.

Crane, from his hiding place on the schooner, saw the two men come over the side, revolvers drawn, searching for him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### STRATEGY.

**S**UDDENLY Welton switched off his torch. The two men became less distinct to Crane in the glow that came up from the cabin through the skylight. But he was still able to see them and watch their movements.

"We'll have a look around up here on deck before we go below," Crane heard Welton say. "Look sharp now, Bert. Have your gun ready to crack down, but don't kill him unless you have to. We've got to find out something about the stones before we bump him."

Though Hendren would be laughing up his sleeve at Welton, Crane realized that Hendren would make every honest effort to find him. Hendren as well as Welton had a vital interest in locating the man whose footprints they had found in the sand on the beach, though the interests of the two men in that respect were not altogether identical.

Welton would doubtless be thinking principally of the emeralds, while Hendren, knowing the whereabouts of the emeralds, would more probably be thinking about his neck with respect to the murder of Dick Broughton and the schooner's crew.

"Try the deck house first, Bert. You take the galley and I'll take the lounge," said Welton.

The space beneath the window seat, it would now appear, was not such an ideal hiding place as Crane had banked on. Under the circumstances, adhering to Welton's policy of missing no chances, it was a certainty that the space beneath the window seat would be searched.

Crane hastily decided to eschew the window seat and take his chances in the open, where he would at least have a running start if necessary.

Crane flattened himself against the wall of the lounge just inside the starboard door, revolver in hand. He heard the footsteps of the two men as they walked forward. One of the men, Hendren, no doubt, passed the port door and went on forward.

At the same moment Welton's form loomed in the starboard door and stopped there. So close was he that Crane could have lifted a hand and touched him.

Then Welton stepped over the door combing and came in, switching on his torch as he did so. But scarcely had both his feet touched the deck in the lounge than Crane brought his gun down upon Welton's head with great force.

Welton uttered a soft grunt and crumpled, his revolver and the torch clattering noisily to the deck. The bulb of the torch was smashed and the light went out.

Crane did not stop to get Welton's gun; he couldn't lose precious moments searching for it in the dark. He leaped to the port door.

"Help, Bert! Help! Help!" Crane yelled.

Then he leaped back to the starboard door and out on deck. He ran aft, making hardly a sound. Over the taffrail Crane went and dropped into the boat that had recently been used by Welton and Hendren.

Crane had taken particular note of where they came aboard. He was familiar with motor boats. In a few moments the boat was untied and the engine was roaring.

The boat shot through the water, moving swiftly forward along the schooner's port side. Crane sprang to the cockpit and seized the tiny wheel. He turned the boat's bow toward the sea-gate.

Crane saw a spurt of yellow flame from the *Sara Belle's* deck, and, above the roar of the motor, heard the whine of a bullet. But he was not hit, and, as far as he could make out, neither was the boat. He was soon out of range, though Hendren, for it must be he, wasted a few more shots firing at random.

When Crane judged that he was within a couple of hundred yards of the sea-gate he shut off the motor. The boat lost headway and began to drift.

There were a few matches in one of the pockets of the pants Crane had appropriated from the forecastle. He lighted a ball of oily waste he found beside the motor. He set the flare on the gunwale at the stern, and the flame lighted the water for quite a distance about the boat.

Any one aboard the schooner could

easily have seen Crane bending over the motor, as if tinkering with it.

It was, Crane thought, ten minutes or more before his decoy showed the results he had hoped for. Perhaps it required just that long for Welton to recover from the whack Crane had given his head with the revolver.

At any rate, Crane heard loud, excited voices, angry voices, cursing voices, and presently the roaring exhaust of a motor boat. He could imagine the exultation of Welton and Hendren as they piled into the boat to give chase. Crane, with a stalled motor, would be easy pickings.

The pursuing boat came toward him like a whirlwind. Crane waited until it had gotten a good start, then kicked his flare overboard and extinguished it. A moment later his motor was roaring again and he was away toward the sea-gate like the wind.

He gave the motor all the gas she could swallow. In the darkness he could not tell if he was gaining or losing on his pursuers. If the following boat gained and caught up with him, his plans would be knocked into a cocked hat.

Crane was close to the sea-gate now. The trailing boat was gaining, he thought. At least he could hear her exhaust more plainly above the roar of his own exhaust.

Now Crane was almost in the sea-gate. He saw the towering cliffs just ahead on either side. Quickly he lashed the wheel amidships to keep the boat on her course. Then he slipped over the gunwale into the water, thanking his lucky star that the men behind had no torch to spot him. Taking a long breath, he dove straight for the bottom.

His lungs were on the point of bursting when he again broke water at the surface. And had he come up three or four seconds sooner than he did the bow of the pursuing boat undoubtedly

would have crashed into him, for he was directly in its path.

As it was, the churn of her wake slapped him violently in the face. Evidently the two men had not seen him, for the boat sped on.

For a brief space, Crane floated and rested, then struck out for the schooner about a quarter of a mile away, keeping the cliffs on his right hand for guidance in the dark. Now and then he paused to tread water and listen. But he heard nothing. Both boats had passed through the gate into the open sea beyond.

When Crane, at last, reached the schooner and climbed aboard, one of his first acts was to clean and dry his revolver and cartridges. The cartridges, he was quite certain, had not been harmed by their immersion in the water. The bullets and caps were well fitted and had the added protection of a film of waterproof grease.

An hour and more passed before Welton and Hendren returned to the schooner. They returned under oar power instead of motor power, however. Evidently something had happened to their motor.

Welton was cursing a blue streak when they got aboard. Hendren was singing a chorus of a like order, though less fervently. From the window seat in the lounge Crane heard and saw all.

"I'd give a hundred dollars cash to know how the hell that drain cock got open!" Welton snarled at Hendren.

"How the hell do I know!" Hendren snarled back. "You talk like you think I opened it!"

"Oh, shut up!" Welton rejoined savagely. "All our work for nothing! We'll never lay our hands on the stones now!"

"You've still got the girl," growled Hendren. "You're the only one gets anything out of this job. You ain't got no kick——"

"Keep your trap shut and get some

gas and fill up that tank!" rasped Welton. "It'll soon be daylight and we've got to tow this boat over to Tulai. Two of us can't sail her over, that's sure."

"I don't see any sense in taking her to Tulai now," Hendren said grumbly. "The stones are gone, ain't they? I say burn her and get her out of the way."

"If we had the stones we could afford to burn her. We've got to have something for our trouble. I know that a certain party at Naples will give twenty thousand cash for this boat and ask no questions. We'll make a few changes in her and run her over there and sell her."

"It's risky; I don't like it," Hendren argued.

"Did you hear me ask you what you like?" retorted Welton.

"You're fixing to slip nooses around our necks, Frank. Don't forget the man who made off with our stones. He may be honest and know more than is good for us. If I had my way, I'd set fire to this barge and get away while we can."

"As it happens, friend Bert, it's my way you're going to have," answered Welton flatly. "We're not going to burn twenty thousand dollars if I can help it, and I think I can."

"This is no time to get cold feet. We're in this job up to our necks literally, and we've got to see it through. You let me handle this and we'll come through all right. I've been in tighter corners than this."

"Go fill that gas tank now. You ought to find a couple of fifty-gallon drums of gas in the storeroom. I'll get us something to eat, then we'll heave Thax to the fish and get him out of the way."

Crane dropped to the deck and rolled in under the window seat, now with the feeling that it would be safe to do so.

There would be no occasion for a careful search of the schooner now, the stranger who had been aboard presumably having gotten safely away with the emeralds.

Crane did not believe that Hendren had hidden the emeralds anywhere in the lounge; he would have sought a more obscure place than that.

There were several articles lying on the deck under the window seat, among them a pair of soft, velvetlike boudoir slippers, or "mules," as they are generally called by the ladies.

The same impulse that had caused Crane to retain Katherine Broughton's handkerchief now caused him to keep the mules close beside him. The other things he shoved into a corner out of the way.

Crane fingered the "mules" almost reverently. The very feel of them in his hands seemed to empower him to paint a mental picture of Katherine Broughton, for he had no doubt as to their ownership.

The "mules" were small and dainty and as light as feathers. The toes were stuffed with cotton to help them retain their shape.

## CHAPTER IX.

### HIDDEN CARGO.

AS Crane lay there in the intense darkness under the window seat, he did a bit of reflecting. Things were not turning out badly for him, at any rate.

His strategy in seeming to escape in the motor boat had, apparently, worked. Welton was bemoaning the loss of the emeralds. Hendren, of course, knew that they were not lost.

Crane, knowing several things that Welton did not, thought he could guess in less than two chances who had opened the drain cock of that gas tank. Hendren was the man. It was very much to Hendren's advantage that

Crane should get away, leaving behind with Welton the impression that he had also gotten away with the emeralds.

Hendren would probably believe, if he were not a fool, that Crane had seen him take the gems while Welton was unconscious. His interest lay either in killing Crane or letting him get away. As he hadn't had the opportunity to kill him, he had let him get away. A very simple matter, that, to drain the gas tank and deprive the motor of fuel.

Shouting, and the exhaust of a motor wakened Crane. He sat up suddenly; at least he tried to sit up. His head came in violent contact with the bottom boards of the window seat.

He fell back, rubbing his head ruefully, and listened. For a while he heard only the steady staccato barking of the motor, then Welton's voice cried out.

For a time Crane could not figure out what was going on, but finally guessed it. It was the slight rolling of the deck under him that made it clear. The schooner was at sea in tow of the motor boat, very likely headed for Tulai—and Katherine Broughton.

"I wonder how long I've been asleep," Crane said to himself.

It was still dark under the window seat. He cautiously lifted a corner of the valance and peeped out. The sunlight was streaming into the lounge. By the slant of the light along the deck he judged that it was either early morning or late afternoon, his guess favoring the latter. Welton's voice again.

Crane was certain that as the motor boat at the outer end of the towing line could not steer itself, it would have a pilot aboard.

Since Welton's voice sounded as if he were aboard the schooner, it followed that Hendren was in the motor boat. Welton's voice also sounded from ast of the deck house.

"I'll have a look," Crane decided.

He crawled from his cuddy hole and got to his feet. The mementoes of his two-day battle with the jungle were sore, and hurt like the mischief. Lying on the hard deck under the window seat for several hours had made his muscles stiff.

Crane looked out a window and saw Welton at the wheel. Then he spent three or four minutes walking to and fro in the lounge to flex his muscles.

On top of one of the bookcases in the lounge was a small ivory clock. Crane plainly heard its ticking. But the clock, Crane was positive, had not been ticking when he crawled in under the window seat.

The inference was plain. Either Welton or Hendren had entered the lounge while Crane slept and set the clock and started it running.

Crane chuckled to himself. "I've often wondered if I snored in my sleep," he said. "I know now that I don't. And a good thing for me I don't."

It was well along in the afternoon when the schooner *Sara Belle* drew in toward Tulai. At least Crane assumed that the island he saw about four miles off the starboard bow was Tulai. Certain orders and instructions that Welton shouted ahead to Hendren caused Crane to draw that conclusion.

Tulai was not a large island as islands in the Pacific go. Crane could see both ends of it at the same time and judged it to be about eight miles long by four or five miles wide. It was generally flat, and copiously vegetated, though there was a cluster of low hills at the eastern end.

Half an hour later the schooner was anchored in a very pretty little harbor, and Welton and Hendren were on their way ashore, perhaps two hundred yards distant, in the motor boat.

Crane used what little of daylight was left to have a good look at the beach and get his bearings for future

use. The drift of the current had swung the schooner with her port side toward the beach, thus Crane had a good view without the risk of venturing on deck.

About a hundred yards back from the water, standing in a grove of palms, was a very nice looking and commodious house. It was supported on piles several feet from the ground, as is usually the case with houses built in tropical jungles.

There was a front veranda, facing the sea. At the water's edge a jetty jutted out from the beach, the motor boat being tied up at the end of it. To the right of the house and some distance back of it, Crane caught glimpses of thatched roofs. The quarters of the field workers, no doubt.

It was a nice looking place. In short, such a place as would very naturally belong to a man who had converted a trading schooner into an elegant private yacht.

"I wonder if Katherine Broughton is confined in one of the rooms of that house," Crane speculated. "If so, it would simplify matters a good deal for me to know which room it is.

"I'll have to try to get word to her to-night that I'm here. It may do her a world of good to know that some one is trying to help her. I'd also like to tell her about her emeralds. I guess, though, she's not thinking much about emeralds. More likely thinking about her brother and what is to become of her."

In the tropics it grows dark very swiftly. The twilight is more a suggestion than an actual fact. Shortly after the sun went down, Crane was able to go out on the open deck without much danger of being seen. He had a few bites to eat in the galley, then made preparations to go ashore.

Though he was inclined to the belief that Katherine Broughton was held a prisoner in the house, it did not neces-

sarily follow that he would be able to see her and talk with her.

What did the girl look like? Merely a very natural question that Crane asked himself, and such as any man in similar circumstances would have asked himself.

But to talk with her would be a greater boon than any other the gods could grant him that night. It would be much better to have her in on any plans he made for her rescue. He doubted very much that he would get to talk to her, however.

Crane went down to the girl's cabin and carefully closed the door behind him. The room was fitted with a small, round porthole, sealed with thick glass, and this he covered by hanging one of Katherine Broughton's garments upon the dogs that secured the port. After which he lit the lamp in a bracket on one of the bulkheads. Seating himself at the dressing table with note paper and a fountain pen he had picked up from the floor where Thax had dumped them, Crane began a message to the girl. He wrote:

I am John Crane. I was shipwrecked on the island where Welton and his gang left the *Sara Belle*. Through your diary and several other mediums I became acquainted with your situation and have come to Tulai to help you.

Thax came alone to the *Sara Belle* last night to search for your emeralds. Welton and Hendren followed and killed him. Welton and Hendren discovered my presence aboard the schooner, but I tricked them into the belief that I escaped out to sea in one of the motor boats.

I stowed away on the schooner and came to Tulai when the two men towed her here. Welton means to sell her. At present Hendren has your emeralds hidden somewhere aboard the *Sara Belle*, but Welton is ignorant of the fact that Hendren found them.

Welton believes that I got away with the emeralds. I have your other jewelry. If I am unable to get contact with you to-night for a personal talk, please keep watch for me to-morrow night and try to arrange to see me.

If the worst comes to the worst I will use every endeavor to kill your three captors, but as I am not as inhuman as they, I will

first exhaust efforts to take them alive. Much depends upon your courage.

That much was sufficient, Crane thought, reading over what he had written. There were many more things he had wanted to tell her in the message, but thought he would be lucky if he got to her even what he had written. He folded the sheet of paper and hefted it in his hand. It was like a feather.

"Now I've got to have something to carry this in through the window," he told himself. "Something heavy enough yet not so hard that it will make a racket when it strikes the floor. I wonder if one of those—yes, the very thing!"

He put out the light and went up to the lounge and got Katherine Broughton's mules from beneath the window seat. He thought they were ideal for his purpose. Sandwiching his note between the mules he bound them firmly together with a string.

In the forecastle he found a wooden tub, the half of a barrel, which he put overside into the water and moored to the schooner's side with a line. Then he undressed and made a bundle of his clothes and put them into the tub with his revolver and the mules.

Crane was on the point of climbing over the rail himself for the swim ashore when his alert ears caught the sound of oars.

It was a very faint sound, and he questioned whether he heard it or imagined it, but, after listening intently for a few moments, decided that he was not mistaken.

Crane made a dash for the forecastle hatch and went down. He had not stopped to get the revolver from the tub. Thus his position would be desperate if he were discovered by the person or persons who were evidently coming out to the *Sara Belle*.

Crane registered a vow not to be discovered, though there was nowhere

in the forecastle to hide, except under one of the bunks, and a close searcher would have him out of there in no time.

## CHAPTER X.

### RECONNAISSANCE.

After what, to Crane, seemed like hours of waiting he heard a little thud and felt a slight tremor as something bumped against the schooner's side. He judged the boat had come to the *Sara Belle*'s side well aft. He then understood why he had not heard the boat approaching long before he did. The oars were muffled.

Only one man came aboard from the boat. Crane could not see him, but he could hear his footsteps, which gave him the impression of there being but one man.

Crane was afraid to chance a peep from the hatch, and consoled himself with the reflection that in the darkness he would be unable to see anything anyhow. So he crouched at the foot of the forecastle ladder and waited, his ears sharply attuned to catch the least sound.

For possibly two or three minutes there was a dead silence broken only by the soft murmur of the water lapping against the schooner. Where the prowler was, Crane had no way of knowing, but hoped that he was somewhere aft and would remain there.

Then the silence was abruptly broken by a terrific burst of swearing in which Frank Welton's name was mentioned with great frequency. Crane instantly recognized the voice as belonging to Hendren. A light of understanding suddenly broke over him and he choked back a laugh.

"Ah-ha, Bert, my lad," Crane chuckled. "I might have known it was you. You sneaked out here to get the emeralds, and if your cursing means anything you find them gone and think

Welton stole a march on you. Score one for Welton."

Crane felt rather sure that was what had happened. Welton had, either by accident or otherwise, found the stones that his faithless partner had hidden while Welton lay unconscious in the cabin after the fight with Thax. Possibly Welton might suspect that Hendren had found the stones and hidden them, and perhaps not. He might reason that Thax had found and rehidden them.

Or to go still further back, maybe Katherine Broughton herself had hidden the gems where he had found them. At any rate, Welton had the stones. At least Hendren's actions led him to believe so.

It was Crane's opinion that Welton had found the stones by accident rather than design. Being under the impression that Crane had escaped in the motor boat with the stones, Welton would have given up the search for them.

Furthermore, Welton was a fool for luck, and it seemed to be one of the ironies of fate that luck went with such men as Welton.

Also it was evident that Welton knew more than a little bit about the game of double crossing, for judging by the way Hendren was carrying on, Welton had taken the stones and said nothing to his confederates about finding them.

If he hadn't already mentioned finding the stones to them, it plainly followed that he did not intend to mention it.

If one could overlook the murder of Dick Broughton and the present predicament of his sister there was quite a bit of humor in the situation. It was, Crane thought, very much a comedy of errors.

With scarcely a pause in his cursing, Hendren got back into his boat and started rowing shoreward. Crane crept to the top of the hatch ladder and lis-

tened to make certain that Hendren had really gone, then stepped out on deck. He could hear Hendren's swearing even after the sound of the oars had ceased, and presently that too died out and all was quiet again.

Crane waited a while longer, however, before he ventured over the side into the water. He swam leisurely to avoid splashing and making a noise, pushing the tub ahead of him with one hand. He reached the beach without mishap and landed about a quarter of a mile from the house. He put on his clothes, thrust the revolver into a pocket, and the "mules" into the breast of his shirt, carefully hiding the tub in a clump of bushes.

Half an hour later Crane was snuggled down in the shrubbery a hundred feet or so from the east side of the house, a little to the rear, watching and listening. It was early yet. Before he left the schooner he had had a look at the clock in the lounge and it was then almost eight o'clock.

He had used about an hour swimming to the beach, dressing, and arriving at where he now was, therefore it was nearly nine o'clock. Welton and his two friends would scarcely think of going to bed before midnight; they would have a good deal to talk about.

Things were rather muddled as far as they and the emeralds were concerned. Welton no doubt had the emeralds. At least that was Crane's opinion, and he had no doubt about what Hendren thought.

Would Welton tell Delano, the third member of the gang, that he, Crane, had run away with stones? Crane thought that he would, and to keep from exposing his own hand, Hendren would have to verify Welton's story.

"Yes, sir, this is what I would call a first-class example of honor among thieves," Crane chuckled. "I find that they are just as dishonest as other folks. No matter who gets the emer-

alds, it would appear that I am the only one who is able to keep track of them at every change of ownership.

"I know that Welton has them. Hendren believes that Welton has them, while Delano doesn't know anything about it. But Delano will have his innings yet. If he is of a piece with Welton and Hendren he certainly isn't going to take it lying down. If they would only start a war of attrition among themselves everything would be fine."

Crane squatted there in the clump of shrubbery for much more than an hour, watching and listening and waiting. Voices came from the veranda at the front end of the house, but they were unintelligible to him. There was no light, except in a room that opened to the veranda, probably the living room.

For a long time he saw and heard nothing whatever at the rear end of the house, where he thought it most likely that the girl would be confined, because of the isolation. Crane had heard Welton say something about a schooner *Hurricane*, Captain Albright, coming to Tulai. The gang would probably wish to keep the girl as much out of the way as possible.

In the starlight, Crane could see the house well enough to note its main features. In the rear wall there were two windows east, and one west of a door about the middle, the door being reached by a flight of ten or a dozen steps from the ground.

About thirty feet behind the house was what looked like an arbor with vines growing over it. A flower garden or something of the sort there, perhaps. The space between the floor of the house and the ground, about seven feet in depth, was inclosed by a kind of wooden lattice. On the east side of the house were five windows, but no doors.

A light suddenly appeared. It came

from an oil lamp and shone through the window nearest to the northeast corner of the house, the window closest to Crane. Through this window Crane saw a man come into the room carrying the lamp. It was Welton. He sat the lamp down upon a table near the door.

With the light shining through the window, Crane saw something that he could not see before when the room was dark. The window was screened, but it was also barred with what were undoubtedly iron bars running perpendicularly and spaced about three inches apart.

"That's her cell!" Crane exclaimed to himself. "I must get closer."

If he was to hear what Welton was going to say to the girl, and perhaps get a clew that would influence his further plans, he must indeed get closer. He crept toward the house, taking advantage of every bush and clump of shrubbery that offered. He had his revolver in hand, ready for use.

Arriving at the house, Crane stopped beside the lattice. But it wouldn't do to remain there in the open. Some one might come along and find him. He must get under the house and out of the way.

"There ought to be a door in that lattice somewhere," he thought.

Crane found it about ten feet away, toward the front of the house, and it was fastened only with a hasp and staple and a wooden pin. He opened it and went in, closing but not fastening it behind him. In a few moments he had crawled softly to a spot directly beneath the room from whose window the light shone. He heard a voice; evidently he had missed some of the talk.

"Well, what do you say?" Crane heard Welton ask.

There was no answer to this question.

"You might as well come to my

terms now as any time, Katherine," Welton's voice spoke again.

Crane's heart leaped. Just overhead, not half a dozen feet away, was the girl whose cause he had sponsored without ever having seen her; the girl whose diary he had read; the girl whose jewelry and handkerchief he had at that moment in his pocket; the girl whose bedroom slippers he had picked up; the girl whose brother had been foully murdered by a gang of ruffians who now held her a captive.

## CHAPTER XI.

### CONTACT.

YOU know I'll do anything in the world for you, Katherine." Welton was speaking again after a silence.

"Then be a man and let me out of here," the girl's voice now said. "Why do you keep me penned here as if I were a wild animal? Is that your idea of chivalry? Are you afraid of me, you and your hirelings?"

It was a pleasing voice, Crane thought, even when broken by the anger it now conveyed to his listening ears.

"For a good many years I had dreamed of a girl like you," Welton's voice went on suavely. "When I saw you for the first time at Brisbane eight years ago—we danced together a good many times that night, didn't we?—I knew then that my dream had come true.

"I fell in love with you then and I have loved you ever since. I know I haven't seen much of you since then, until the past year or so, but I never forgot you or ceased to love you. It was because of you that I cultivated your brother. Katherine, why do you persist in refusing me? What is wrong with me?"

"Oh, if you would only go away with your abominable lies and let me alone!" the girl cried wearily. "The

very sight of you repels me. You ask what is wrong with you. I will tell you. Everything! You are dishonorable and degraded and despicable. I loathe you. Now that I have answered your question, will you please go?"

"All in good time, my dear Katherine. I have no intention of going until this question is settled definitely one way or the other. I am determined that you shall marry me."

"And I am determined that I will not marry you!" the girl answered defiantly, and Crane applauded her spirit. "I can imagine nothing so repulsive as being your wife. That settles the matter definitely, doesn't it?"

"By no means." Welton laughed. "I won't compromise with you, my dear. I have gone too far, risked too much."

"Indeed you have gone too far. Far too far—murdering my poor brother as you did."

"I? My dear girl! Remember, please, that it was Thax and not I who shot Dick."

"I hold you responsible. You could have prevented it. Though I have no proof, I am morally certain that you ordered that beast Thax to shoot Dick to get him out of the way."

"I refuse to argue the question with you," said Welton serenely. "But since you hold me responsible for Dick's death, don't you see how necessary it is for me to take steps to protect myself? As my wife, you either wouldn't or couldn't testify against me, in case I were brought to trial."

"What a cur you are! So that's why you want to marry me?"

"Not at all. I asked to marry you before Dick's death, if you will please remember. Of course, if you married me now it would be rather—er—convenient—a sort of life insurance, so to speak. I know what I'm up against, dear girl. I'm not trying to fool myself about that."

"But don't think me such a cad as

to have for my only reason for wanting you to marry me, the advantage of our relationship in the event something happens. I'm not hiding behind a woman's skirts."

"You most honorable of men," said Katherine Broughton's voice scathingly.

"I think we have mutual interests, Katherine. I not only want to settle down, but now that Dick is dead you will naturally need some one to look out for your material interests.

"You are the sole owner of several fine plantations located here and there on islands in the Pacific. You and Dick inherited most of them from your father, I believe. Dick gone, you must have some one—some good man to manage your properties for you. It occurred to me that—"

"Please don't go on," interrupted the girl. "It is so revolting to hear a man talk to a woman as you are talking to me now. It makes me feel almost ashamed that Dick was of your sex. You are a monster. I thought that such creatures as you lived only in fiction."

"That's cruel, Katherine."

"You are a Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the flesh. At Honolulu and other places where we met you were so nice to me; a gentleman, so attentive, so gallant. In fact, you typified one of those men whom women yearn to meet, but of whom there are so few.

"Even then, though, I had a curious feeling about you; that there was something wrong with you, that you were, in short, a devil. Something told me to avoid you as I would a plague.

"But poor Dick was so wrapped up in you. I was a long time discovering why. Would you mind telling me just what it was you held over Dick's head—that Singapore business?"

"It is a long story, my dear," answered Welton. "It was just a little affair that made Dick liable to several years in prison if he were found out.

He was perfectly innocent when he went into the business."

"I think I can guess who persuaded him to enter the business," said the girl.

Welton laughed. "Anyhow, when he learned what he had let himself in for he had to go ahead with it or get caught flat. Because I was good enough to say nothing about the affair to the authorities, Dick forced me to accept a present of five thousand dollars a year, since."

"Of course, blackmailing, too, would be in your repertoire," was Katherine Broughton's comment. "Anything to get money seems to be your creed. You beast!"

"My dear Katherine—"

"At any rate, I suspected you of dirty work. My opinion of you has been justified. Dick murdered at your behest, my emeralds stolen, myself looking forward to I don't know what terrible things."

"Very good indeed, Katherine," said Welton mockingly. "But I can't afford to compromise with you. Marry me and you are safe. Refuse and you are—"

"I understand," the girl said when Welton paused. "One murder more or less means nothing in your life. Even a helpless woman is not safe in your hands. The devil has a perfect henchman in you, Frank Welton. Won't you please go?"

"I'm sorry I bore you," said Welton cynically. "All right, I'll go. But think it over, Katherine. Dick told me that Albright is due here in the *Hurricane* in a few days. The captains of steamers are empowered to perform the marriage ceremony. Perhaps the captains of trading schooners are likewise empowered. Meantime, think it over."

Crane saw the reflection of the light disappear from the ground outside. Footsteps, a door shut, a key rasped in

a lock, then more footsteps that passed on toward the front of the house.

For about five minutes Crane waited, then came from under the house and went to the window where he had recently seen the light. The screen over the window would prevent his getting the note to the girl without her assistance; she would have to open the screen for him.

"A personal talk with her would be better anyhow," he said optimistically.

He dared to make a soft hissing sound with his lips, repeating it several times, but got no response. The sill of the window was about ten feet from the ground, at least four feet above Crane's head. He could easily have leaped and caught it with his hands, but doubted that he could hold on long enough to do any good.

He found a small table, carried it to the side of the house, and placed it beneath the window.

Crane was a man of considerable weight. He mounted the table with extreme care, ready to jump and run at the first warning creak or crash. The table held firm. Presently he stood erect, his hands on the sill, his head just above it.

"Miss Broughton!" he whispered. "Don't make any noise, please!" he added quickly.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A WORKING AGREEMENT.

AN eternity seemed to pass before, not far from the screen, Crane was able to make out the girl's figure. He suspected that she was staring out at him, perhaps wondering what new trick her captors were up to.

"Don't make any noise, please," he repeated.

"Who are you?" she demanded in a low voice, and Crane thought he caught a mixture of both hope and fear in her tone.

"I am John Crane. I was shipwrecked on the island——"

And he went on hurriedly to tell her substantially what he had written in his note, adding a few items that occurred to him as he went along. He heard her sob once or twice.

"Thanks, John Crane!" she said throatily when he had finished.

She was crying very softly to herself. Crane waited until she had regained her composure. All the while he kept his ears wide open and a sharp lookout along the side of the house.

"The *Sara Belle* carried only a dinghy, a small whaleboat and a motor boat," the girl said presently. "When they brought me here to Tulai, they brought the three boats along. There was another motor boat already here."

"I may not have much time to talk to you, Miss Broughton; some one might come along. I think we had better try to come to a working agreement while we can. Have you anything to suggest?"

"I don't know what to tell you," she replied. "There are three of them and only one of you. They would delight in killing you if they found you here. There will be a great risk in anything we attempt. And I can be of little or no help to you as long as I am locked in this room. I can open the screen, but not the grille."

Crane consumed several precious moments, critically examining the steel grille that virtually made of the room a prison cell. The grille covered the whole window.

There were eight bars, each about three quarters of an inch in diameter, set in a steel frame that fitted into the window frame outside the screen and the sash.

By pulling himself up by the bars, Crane determined that the grille was fastened into the window by long bolts that passed through the window frame at top, bottom and sides, being firmly

locked with nuts screwed tightly at the inner ends of the bolts.

He would need a wrench to loosen and remove the nuts. A file would, no doubt, cut through three or four of the bars and allow the passage of the girl's body.

But to remove the grille from the window with a wrench would, he knew, take quite a while, and it was almost idiotic to think of filing through three or four of those thick, tough bars.

Moreover, and to the point, Crane had neither wrench nor file. Still further, the employment of either method for freeing the girl would mean noise. He uttered a sigh of disappointment.

"Were these bars here when they put you in the room, or did they make them afterward?" he asked curiously.

"They put up the grille after they put me here. Delano and Hendren put it up at Welton's direction," she replied. "But they didn't make the grille themselves."

"Three years ago," she went on to explain, "while Dick and I were here, there was an uprising among the natives we employed to work the plantation here. We put it down in a few days, but not before the natives lost five men and we had lost our house boy who was helping us to defend the place."

"Dick had a big scare about me at the time. As soon as possible he had all the windows and the outside doors fitted with these grilles. It happens that we haven't needed them since, and in the meantime they are stowed under the house out of the way."

Fate certainly had a way of playing queer pranks, Crane thought. The very measure that Dick Broughton had taken for his sister's safety and protection was now proving to be a boomerang.

Crane told the girl what he thought about the prospects of freeing her with a wrench or a file, frankly stressing

the improbability of it. She, like him, understood the futility of looking to the window for escape.

"But if you want to try it," she said, "there is a tool house out near the barracks where you can no doubt find what you need. You will have to be very careful, however. We use more than fifty blacks on the plantation and they are not to be trusted too far."

"No doubt, you have had experience with the South Sea blacks and know them. Sanna, our overseer, was fully trustworthy; in fact, he virtually managed this island for us."

"Then suppose I try to see him and get his help?" Crane said.

"Sanna was killed this morning by Delano for trying to communicate with me through this very window," Katherine Broughton told him.

"Oh," said Crane. He studied a few moments. "Who is this Captain Albright of the *Hurricane*, that I heard Welton speak of?"

"He is a trader. Dick used him frequently to run supplies and recruits to our plantations."

"Is he to be trusted?"

"I am sure of it. He and my father were good friends."

"When is he due here?"

"I can't say exactly what day. Dick told him to stop here some time this month for copra. Until you came I looked upon Captain Albright as my only hope, though I must admit that it was a very faint hope."

"If we could get you out of there we could take to the bush and perhaps manage to keep clear until the *Hurricane* arrives," Crane said thoughtfully.

"It would be a chance, of course, but I don't think we could bank on it very much. Welton took great pains to inform me that he had posted with the natives a reward of one thousand sticks of tobacco for my return if I escaped and the reward applies for me either dead or alive."

"Most of these natives would sell his mother's head for a thousand sticks of tobacco. However, if you can find a way to get me out of here I am willing to take the chance of hiding in the bush."

"Maybe we could get away in one of the motor boats," Crane suggested.

"No, the boats are constantly watched. Welton doesn't trust the blacks any more than I do. I told him if I got the chance I would offer ten thousand sticks of tobacco to any native who would help me to escape. Sanna paid the price of trying to help me.

"I believe, as a choice, I would prefer to take my chances in the bush. After all, perhaps our best course is to wait for the arrival of the *Hurricane*. You could contrive to see Captain Albright and have a talk with him."

"Suppose Welton decides to force the issue with you," said Crane. "He wouldn't hesitate to kill you."

"I don't think he will," the girl said confidently. "He won't kill me until he gets from me what he wants. But we must take that chance. When he comes to see me again I will pretend to consider his proposal and ask for more time to think about it. What will you do?"

"Go back to the *Sara Belle* and wait," Crane answered. "That's all I can do. I can watch the house better from the schooner than from ashore. I'll come ashore again to-morrow night and try to see you. During the interval, some plan may occur to me."

"You mustn't take any unnecessary risks, Mr. Crane. If something happens to you I can see the end for me. I can't expect much of anything from Captain Albright, because I will probably not get to see him. Welton is clever at lying, as I know by experience, and will somehow manage to pull the wool over Captain Albright's eyes."

"I'll be careful," Crane promised her.

"By the way, Miss Broughton, I brought your boudoir slippers ashore with me. I found them under the window seat in the lounge. You see, I wrote you a note which I intended to try to get to you through the window, and thought your slippers would be ideal as a weight to carry my message. Open the screen and I'll give them to you."

She softly unlatched the screen and raised it a little way. Crane handed in the "mules." Their hands met and clung together. The touch of the girl's soft fingers thrilled Crane through and through.

"Good-by, until to-morrow night," said Crane.

"Good-by, John Crane!"

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### CLOSE QUARTERS!

CRANE impulsively started to lift the girl's hand to his lips. The stillness of the night was suddenly shattered by the sound of two shots fired in rapid succession from the front of the house. The bullets whistled dangerously near Crane's head. Katherine Broughton uttered a stifled scream.

Crane leaped from the table and dashed toward the rear of the house. As he rounded the corner of the house he collided with a man coming from the opposite direction. Crane struck. His fist caught the man on the point of the chin and sent him tumbling head over heels.

Crane had the curious feeling of being in a trap. The man who had fired the shots at him would doubtless be rushing toward the rear of the house and soon come charging around the corner as Crane had done.

Some one might come charging from the other corner, sandwiching Crane between them. If he ran away from the house, toward the rear, he was sure to be seen and heard.

Not a dozen feet away was the flight of steps that led up to the back door. Crane was halfway up the steps almost before he knew it. The door stood wide open. He was quickly inside, lying prone on the floor, gun in hand, his head toward the steps.

Now if any one came through from the front, Crane was indeed trapped. He prayed earnestly that no one would come that way, for he was not yet ready to shoot it out with the gang. The odds against him were too great.

"Tom! Bert!" Welton's voice was shouting outside.

"Come here, Frank!"

That was a deep voice, a true bass, and one that Crane had not before heard. He surmised that it would be Delano. A beam of light appeared. Crane fairly ground himself against the floor where he lay in the event that the beam of light was thrown up the steps through the door.

"You, eh?" Welton said. "Where's Bert?"

"You'll step on him in a minute."

"Is he dead? Who shot him? You?"

"He's not dead, he's knocked out," Delano said.

"Tom, was that you shooting?"

"Yeh, at one of the blacks," Delano answered. "I came along the side of the house and saw him standing on something at the girl's window. I shot at him and missed."

"Are you sure it was a black you shot at?" Welton demanded to know.

"Who else would it be? Where were you and Bert?"

"On the front veranda. Bert came back to get a drink of water, and a moment after he left me I heard the shooting. He must have come out the back door to see what was going on and the black bashed him. You, Bert, get up out of that and talk! Lend a hand, Tom, and let's get him."

A few moments later Crane heard Hendren's voice cursing roundly.

"Who hit you, Bert?" asked Welton.

"I don't know," replied Hendren. "I ran into him, whoever it was, and he knocked me out."

"Didn't you see who it was?" said Welton.

"I ain't no owl," growled Hendren.

"I tell you it was a black, Frank," Delano's voice broke in. "I had a good look at him."

"Sure you're not mistaken, Tom?"

There was, Crane was certain, an anxious note in Welton's voice.

"Hell!" said Delano raspingly. "Don't you think I know a black when I see one!"

"All cats are black in the dark," Welton commented with a grunt. "All right. You two look around out here and see what you can see. I'll go have a talk with our guest. Here, Tom, you'd better take this flasher."

Crane's heart came into his throat. Would Welton go to the front of the house and come through to the girl's room from that direction? Or would he come——

Crane quickly rolled against a wall and made himself as small as possible. He was ready to shoot to kill at a moment's notice. Welton's footsteps on the stair that led up to the back door sounded to Crane like trip hammers. He lay as quiet as he could. It was dark in the house, pitch dark.

That saved Crane. Welton passed on by, within less than a foot of where Crane lay, and stopped at a door not far away. Crane waited until Welton had unlocked the door of a room, doubtless Katherine Broughton's room, and gone inside, before he moved.

He had quickly decided that his best move lay in getting clear of the house. With only Welton to deal with, he could have solved his problem in short order. But after taking care of Welton he would have to take care of Delano and Hendren. The risk was too great.

Stealthily, Crane squirmed his way toward the back door. He heard low voices, but could not locate the two men until he saw a point of light in the darkness about twenty feet to the rear, and to his right. One of the men had lit a cigarette.

Crane decided to remain where he was. He could not creep down the steps without being heard, if not seen. It was risky to try to get through to the front of the house.

So Crane crouched against the wall near the back door and waited for whatever was meant to happen. He had his revolver clutched tightly in his hand. He settled himself, and could hear what Delano and Hendren were saying to each other.

"Damn you for a damn fool!" Delano snarled. "Why didn't you kill him over there at Le Garde last night when you had the chance? We'd have the stones by now if you had."

"I couldn't kill him, Tom, not with him helpless that way," Hendren said. "I stabbed a man to death once while he was asleep in bed, and when I lifted that table leg last night to knock Frank's brains out that other chap rose up in front of me like a ghost. I just couldn't do it. Besides, I'd just spattered Thax's brains all over the floor and one man a day is my limit."

"You chicken-hearted fool!"

"When Frank and I left here last night to go after Thax you and I didn't have any agreement, did we? Only when we got back from Le Garde a while ago and I told you about the stones did we agree to go fifty-fifty. I could have taken the stones and said nothing to you about 'em, you know."

"Yes, and you wouldn't have said anything to me about the stones now if Frank hadn't found 'em," retorted Delano savagely. "You told me about 'em so I'd help get 'em back. You're a fool! If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't get anywhere but in prison.

Say, look here, you ain't trying to do me, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Bert. Did you hide them stones in the deck house like you told me? And did Frank really find them? Are you trying to put me up to killing Frank, then when he's out of the way you'll skip out with the stones? You ain't above double crossing me. Say, if I catch you at any funny tricks, I'll kill you!"

"Aw, you make me sick!" grumbled Hendren. "I tell you Frank found the stones and he's got 'em now. It was only an accident he found 'em, though. When that man we told you about got away in the motor boat, Frank thought he had the stones. I let him think I thought so, too. Maybe Frank thinks Thax found the stones and hid 'em in the deck house."

"Maybe," said Delano laconically. "Anyhow, if Frank's got the stones he ain't going to say a word to us about 'em. If you ain't blind you can see he's watching us. And we've got to watch him."

"We'll watch him, all right. That's the only way we got of finding out what he did with the stones. He wouldn't be carrying 'em on him; not what he knows now. We'll let him show us where he's got the stones, then bump him. What are we going to do with the girl?"

"I'll take care of her."

"You'd better take good care of her, then. She knows too much for our health, Tom."

"When I get through with her she won't know anything," Delano said with brutal frankness.

"Going to kill her?"

"What else? A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, my friend, and in her case it's going to be fatal."

Delano laughed at what he thought was a pretty bit of wit on his part. Crane gritted his teeth.

"What about the schooner and the house and everything?" Hendren wanted to know.

"A few matches will fix all that. But we ain't doing anything in that line till we get the tip from Frank about the stones."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A THREAT TO KILL.

FOR a brief space the two men were silent. From the other direction, along the hallway toward the front of the house, Crane caught a murmur of voices. A closed door intervened, however, for he could make no sense of what he heard.

"Say, Tom," Hendren started the talk outside again. "Who was that you shot at? Honest now."

"Didn't you hear me tell Frank it was one of the blacks?"

"Yes, but I don't believe that. I bet it wasn't a black."

"Who was it then?"

"I don't know. I was thinking—well, you remember that chap we told you about at Le Garde. I was just wondering if maybe he couldn't have come here when he got away from us at Le Garde. Maybe it was him you saw—"

"Forget it," Delano interrupted with a short laugh. "I'll tell you who it was I shot at. It was Frank."

"Frank! What was he—"

"Not so loud," warned Delano. "Listen. Since you use your head only to hang your hat on, I'll put you wise. Here's the play as I see it."

"Frank's got the stones. That is, unless you're lying. But say Frank's got 'em and keep down argument. All right, now for a clean get-away."

"Frank wants the girl, too, see? Until he can get her to sign the deeds for her property, anyhow. He's not the lad to let all that property slide out of his hands without making a good try for it."

"All right! To help his game along he tells the girl a cock and bull about helping her escape the clutches of a couple of blood-thirsty wretches, meaning you and me. It's a case of half a loaf is better than none with her, so she tumbles for his game."

"He's too wise to try to get her out of the house the usual way, so he figures to slip her out through the window. He knows we're watching him as close as he's watching us, see? All right, when he gets her out they make their get-away in one of the launches, fixing the other boats so that we can't follow 'em."

"That's his game, the dirty hound. But listen. Any time Frank Welton, or whatever his name is, puts anything like that over on me, you call up the bug house and tell 'em to send for me."

"But if you knew it was Frank, I can't understand what you shot at him for," said Hendren. "If you had killed him maybe we never would have known what he done with the stones."

"I didn't try to kill him," answered Delano. "I hope I can handle a gun better than that. I shot at him for the moral effect, if you know what that means. I wanted him to know we ain't dead."

"And, besides, I wanted to have something to give point to me telling him I thought it was a black I shot at. I'm too wise to let him know I thought it was him. I missed him on purpose, see? Another thing, Bertie, boy, I'm not satisfied about things."

"What do you mean, Tom?"

Crane thought he detected a startled note in Hendren's voice, as if Delano had suddenly caught him at something reprehensible.

"Here's what I mean," answered Delano. "All I know about the stones is what you've told me, see? Maybe you told me all you know and maybe you didn't."

"I know you, Bert; I wouldn't trust you any further than I can spit. I've got a hunch you're holding out on me. You tell me Frank found the stones and I don't know whether to believe you or not. What's your game, anyhow!" he said savagely.

There was the sound of a scuffle. Crane heard an oath from Delano.

"My God, Tom, don't kill me!" Hendren's voice whimpered.

"Get down on your knees and swear you told me the truth about the stones!" ordered Delano fiercely. "Get down before I blow your insides out!"

"It was the truth, Tom! I swear it on my knees! When they fell out of that statue that smashed on the cabin floor I took them and run up to the deck house and hid 'em in Katherine's slippers just as I told you! I hope I drop dead right here if that ain't the truth!"

Delano cursed roundly.

"Well, I'll have to take your word for it, seeing there's nothing else I can do," he said doubtfully. "But remember, my lad, if I find out you didn't tell me the truth, I'll kill you! Come along, let's get around front and see what Frank's up to now."

Crane heard them moving away around the house toward the front. He was a bit dazed about what he had just heard. The emeralds were in Katherine Broughton's "mules." He had innocently brought the "mules" ashore with him and handed them through the window to their owner, little suspecting what they held.

Silently, Crane crept from the back door and down the steps, then made a wide detour and reached the beach safely. Some time later he was again aboard the *Sara Belle*, walking up and down the deck in the dim starlight, chewing the cud of his thoughts.

Crane was rather afraid about one thing. If Welton's luck did not desert him, he might get hold of the emeralds.

It might be that at that very moment he had them. Though Katherine Broughton would do everything she could to keep Welton from knowing that Crane had brought the "mules" ashore—she would of course do that much as a protection to Crane—Welton, perhaps, would get them. The luck of the man was phenomenal.

If he found the "mules," not knowing for what purpose Crane had brought them ashore, he would ask himself how they got there and why. He was sure to attach some significance to them.

Welton, however, would suspect either Delano or Hendren of bringing the "mules" to the house. There was nothing else he could suspect, since he would know that he, himself, had not brought them ashore.

He would try to get to the bottom of the mystery. He would most naturally suspect a note or a message of some sort and investigate the wads of paper in the toes of the "mules." Then the emeralds would be his.

There was no dispute in Crane's mind with respect to Welton's course should he find the emeralds in the "mules." He would simply say nothing about finding them. If they accused him, he could counter with an accusation of them. All Welton had to do, provided he got the stones, was to hide them and admit nothing.

From the bottom of his heart, Crane prayed that if Welton got the stones he would keep their whereabouts a secret, at least until after the arrival of the *Hurricane* with help. As far as he could see at present, his own welfare, as well as the girl's, hinged on that.

In his mind's eye, Crane could see Delano, once he got his hands upon the emeralds, killing Welton and Katherine Broughton without further ado. Nor was it likely that he would stop there. Why split the loot two ways

when another bullet judiciously placed would give him all of it?

Crane was not the least concerned about the killing of Welton and Hendren. Their elimination would simplify Crane's problem, except that in that event Delano would have no excuse for letting the girl live and would have, from his point of view, an excellent reason why she should not live.

Crane decided to let his problems rest until morning, feeling sure no one would visit the schooner that night.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE MAGNET.

THE next day, Crane waited until darkness fell. Then he lost no time getting ashore. Katherine Broughton would doubtless have a number of things to tell him about the visit of Welton the previous night, following the discovery of Delano of a man at her window. That, of course, would be of great interest to Crane. But his greatest interest, as he well knew, would be in seeing the girl, in talking to her, in hearing her voice.

Conditions about the house were practically as they had been on his first visit. There was a light at the front and the rear was dark. Aboard the *Sara Belle* during the day, Crane had argued with himself the wisdom of trying to see the girl again that night. An instinctive circumspection advised him against it.

His heart, however, had argued strongly for it. His reason inclined him to the belief that it was hardly probable that Welton would feel the necessity of increasing their vigilance, in view of the fact that there was not likely to be a repetition of a visit of one of the blacks who would have learned that it was a dangerous busi-

ness to be seen in the neighborhood of the house. Welton, in the opinion of Delano and Hendren, would lay low for a while.

When Crane was satisfied that the coast was clear, he stole toward the house. The table, he found, had not been moved. There he should have paused, alert, suspicious.

But he did not. The nearness of Katherine Broughton intoxicated him and stole away his better judgment. In a moment he had mounted the table and was standing with his head above the window sill.

"Miss Broughton—Katherine!" he whispered.

"*Shhh!*" came an answering whisper from the darkness of the room.

The whisper was like a flow of electricity through Crane. It thrilled him from head to feet. Little by little the screen was lifted.

It was only then that Crane noticed something queer about the window. It did not look as it had before; there was, he felt rather than saw, something missing. Ah, yes, it was the steel grille. And on the instant he saw it all clearly. He started to leap back from the window, and the next moment felt a crushing blow on the head.

Crane struggled against the numbness that surged over his body—against the strong arms that pulled him down. In a last flash of thought, he realized his foolhardiness in placing himself in the hands of Katherine Broughton's enemies—men desperate and calculating, who killed without thought of humaneness. Then oblivion swept his tortured mind. He knew nothing more.

The concluding installment of this mystery serial will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, on the news stands March 1st.



# The Brand Changers

by Wolf Wilson

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

## CHAPTER I.

### MISSING CALVES.

**R**IDING out from the cow town of Red Butte toward the Bar Open A Ranch, "Steady" Metlin swung the end of his rope in idle circles and hummed the tune he had just heard ground over and over on the gramophone at Pete's pool hall. Rolled in his slicker behind the cantle of his saddle, were the new ropes for which Boss Jeff Todd had sent him to town. Ahead of him ambled a Bar Open A cow and her brockle-face calf, which Steady had picked up wandering off their range into the county road.

It was a mild spring day. The range-land sun blazed from a cloudless blue sky. But, after the heavy rains, the road was still a greasy, yellow gumbo. Even Steady's horse, his forefeet shod, made heavy going of it.

"Damn it!" the puncher confided to his pony. "If it wa'n't so dog-goned

wet, I could have had all the kinks drug out of them ropes afore we got to the ranch." He reined the animal to one side, where the sparse grass and sage-brush offered better purchase for footing.

Toward them, down a long hill, came another horse and rider, evidently hound for Red Butte. The buckskin pony, barefooted, sprawled his legs, slipped, slid, and just as he neared the cow-puncher, sat down suddenly and splashily on his haunches.

His rider swore lustily and lashed the animal with a heavy-shotted quirt. "Stand up on your feet, you worthless hunk of Injun horseflesh!" he bellowed.

Steady, with a glance at the cow and calf as they dodged into a shallow wash, pulled up. He grinned pleasantly into a pair of angry, dark eyes set in a long, thin, sun-reddened face.

"Slick, ain't it?" he offered, his blue eyes twinkling in spite of himself. "It's some better over here on the side."

The other swept the cow-puncher with a hostile look. "Are you telling me where to ride?"

The grin faded from Steady's face; his brows drew together and his jaw set forward. "What's eating you?" he demanded. There was a quiet menace in his voice.

The man's eyes narrowed, then crinkled into a half-mocking smile. "My mistake, pardner," he apologized, "I'm so plumb riled at this spavined bronc, I could chew horseshoe nails. Been most all day coming in from the ranch."

"It ain't the hoss' fault," snapped Steady, not so easily mollified.

"Oh, come now, I didn't aim to put you on the prod. You're one of the Bar Open A spread, ain't you?" He glanced at the brand on Steady's pony. "Waal, I'm your neighbor on the old Taylor outfit. I've been so damn busy since I took it over this winter that I ain't got round to getting acquainted much."

"That ain't one of Taylor's hosses you're forking."

"No," smiled the other, a glint in his eye, "I picked up this yere bronc on my way in. He's been broke long enough to have some sense, but he's still jumpy. Gathering in strays?"

"Yeah; we're branding this week if the corrals dry out a bit."

"That's a prime calf."

"Uh-huh! Plenty of feed for the cows last winter."

"Twas a good year, wa'n't it? Waal, guess I'd better be moving if I'm going to make town to-night. See you again!"

Steady, starting the cow and calf on again, rode home without a backward glance.

The ranchman sat his horse and watched, through half-closed lids, the diminishing figures of cattle and pony and cow-puncher.

At the Bar Open A, Steady pushed

the cow and calf through the wagon-yard gate onto the near range.

As he handed the ropes to "Snowshoe" Ross, his grizzled cow-puncher pardner, he spoke nonchalantly, "I met up with that new neighbor of oun this afternoon."

"Yeah? Cloy Treagle?" Snowshoe wrinkled his little nose and scratched his left ear meditatively.

"Is that his handle? Ugh! Sorgum and honey! It shore fits. Do you know him?"

"Nope; only seen him once in town buying supplies. They say he's from the East somewhere, Chicago, I guess. Must be a locoed tenderfoot to expect to make a go of the Taylor outfit."

"Humph!" grunted Steady, "he don't talk like no tenderfoot."

About two weeks later, the branding over, Steady Metlin rode out of the Bar Open A corrals with a smile on his square face. The smile deepened and broadened into a grin. He jogged up and down the rolling sagebrush hills, his eyes taking in every detail of the condition of cattle and range. That morning the boss had called him aside; had told him that the foreman had asked for his time; and had offered him the job.

To Steady Metlin the promotion meant more than an expression of confidence in his efficiency as a tophand. It meant that, on the strength of the increase in wages, he could send "Chuck," his fifteen-year-old brother, back to Kansas and his mother for the winter.

Steady was proud of Chuck; the youngster was going to make a rarin' good cattleman all round. He would miss him, too, miss him like thunder; his shrill coyote yell of greeting across the snowy range, his boyish laugh in the bunk house. But Chuck was running wild.

He was drinking too much for his

good at Pete's on Saturday nights. He was throwing away the rest of his wages at poker. The kid was a bungler at bluffing; he was always being called on a poor hand; yet he could not resist sitting in at any and every game that offered. A winter at home would at least joggle him out of his rut; besides, their mother would be darn glad to see him.

Touching his horse lightly with his spurs, Steady trotted along a narrow, red-shale trail high above the gulch which led down to the water troughs for this section of the range, over against the old Taylor outfit fence.

The ancient creek which had carved out the little valley had long since gone dry; but a spring still gushed at the head of the draw. This they had piped down to a broader part of the gulch, to wooden troughs whose roily content saved the cattle miles of weary trailing to the water hole nearer the ranch house.

As Steady threaded through the scrub pines at the top of the hill, whence he first could see the bottom above the troughs, he jerked out an involuntary oath and reined his horse sharply back. Swinging off, he wound a strand of hair from the pony's tail around the animal's nostrils to prevent him nickering; then, leaving him standing on his reins, crept forward and down. Here was luck, indeed! Here was another of the things Steady meant to do as foreman of the Bar Open A, thrust into his hands at the very first throw!

The calf round-up had shown him an unaccountable shortage. Some of the best cows had appeared without any knobby-kneed offspring trotting at their flanks. Not much had been said before the representatives from other outfits that had dropped in to help.

That morning, however, with the responsibilities of his new job uppermost in his mind, Steady had said quietly to

Jeff Todd, "I'm a-going to find out where them calves went to." Now, already, he had run smack into the answer.

He thrust his head cautiously around a tree and peered into the gulch. The opposite hill, barren, sun-baked, pot-holed terraces of white-and-yellow alkali, was a favorite haunt of rattlesnakes.

In the bottom, where the seepage from the spring oozed down, flowering hawthorn and service-berry choked the narrow end. Where the gulch broadened out, a patch of grass flourished with unusual luxuriance, and a solitary cottonwood flickered its leaves.

## CHAPTER II.

### BRAND BLOTTING.

ON the lowest ledge of the alkali, a little spiral of smoke twisted up from a fire of dead sagebrush. Outside the barbed-wire fence which kept the cattle from going up to the spring and trampling the exposed pipe, stood a bawling cow.

Through the branches of the cottonwood, the cow-puncher glimpsed the movement of a saddled horse underneath; but the tree prevented his seeing enough of it for identification. From beneath the thick-topped bushes, drifted up the sound of snapping twigs, of low-voiced cursing.

Yes, this was the best time of the year to rustle calves. It was easy to alter the almost fresh brand, so that when healed the old and new blended indistinguishably except to expert inspection.

Steady drew his gun and worked his way down the hill. This rustler must be a bold one. Why, Chuck had ridden over this morning to inspect the troughs; that was part of his special job.

The brand blotter must have been hiding out; must have waited till Chuck

left. He must have figured that no other puncher would be along, and decided to "pick a few blossoms" as the cattle came in to water.

Out from the bushes, where it had evidently been entangled, suddenly bounded a calf. Steady recognized it instantly as the brockle-face youngster he had picked up on the road from town. A rope dragged jerkingly after one hind leg. At the end of the rope strode a cow-puncher.

As the calf came clear in the open, the puncher ran down the rope. Then he wrestled the calf; busted him near the fire, hog tied him, and pressed the glowing twist of telegraph wire, the brand blotcher's handy iron, against the animal's side. A cloud of white smoke obscured the rustler's figure. The acrid smell of burning hair and the bawl of the brockle-face calf floated up to Steady Metlin, where he crouched under a scrub pine, his gun drooping from his hand, his face gray.

Softly he rose and started to steal back to his horse. A stone slipped under his foot and rattled down the bank. He whirled. On the other side of the calf, the rustler, erect and startled, stared up at the interloper. The sun gleamed dully on the dark-blue barrel of his six-gun.

"Stick 'em up!" he shouted, "I got the drop on you."

Steady raised his arms and moved out into the open. "Just be a little easy on that trigger, Chuck!" he said quietly. "I'm a-coming down."

Across the prostrate calf the brothers confronted each other, the man grim, intense, stunned, the boy sullen, determined.

"Don't come no nearer," he ordered, as Steady approached to read the altered brand.

"What does this mean?" asked the elder, his anger-darkened eyes boring into the defiant ones opposite.

The boy shifted uneasily. "It

means," he replied, his eyes dropping momentarily before the look in his brother's face, "it means I'm a-going to have some money I needs right bad."

"You damn little gambling fool!" scoffed Steady. "How do you think you can sell stolen stock? You don't even own a brand. What brand you putting on 'em? Not mine?"

"No; 'tain't yours, Steady. Stay where you be. I don't want to have to shoot you."

"Chuck, come clean on this whole rotten business. Jeff Todd made me foreman this morning. I was planning to send you to Kansas on the extra wages I'd get. How the devil did you get into this mess and how deep in are you?"

Chuck's gun dropped to his side. "Foreman! Whoopee!" he cried; then sobered abruptly. "Oh, Stead!" he faltered.

"Tell me, pronto! How you playing this game?"

Chuck shook his head. His brother took a step toward the calf. The blue gun swung up again. "I can't tell you, Stead," groaned Chuck, "I—I daresn't."

Steady ejaculated impatiently. "For pity sake, Chuck, don't you see what this means to both of us? Come across now, and let me do what I can to drag you out, afore you bog down permanent."

Chuck's gun wavered. Steady made another stride forward.

"Stop right there!" rang out a sharp command, "and reach for the sky, both of you. Pronto!"

The two turned slowly, hands high. Neither had heard the approach of horses from the direction of the watering troughs. Outside the fence two riders sat behind two menacing muzzles: Cloy Treagle of the old Taylor outfit and Hal, one of his riders.

"Waal, waal!" said Treagle, as his cow-puncher climbed down, opened the gate in the wire, and they both came

through. "If it ain't my pleasant friend of the slick roads! Interested in other kinds of slicks, eh?"

The leering dark eyes and sarcastic mouth made the anger flame in Steady's face. His arm started downward for his gun.

"Nope!" The click of Treagle's hammer warned him. "Hal, suppose you frisk the two rustlers, afore they causes me to damage 'em, regretful but necessary. Come away from that calf."

Hal took their guns.

Then Chuck found his voice. "Treagle," he began, "I—"

"Shut up!" snapped Steady. "I'm doing any talking there is to be done."

"Treagle, it was my—"

"Shut up! Mind your brother!" Hal swung the heavy butt of a gun against Chuck's head.

Chuck dropped like a clubbed steer.

"You devil!" Steady gasped and sent the cow-puncher spinning backward with a crashing punch to the jaw.

Treagle, leaping from his horse, thrust the muzzle of his weapon into Steady's ribs. "That'll be enough!" he said sharply. "You told him to shut up, didn't you? Hal"—to the glowering puncher—"you shouldn't have hit the kid so hard. Get some water from the troughs and throw it over him. Now what you got to say for yourself? Stand up and leave the kid alone." From under half-drooped lids, his eyes pierced Steady's.

The cow-puncher met the ranchman's gaze angrily. "Just this," he replied shortly, "if you're intending any action about this, I'm taking all the blame. Chuck here is just my kid brother; he does what I tells him, and ain't responsible, see! You're dealing with me, not him."

"So? Waal, that's reasonable. He don't look like no brand blotter. He'll likely be wanted to testify against you, though."

"I'm thinking he'll likely do some

testifying against this yere bull of a rider you're traveling with."

"Hal was a mite hasty," admitted the ranchman easily; "but he wa'n't taking no chances with folks what's caught with the calf this a way. Hey!" he called as the puncher came up with a hatful of water. "Just set that down and keep this bird as is a minute, while I look over the evidence.

"Him-m! One horse under the cottonwood, one up on the hill. Bar Open A cow outside; calf inside, brand—hm-m!—must have been Bar Open A worked over into— Ah! here's the artist's fancy running iron. Waal, I guess that's all plain enough. It's rustling, all right."

"Hal, I reckon the best thing to do with a man what'll rustle his own boss' stock, is to herd him right in to the sheriff. Don't doubt but what he's been monkeying with our calves, too. You just gather up the evidence and bring it along after us.

"The other one is coming to now. Splash that water on him and he'll kick out of it, pronto. Drop him at the Bar Open A and tell Jeff Todd to hang onto him; he's likely slippery, same as his brother. Better explain to Todd, too, how we happens to be horning in on his business for his own good."

The rider nodded. Treagle stepped back in front of his prisoners, mounted his horse, and covered Steady Metlin with his gun.

"Start lifting your hoofs, puncher," he ordered, "up the trail. We'll take on your horse when we gets to him."

"I ain't leaving Chuck here half conscious."

"He's all right. His eyes is a-fluttering open, see! You'll spy him on his feet by the time you get to the top of the hill. Now march!"

"I ain't—"

"Hike!" roared Treagle. He fired a shot into the ground behind Steady's heels.

## CHAPTER III.

## DETERMINED SILENCE.

THE next morning, in his cell at the little, stone jail of Red Butte, Steady Metlin awaited the return of the messenger that the sheriff had allowed him to send to the Bar Open A. He had asked simply that Chuck come to see him at once.

He hoped fervently that the boy had not blabbed his own guilt to Jeff Todd the night before. He trusted that he could now prove to his brother the necessity for revealing to him the details of the whole rank adventure. If he only knew the facts, he felt that he might save both himself and Chuck somehow. Working in the dark, he saw disaster for them both.

A key grated in the jail door. Footsteps crunched along the corridor. Steady, springing to the bars, confronted, besides the sheriff, Boss Jeff Todd and Snowshoe Ross.

"Where's Chuck?" cried Steady, a cinch of apprehension tightening around his chest.

The boss pushed his sombrero off his forehead. "Waal!" he exploded, "this shore is the last place I ever expected to meet up with you, Steady Metlin."

"Yeah! You ain't no more surprised than I am, boss. Where's Chuck?"

"What's this yarn the sheriff's telling me about your rustling my calves?"

Steady grasped the bars with white-knuckled fingers. "I know it looks bad against me, boss; but I'm trusting I can prove it ain't so."

"You're trusting, are you?" Jeff Todd's eyes flashed. "You don't seem to consider that I was trusting you!"

Steady's blue eyes darkened. "I know it *looks* bad," he repeated, "so I'll just be handing you back that foreman's job till you feel like offering it to me again."

"That ain't the point," bristled Todd, "I ain't condemning no man without a

hearing. We ain't heared your side of this yere calf story yet. What is it?"

Steady set his jaw. "I ain't got nothing to say—not to-day. After I see Chuck, mebbe I'll talk. Where is Chuck?"

The three men in the corridor stirred impatiently. The boss scowled; the sheriff raised his eyebrows; Snowshoe coughed nervously.

"Steady, you're making it uncommon hard for us. The sheriff says we ain't the only ones what is missing a bunch of prime calves this spring. If you don't defend yourself, you're drawing a straight flush for a conviction."

"Yeah; I know it, and I'm sorrier'n you are; but, you see, there's some special earmarks to this yere case what I ain't free to discuss just now. Mr. Todd, I'm asking you onces more, where is Chuck?"

"We ain't seen him, Steady."

The cow-puncher recoiled. "Not seen him?" he cried. "Didn't that rider of Treagle's bring him to the Bar Open A last night?"

"No."

"Treagle told him to. Didn't the rider come to tell you about me?"

"No."

"Good gosh! How did you find out?"

"Just this morning by your messenger."

"Didn't Treagle's rider come to town last night with the evidence?"

The sheriff shook his head. "No. Treagle said he must be having difficulty with the calf. He said they'd both be in this morning. Then I'll ride out with 'em to look over the ground."

Steady leaned against the wall. "But where can Chuck be?"

The boss stroked his stubby chin and drew in his lips spasmodically twice before answering. "Waal," he said finally, "from what Treagle told the sheriff here, we've figured he didn't want to be hauled in 'as a witness against you,

Steady, so he got away from that there rider somehow, and scattered out for the mountains.

"That's probably why the rider didn't get in; chasing him, likely. Course, 'would be goldarned hard on the kid to have to help convict his brother. Chuck thought a heap o' you, Steady."

The cow-puncher sat down on the stone bench. His brain was dazed and whirling. Here were unlooked-for complications with a vengeance. He could not blame the boss for his hardly glossed belief in his foreman's guilt. The story of circumstantial evidence that Treagle had had to tell was unquestionably strong. But Chuck! How could Chuck desert him?

Even if the boy were afraid for himself, it was not like the Metlin blood to run away, nor to abandon a brother who was sacrificing himself for the other. A wave of sickness swept over Steady. Then he rallied. It couldn't be. Chuck must be carrying out some wild plan of his own for their freedom.

"Waal, Metlin," the sheriff interrupted his thoughts, "changed your mind yet about talking?"

Steady looked up with a troubled face. "Not yet!"

"See you later, then," grunted the sheriff.

"Hope you'll swap ends on this yere fool stubbornness, Steady," advised the boss.

Snowshoe said nothing; but lingered behind, as the other two strolled down the corridor toward the jail door.

Steady came to life. Against the bars, he breathed into Snowshoe's ear, "I ain't no rustler, old-timer."

"Jee-roosalum!" retorted Snowshoe, "don't you suppose I know that? What to do? Quick!"

"Find Chuck; I has to see him. Find that little old brockle-face calf what I brung in from the county road. Remember? Or his hide; Treagle's got it, probable. I has to see it."

"Yeah. Anything else?"

"Yeah; one more." Steady lowered his voice to a whisper.

Snowshoe nodded, and stalked out after Todd and the sheriff.

Three days later, at supper time, the sheriff again stood outside Steady's cell and looked into the cow-puncher's worried blue eyes. "You're either a goldarned fool, Metlin," he was saying, "or you're guilty as hell; mebbe both."

"I ain't guilty, sheriff."

"Waal, for gosh's sake, why don't you spel your yarn, then? There was plenty of us would a-staked our last dollar on your honesty. We ain't hankering much to feed oats to this yere oily Treagle stranger. But what in tarnation we going to think when you was caught with the goods and won't even make up a yarn to explain it? And the outfits what's been branding this week is a-finding more dogieless cows every day, too!"

The cow-puncher writhed. "There ain't no good in saying nothing until I gets the evidence I'm a-looking to turn up. If I don't draw the right cards to fill my hand, I gotta pass. What else I can say won't be worth a cow's froze-off tail. Treagle brought that calf in yet?"

"Yeah; this morning. I skinned it out this afternoon so's to see the inside o' the hide for certainty; it's a plumb slick job o' blotching on the outside."

Steady stiffened. "You let me see that there hide; that's one piece of evidence I've been a-waiting for."

The sheriff gave him a quizzical look. "Waal, if that's the kind of help you was expecting, you'd a done better to have cashed in afore it showed up!"

He went out, returning presently with the green hide over his arm. He thrust his fist under the brand on the side and held it before the cow-puncher's face. "Reckon you know that brand, Metlin."

## CHAPTER IV.

## SEARCHING FOR EVIDENCE.

STEADY gripped the bars and stared. "Bar Diamond Bar," he read aloud in a thunderstruck tone. "Why, Chuck swore he didn't put my——" he caught himself abruptly.

"What's that?" snapped the sheriff.

"Nothing. Wait a minute. This yere sort of took me by surprise." Had Chuck lied to him, as well as deserted him?

"You didn't think you run any brand on the critter but your own, did you?"

Steady started. "Look here; let's see the whole o' that hide to oncet. Stretch 'er out, will you?"

"Waal?" challenged the sheriff.

The cow-puncher's eyes, trained to reading every distinguishing feature of an animal, devoured the details of the red-and-white markings on the brockle-face calf hide. "Let's see the inside!" he demanded. "All right. Flop 'er back."

"Waal?"

Steady looked up, unblenching and grim. "There ain't no denying," he said slowly, "that them brands is like you say on that there hide."

"Then you're admitting you done it?"

"Not by a kegful of redeye! But I'm holstering what I has to say till after I've talked to Chuck."

The sheriff lost his temper. "Man," he bellowed, "you're crazy! Didn't Treagle's rider report that the boy broke away from him and escaped, when he was trying to herd both him and the calf at the same time? That he 'most ruined a good horse trying to ride the kid down, and then had the very devil of a time catching the calf again?"

"How did he know he cotched the right calf again?"

"Know? Why, by the fresh-altered brand, o' course, and its being separated from the cow."

"Hm-m!"

"What you gonna do if the kid stays hid out on you?"

Steady winced. "I dunno," he admitted. And the disgusted sheriff left him.

Darkness settled over Red Butte, while Steady Metlin sat beneath the window of his cell and listened dully to the noises of the town. There seemed to be some sort of excitement; riders loped back and forth in the street; shouts and loud talking resounded from the direction of Pete's pool hall. But Steady heard only vaguely. He was milling around in his brain the problem of the brockle-face hide and Snowshoe's despairing report of the night before on Chuck's trackless disappearance.

Under his window he heard stealthy footsteps. "Pst!" came Snowshoe's voice. "You there?"

A scraping of hollow wood over dirt, and Snowshoe's grizzled face thrust itself against the window bars.

"News?"

"And then some," answered Snowshoe excitedly. "Here; take this and start sawing quick and quiet. I'll work from this side. You gotta get out of this pronto."

"I ain't aiming to break jail."

"Get to work, you idjut. If you don't you ain't likely to see nothing but jail the rest of your life and that ain't liable to be for more'n two hours. Hopkins come in from branding to-day and reported twenty-five calves and three cows missing onnatural. The town's hot; and Treagle's in here a-stirring 'em up by describing his catching you and everything." Snowshoe worked frantically at the bars. Steady, bewildered, began to help.

"The sheriff's up there now, trying to quiet them down," said Snowshoe, "but he ain't a-going to hold 'em, not if one more rancher lopes in with a

missing calf yarn, especial. I made a round-up in the blacksmith shop for these yere tools. Quirt 'er down the hind leg; we gotta be moving. Here; pull; push; now she's coming!"

Feverishly the two cow-punchers yanked and pried. One bar gave; another loosened.

"If it wouldn't make such a goldarned racket, I'd let 'er have it with the sledge hammer," grunted Snowshoe. "Jee-roosalum!" he paused an instant to listen. "They're a-coming this way. Can't you squeeze through that hole now? Stick your shoulders in edge-wise and I'll haul you out. What's them? Your chaps? Yeah, I got 'em. Come on!"

By combined efforts, Steady forced himself between the wrenched bars and wriggled out.

"Horses over here!" guided Snowshoe. "I tied rags on their hoofs. That'll cover the noise and the tracks till we get out of town a ways."

"They'll know I'm guilty now."

Snowshoe grinned in the dark. "Me, too; I'm one of these yere what-do-you-call-'ems, er—ax-handles to the crime, ain't I? This way."

Like shadows in the moonless night, they rode out of Red Butte and put their horses into a run across the sagebrush flats.

"Where you heading, Snowshoe? We're shore stretching hemp if they sneaks up on us."

"Treagle's!" shot back Snowshoe, "I got a hunch. Explain later."

"Uh-huh!" agreed Steady, and gave his attention to getting the best speed from his pony. If only the brute would keep his feet out of dog holes!

As they reached the far side of the flat and turned into the hills, faint and far away sounded three pistol shots.

"By gosh!" ejaculated Snowshoe, "they shore wa'n't long in finding out you're gone. Plumb lucky I picked out the fastest horses in the cavvy. They'll

be some little time picking up our trail."

At the old Taylor ranch, now Treagle's, they flung themselves from their spent horses under the shelter of a box elder by the creek, unbuckled their ropes from their saddles, and crept toward the corrals, guided by the occasional bawl of a calf.

"Dog-gone handy sometimes to have these yere old corrals away from the house. Casual visitors don't never get to see what's in 'em," whispered Snowshoe. "Horses in the first yere; we'll look at them later."

They crept on stealthily. Snowshoe's hand clamped suddenly on Steady's arm. A whiff of cigarette smoke scented the air. Ahead, close beside the poles of the farthest corral, a tiny red glow in the darkness dimmed and brightened.

"Guard, eh? Thought so! Got to bump him off quiet, 'thout rousing any more devils. Climb in and stir up them calves a bit."

Steady obeyed. As the cow-puncher dropped softly into the corral and moved out among them, the restless animals surged away from him. The guard outside, with an oath, swung to look in. And at that moment, the butt of Snowshoe's gun crashed down upon his head, felling him like a lightning-struck steer.

"Good!" remarked Snowshoe, when they had made sure that no other guard impeded their movements. "Now, we gotta risk lighting a few matches to find what we're after, if it's here."

Furtively they moved about among the cattle in the corral, interposing their own bodies between the flare of their intermittent light and possible detection from the house.

"Helluva job in the dark!" growled Snowshoe. "A-a-ah!"

Steady sprang to his pardner's side. "Nother match. Here; look! This the right one?"

"Yeah," the cow-puncher swung his rope, "I got him! Damnation! He run through the loop!"

"Listen! I hear horses coming——"

"Treagle! Posse!"

"Bunch them matches and make a man-size light! Quick! I'll rope. Where is the little devil? Here! Here!"

The matches glimmered out. A calf bawled raucously, bucking at the end of Snowshoe's rope. "One more match. Yep; that's him!"

The thunder of horses swept splashingly through the shallow creek and up to the ranch house. "Hal! Boys!" roared Treagle's voice, "Turn out!"

"Where's the gate of this damn corral?" sputtered Snowshoe. "Go rope out that buckskin of Treagle's. I'll bring this critter."

Steady scrambled over the top pole and bounded toward the first corral. A gun barked behind him; his left leg crumpled. As he fell, another gun spoke from the calf corral; a man screamed. Then came Snowshoe's voice, "By gosh, you're out permanent this time!"

Steady staggered to his feet and stumbled on. A pandemonium of running horses and shouting men rushed toward the corrals. The cow-puncher managed to squeeze between two poles into the horse corral. The animals plunged around the fence.

"In here; he's after the horses!"

"Here's a lantern."

"Open the gate; let 'em out."

A wave of arching backs and tossing manes broke from the corral. Last of all trotted the buckskin, a rope around his neck; to the rope clung a cow-puncher, dragging one leg.

"There he is! Hal must have pinked him just now. The fool! Trying to get away on one of my horses, is he? String him up!"

"Hold on, boys; go slow!" boomed the sheriff's voice.

But the crowd of enraged ranchers, incited by the yelling Treagle, their losses fresh in their minds, the cow-puncher's guilt confirmed by his flight, swooped down upon Steady Metlin like a grass fire. It took but a moment to truss his hands behind him and fling him astride the buckskin.

"Up this a way!" called Treagle. "There's a good stout beam out from the roof of the wood house."

## CHAPTER V.

### UNCOVERING FACTS.

THE mob jostled along, with drawn guns shoving the protesting sheriff into the drags. Steady found himself with a loop around his neck, under the wood-house beam, over which the free end of the rope dropped into grasping, twitching hands.

A commotion stirred the edges of the crowd. The voice of Snowshoe Ross burst through. "Get in there, you two-bit sheriff, and stop that murder! I'm a-bringing new evidence."

Hazing the sheriff ahead of him, Snowshoe kicked his sidling way to the front, dragging into the light a half-choked, brockle-face calf.

Treagle, beside the rope pullers, raised his quirt to lash the buckskin into a forward jump. "Hang 'em first; talk afterwards," he yelled.

Snowshoe's right hand flashed to his hip. Two shots rang out, one upon the heels of the other. The rope above Steady's head frayed into strands, parted, and slid to the ground.

"Now then; we'll do a little business," said Snowshoe calmly, before the angry ranchers recovered from their surprise. "You-all see this yere brockle-face calf?"

"Shore! What of it?"

"Speak up, Steady; they're asking for your evidence."

The cow-puncher straightened as best he could, his face pain-ridden. "I'm

just asking you to look and see what brand has been run on that calf over the Bar Open A. That there is the brockle-face calf what I stood beside above the water troughs when Treagle and his man rid up on me."

"What kind o' bluff are you trying to pull, Metlin? Treagle brung that brockle-face calf into town to the sheriff, a-carrying your brand over the Bar Open A."

"Yeah; he brought one brockle-face calf in, marked with a Bar Diamond Bar."

Treagle spat like a bobcat. "Are you saying that Bar Diamond Bar ain't your brand?"

"Certain it's my brand; but it ain't never been run on no Bar Open A critter by any fellow name o' Metlin."

"It ain't, eh? These yere men have all fingered the brand on that hide. They're all cowmen; you can't dust their eyes."

"I ain't trying to. I'm just a-saying that that there hide you brung in is the wrong brockle-face calf. The right one had a patch of white hair on his right shoulder; there he is. The one you brung in has both shoulders plumb red, as all you gents what has examined it so particular will remember. Jeff Todd ought to recognize this one yere as the one I drove home that night."

Todd stepped forward. "Blamee! I ought to remember it," he admitted, apologetically, "but I'll be damned if I know whether it had a red or a white shoulder. It was purty dusky when Steady brung that cow and calf in that night and I was on the far side of the wagon yard when he rode through. I never noticed much beyond its being a brockle-face. I ain't saying he's wrong; but I can't undertake to prove he's right on that point, neither."

"You don't need to!" dryly remarked Snowshoe, who had been doing some surreptitious investigating. "You-all just look at this brand!"

Treagle sprang forward. "What's the use of all this harangue, anyhow?" he fumed. "They're both lying. I say string 'em up, pronto."

"Better pull leather there!" suggested the sheriff. "Some one bust that calf."

Hands reached across the red back and grasped the loose skin of flanks and shoulders. The calf crashed to the ground and was promptly hog tied.

"Bring that lantern closer," ordered Snowshoe. "See; there's the white spot on the right shoulder. That proves this yere is the county-road, water-trough, brockle-face calf. Now, flop 'er over."

Steady Metlin, swaying dizzily on the back of the buckskin, tried to lean forward to see, also. Jeff Todd looked up just in time to catch him as he fell.

"Untie his hands."

"Get some water."

"He's got a bad wound in the leg."

"I'm all right," Steady waved them away. "I just wanna see that brand."

"Don't you know what it is?"

"No; that's why I couldn't say nothing till I got aholt of this yere calf. There's a Bar Open A underneath, natural; but I ain't never been give a chance to see what's on top. I'm thinking that Treagle—"

"You dirty liar!" burst out the ranchman, his thin face livid, his gun flashing in his hand, "I'll send you to—"

The sheriff wrenched the gun from him, the bullet whining viciously over the heads of the posse. The atmosphere became electric. Snowshoe flopped the calf. Steady hitched himself over where he could see the brand. The sheriff bent down and inspected it minutely. He straightened suddenly. "Stop that man!" he hurled out.

Treagle was edging his way along the fringe of the crowd. Hands reached out and clutched him. "What's the big idea?" he cried indignantly. "I was just a-going up to the house after another piece o' evidence I forgot to give the sheriff."

"There's plenty right here, I reckon," grunted that officer. "Just keep a hand on him, Jeff."

"Waal?" asked Steady from the ground, his eyes gleaming.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "The brand, gents, on this yere animal, whether it's the critter what Metlin claims it is, or not, seems to be a Lazy R Triangle."

Mutterings rumbled through the crowd. "There ain't no such brand on this range," some one shouted.

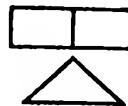
"Is it over a Bar Open A?" asked another.

Snowshoe snorted. "Of course it is. Want me to kill and skin the critter for you?"

The sheriff turned to Steady Metlin. "Yeah," nodded the latter, "this yere brockle-face is 'most all the evidence I has on hand, and I'll have to explain it, at that. Any one got a pencil and a scrap of paper? Now then! This yere is how the Bar Open A looks, ain't it?"



He offered his quick drawing for the inspection of those nearest him. "And this is how the brand what's on the calf now looks, which the sheriff calls Lazy R Triangle."



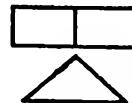
The paper passed from hand to hand. "Waal, now, I'm a-telling you that the running o' this yere brand was interrupted unexpected, so that it wa'n't complete."

A derisive laugh came from Treagle. "I'll say we interrupted 'em unexpected," he cried, "him and his brave brother, him a-bossing the job and the kid a-running the iron."

Steady paled visibly. "Shut up, you low-down—"

Treagle shrilled above him. "Waal, he's took to the hills, ain't he? He shore left you in the lurch."

The cow-puncher winced; but again turned to pencil and paper. "Here's how that brand was intended to look if the artist had a-had time to add the one finishing line." Here he showed them the finished brand.



"Recognize that brand? Know who owns it? Double Box Triangle, the brand Cloy Treagle registered in addition to the old Taylor brand, soon as he come in here. No, 'tain't in the brand book yet; but it's been in the *Weekly Enterprise*. And I'm saying it's damn funny he bought the spread next to Jeff Todd's and then registers a brand what can be made over a Bar Open A so plumb easy!"

Treagle struggled to regain a surface composure. He spoke bitingly now, each word a lash, "the artist what painted that brand on that there calf was Chuck Metlin. I see it now; it's a frame-up to run me out of the country, 'cause I'm new. This yere Metlin has it in for me."

"I shore has," agreed Steady, "but not account of your newness. You're too darn old in brand-blotching tricks."

The ranchman wrested himself free from restraining hands and leaped forward, his right hand hovering near his breast. "Are you calling me a rustler?" he hissed, flipping a hidden gun into the cow-puncher's face.

Steady Metlin did not quiver a muscle. "That's just what I'm calling you!" he answered deliberately.

Jeff Todd dug his six-shooter into Treagle's ribs. "Drop that gun, you coward!" he snapped. "Drawing on a wounded man what ain't heeled! That's the stuff. Got any more? I'm just a-keeping you covered, remember?"

## CHAPTER VI.

## SUDDEN JUSTICE.

THE sheriff whistled. "This yere brockle-face calf is a-proving to have more meat on his carcass than a prime beef!" he announced.

"Aw!" said Treagle, trying to plaster on his suavity once more. "I wa'n't intending to lose my temper; but it shore gets under my skin to be called such names. You can understand that."

"You betcha I can," remarked Snowshoe conversationally.

Treagle glared. Snowshoe returned the look with interest. "How come Chuck Metlin to be running your brand on this yere calf?" he spat out.

But the rancher was not caught napping. "It wa'n't this calf nor my brand. He was running his brother's brand on the hide of that calf I brung in."

"Whoop!" cheered Snowshoe. "You just said he run your brand on this yere calf to frame you! Just when did you catch 'em branding the second calf? How come this yere calf—this one yere—to be mixed in with a bunch of dogies—supposed to be yourn—in that far corral to-night?"

The posse drew in long, sibilant breaths. Treagle paled.

Snowshoe grinned. "Damn rich pay dirt you've struck on this old ranch, regular bonanza! This yere"—with a sweep of his hand to the prostrate calf—"is only a snifter. I done a little prospecting after I bumped off Hal over yonder. There's a right smart variety of brands milling around. You gents will likely find most of your missing red babies in the nursery."

There was a general movement to investigate the corrals. Then one rancher gave pause. "Look here; even if all this what Snowshoe's spinning is true, it don't clear Metlin or his brother, what's seen to have done the branding. They did brand over a Bar Open A."

Steady drew himself painfully to his

feet and towered over Treagle, where Jeff Todd prodded him with his gun. The cow-puncher's voice was threatening. "Where you cached Chuck?" he asked suddenly. "You can't make me believe now that he vamosed for the mountains. What you done with him? Spit it out, pronto, afore I chokes it out of you!"

His hands crept clawlike up toward the ranchman's throat.

Treagle cringed. "I don't know nothing about him," he said sullenly.

"Have you murdered him?"

"No; I hain't. Yell for him if you want him."

Steady took him literally; made a trumpet of his hands; and hallooed, "Chuck!" The others joined their voices to his. They waited. Only silence answered them. Treagle laughed. But Snowshoe had dropped to the ground and laid his ear against it.

"Yell again!" he ordered. "Now shut up!"

He rose and looked around; then headed straight for a dugout in the bank behind the wood house. He kicked in the door.

"Come out, Chuck," he called, and steadied the boy's steps as he emerged.

Chuck blinked against the lantern light.

"Chuck!" begged Steady, "don't—"

"It can't be helped, old-timer," interrupted Snowshoe. "Chuck's got to stand up under his own pack. Do you want to pull the wadding out of this yere case, sheriff?"

"Go ahead, Snowshoe; you seem to have it hog tied."

"I reckon. Chuck, was this yere the brockle-face calf what you was a-working on when Steady rode in on you?"

Chuck nodded. A murmur rippled over the crowd. Steady Metlin groaned.

"Uh-huh!" agreed Snowshoe, "and what brand was you a-running over the Bar Open A?"

The hoy quailed before the ominous face of Treagle; but he answered, "Double Box Triangle."

"And whose brand did you think that was when you was a-smearing it onto the calf?"

"Treagle's."

In the tense silence that had fallen over the group, the heavy breathing of the ranchman and of Steady Metlin whirred raspingly.

"How come you to be a-running Treagle's brand on Bar Open A stock?"

Even the sound of breathing stopped. Chuck's head dropped in shame. "He hired me to. I needed money bad."

"It's a damned lie!"

A growl from the ranchman overwhelmed Treagle's protest.

"How many calves did you brand for Treagle?"

"That was the first one."

"How did Treagle happen along just then?"

"I told him I'd try for one there that morning."

"Who pitched you into the root cellar?"

"Hal. after he made me help him bring in the calf."

"What became of the calf?"

"I don't know."

"'Sall right, Chuck. The rest of us does. Treagle tried to eat his pie and keep it, too. Consequent, there's two brockle-face calves mislaid for the Bar Open A: this one, and that there doctored hide that was intended to railroad Steady Metlin to Deer Lodge or a rope. Steady, there wa'n't no way to bring this out without dragging in Chuck here; it wa'n't nohow possible for you to rep for him, like you figured. You just played into Treagle's hands—hell!"

Treagle had crashed his fist suddenly against Jeff Todd's jaw, and leaped for the nearest riderless horse. He tripped over the legs of the brockle-face calf. "Out of the way!" roared the sheriff; and fired. Treagle pitched forward;

clawed the earth; writhed convulsively; and lay still.

"Dead?"

"As a poisoned pup."

"It's just as good," Snowshoe assured them. "I was a-going to spill some more hot Java over him, pronto. Set down, Steady; you look sort o' green."

He strode to Treagle's buckskin horse and turned it around. "This yere was Steady's hunch," he explained; "he noticed it the day he met the varmint on the road. But I ain't had a chance to tell him all I found out for him.

"See that there brand—888. Old hatchet-face there told Steady he picked up this yere bronc on his way in from Chicago. Waal, according to the records, that there Triple Eight belongs to an old-timer from the Beaverhead, name o'— Say, did you ever hear of Roy Beagle?"

A clamor of assent answered him.

"That damn rustling outlaw!" exploded the sheriff.

"Waal," Snowshoe wrinkled his little old nose and scratched his left ear meditatively, "Roy Beagle and Cloy Treagle sounds a powerful lot alike to me, especial when they rides the same brand o' hossflesh."

Boss Jeff Todd stood over Steady Metlin, where he sat propped against the wood house. "Boys," he said, "suppose you wrangle a couple of broncs and hitch up Treagle's buckboard. I ain't aiming to lose this plumb valuable foreman of the Bar Open A through no gunshot wound. I'm a-taking Steady to town to the sawbones, right now."

Steady shook his head. "Chuck?" he asked weakly.

The boss coughed; then winked deliberately at the sheriff. "Chuck?" he echoed. "Waal, what do you say to sending him East to Kansas for the winter? I reckon he's found out he ain't such a helluva success at rustling a brockle-face calf."



# A Horse for A Scar

by Sam Carson

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

## CHAPTER I.

### STEALING A RIDE.

**T**HEY gave Tom Threlkeld the bum's rush. It took everybody in Stable G to do it. But out he went, into the mud and slush of a rainy fall day at Churchill Downs. And the latter part of October at the Kentucky track can be exceedingly wet and muddy upon occasion.

Pete Murphy, tall and unhurried, stood in front of his gang, arms akimbo. "You keep out!" he ordered. "Buttin' in around that crazy horse of mine."

Threlkeld reached for his cap; it was mud caked. "Oh, all right, boss. Just wanted to see what made him crazy, that's all."

"Keep out of here!" Murphy repeated. "Or I'll pull you apart!"

"Yeah. Wouldn't that be terrible?" Threlkeld grinned cheerfully. He

might have said something else, but a whirlwind of bodies and flying fists sweeping from around the stable bore him down to earth again. "This," Threlkeld muttered, spitting out part of the stable roadway, "is too much."

He crawled from underneath the animated scrimmage and reached for the first available scalp. "Ouch!" its owner yelped, and followed.

Pete Murphy, standing in the doorway, was treated to a sight he wasn't to forget for quite a while. Tom Threlkeld was barely five feet and seven inches tall. He weighed a hundred and ten pounds. But this stable boy he proceeded to maltreat could turn the scales at a hundred and forty.

He stood five well-directed blows and jerked away. Threlkeld grinned, reached into the scrimmage and yanked out a second party.

Treated individually, the attackers faded. This freckled, pug-nosed young man was little, but he was loud. It

was all over inside five minutes. Tom Threlkeld brushed away at the mud on his trousers and leather jacket. Then he turned and surveyed Pete Murphy's crew.

"Next?" he inquired amiably.

There was no response.

"I'll be back—seven in the mornin'," Threlkeld announced. "Gonna ride Big Jeff. S'long."

"Third straight morning that imp's stood it," Pete Murphy growled. "Gets more like a wild cat every time." He studied the stable gang thoughtfully. In the rear hovered his wrecking crew, mud-coated and sheepish after Threlkeld's recent demonstration.

"You bums!" Murphy growled. "For two cents I'd fire the whole outfit and take this freckle-faced hunk of dynamite on, instead. You keep him out in the morning. Hear? Or I'll fire the last one of you."

Pete Murphy had cause for being disgusted. He was hard; had to be. Murphy was trainer for Mack Bray, the gambler. Ostensibly he was owner of the Valhalla Stable because Bray, with his half dozen handbook places, couldn't very well let it be known to his clients—or victims—that he accepted bets against his own horses. Besides, no racing association would have permitted registration of his ownership.

This Tom Threlkeld affair was getting on Murphy's nerves. For three mornings, this amazing young man had come into the stable, with the announcement that he was going to ride Big Jeff, the most erratic-behaving thoroughbred in all Kentucky. Nobody had ever heard of Threlkeld before. He had just strolled in, that first day, cap pulled down over one eye, and proceeded to yank the blanket from Big Jeff.

Pete could call in the police. Or he could appeal to track authorities. There wouldn't be any trouble in keep-

ing this troublesome interloper away. But who ever heard of Pete Murphy needing the law to keep order in his own establishment? It would be a joke, and a good one. No, he would handle this situation himself.

MURPHY was in the tackle room when an individual with flattened nose and distorted ear strolled in.

"'Battle' Evans!" Murphy exclaimed. "By all that's unholy! How come?"

"'Spider' Keller's gotta stable of ham fighters, Pete. I'm one of 'em. Ain't you readin' the papers?"

"Did notice a card Saturday night. You on?"

"Yeah. Monte an' 'Pusher' McCauley's the main noise. Me'n Young for the prelim. How's the ponies?"

Pete Murphy thrust forward a chair. "Battle," he said, "you're an answer to my prayers. Going to be here any time?"

"Week. Maybe ten days. Depends."

"Like some extra jack?"

Battle rolled his eyes skyward. "Hear him—he asks me that!"

Murphy leaned forward. "There's a tough little egg named Tom Threlkeld—"

Fifteen minutes later, Battle was patting the horseman's shoulder. "He gotcha goat, Pete. 'At's all. An' when I git through, he won't have any goat. What time's he comin' back?"

"Seven bells to-morrow. Don't miss, Battle. Be a good work-out. And here's five bucks on account."

Now, Tom Threlkeld knew his limitations. He couldn't very well invade Stable G the fourth time, with probable reinforcements on hand. And Murphy would have them, he reflected, grimly.

So just before daylight, Threlkeld leaped out of bed and snapped on the light. He dressed in his riding outfit, with boots and sweater. Then he let

himself out of the room on tiptoe. Other men, soon to be hurrying drowsily toward the track, were still sleeping soundly.

Stable G loomed in the darkness, quiet except for an occasional stamping of hoofs. No one was stirring. Threlkeld went around the building, found the window he judged nearest Big Jeff and proceeded to crawl in.

The big gelding was in the second stall. Threlkeld slid in, studied the thoroughbred for a while. Then he began removing its blanket. "You got to keep quiet," he muttered. "Got plain foolish yesterday. Said I'd ride you this morning. Aim to keep my word."

No chance to invade the tackle room, where two men were sleeping, and get a saddle. But there were blankets and surcings on racks in the runway. Threlkeld obtained them and slipped them on Big Jeff. The bridle was on an outside peg.

They went out the rear door. It creaked a bit and Threlkeld had a moment of panic. But he managed to get the horse outside. "Now," he observed, "cain't nobody stop me."

Some men could have tried what Threlkeld did with Big Jeff and suffered the consequences. But the gelding followed this kidnap with as little spirit as a plow horse. They reached the track gate, and Tom Threlkeld drew Big Jeff alongside, scrambling to the gate rail. From there he crawled atop the gelding. "Gimme some action," he ordered. "We're doin' a mile. Half at top speed."

The first of the stable crews were coming into the track when a wraith of a horse pounded through the early gray light toward Stable G. Pete Murphy was in the van. And he gaped with the air of a dazed man, when Threlkeld slid to the street before Stable G and began to hammer on the door.

"Yah," the young man yelled, "I rode 'im. Here he is. Ready for a rubdown."

At first, Pete took on the look of a man willing and about to commit murder. This snip of a youth had kept his word. Not that Big Jeff didn't need a competent rider. Nobody wanted the job. Big Jeff was six years old and getting worse. But this boy had ridden the gelding. Its lathered body was proof enough.

Pete rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "What d'you want, anyway?" he demanded.

"A job."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? What's the big idea?"

Tom Threlkeld relaxed his vigilant air slightly. But he remained some distance away from the trainer. "Big Jeff's your toughest horse. You ain't got anybody around—with stuff enough to want the job. I do! I want it bad!"

"I ought," Pete reflected, "to have you put in the dozen class for keeps. Anybody that works for me obeys orders—and keeps his mouth closed. If he don't—well, there's some jocks, and other guys, who remember."

"Meaning Mack Bray," Threlkeld replied softly. "I got the low-down, Mr. Murphy. And I'm asking you for a job."

"Another crack about Mack Bray," Murphy warned, "and you won't ask for another job! Lay off his name. Get me?"

Threlkeld nodded. A couple of darkies already had rubbed Big Jeff down. Murphy motioned them to lead the gelding back inside.

"I'm going to take a chance on you," he announced. "Join the first gang and take Old Moss for three quarters. I'll be out on the track, straddling a pony."

Threlkeld grinned and trotted inside.

## CHAPTER II.

## HANDLING A WINNER.

WHEN Battle Evans, still sleepy and twenty minutes late, stepped out of a taxi, Murphy waved him on. "I've hired the wild cat," he said. "May need you later to help tame him."

"What about my trouble—an' a taxi?" the boxer inquired.

"Take it out of that five-spot I handed you last night."

Battle grinned sourly. He stood beside the entrance as the first-string riders emerged. Murphy jerked a thumb toward Threlkeld, astride Old Moss. "That's him," he said.

"Kinda fresh bozo, ain't he? Cap on the side of his head. Scrapper, huh! I'll tame him for yah!"

Threlkeld was abreast the pugilist. Swinging lightly from the saddle, he slid to the ground. He was standing before Battle Evans before that ring veteran hardly realized it.

"Any time," Threlkeld announced briefly, "a ham-an'-egger can take me, there ain't nothing but air between."

"You get on that horse," Battle growled, stepping forward and putting on his best ring scowl.

The rider waited. And Battle Evans, outweighing Threlkeld by fifteen pounds, nevertheless comprehended what he was inviting. He drew back.

"Get on that horse." It was Murphy who spoke now. "And you, Battle, pipe down! Get that string of horses moving, you lazy bums!"

Without further word, Tom Threlkeld leaped for the stirrup. It was high, but he made it gracefully, and drew up to his seat.

"I'd like to paste 'at fresh kid one," Battle grumbled. "An' I'm gonna, first chance I get."

"May need you," Murphy agreed. "But now. Depends on how he minds orders. Said something about Mack—

an' it ain't going to be healthy to repeat. The 'boss' wants shut mouths around here."

"Any time," Battle promised. "I'll be pleased to shut his mouth."

On the way to the pylon marking the upper turn of the home stretch, a horse bumped into Old Moss. Threlkeld, caught off guard, all but tumbled. As he righted himself and brought the big horse under control, he glanced back and saw the next rider grinning.

Threlkeld pulled up. "You know how to put on gloves?" he asked softly.

The other one nodded. "Yeah. Why?"

"'Cause I'm gonna trim you behind the stable, minute we get in."

A moment later, the string was in motion. Pete Murphy's riders were carrying out orders. But every person had heard Threlkeld's promise and were expecting action. "Jelly" Thomas had bumped Old Moss intentionally. He hadn't been present the morning before, and was incredulous of the newcomer's ability.

"Fight," they cried after the work-outs were over. "Fight," they chorused as the gang rushed to the flat territory behind Stable G. Some one had produced gloves. Others were marking off a ring with a stake.

Pete Murphy rode back. Battle Evans had been talking with a clocker. The trainer called him. "Chance to look the kid over," he said, "behind the stable."

Battle appeared a bit sick after it was over. And by the timekeeper's count it wasn't more than three minutes. Jelly Thomas went down with a short jab behind the ear. His second dive came when Threlkeld's left connected to the chin. He didn't get up immediately.

Threlkeld held out his hands to a grinning darky stableman. Without a backward glance he strode away. Battle

touched Pete's shoulder. "I've seen 'at fellow before," he said. "An' his moniker wasn't Threlkeld, either. Seen him under the spotlights—or somewhere."

"Better look him up," Murphy observed. "If I pull a boner with my outfit, the boss will have my shirt and part of my hide. Taking some big money on the Dixie Handicap already. Delilah and Grandeur."

**N**OW, the surprising part about it all was that Tom Threlkeld had no further fights. Perhaps that last one was sufficient. He kept away from the other stable employees and paid strict attention to Big Jeff. And at the end of ten days, Murphy, after a particularly good work-out, summoned his new stableboy.

"Got a license?" he demanded.

"Need a new one," Threlkeld replied. "Never stayed in the saddle but three months."

"Threlkeld your right name?"

"Yes, sir. It's my honest-to-goodness name."

"Well, I'm going to go before the stewards to-day and put up your name. Go to school—and mind your business, and I'll give you a chance under silks."

"Thank you," Threlkeld said respectfully. "I'll do my best."

It occurred to the trainer that he had a find. The boy hadn't caused any trouble, had been carrying out instructions to the letter, and knew what he was about. Still, Murphy felt he hadn't said enough.

"You mentioned—the boss," he added. "We don't say his name around here. See? And you'd better do what he wants done. Before I took this job, there was a jockey who didn't play the rules at Tia Juana. They took him for a ride."

Threlkeld's expression was a total blank, as if he hadn't paid much attention. But his voice wasn't exactly

level as he asked: "What'd they do to him?"

Murphy bit off a plug of tobacco. "Slash across his shoulders, when he put up a fight. Then a cat-o'-nine-tails. Believe he quit riding."

"Kinda hard on him," Threlkeld observed. "What'd he do?"

"Rode to win. Happens to be the same horse you're so blasted crazy about. Big Jeff. Boy had orders to go easy that day. Well, he didn't. Just warning you, kid."

"Thanks, Mr. Pete. An' there's just one more question. Big boss come around often?"

"Yeah. He'll be here when the Dixie's run. But we ain't got any entry worth shooting. Unless you have Big Jeff in running order."

"Maybe I will," Threlkeld grinned. "Mr. Pete, so help me, I can lick half these handicap horses here with that gelding."

Murphy laughed. "Sky's the limit, kid! The horse likes you. Do your stuff, and I'll give you a chance Saturday. Going to toss Big Jeff into an overnight handicap. Fifth."

The trainer kept his word. And so did Tom Threlkeld. Big Jeff went to the post a ten-to-one shot. And the big gelding, urged on by Threlkeld, swept around the field to win by two full lengths. In addition, the gelding came within a fraction of the track record for a mile and an eighth.

"Back again Wednesday," Pete Murphy told the rider. "Boy, you've got no riding orders, except to get out in front. Better field next time."

"Makes no difference," Threlkeld grinned.

It didn't. Big Jeff charged down in front again, at shorter odds, but still not favorite in the betting. And thus it dawned upon the public that the Valhalla Stable entry was something speedy and consistent.

Mack Bray, from his office in Chi-

cago, called Murphy the night after Big Jeff's second victory.

"What have you got down there?" he inquired.

"A new boy, from the Tennessee mountains," Pete replied. "And he's got Big Jeff in the stake-winning class. Tends the gelding himself. Works him out. And keeps his mouth shut."

"H'm! Know where he learned to ride?"

"No, sir. All I know is that he does know. Boss, I think the combination is good enough for the Dixie."

A low chuckle came over the wire. "One more win would make him one of the favorites, huh?"

"The favorite, more than likely."

"Enter him Saturday. Mile and quarter. And if he goes over, stand by!"

Murphy hung up the receiver thoughtfully. He was a horseman first. Big Jeff had been a liability for a year. And this fighting wild cat of a jockey had done wonders. The trainer wanted to go ahead with the gelding and win the Dixie handicap.

But Mack Bray was deep. And Murphy had to do as he was told. Bray paid him an exorbitant salary, from a trainer's viewpoint. Maybe it was true, as certain persons had hinted, that Mack Bray assumed that he owned Pete Murphy.

That mysterious individual owned many persons. He had an uncanny way of learning things. None knew the extent of his interests. It was rumored he possessed gambling concessions in Tia Juana and was financing a syndicate of smugglers.

Even Murphy hadn't seen Bray so many times.

Bray had picked him up in Canada, after a certain bit of trouble with racing authorities, and established him as owner of the Valhalla Stables, with orders to carry out instructions.

Murphy had a number of fair

horses, which ran second when the odds were short. He knew, of course, that it was Bray who booked money from the public on his own horses. So did a lot of other people. But it couldn't exactly be proven.

"The little cuss!" Murphy muttered, thinking of Tom Threlkeld. He realized he was growing fond of the rider, and Big Jeff, too. Most people like horses with courage.

Murphy sent for the jockey. "Think you can do it the third time?" he inquired.

"Depends," Threlkeld replied, "on the field and our weight. What you thinking of, Mr. Pete?"

"Nice handicap goes Saturday. Mile and a quarter. There'll be Quantico and Sevier. We'll be likely to draw a hundred and ten on Big Jeff."

"Fair enough," Tom decided. "Listen, Mr. Pete. Does that mean we'll have a shot at the Dixie—you think?"

"Pretty certain, kid. I'll file entry papers to-day. Same riding orders. Win that race!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### INTIMIDATION ORDERS.

**M**URPHY stood at the rail Saturday and saw the Valhalla Stable colors drop back at the start of the mile-and-quarter race. He wondered if Big Jeff had reverted to old traits and was sulking. But on the back stretch he saw the gelding move up, third, then second, to take the lead at the upper turn and come thundering down the home stretch, Threlkeld riding without using his whip, an easy winner.

"Do we go in the Dixie?" Threlkeld shouted, after he had weighed in.

"I'll let you know to-night." Murphy grinned at his rider. "Kid, you put up a million-dollar ride out there. Just wanted to tell you that."

Five minutes later, the trainer experienced the shock of his life. For,

leaning against the track fence and regarding him with a smile, was Mack Bray. His dark, lean face was topped with the wide-brimmed hat he always affected. And at his elbow was Battle Evans.

Murphy went forward. Bray greeted him cordially. "Good race," he commented. "Good horse and a splendid rider. Makes three straight wins, I believe."

"Won all of 'em the same way, Mr. Bray."

"Uh! Guess Big Jeff's a better investment than you led me to think. By the way, did Threlkeld, your new rider, ever mention being out in Tia Juana?"

"No, sir."

Bray turned to the boxer. "You—and the party you mentioned," he observed, "had better call on the boy. Make it to-night."

"This," he explained at Murphy's look of inquiry, "is something I'll attend to. You need Threlkeld, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. He's been a good boy, Mr. Bray."

"He'll continue to be—a good boy," Bray chuckled sardonically.

Murphy went away worried. He knew better than to quiz Battle Evans. That battered veteran of the ring could keep as tight a mouth as any one. That he was so well acquainted with Bray was a surprise. He debated whether to drop a hint to the jockey or not. But Threlkeld spared him that problem.

For the jockey, coming down from quarters after the race, grinned at the trainer. "Saw—you know—hanging on the rail when I left the judges? Meet him?"

"Yep. He asked if you had ever been to Tia Juana."

Threlkeld started to speak. But he didn't, for quite a while. Then he looked up at Murphy. "You been mighty good to me, Mr. Pete," he said.

"An' I'll stick—to ride in the Dixie. If you don't get orders to can me."

"Why can you?"

"I dunno," Threlkeld laughed. "You never can tell."

Murphy rubbed his chin. "Kid," he said, "I'm not much on the heavy thinking, at times. But—were you the jockey Mr. Bray's gang took for—a ride?"

Threlkeld nodded. "There's a scar on my shoulders, Mr. Pete. An' I limped for a year."

They walked across the infield. Across the way men, released from stable work, were hurrying for exits. "Why," Murphy demanded, "did you put up all that row about coming back to work for the boss?"

"That," Threlkeld replied, "is something—between me'n him. Had two years to think it over. You gonna gimme the gate, Mr. Pete?"

The trainer put a hand on the rider's shoulder. "Kid, I'm neutral, as long as that's possible. But I'd better warn you. Battle Evans—and a buddy are planning to call on you—I think to-night."

"Was he the ham-an'-egger with you the other morning?"

"Yes. And I brought him out to cause you trouble, kid. Instead, I hired you. I—well, I changed my mind. I'm not in on this last deal. But—you'd better breeze, Tom. You can't buck Mack Bray."

"Don't you bother about me," Threlkeld said. "I learned better'n to buck the big boys. Tell the boss that, will you? I'll be at home to welcome Battle, Mr. Pete. I can handle him!"

But the more Pete Murphy thought about Battle Evans and Mack Bray, the more he worried. He thought about the jockey so much that, shortly after nine o'clock that night, he went up the side street to the little frame house where Threlkeld boarded.

Three men were outside, near the

porch. It wasn't very light, but the trainer caught sight of the smaller figure of the three. "Tom," he muttered.

As he approached, Murphy heard Battle Evans' voice. "Keep your trap closed, mutt. I'm talkin', see. An' the boss said for me to ride herd on yah, get me? Now, who's boss?"

"You are."

Murphy heard in amazement.

*Blam!* The jockey reeled in the semidarkness. Murphy looked for a whirlwind of fists to spring back. Instead, Tom Threlkeld came up quietly.

"Gonna try any funny tricks?"

"No, sir."

"Gonna do what you're told?" Battle asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Evans," the pug demanded.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Evans," the jockey repeated humbly.

Murphy turned away. He was disgusted. If Battle and his friend had attacked Threlkeld, and the rider had put up a fight, Murphy had made up his mind to join in, regardless of results. But this trend of events was unexpected.

"I'm through with him," the trainer growled. "But I wouldn't have believed it, except I saw it."

AS the day of the Dixie Handicap, last big race on the autumn program at Churchill Downs, approached, it was evident that Big Jeff, because of three straight victories, was ruling favorite. Obsidian, shipped down from the East, was second choice, with Queen Diana prominently mentioned.

Murphy, in absence of other instructions from Bray, went on through his program of preparing Big Jeff for the race, Tom Threlkeld doing the morning work-outs. The jockey was silent these days, avoiding every one. When he alighted from the saddle, Battle Evans would be waiting.

When Threlkeld left jockey quarters after the last race, Battle would be downstairs. Wherever the jockey went, the boxer accompanied. People wanted to know if Battle had become Threlkeld's riding agent and Murphy let that report gain credence.

The morning of the race came. Mack Bray had said nothing to Murphy. The public, of course, was beginning to wager heavily upon Big Jeff. Murphy knew that, and wondered. Bray must be taking a lot of that money. The odds were two to one and inclined to drop. Everything pointed to one of those killings Bray promoted so skillfully.

Threlkeld didn't come around. The day was one of those cloudless ones, with a warm breeze drifting across the downs. Quite a crowd was certain to attend. It was get-away day. By Sunday, horsemen would be scattering, the majority for winter quarters, until winter racing opened at Tia Juana.

Murphy stayed around the stable, hoping that he would hear something, preferably from Bray, instead of last-minute instructions. In truth, he was hoping nothing would be said. For he wanted Big Jeff to win its fourth straight race. The public was for the Valhalla Stable entry. But—

The trainer remembered other races, when orders hadn't come until after the horses were in the paddock.

The first race came and went. Then the second, and so on until the cheering ended after the fourth. Time to take Big Jeff over across the infield.

Obsidian drew the larger audience in the paddock. That was because Kentucky hadn't seen the Eastern horse before. But, with curiosity satisfied, the majority came by to study Big Jeff. Murphy liked this.

His entry was a strapping thoroughbred, right at seventeen hands. And, as Threlkeld came in at the bugle, the trainer began to feel that Mack Bray

was going to play hands off and let Big Jeff try in earnest for the Dixie Handicap.

"Feel all right?" Murphy inquired.

"You betcha! An' I gotta ticket in my boot on this baby, Mr. Pete."

Battle Evans came up, on the clubhouse side. He signaled Murphy cautiously.

"Orders," the trainer muttered, "have come."

Battle glanced about, then leaned over the paddock railing. "Boss says no better'n second," he whispered. "Tell 'at jock I'm gonna lam him if he draws even a fine finish."

The trainer shrugged his shoulders philosophically. He returned to Big Jeff's stall, surveyed Threlkeld thoughtfully. "You saw Battle!" he asked.

Threlkeld nodded.

"Says it's second for you. He's messenger for the boss."

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### HARD BUT SQUARE.

THE last bugle sounded. Stooping, Murphy took the jockey's boot and hoisted him into the saddle. Threlkeld gathered in the lines. Then he grinned at the trainer.

"Boss," he said, "I told you I had a ticket in my boot—on Big Jeff. It's—straight."

"You've got your orders," Murphy told him.

"Yeah—my own. To cop this race. S'long!"

The trainer followed the file of entries out to the track gate. He watched Threlkeld canter away with Big Jeff.

Despite the rider's defiance, Murphy grinned. "The little monkey," he growled. "If he does cop this race, they'll tear him to pieces."

He would lose his job as well, Murphy reflected. Especially if Mack Bray had taken in quite a sum of money bet on Big Jeff. Maybe Threl-

keld was just talking. Well, in that case, he'd let the boy go.

The field left the harrier without delay. And like a flash the colors of Sid Maclyn, who owned Queen Diana, showed out in front. The mare was cutting the early pace. Obsidian was next. And in a smother of horses and colors, was Big Jeff, well back.

Murphy chuckled. Tom Threlkeld was bluffing, after all. Instead of breaking fast, he was going to resort to the old excuse of getting into a pocket. Well, it had served many a jockey before. Only Murphy had expected Tom Threlkeld to be different.

Bray wouldn't be satisfied, either. Presently he would send Big Jeff to the post, with orders to the rider to win. If Big Jeff didn't make a decent showing in this race, the stewards might be inquisitive.

Now Obsidian was going around Queen Diana. Stout-hearted colt, that Eastern entry, game and capable of going any distance. Queen Diana was chucking it at the mile, and Big Jeff still was fifth, well flanked and not able to go forward if Threlkeld had wished.

"Well, ain't my funeral!" Murphy murmured.

Suddenly a new cry went through the stands. The field was in the turn above the home stretch. Something was passing horses, on the outside, and coming like a house afire. "Big Jeff—Big Jeff!" the cry raced down the row of humanity. "Look at him come! He's mowin' 'em down!"

Murphy reached for his field glasses. He could make out the Valhalla Stable colors. Threlkeld was bent forward, hand riding. But Big Jeff was third and fast overtaking the tiring Queen Diana. Within two jumps the gelding had passed her. And as Obsidian straightened out at the head of the stretch, the Valhalla Stable entry was at the Eastern colt's flanks.

"He is going after the Dixie," Murphy muttered. "The little fool!"

Down the stretch, the two leading thoroughbreds thundered. And Tom Threlkeld worked Big Jeff up. Now the gelding was a half length back. Now a neck. And as the pair swept by, the stands roaring as racing fans can when a favorite is coming up, Murphy saw Big Jeff pass Obsidian, to win by a neck.

Murphy realized he had been shouting. He had been calling upon Threlkeld and Big Jeff. And as the roaring thousands became silent, he smiled. "Who wants a good trainer to mess up orders?" he asked of the sky.

Murphy went before the stewards and accepted the silver trophy which went to the victor in the Dixie. Threlkeld passed him on the way to quarters. His face was pale, but the jockey grinned.

"Gonna be over at the stable, directly," he called. "Callers comin'."

Murphy felt he had a crow to pick also. But a protective impulse came over him. "Kid," he growled, "you messed me up by acting a fool. Take my advice. You beat it, unless you want a second ride."

Threlkeld nodded. "Thanks, Mr. Pete. Some time I'll show you that scar across my shoulders. See you at five thirty."

If the jockey did dare to go over to Stable G, it was his own funeral, Murphy reflected. He was going to have an unpleasant session himself with Mack Bray. Might just as well go over and wait. He probably wouldn't be fired. But all the same—

Battle Evans came over first. With him was a sullen-looking individual who Murphy had noticed that day Battle had appeared with Bray. They waited outside the stable.

Bray's big sedan purred down the stable road. It came to a stop across the way, and the gambler-owner

stepped outside. His chauffeur, a swarthy-faced person, nodded at curt instructions.

Murphy waited in the tackle room. If he was going to be fired, it wouldn't be outside. Bray or no Bray, he demanded some respect.

But the gambler didn't come in. Evidently he was waiting for some one. And that some one was Tom Threlkeld, who strolled into sight, whistling cheerfully.

Murphy saw Battle Evans step forward. He saw Bray's chauffeur lean over, heard the whir of the starter. "Going to take him for another ride," Murphy reflected. "Well, I'll have something to say about that."

Battle Evans met Threlkeld just before the stable entrance. And just as promptly Threlkeld abandoned his careless air and rushed the boxer. The result was a surprised Battle Evans. He dropped to the ground with a neat clip to the jaw.

The sulky-faced one started in. He never got there. Murphy's long arm reached out and spun Battle's partner across the street.

"Take Battle," Murphy cried. "I'll take the rest."

"Much obliged." Threlkeld grinned. "Bankin' on you doin' that, Mr. Pete."

Bray and his driver, who had alighted, went in. But they halted as a crowd began to gather. Publicity wasn't what the gambler craved. So it was that the owner of the Valhalla Stable watched Tom Threlkeld batter the boxer's face into a pulp, for that was a fair description.

The ring had lost a wonderful scrapper in Threlkeld. Outweighed, he made up in skill and courage. Battle was no match. With closed eyes and crimson from cuts in a half dozen places, he went down and stayed there.

Threlkeld walked through the circle and directly before Mack Bray. "Took me for a ride—once, huh? An' I told

you I'd ride Big Jeff an' dry clean you, didn't I?"

Bray said nothing.

"Well," Threlkeld went on, "I kept my word. Thought Battle'd cowed me, huh? Lissen, you wanna keep the war up?"

The gambler looked over the group of curious faces closing in. "Let's go inside," he suggested quietly.

So Murphy, Threlkeld and Mack Bray met in the tackle room with the door locked. Bray studied the jockey thoughtfully. Then he whirled on Murphy. "You too?" he demanded.

"I'm stringing with the kid!" Murphy admitted defiantly. "But I had nothing to do with his ride."

"That so?" Bray asked Threlkeld.

"Yes."

Bray studied the big diamond which flashed on a finger. "I lost," he observed, "plenty. One thing I don't tolerate," he added, gazing at Murphy and the jockey, "is double crossing. I'm fair! It's a hard game I'm in. Until a few minutes ago, I had cause to believe you were afraid, Threlkeld. Or is it Murphy? That was your moniker in Tia Juana."

"Ran away from home," the rider explained. "I'm going under my right name. You say I double crossed you. Look—"

Threlkeld yanked off his coat. Off came his shirt. And there was revealed an ugly scar across his shoulders. "That's what your Mex gang did at Tia Juana. The day I couldn't take your orders to hold Big Jeff back. Double crossed you, huh? I got even—a little bit."

Mack Bray was on his feet, a strange look on his face. Before him was Murphy, ready for any eventuality. "Wrong idea," Bray said quietly. "My word is considered good, isn't it?"

**"The Round-up at Fishtrap," by Edward Parrish Ware, is a story of black pearls and lawless men, of grim strangers in the wilds of Arkansas, of adventure and romance of to-day. It's the complete novel in our next issue.**

"It is," Murphy conceded.

"They told me Murphy—er Threlkeld was a good rider—but afraid. I never ordered—anything like that. Never knew. Heard you'd beat it because you couldn't stand the pressure."

Bray gazed out the window for a time. Then he smiled thoughtfully. "We're going to split," he told Murphy. "Wouldn't get along worth a cent, after this. But"—he eyed Tom Threlkeld—"if you and this boy want to buy Big Jeff—as your own—I'll close him at ten grand and give you all the time in the world to pay off. That suit you?"

"Gee!" Threlkeld breathed.

"Then that's settled!" Bray walked to the door. "You'll make out bills of sale to Gus Edwin. He'll take over things. And you'll be paid a month in advance, Pete. As far as I'm concerned, we're square."

Chuckles softly, Mack Bray went out.

It was two months later, with Murphy and Threlkeld in New Orleans, ready for winter racing, when news was flashed over the wire that a rival gang of smugglers had turned a machine gun loose on the automobile of Mack Bray. He had been killed instantly.

Two days later, came a formal letter from a Chicago law firm. It contained two notes, signed by Murphy and Threlkeld. Across the face, written in red ink, was this notation upon each:

"In case of my death, these notes are hereby canceled. Mack Bray."

Big Jeff had won a handicap the day before. Threlkeld was going over the gelding when Murphy handed him the letter. Tom Threlkeld read it.

"Hard but square," he muttered. "Bray gimme a horse for a scar."



# American Adventurers

by  
Boyd Taylor

## Commander Robert E. Peary, U. S. N.

**N**EW YORK CITY throbbed with heat. The faint breeze that swept in from the river was hot and feverish. It was the hottest part of the afternoon of July 6, 1908. A bell clanged, and the U. S. S. *Roosevelt* backed slowly out of her slip, into the East River. She was starting on a voyage into the coldest regions of the earth.

In spite of the furious heat that parched the streets, thousands of people gathered to witness the departure. The piers were thronged with shouting crowds. The cheers echoed and died away. Tugs, ferries and yachts whistled and saluted. Factory whistles moaned and sirens screamed. The *Roosevelt* headed north, bound for the ends of the earth.

She was ideal for the trip. She was of American design, built in an American shipyard of American timber and steel. She had an American engine and an American crew. The expedition in command of an American, Commander Robert E. Peary, U. S. N.

Bronzed and weather-beaten, the explorer stood on the deck. His eyes gleamed, his grizzled hair was vital with

life. He smiled like a boy. He was making his eighth voyage into the Far North. This would be his last attempt. He must succeed. Peary was now in his fifty-third year, an old man to set off adventuring into limitless ice fields. But his heart was young and his determination flamed.

His magnificent physique had withstood the rigors of many sieges in that frozen country. Now, he must make use of his dearly bought experience. For nearly four hundred years, explorers had been trying to reach the top of the world and claim the north pole. Peary wanted the honor for his country.

Since 1886 he had planned, calculated, hoped. He had spent twelve years within the arctic circle. This was to be his supreme effort.

At Sidney, Cape Breton, the vessel was coaled and the last supplies taken aboard. In the brilliant sunshine of mid-afternoon, July 17, 1908, the expedition again headed north. At Hawks Harbour, Labrador, they met the auxiliary supply steamer. Again the *Roosevelt* was coaled, and twenty-five tons of whale meat taken aboard for

the dogs. The two boats steamed northward together.

The nights steadily grew shorter and shorter. After July 26th, they were in perpetual daylight. On August 1st, they were at Cape York, the gateway to the arctic world. Yet Cape York is as far from the pole as Tampa, Florida, from New York. Beyond the outpost stretched endless miles of trackless waste.

There was nothing ahead but danger. In the arctic the chances are always against the invader. Every mile now meant struggle; every day would call for daring, courage and dauntless command. Peary's eyes fired in anticipation of the battle and the victory. He was ready.

He took on Eskimos, dogs, and materials to cope with the frozen world. On August 18th, the supply ship turned back. The *Roosevelt* steamed ahead into the unending mass of ice. The last connection with civilization was broken.

The weather then was a sample of what was to come. The snow drove heavily. The wind cut like a great blade, but the hardy explorer smiled grimly. There were three hundred and fifty miles of almost solid ice between him and Cape Sheridan, where he planned to establish his winter quarters.

Navigation was fraught with danger. For two or three weeks he would go without taking off his clothes; snatching an hour or two of sleep once or twice a day. But he was undaunted. He would win this time!

Every rod of the three hundred and fifty miles was beset with peril. The sturdy little steamer would have to jab and ram her way. She would have to dodge the great mountains of blue-veined ice.

There would be constant danger of her being crushed by the towering, floating masses. The tortuous, ice-encumbered channel was considered impass-

able, but Peary's bold spirit was unafraid.

Progress was slow. For hours the boat was unable to budge. At ebb tide, Peary forced the nose of the steamer along the narrow track of water between the moving ice pack and the shore. With every bolt straining, she lunged and butted her way ahead.

When the tide changed she must find refuge or be carried back and lost in the crushing resistless jam. Peary knew the tides and the shore line, but the journey called for every bit of the knowledge he had gained. Constantly he stood at the side of the steamer captain.

The wind drove from the south. The speed was greater now. The ship went steadily northward with the ice pack. The wind divided the floating masses. Here and there an open pool appeared. The creaking masses swung closer, threatening. Everything was in readiness to abandon the steamer at a moment's notice.

Supplies were packed in the whale-boats. Emergency outfits prepared. Every person was ready, with his little bundle, to go over the side into the sea of shifting ice.

Peary's generalship was superb. Harnesses were made, sledges assembled and garments sewed. The pack cracked and groaned. Great icebergs crashed into each other, trembled, parted, and drifted on.

The weather was against the expedition. Fogs, winds and snow all hampered progress. Momentarily, the ice pack threatened. Two big floes pressed the ship's sides relentlessly. Gradually the weight increased. The vessel quivered. Peary was on the bridge.

He caught up the tube and called down to the engine room. "Chief, you've got to keep her moving until I give you the word, no matter what happens."

Every minute seemed an eternity.

Again, the commander seized the tube and begged for more power. The brave little ship shook. Live steam was poured into her cylinders for the spurt.

She rocked and reared. Her nose jabbed and struck at the frozen masses. She rose higher and higher in the water. Her tremendous added power and the ever-increasing pressure from the floes forced her up. Again the commander shouted through the tube.

"You've got to jump her now, chief!"

The noble little ship responded. She lunged like a live thing. The expedition had escaped what seemed like certain destruction. The huge cakes of ice, pushed on by miles of other floes, all swung in the irresistible force of the tides. Heavy ice has ground many a ship like grain between turning stones.

EVEN at ebb tide the little channel was never free. The *Roosevelt* continuously butted into the smaller floating ice cakes and constantly dodged the larger bergs. She moved back and forth ceaselessly, boring, twisting, and charging until the ice was too heavy to penetrate.

It was heartbreaking for the commander. The boat was under full steam, but she would have to wait. The black smoke from her funnel puffed into the frozen air. Coal is precious in that land of ice. His present supply would have to last until his return. Peary was willing to batter at the ice, using the valuable fuel, if he got anywhere. It hurt to see a single pound wasted.

Days were measured only by the clock. Daylight was continuous.

Again the ice pack closed in around the *Roosevelt*. Peary saw a narrow channel away to the east, leading into another pool of clear water. The iron prow rammed into the tiny opening. The ship plunged forward, driving and biting her way ahead.

Huge icebergs kicked against her

sides. She rocked and turned like a football. A big ice cliff came steadily at her. The explorer's eyes searched for a place to turn. Desperately he drove the vessel to the left. She escaped for a moment. The same iceberg turned, eddied, and whirled upon the little steamer. Again she shifted frantically. A spur of the berg caught her keel. She was thrown aground. Another mountain of ice hurtled down upon the helpless craft, carrying away part of her after rail.

The little steamer quivered and trembled. Two huge floes drifted rapidly toward her. Again death in the frozen wilderness yawned. The floes collided, rocked and bowed. They parted and the *Roosevelt* shot through. The pressure on the vibrating ship relaxed. A huge block of ice thirty feet square was flung from the heights of a floating cliff.

The men held their breaths. The flying tons seemed shot at them. The frozen mass barely missed the deck and crashed against the ice pack. At the mercy of the drifting pack the ship vibrated like the taut strings of a violin. The pressure was tremendous, relentless, crushing.

Peary immediately ordered the ice dynamited. It was time for lightning action. The charge was prepared and the plunger clicked. The ship rocked. A column of water rose into the air.

The pressure was released, but the steamer was aground. When the tide rose, she backed and lunged, surged and strained. Once more she was afloat, and in the embrace of the vast drift.

On September 5th, they reached Cape Sheridan. The ship was grounded inside the tide crack and the unloading was begun. Those were busy times of preparation. The days were still determined by the clock. The sun circled the heavens, and there was no night.

Hunting parties went out. Musk-ox,

deer and bear meat supplemented the menu of the expedition. Everywhere there was activity. The Eskimo women sewed fur clothes; men looked after the dogs.

Everything was made ready for the long winter night and the dash to the pole in the spring. Supplies were transported and stations established along the route for a distance of ninety miles. Igloos were prepared for the spring advance.

By the 12th of October the sun had gone. The twilight thickened constantly. Field work was difficult. Winter was coming. The temperature dropped lower and lower. On October 29th, the thermometer stood at twenty-six degrees below zero. The light was entirely gone. The long arctic night settled. The expedition was housed; the ship stood high in the fast embrace of the ice.

Only those who have experienced the months of darkness can know the horror of the arctic night. Peary kept his people busy. He was father to the colony. He smiled when the wind howled and the snow fell upon snow and ice. The temperature dropped to sixty below, but his smile never failed.

Even when the great resistless wave of ice came to threaten the *Roosevelt*, he was cheerful. The high wind became stronger. It howled and shrieked. Clouds of snow flurried like specters. The hurricane hummed in the rigging. The ship complained and groaned. The winter moon was shining. The heaps of ice cast dim hulking shadows. Peary was alert, watching, waiting.

Above the groans of the ship came another sound. The ominous grinding of the ice in the channel. Immediately the commander was on deck. The ice was moving steadily, irresistibly, past the point of the cape.

The tide was running flood and the pressure was enormous. The ice rose in great waves. It cracked and

screamed with a deafening roar. Huge blocks were heaved into the air, others were crumbled beneath the surface.

Peary knew that any minute might see the ship crushed like grain in a mill. The grounded steamer was forced farther up and driven against a huge block of ice under the starboard quarter. She trembled. Every pulse of the tide swelled the pressure. A great iceberg was jammed against her sides from midships to the stern.

The commander immediately ordered all fires out. A blazing ship there in the midst of the polar night would be horrible. The Eskimos were terrified. They set up a weird wailing, calling upon their ancestors.

Women and children slipped over the rail onto the ice, making for the shelters built upon the shore. At last the tide turned. The ship had listed to port. She never sat straight until spring.

ON February 22nd, Commander Peary set out, walking in front of the sledges, leading them into the vast frozen world. The winter night was passing.

After leaving Cape Columbia, the rest of the track lay over the frozen Arctic Ocean. There was no more land—only rough ice.

Peary had planned with perfection. The cached supplies reduced the heavy loads. When a sledge load had been consumed, the drivers and dogs with the sledge were sent back. Provisions were too dear to be spent in feeding those idle mouths. This kept the return trail open, and the snow igloos built going out were used on the homeward trip.

The second day from land, trouble commenced. The great ice parted leaving an open "lead." The explorer gave the order to camp. Fortunately, by morning, the lane of water had closed enough for them to cross.

They struck the "big lead" on the 6th of March. The mighty forces of nature had torn the heavy floes in two. Peary decided to bridge it, but there was no loose ice suitable. An ice ferry was tried, but failed.

The gaunt man strode up and down the edges, thinking, planning, scheming. His tall, fur-clad figure was restless. He was like a caged animal. The lead continued to widen. Young ice was forming, but it was too thin to bear the heavy sledges. For days Peary waited. At last the ice was tough enough to cross.

The crossing was made safely. The gallant explorer forged ahead. His bright eyes alert, his keen ears straining for every sound. Leads were constantly opening. Even as the party camped, a vast crack might open immediately under them.

On, Peary led his men. As sledges were emptied, men and dogs were sent back. Out of the six parties who started, only one reached the pole with Peary. The air was full of frost. Often Peary's eyelashes were cemented together by the congealing haze. In opening his mouth to give an order there was a sharp pain—his mustache had frozen to the stubble of beard.

Every day they marched forward. The weather varied from sixteen to thirty degrees below zero. The sun shone brilliantly on that world of white. Only dark goggles saved the daring adventurers from snow-blindness. Frosted noses and split and bleeding cheeks counted as nothing.

Peary crossed 87 degrees latitude hopefully. His dogs were healthy and supplies plentiful. Now, every sound was a threat. Ahead a smoky fog foretold danger—open water. Still he traveled straight ahead toward it, but made camp before coming to a lead.

As Peary dropped off to sleep the ice creaked and groaned. He got everything ready for an emergency. He

was exhausted. In the face of the danger of a lead opening under him, he settled himself for a sleep.

Peary was roused by shouts. Raising his big frame from the deerskin bed in the little snow hut, he pressed his face to the peephole of his igloo. A broad gap of water lay between him and part of his party.

It was a moment for action. The igloo on the opposite side was moving away on an ice raft. The dogs were all but dragged into the freezing water.

"Hitch your dogs," Peary shouted.

At any moment his own snow hut might be adrift in the black water. All hands worked feverishly.

Quick work with pickaxes, and a path was leveled. The sledges moved onto the floe. Peary had his men ready to help their companions across with their loads the moment the raft could be maneuvered alongside. Directed by the intrepid commander, the men brought the ice raft up to the big floe.

Eager hands reached over. The dogs and sledges were pulled across. Once more they made camp. They must have rest before pushing on. Any moment another lead might open in the big floe.

The expedition was now farther north than man had ever been before. Happy in this knowledge, Peary lay down and slept.

When he waked, the ice murmured and creaked. The sound became a roar. Sharp snapping sounds like rifle fire rose above the crackling and groaning. The dark curtain of fog lifted, but ahead was another ominous, low-hanging cloud.

Peary acted quickly. The party was roused and hurried across the floe lest the crack reopen. On they pushed, crossing lakes of young ice that buckled under the weight of the sledges. Forward they rushed at full speed, regardless of danger.

At  $87^{\circ} 47'$  another supporting party turned back. Only the backbone of the expedition went forward, with Peary at the head. Straight toward the north pole they sped. Across floe, pressure ridge, now around a towering pinnacle, on they drove. A lead ten yards wide, opened in front.

Peary turned and shouted to his followers to hurry. They came up, the dogs panting, their breath making a white cloud. Ice cakes rattled and creaked. Fearlessly he picked a path across the rattling, shifting surface. He stopped to test a cake, lest it turn over when the sledges hit it. He called to the dogs and cheered his men. The dogs halted. They whined piteously. They feared the moving mass of ice. Peary called again.

There was something in his voice that cheered even the dogs. They crouched, whined, and sprang across the widening space. The men braced and the sledge shot forward. Only the great length of the sledge, twelve feet, enabled it to bridge the gap in the ice.

Peary leaped ahead, testing the ice. The thin sheet swayed and buckled under him. He spread his legs to distribute his weight. He dared not lift his feet, but slid them gently. The men came after him on all fours, leaving the dogs and sledges to get across as best they might. At last the crossing was made.

The bitter wind cut into his face, but his purpose led him on like a beacon. His courage was indomitable.

The morning of April 6th, ended his last long march toward the pole. His observation indicated  $89^{\circ} 57'$ . The goal was in sight, but accumulated fatigue

**Another article in this series about "American Adventurers" will appear in our next number.**

surged up. He could not drive himself on. His energy had been drained. Exhaustion triumphed. Sleep was absolutely necessary.

Not even exhaustion could hold him long. Peary waked shortly. Hastily everything was made ready. He pushed forward. His feet lifted with a new strength. Even the wind sang, instead of howling. The goal was at hand—every direction was south. Every wind that blew was a south wind. He had reached  $90^{\circ}$  north latitude, the top of the world!

Observations were taken and checked. Then Old Glory was set waving from the pinnacle of the earth. The place was claimed in the name of the United States. Peary had achieved the goal toward which he had worked for twenty-three years. Only his magnificent courage and undaunted will, aided by his generalship, had made it possible.

ON his return to civilization, high praise and acclaim greeted him. On March 3, 1911, a bill was passed making him a rear admiral, United States navy, dating from April 6, 1909.

The material benefits of the discoveries of Columbus and Magellan are incalculable; but no explorer in all times has shown more courage and daring than that intrepid American, Robert E. Peary, in his expedition to the pole.

Before his death, February 20, 1920, he became active in aviation. Even to the end, he was courageous, daring, and fearless. He was buried in Arlington. No more fitting tribute than the motto on his tomb could have been found: *Viam Aut Faciam*, (I will find a way or make one.)





# Knaves Three

*by Wilton Matthews*

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

**A** SMALL circlet of light preceded an obscure figure slowly across the dark room, playing fitfully on the various furnishings. Along the edge of the bed, the light ran. It wavered, and swept to the right, touching a screen in the corner.

Then to the left, in a jumpy, searching course, the circlet flashed across a mahogany writing desk, a window with the blind drawn, and finally, a small steel safe.

Upon this it remained motionless for a moment. Then "Spud" Ricks, guiding hand behind the light, moved forward cautiously and knelt beside the object of his quest. Before laying his flash upon the thick carpet, he adjusted the circle to illuminate the door of the safe. Two words in gold letters appeared on the steel—"Arnold Vander-veer."

After removing and placing carefully

beside the light a pair of black gloves, Spud drew a piece of fine sandpaper from an inner pocket and proceeded, with rapid, even motions, to sensitize his finger tips. This done, he leaned forward and gave the dial a preliminary twirl.

With ear held close, he worked for several minutes, listening for the fatal click. Presently, meeting with no success, he paused and drew the back of his arm across his forehead. After a short period of listening intently for sounds from without, he renewed his efforts.

The second time he stopped, it was to swear softly and mutter aloud, "Hell! It'll take me an hour at this rate. Guess I'll blow it and make a quick get-away."

Again Spud's hand went to the inside pocket, presumably for tools, but at this unhandy moment the door behind him creaked slightly, and the room

was flooded with lights. Half blinded, he instinctively sought to turn and rise.

**H**OLD, my good fellow," came a warning tone at Spud's back, "hands above the head. That's right." The voice was soft and velvety, but firm. Spud obeyed.

A hand frisked deftly over his body, found and appropriated the inevitable gat, and touched him in the back with it.

"O. K., buddy," spoke the surprise party again. "Now face around where I can see what my visitor looks like."

As the trapped man stood in the glare of the light for inspection, a sheepish look appeared on his face, for he saw that his captor held no gun, except the one he had just confiscated.

"Put one over on you then, didn't I?" said the latter, grinning more good-naturedly than would ordinarily be expected of a man who had surprised a burglar at work.

"Yeh," assented Spud disgustedly. "You get me fair, all right. I'd a swore you was gone to the train to meet your wife." He looked at the evening clothes in which the other was attired. "I didn't hear you come in on me. You're pretty slick."

The man with the gun smiled depreciatively. "I was in the back room when you came in," he said. "I've been watching to see what success you had, but when you plainly announced your intention of doing a little damage along with your pranks, I had to come out in defense of the safe."

Then, with a sterner note in his voice, he continued, "What's your name, fellow?"

"Spud Ricks," replied that gentleman after a short hesitation. He could think of no other at the moment, so he let out his real name.

"Probably a lie," accused the protector of safes coolly. "But no matter. Now, Mr. Ricks, if such you are, I don't

suppose you can think up any reason on the spur of the moment why I shouldn't call in the police and surrender you; can you?"

"Not a one," rejoined Spud resignedly. "But give me three minutes to get away, and all the cops in New York can't catch me."

"That," said the captor, smiling, "is something I'm not interested in, since there's no reason I should give you that chance." Looking at his victim with a cold eye, the captor of Spud mentally patted himself on the back, and complacently reflected that his own plan had an even chance to meet success.

He knew that, although the detectives of the police department had trailed him—as he had meant they should—to this very house, his own past cleverness in remaining a shadowy, elusive crook, and escaping capture, had left them with no picture of him and only a fair description. If he could only make the detectives believe that Spud was Danny Brooks, the fade-away man!

Spud, on his part, was wishing he could trace to the original giver the tip he had received for this job and mete out doom to the scoundrel. It is doubtful if he would have sprung into action, however, even if he had known that the culprit stood before him, preparing to palm him off as a notorious crook in order to save himself.

Danny was so self-satisfied as he reached for the telephone receiver that he felt slightly annoyed when something stayed his hand. Was it that strange sixth sense, which some of us supposedly possess? Or was it the significance of the hard, round object boring into his back which vanished the smile of amiability from his face?

**A**T any rate, Brooks had an uneasy feeling that all was not well. His disquietude was further accentuated when his gun was quietly removed

from his unresisting fingers. He made no move of protest, for he was a discreet knave, and he had business to perform on earth.

He merely said, with an attempt at jocularity: "Ho! More visitors, eh? It seems that I am to have no peace this evening."

Turning slowly around, he saw a squarely set man of medium height standing by the screen, behind which he had doubtless hidden during the conversation between Danny Brooks and Spud.

The stranger wore a soft felt hat and a well-fitting suit of dark material. Except for the gun in his hand, his looks were those of a respectable gentleman.

"Good evenin', Mr. Vanderveer," greeted the present master of affairs ironically. "I guess you're not the only one that's puttin' somethin' over to-night, huh?"

Noting the look of chagrin and accusation Danny was casting toward Spud, the stranger said hastily, "Naw, that gent ain't in cahoots with me. I was here afore either of you guys, and I ducked behind the screen when I heard you come in from the next room."

He looked reflectively at the man before him and further blessed him with enlightenment. "Like this Spud Ricks bird, I kinda figgered on the rich Mr. Vanderveer meetin' the wifie to-night, but I guess you ain't so lovin' and considerate as some folks think, heh?"

"Now listen, gents. When the old lady gets here, bein' kinda surprised, she'll yell for help in spite o' hell and high water. So I'm clearin' out now; but I ain't goin' plumb empty-handed."

He edged in a circle around the two men and the bed to a small dressing table on the other side of the room. With one eye and a sinister muzzle on the others, the stranger hastily rummaged the drawers and overturned the

jewel box, stuffing into his coat pocket what he thought valuable.

It was a matter of only a minute before he was ready to go. Opening the hall door, he backed out, bidding a sarcastic good night to those within. Brooks and Ricks heard the key turn as he locked them in. Then his footsteps receded down the hall.

"Well, Mr. Vanderveer," said Spud deprecatingly, "I guess you'll let me go now, won't you?"

The gentleman addressed, looked perplexed. "Wait a minute," said he, "and let me figure this out."

For a minute, Brooks wore a look of indecision, and by that time the thing had happened on which he had counted.

A KNOCK was heard at the door, the key turned. Two policemen and a plain-clothes man appeared, conducting him who had departed with the jewels and trinkets.

Danny Brooks assumed an expression of relief and rushed forward immediately. "Here, Mr. Officer," he urged, "arrest this man. I see you've got that one, but I have two burglars in my house to-night." As a policeman secured Spud, Danny briefly gave his version of the affair. "I was starting to phone the police department," he finished, "when this other fellow spoiled it all."

"Oh, we know the one we caught outside," said the plain-clothes man. "But this fellow"—pointing to Spud—"is the man we're after. We trailed him here and had the house surrounded, when we unexpectedly killed another bird with the same stone."

"My name is Spud Ricks," protested the accused.

"Yeh, but you've got another name. You're sometimes called Danny Brooks," asserted the detective. "It's under that name that I arrest you."

After discouraging further protests

by threatening to use arguments other than oral, the detective turned to Danny. "You say, Mr. Vanderveer, that this other fellow must have been here before you came? Yes? Then you don't know yet that he didn't rob the safe and hide the loot before you came. With so many burglars in one night, it's even possible that yet another one was here before these two, and that you are already robbed."

"Why—ah—I feel sure that they were apprehended in time," said Danny uneasily.

"Yeh?" said the detective, unimpressed. "Well, there's only one way to find out. Better open the safe and make sure."

Danny knew better than to create suspicion by hesitating, but his heart sank as he stepped toward the safe with an unconcerned air. With his little case of blue-steel instruments, he could have drawn the knob and opened the door in a matter of minutes. But he felt that only by rare luck could he open it as the owner should.

After giving the dial a few turns, however, he knew that such luck was with him. Spud had evidently been on the verge of success, for Danny's ear, cocked sidewise, caught the click of the disturbed tumblers. He turned the handle and opened the door.

With a sense of relief, he showed the detective the packets of yellowbacks and greenbacks, affirming the amount was correct.

The detective scarcely looked at the money. "I just wanted to make sure," he said. After saying good night, he departed with his prisoners.

As the door closed, Danny returned to the safe and swung the door open again. Methodically, he rifled the compartments and money drawers.

Then he returned everything, except the currency, seventeen thousand dollars of it, as he had determined for the detective. Thrusting the packages

into his pockets, he stepped softly to the hall door and opened it.

AS Danny Brooks stepped out, he was seized from both sides, and the detective again stood before him.

"Always best to get the evidence, you know," he remarked coolly, lighting a cigarette. "We'll see if you've got it."

When a short search disclosed the bills, the detective continued, with satisfaction, "We've got you now, Brooks, and here's the proof. I arrest you for burglary, and also the other things I've got down on the warrant."

Knowing when he was defeated, Danny Brooks submitted to the bracelets peaceably, trying, for his high-brow reputation, not to appear sullen.

"Say," he asked suddenly, "how did you know I wasn't the owner of this house? You never saw me before."

"Oh, I wasn't sure of anything till you came out," responded the detective amiably, "but I had a hunch when you opened the safe. I must say you did it slicker'n a ribbon, but you gave yourself away."

"I've known many a safe owner in my day, and every one of them looked at the dial when he twirled. You did not work the combination by sight. You just poked your ear up and listened. You want to watch these little things, kiddo."

#### In Difficulties

A DOCTOR advised a corpulent patient to take up golf. After a few weeks the patient returned and said that the doctor would have to advise another game.

"But there's nothing to beat golf," said the doctor.

"Quite so," agreed the fat fellow, with a touch of impatience, "but it's no good to me. If I place the ball so that I can see it, I can't hit it, and when I put it where I can hit it, I can't see it."



# Law of the Hills

by **Otwell Binnis**

Part I

## CHAPTER I.

### EVIL SHADOWS.

**A**S Nick Shervington, more than a little out of luck, meandered down the narrow lane of a street, the hand in his pocket

played with the single coin that stood between him and destitution.

On either side of him the crazy beetling houses deepened the growing gloom. Overhead, the multitude of signs with their twisted Chinese lettering brought night before day was yet done. The heat was stifling.

The half dollar, slippery with the sweat of his hand, cried aloud his desperate case, but it still was a thing of potence. On one hand it represented a meal, with due economy two meals, and on the other, it was capital that with luck might yet lead on to a fortune.

"Fortune!"

Shervington laughed a little harshly as he whispered the word. Then he

paused before a narrow, snaky lane which opened out from the one he was traversing. This alley, for it was little more, was already in darkness. One or two softly glowing lanterns accentuated its Stygian gloom, and served to deepen the shadows.

It was, he knew, a place of no great repute. Almost every house in it was an opium dive or a gambling den; but then the last was precisely what he was looking for.

The Mexican half dollar in his hand, legitimately employed, would be less than dust in the balance in the booming international trade of Shanghai; but at fanning it might lead to temporary affluence.

In any case the loss of it would only mean that he would go hungry four hours sooner than need be, and that was a small hardship weighed against the sole chance that remained to him.

Shervington was still thinking these thoughts, staring into the twisting alley, when the sound of well-shod feet made

him turn swiftly around. As he did so, two men passed him. One was a young man, obviously European or American, dressed in white ducks, which made him seem ghostlike in the gloom. The other, by dress and feature, was as evidently a Chinaman.

They turned into the dark gut of a street without so much as a glance at Shervington. He was reflecting that here was some tourist seeing the sights and seeking the trouble that overtakes his kind when a third figure slid by him, soft-footed and furtive, plainly stalking the pair ahead.

Intrigued for the moment, Shervington forgot his own cares and began to stalk the stalker. Dark as the alley was he had no difficulty, for the sound of the white man's boots came to him clearly. Once under the dim yellow light of a lantern the white suit gleamed; while the shadower showed blackly like a silhouette.

Without pause the three followed the course of the winding passage until they reached a building whose gable caused the alley to make a farther tortuous twist. Over the double doors of the building a lantern glowed softly.

By its light Shervington saw the pair halt, the shadower also coming to a standstill. He, himself, checked his advance in order to watch the trio undiscovered. The native accompanying the white man knocked in a peculiar manner upon the folding door.

A moment later one half of the door was cautiously opened, and a head was thrust forth as if the owner desired to scrutinize the pair who sought admission. The scrutiny was a remarkably brief one.

In three seconds the keeper of the portal had opened the door wide, letting into the alleyway the queer wailing music of native violins. On a gesture of invitation from the man in charge, the two men passed inside and the door closed promptly.

Shervington, hidden in the deep shadows, watched and listened. A minute passed, two minutes, and yet the shadower ahead did not advance. Then, as if he had been counting the seconds, at the third minute he began to move; and in turn halted under the lantern before the folding door.

His knock sounded up the alley. The process of the cautious opening of the door and the scrutinizing of the caller was repeated. This time, if possible, the scrutiny was even briefer than before, and the shadower passed inside without challenge.

Nick Shervington, left alone, lingered in the darkness for something like the space of time in which the shadower had remained halted. Of the character of the place which the trio had entered he was not for a moment in doubt. This snaky alley admitted of none.

Every house in it was a den of some kind; and there was in its length more iniquity than in any equal space in the native city. Nor did Shervington question that some evil purpose actuated the furtive shadower, if not also the native who was acting as guide to the young white man.

Impulsively Shervington determined to save the young man from the consequences of his folly, which at the lightest meant robbery; and at the worst, a knifed body floating down the Hwang-pu River toward the estuary of the Yang-tse-Kiang.

He began to walk forward; and when he reached the folding doors he rapped in the peculiar way the others had done. The half door opened, and a wizened Chinese face appeared; the slanting eyes of which were of a peculiarly penetrating quality.

Shervington faced their scrutiny nonchalantly. He knew that his rather decrepit clothes, and the bursting condition of his canvas shoes would rather commend him to the doorkeeper than otherwise.

And in that he was right. The alert eyes swept him from head to toe, the half-challenging look in them died out; and the Chinaman opened the door for him to pass through. As he made his entry, with a little pang of bitterness Nick Shervington thought to himself that to native eyes already he appeared to belong to the outcasts of his race—the beach combers of the Orient, who abound in the Treaty ports, living their sordid life among the native scum.

The bitterness, however, was lost in a surge of interest as he passed through an unlighted passage to the chamber beyond, which was much larger than he had expected; being a hall of entertainment rather than an ordinary dive.

At one end of the hall there was a stage, screened at the moment by a silken curtain. Scattered about were tables and chairs of the beer-hall type, where men sat drinking very much after the fashion of some low-class European music halls, while a half-hidden native orchestra made nerve-racking music.

But the place had all the characteristics of the dive. At the end, remote from the stage, there was a fan-tan table with shaded lights, round which players were grouped thickly. A reek of opium told its own tale.

The sound of a drunken voice raised quarrelsomey caused Shervington to turn in the direction from whence it came. He marked a party of sailors, which gave him a clew to the patrons of the place.

He looked farther afield trying to locate the trio whom he had followed. Badly lighted as the place was, he had no difficulty in finding the man in the white suit. He was seated at one of the tables a little way up the room, fairly near the low-built stage. With him was a man in native dress, obviously the guide who had brought him to this place.

Shervington considered the white man carefully. He was young, certainly un-

der thirty, good looking after a fashion, but with a slack mouth, and a chin too small and round for strong character. The man's eyes glowed with excited curiosity as they roved about the tawdry chamber, proclaiming that he was unaccustomed to the raw, vicious life about him, and vastly interested in it.

## CHAPTER II.

### WOLFISH HOWLS.

As he marked this, Nick Shervington nodded to himself. Here was a tourist out to see the sights, and likely to burn his fingers in the process. A boy set tea before the native and a glass of whisky before the tourist.

Satisfied as to the status of the quarry, Shervington looked round for the shadower; but in vain. There were many natives present, no doubt most of them drawn by a predatory purpose, for drugged or drunken sailors are easy to rob. But on none could he fix as the one who had so surreptitiously followed the pair in front.

Moving forward, Shervington maneuvered himself into a position some seven yards from the table where the pair sat. As he seated himself a Chinese boy advanced to receive his order, and manifested some surprise when he was told to bring melon pips and tea.

For his half dollar, Shervington received in change a handful of that small copper coinage known as cash, twenty of which go to the English penny. As he surveyed them with a half-rueful expression, his eyes wandered to the distant fan-tan table. His chances of fortune had now gone by on the other side, thrown away for what was little more than a whim.

A sudden cessation of the roar of conversation about him arrested his attention. He looked round for the cause, and saw that the silken curtain had been dragged aside and that the stage was set for the performance.

A second later a murmur of appreciation arose. A girl of an exotic type, had glided into view. Shervington looked at her incuriously. The almond eyes, the black hair, the heavily painted face and vermillion-colored lips, the jeweled limbs and exposed torso, represented to him nothing new. He had seen the like before; just as he had seen the slow posturing dance that followed.

Shervington's eyes left the stage and turned to the pair he had followed. The white man's eyes were fixed upon the dancer, rapt, absorbed; but his companion's were directed in quite the other direction, somewhere beyond Shervington's shoulder, and his attitude had a tenseness which surprised the watcher. The man was very much interested in something. What—

A sound impinged on Shervington's hearing as the question was shaping in his mind, a sound of a steady tapping on a table behind him. For the moment it was the only really distinct sound in the room for the orchestra was silent. The sound was rhythmical as if some one were beating out a strain of music or—yes!—a message to some one in the room.

Shervington listened carefully to make sure. The sounds were not quite uniform in their regularity. There was a perceptible difference in the interval of silence between them. One tap came quicker on the heels of its predecessor than another.

His attention fixed on that. He began to try to measure the difference in the time; and quite suddenly he understood. The short and long intervals between the steady tapping were the dot and dash of the Morse code—it was a signal.

His curiosity provoked, Shervington turned slowly and, with an air of nonchalance, looked around to locate the operator. Guided by the sound, he had no difficulty in doing so. The tapping

came from a table in a straight line with his own.

The operator's face was turned from him so that he could not see it, but the hand holding the closed fan with which the marble table was being struck was distinctly visible, the light from a shaded lantern near by striking full upon it.

It was a long thin hand, very well manicured. The fingers long and pointed, with a suggestion of extraordinary virility about them, were ringless; but on the little finger, looking very like a ring cameo something was tattooed.

Shervington stared at it intently and had just decided that it must be a representation of the lotus flower—the mystical symbol of the East—when the tapping ceased. The fan rested upon the table, the long tapering fingers still holding it, as if ready for instantaneous action.

Scarcely had this happened when the sound broke out in another direction. This time Shervington turned swiftly. The exotic dancer upon the stage was still posturing. But Shervington's eyes never even glanced at her. Instead they went straight in the direction from which the sound came.

Eyes and ears swiftly located the place of its origin, which was at the table where the young man in the white suit was seated. His native companion was the operator; and was apparently no less skilled than the owner of the tattooed hand.

With some implement that Shervington could not see, but which he guessed was the haft of a pocketknife, the native tapped away.

"Dot-dot-dot!"

Shervington, moderately familiar with the code, concentrated his mind upon the message. That was "s."

The knife tapped on with a rapidity that proved the native's expertness, and which was almost too rapid for the listener-in.

"Dot-dash! Dash-dot! Dot! Dot-dot-dash-dot!"

"A-N-E-Q!" The eavesdropper translated slowly "Saneq" That told him nothing, meant nothing intelligible to him, but undaunted he tried again, listening very closely.

The result was even more disappointing. He got a string of letters and numbers that seemed as ill assorted as a broken-up jig-saw puzzle. Realizing that the message must be in some kind of code, Shervington ceased to attempt the reading, giving his attention to the actors in this little drama.

But the signal still went forward. To Nick Shervington it was like something tapping in his brain; worrying him enormously by reason of its unintelligibility. But no one else seemed to notice the tapping in that quiet room, except that man with the tattooed finger who sat in an alert listening attitude, plainly receiving the answer to his own message.

But scarcely had this thought crossed the watcher's mind when he had evidence to the contrary. Quite suddenly the young man at the table ahead broke out with explosive querulousness.

"Hang it. Ah Yeo, stop that infernal racket! It gets on my nerves."

He said no more. The native's knife ceased to tap the table top. But the man with the tattooed lotus, himself tapped out some sharp message, which to Shervington's amazement was answered from another quarter altogether.

He stared round in the semidarkness trying to locate this third operator; failed, and then the message, a very brief one, ceased just as the native fiddles broke up the silence with their plaintive music.

The exotic dancer on the stage quickened her steps a little to a finale. A sailor to the left of the pair whom Shervington was watching, struck a match to light his pipe, and under the wailing of the violins, the watcher had a sense of movement close beside him.

He glanced to his left and, in the semidarkness, caught sight of a figure in a crouching attitude between two tables, from which it crawled forward noiselessly ahead.

There was something so oddly furtive in the crawler's movement, that Shervington had a conviction that some evil purpose dictated it. He watched closely. The furtive one was making directly for the table, the occupants of which the white man was himself so interested in.

Remembering the man with the tattooed lotus, Shervington spared a glance to look round. The fellow's hand had fallen from the fan and now was clenched upon the table, the knuckles showing white in the light of the half-shrouded lamp. The man's back was straight, his head thrown slightly back as if listening for some sound behind him.

He was, as Shervington was assured, still on the alert; though not perhaps for the signaling of a knife haft on a table top. Shervington took all this in at a glance. Then his eyes sought the skulking figure again. Scarcely had they done so, when he was on his feet, crying a warning.

"Look out!"

He leaped as he shouted, for the furtive one had suddenly risen behind the man in white drill. The skulker's arm was thrown back. It held a weapon of some sort, whether knife or bludgeon, Shervington could not tell. Before the blow could fall, his own fist caught the aggressor in the neck, knocking him clean over the table in front of him, and sending his intended victim sprawling from his chair.

The latter's companion rose swiftly. A knife flashed in the subdued light, while at the same time he cried something in Chinese. What the words were Shervington did not quite catch; but their import was made clear to him by that which followed.

The wailing violins checked as if all their strings had broken simultaneously. The hectic posturer on the stage seemed of a sudden to become statuesque. Then pandemonium began.

A howl of rage broke from half a hundred throats, the howl of men kindling to the killing lust with the swiftness of tow to fire. There was a sound of tables overthrown, a crashing of glass and porcelain, a wild surge forward in the half gloom of men whose eyes gleamed strangely.

Something whizzed by Shervington's cheek so near that he felt the scratch of it. Then he gripped the man whom he had tried to serve.

"Run!" Shervington said. "Make for the door over there. We've got to reach it first or—"

The man whom he addressed stood there gibbering with fear as it seemed; and frozen in his place.

"Run you idiot!" roared Shervington again. Gripping the man by the shoulder, he jerked him forward.

That gave the fellow the needed impulse. He ran forward like a hare, leaped a table in his way, and then pitched over a fallen chair, sprawling in front of the curtained doorway. It was, as Shervington saw, already blocked by three or four Chinamen with knives in their hands, and the case was desperate.

The howls behind grew more wolfish in quality. There was a brimming tide of yellow faces on the right as the fallen man picked himself up. It seemed to Nick Shervington that he and the unknown man in white were to be swept from the door into the recesses of the hall, in which case, as he knew, they were utterly lost.

"A table," he shouted to the other. "Use it as a shield and charge for the door."

A roar greeted his words. "That's the talk," cried a rollicking half-tipsy voice. "Here y're, mate."

Some one thrust a marble-topped table in his hands. With a leaping heart Shervington remembered the drinking sailors. To them a row in a foreign dive was meat and drink; and as one of them laughed as it seemed with pure pleasure, he himself laughed with relief.

"One of you to the fore!" Shervington shouted. "The others watch that crowd. Now! Are you ready?"

"Ready!" came the roaring response. The wedge moved forward, driving straight for the Chinamen who barred the door.

### CHAPTER III.

#### STARK FEAR.

THE yellow men stood for a moment, hesitated, and one of them flung his knife, the blade of which snapped against the marble shield. Then, without another stroke, the Chinamen fled headlong down the passage.

A glance back showed Nick Shervington a wave of yellow menacing faces pressing on behind, the owners baying with fury; and he saw the danger. That folding door to the street opened inward.

Jammed against the door, with the howling mob behind, there would be not the remotest chance for them. They would be knifed or crushed to death, maybe trampled to pulp by feet that knew not mercy.

"Hold them!" he shouted warningly. "Drive them back while I free the doors."

The sailors responded cheerfully and, while yells of rage sounded, Shervington slipped back and threw the folding door open, the guardian of it having fled. The glow of the lantern overhead revealed one or two men lurking in the shadows, and in the same moment a hand gripped his arm.

He turned to find the man in white at his elbow, his eyes wide with fear.

He marked the signs with a touch of contempt.

"Pull yourself together, man," Shervington exhorted, "and watch those shadows out there."

"I—I've got a g-gun," chattered the man, "if it's any use."

"A gun! High heavens! Why didn't you say so, man. Where is it?"

"H-here!" was the answer through dithering teeth.

Shervington asked for no permission. He snatched the weapon, an automatic, from the other's shaking hand.

"Ready!" he cried to the sailors, and led the way into the snaky alley.

One of the lurkers leaped forward, but Shervington fired the pistol over his head, and the man fled round the gable. With a glance to see that the unnerved tourist was safe, Shervington led the way toward the wider street.

As they went, the dark alley waked into life. Chinese curses and yells followed them. There were dangerous little rushes from the denizens of the dives, but, in a phalanx, the sailors roared their way to the wider thoroughfare, now lighted by the glow of a hundred lanterns.

The pursuit slackened; but not until they had crossed the bridge over the Soochow Creek was there any safety.

Once across, the man with whom the trouble had begun lost his rather abject look. The fear died from his eyes.

"We did that rather well," he remarked with a touch of boastful pride that almost sent Shervington into a roar of laughter.

"We—" he began and then checked himself.

The other saw no reason for modesty. "Yes—Janet will be interested to hear of—"

"Who is Janet?" demanded Shervington, abruptly.

"My cousin. She is at the Marco. You must meet her. She will like you. You will come with me?" Then

whether by way of inducement or not Shervington could not guess, the man added, "Janet's a beauty."

Shervington was moved to accept, and then remembered the state of his clothing, particularly the condition of his shoes.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered. "You see I'm rather down on my luck at present, and my raiment is not exactly like Solomon's in his glory. As like as not they'd chuck me out at the Marco Polo, and—"

"Down on your luck," cried the young man condescendingly. "Then I guess you'd better come right away. I can find you a first-class job that should suit a fellow like you down to the ground."

"A job! Then I'm your man," answered Shervington ignoring the other's condescension.

Together they marched forward until they reached the hotel. There, the stranger went off to find his cousin, leaving Shervington alone and very conscious of the stares provoked by his sartorial defects.

Five minutes passed, six, and then he saw the man returning. With him came a girl of a beauty so flawless that Nick Shervington caught his breath in sheer wonder.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### A STRANGE STORY.

THE advancing girl was of no more than medium height, but her slim shapeliness gave Shervington an impression of tallness. Her features were delicate and regular. She had a complexion of quite startling purity, no hint of color anywhere save in the ripe redness of the lips. Her hair was black, wrapped in smooth coils about the small, well-balanced head. Her eyes were of the same color, but with a sparkle in their depths that proclaimed a nature bright and ardent.

As she drew nearer, her cousin by her side, those eyes met Shervington's in measuring glance. His own steel-blue eyes remained steady enough. As the girl's gaze left his face and wandered downward until they rested on his decrepit shoes, he felt his cheeks flame.

But two seconds later the dark eyes were lifted again, and there was a hint of friendly curiosity in their depths. A moment later the pair had halted in front of him. Then he discovered how deceptive was the impression of her height which he had received, for the dark head scarcely passed the height of his own shoulder. A second later she spoke crisply, addressing her companion.

"'Husky'! Introduce me."

Instantly the man was jerked into action: "Meet Miss Craydon," he began abruptly, and continued: "Janet, this is—"

"Nicholas Shervington at your service, Miss Craydon," said the owner of the name as the other broke off.

Then Shervington addressed the man. "We had no time for introductions just now."

"Gee! No! But we may as well finish the job. I'm a Craydon, too."

"Happy to meet you, Mr. Craydon," answered Shervington politely. An instant after the girl spoke again. "Husky tells me you have been having adventures in the native quarter?"

"Oh, a little scrap," answered Shervington carelessly.

"A little scrap! Don't believe him, Janet. If we hadn't fought our way out we'd have been as dead as mutton. There was a whole tribe of chinks fairly howling for our blood."

For one moment the girl's dark eyes met Shervington's questioningly. With a feeling that the girl was inclined to doubt her cousin's statement, he laughed as he said nonchalantly: "There was certainly a pack of them, and they might have proved dangerous."

The question faded from the dark eyes as the owner of them smiled. "Husky is always inclined to talk in superlatives. There really was trouble then?"

"Mr. Craydon looked like being knocked upon the head when I intervened. With the help of some sailors we had to fight our way out."

"Ah! Tell me! I should like to hear. Those chairs there will suit—"

She led the way without completing the words, and the two men followed her. Then the dark eyes looked at Shervington.

"Now Mr. Shervington! A full account, please. I want to hear all about this matter."

Nick Shervington flushed at her way of putting the matter, and for a second was aware of a resentful surge in his heart. That passed, however, as she smiled. Without more ado he began to tell her what had happened, keeping back nothing except the fact of Craydon's cowardice; and very conscious all the time that she was watching him closely.

She listened carefully, and at the end the dark eyes were glowing. Then a hint of trouble showed in the beautiful face. She asked a question: "You are sure that Chinaman was going to attack Husky?"

"He was in the act of striking when I knocked him over the table."

"And you think that the signaling you noticed had to do with the attack?"

"I couldn't read the message, but it was an odd coincidence if it hadn't something to do with the intended knockout."

Miss Craydon nodded thoughtfully. "You think they meant to rob Husky?"

"What else? It is not an unheard of thing in dives of that sort."

The girl sat in thought for a moment, then she questioned her cousin. "Husky, did you see the man with whom the appointment was made?"

"No! That chinkie bonehead got us there too soon."

"Do you really think so? Suppose he just took you there with the intention of knocking you on the head and robbing——"

"Oh, that's flip-flop, Janet. The fellow knew he had to come back here to get the dollars, which I didn't carry with me. That was the arrangement. It wouldn't have paid him to sell me like that."

"Nevertheless, according to Mr. Shervington, he signaled to some one in that hall, and the attack followed," said Janet Craydon stubbornly.

Nick Shervington looked from one to the other. There was something behind the occurrences in which he had taken part to which he had no key. He, in turn, shot a question.

"Do I understand that you went to that hole to meet some one?"

"Yes! A man who was to give me news that Cousin Janet and I want rather badly!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

HUSKY CRAYDON offered no further explanation, and the other forbore to press him. His gaze went to the girl. There was an absorbed look in the dark eyes; an expression of extreme thoughtfulness in the beautiful face, as if she were considering some debatable course.

Shervington found himself wondering what was in her mind; then quite suddenly she broke the silence.

"Mr. Shervington, my cousin tells me that you are seeking employment, may I ask what kind of employment would attract you?"

The man whom she addressed looked at his broken shoes, then looking up caught her eyes, and surprised in them a look of sympathy.

"Any sort, Miss Craydon. Beggars can't be choosers—even in the East."

"But suppose you were offered something that was perilous, adventurous to the——"

"What matter? Adventure is the salt of life, and peril is its sauce."

"If you were well paid you would face both?" she inquired gravely.

"Try me," he answered gayly.

"I am inclined to do so," was the reply quietly given. "You appear to have resource and courage." There was a little pause, then the girl asked: "Do you know anything of Tibet?"

Shervington started at the question. A flash of the keenest interest lit his eyes; then he gave a short laugh. "I know a little," he answered. "Four years ago I went there with a secret surveying party that was also prospecting for minerals."

"Yes?"

"We had not much luck. The Tibetans are an exclusive lot; and we hit against a good deal of trouble. I was seven months a prisoner in one of their big monasteries. I managed to get away with the help of a renegade monk, who'd been expelled for falling in love with a nun."

Miss Craydon's interest quickened. She leaned forward in her chair, and there was an eager note in her voice as she asked: "You would not be afraid to go back there?"

"Afraid? No!" was the curt answer, given in decisive tones.

The girl laughed. "Forgive me! It was very tactless to ask such an unnecessary question. What I should like to know is whether you would be averse to leading an expedition into that country?"

"Not at all if it were properly equipped! But what would be the object of it?"

Miss Craydon looked at her cousin who nodded. Then she asked: "If references were required from you could you furnish them?"

"Yes, the consul here knows me, and

the president of the Asiatic Anthropological Society——”

The girl laughed. “No need to continue, Mr. Shervington. The last ought to be sufficient. I think I will tell you what the object of the expedition will be.”

“Yes?” he asked as she paused and appeared to consider something.

“It is to find a man——”

“A man?” he cried a little astonished.

“Yes—my father. Also a girl child, my sister.”

“They are lost then?” he asked quickly; and then broke out in wonder. “But in Heaven’s name why did a man take a child to Tibet?”

Janet Craydon shook her head. “That we do not know with any exactness. We can only guess, and guessing is rather a futile game. But these are the facts:

“My father was a wealthy man whose interests were in out-of-the-way things and places. He was fond of adventurous enterprises and traveled a good deal—off the tourist route.

“One of his adventurous journeyings was to the country of which we were speaking just now—Tibet. It was his design to penetrate Lhasa disguised as a coolie, and he got to Shigatse without being discovered. Then he was found out, rather roughly treated, and sent back. He wrote a book——”

“I remember,” cried Shervington, “I read it at the time. ‘The Secret Land,’ by Eliot B. Craydon. A fine book!”

“Naturally, I think so!”

“And he is up there now?” asked Shervington excitedly, half turning to the west as he spoke.

“We have reason to believe so if he is alive! But you shall hear. His very last expedition was a cruise among the islands south of Papua. My mother and my sister accompanied him—I was a girl at school in the Middle West. What happened we do not know, but one day there came a letter—a mad despairing

sort of epistle written to my aunt, telling her that my mother had died tragically at Rossal Island——”

“I know the place. It has or used to have a bad reputation for cannibalism.”

“Yes! We discovered that. The letter went on to say—that we must never expect to see him again, and that he was fleeing to what he described as a city of refuge, taking my sister with him.”

“What age was the child?”

“Six.”

“Why didn’t he send her back to——”

“I am coming to that! From the letter it was clear that he stood in great terror of something. Whether it was imaginary or real, my aunt at that time did not know, but it was very plain that he believed that the peril which he feared threatened the little one also. Indeed his distraughtness seemed to center around her.”

She broke off for a moment a little shaken by emotion, and then, recovering herself, continued: “My aunt is a woman of character. When she received that letter she acted promptly, having the little one much in mind.

“She went to San Francisco, chartered a tramp steamer and went to Rossal Island in the hope of finding them. The hope was a vain one. She found my mother’s grave with a cairn of coral, and a wooden cross on which was carved her name and the date of her death, but my father had gone.

“The master of the steamer was a man who had spent his life in the South Pacific. He went to some trouble to find out what had happened. From a Chinese trader on a neighboring island they gathered a fragmentary story of my mother’s death; a quite terrible story of her being hunted by savages and strangled——”

The clear voice quivered with emotion, broke, and then resumed shakily. “Behind the murder there had been a white man, so the rumor ran, who had

watched her die, and then sent the body to my father with a piece of magic paper—a letter.

"That was all my aunt was able to discover at the time. But it pointed to one thing, and that was that the terror from which my father had fled was real, and not the phantasmal thing of a disordered brain."

Nick Shervington nodded, glimpsing behind the meager details a depth of tragedy beyond anything the girl's words expressed.

"There was another letter. It was waiting my aunt when she got back to St. Paul. It said that he had escaped the threatened peril, that the city of refuge was in sight, and with the letter was a legal document duly executed by an English lawyer in this city, transferring all his property to myself, with my aunt as trustee until I came of age. Since then the silence has been unbroken—"

"How long is it since—"

"Eleven years."

"And the lawyer? You have seen him?"

"No! He died four months after executing the document."

"Ah!" For a moment Shervington did not speak. Then he asked abruptly: "How do you know that your father is in Tibet, or that he went there?"

"My aunt advertised for years offering a great reward for information. The reward was never claimed. She gave up all hope; and I myself thought there could be no possibility of ever learning what had happened."

"But five months ago there came a letter from a British officer at Gyangtse saying that by a rather odd circumstance he had just seen the advertisement; this being due to the loss of a package of papers in the post three years before, which the British Post Office with the efficiency on which it prides itself had delivered, even after the interval of years."

"Looking idly through the old newspapers he had seen the advertisement relating to my father and sister. It had recalled to his mind a story told to him by a Tibetan whom he had been with on Shikari—a curious story of a white man and a child who had entered one of the lamaseries in an inaccessible part of Tibet, and who had earned the reputation of being a very bold man."

"The officer thought that possibly this story might have some relation to the man and the child in the advertisement; but could give no particulars beyond the name of the Tibetan guide, who had been a monk, and of whom he had lost sight."

## CHAPTER V.

### ORIENTAL MYSTERY.

SHERVINGTON started, and a curious eager look came in his eyes, an expression of something like expectancy upon his face. "The name?" he demanded quickly. "The man at Gyangtse sent it to you?"

"Yes! The name was Nima-Tashi."

"Nima! I knew it!" cried Shervington in a voice that made other people turn and stare at him. "It is the name of the old rogue who helped me out of my bondage in the Batang monastery."

A strange glow came in Janet Craydon's dark eyes.

"It is Fate," she half whispered, "Fate that has sent you to me."

Nick Shervington felt the blood running in his face. He was conscious of a sudden wish that the words might be true in a sense quite other than those in which they were spoken.

Then Craydon intervened. "That talk of Fate is just guff, Janet. It carries no water. Question is does Shervington know where to put hand on Nima-Tashi? If he does then we step up one pace, an' if he doesn't, well, it's as you were."

A little puckered frown came on the

girl's white forehead. It was plain she did not approve of her cousin's manner, but she turned questioning eyes to Shervington, who answered promptly:

"I know where old Nima is at this moment."

"You do?" cried Craydon, staring at him in wonder.

"Yes. I had a message from him two months ago. He's away on the western border, a place called Che-to. He has set up as a caravan master."

Miss Craydon made a swift movement. The glow was in her eyes again. Her white face had now a little flush, and her voice was eager as she asked: "This Che-to? Exactly where is it?"

"On the Litang-Batang road into Tibet. Indeed just this side of the hamlet there's a bridge that is known as the *Gateway of Tibet*."

For a moment no one spoke. The girl stared into vacancy—an absorbed look in her eyes; while her cousin fidgeted nervously.

Then the girl whispered: "I must see Nima-Tashi. He may be able to tell me more about my father."

"Better send Shervington," said her cousin.

"No! I must know the truth first-hand. But if Mr. Shervington will go with us as conductor I shall be grateful. It may save time. If the *Gateway of Tibet* lies there we may learn even more than Nima-Tashi can tell us."

She turned quickly to Shervington. "My father would go that way?"

"From here, yes, I should say so. He would scarcely go on to India and up through Sikkim. The Yangtze-kiang and the Min River would be the more direct route. Besides, Mr. Craydon, with his knowledge of the *Forbidden Land*, would be aware that entrance would be easier from the west."

The girl's face grew more eager. "Some one may remember him. We may get direct news of him and my sister!"

Shervington did not contradict her. If Eliot Craydon had indeed gone that way with a small child, the memory of the unchanging East would have recorded the fact.

Shervington's mind was very busy reviewing in lightning fashion all that he had been told. Suddenly it fastened on an important point, moving him to shoot a question at Husky Craydon.

"You went to that dive to hear news about your uncle?"

"Yes!" answered Craydon, looking at him in surprise.

"You were with a native. He was to take you to some one who had the news you sought. How did you get in touch with him?"

"We advertised here for any news of my Uncle Eliot. That fellow replied in person. He knew a man who had information, but who daren't come into the European quarter. It seemed plain sailing. So I agreed to go, on the condition that I stumped up here, afterward."

"And yet they were going to knock you on the head." Shervington looked puzzled. "A queer thing that! And there was some one behind directing the business—an educated man who understood the Morse code."

A startled look came on the girl's face as he spoke, and for a second the dark eyes were full of troubled thought.

Then she spoke, quickly. "There is something we ought to tell you, Mr. Shervington. Since that advertisement appeared both Husky and I have thought that we were watched, and last night our rooms were burgled. Nothing was taken except a locked writing case in which I kept the two letters from my father."

"And that's a queer thing, Shervington," commented Craydon.

It was, as Nick Shervington owned to himself. Then an explanation occurred to him. "You offered a reward when you advertised? Yes! That may

account for it. The Treaty ports have as many rogues per acre as other places. Some one may have designed to get information from you by which to earn your reward."

"But in that case why the attack on my cousin?"

"I don't know. The thing is very odd and mysterious."

Husky Craydon laughed boastfully. "Anyway we gave them a lesson, hey, Shervington? They got more than they bargained for."

As the man spoke Nick Shervington recalled his face stark with fear as he had seen it in the light of the lantern outside the dive; and heard again the sound of his dithering teeth.

With the recollection he felt a surge of contempt. Craydon was a boaster who evidently sought to stand well in his cousin's estimation.

Shervington caught himself wondering if there were any tenderer relation between the two, and instinctively his eyes turned to the girl's slim hand. The left was ringless. That brought him a little glow of reassurance. Whatever might be Husky Craydon's aspirations; at present——

The girl's voice broke on his thought. "Mr. Shervington you will go with us to Che-to to see your friend Nima-Tashi? Neither Husky nor I know any Chinese. Here we are just babes in the wood, and we shall need an interpreter. You will be doing us a great favor; and——"

Craydon broke in: "You can name your price, Shervington. That's what Cousin Janet wants to say. And you needn't cut it, for Uncle Eliot passed on a regular mint when he dropped things."

The girl flushed with annoyance and there was a little flash of indignation in her eyes. She looked apologetically at Shervington, and tried to soften her cousin's crudeness.

"That is one way of stating the truth,"

she said quietly. "Expense will not be considered. I hope you will help us."

Shervington needed no urging. The proposal represented what he needed more than anything else at the moment—remunerative employment. But that consideration had less to do with his decision than another.

Craydon, he knew for a coward, and a braggart. He was a reed on whom his beautiful cousin could not be allowed to lean. To permit her to make a journey to the back blocks of China in his keeping would be a crime. With that thought in his mind, Shervington answered laconically: "Yes!"

Miss Craydon did not dissemble her pleasure. "I am very glad," she said, simply. "You and Husky can talk over things——"

She broke off abruptly. An odd look flashed in her dark eyes, and Shervington noticed that they were fixed on something or some one beyond his shoulder. He half turned to discover the cause.

As he did so he encountered the gaze of a man who had just entered the hotel and was standing, hat in hand, staring at himself with a quite startling intensity.

The newcomer was very tall, lithesome, and lean, and of indeterminate age. His smooth-brushed hair was quite black, his forehead high and broad, his cheek bones high, his nose rather flat, his mouth a straight line above the firm chin.

His eyes, fixed just now on Shervington, were of a piercing quality. Those eyes, as Shervington was quick to notice, were small with just a hint of obliqueness that told its own tale. As he noticed this, in spite of the fact that the man was immaculately dressed in European fashion, and had a complexion without a hint of yellow, Shervington knew that he was Mongolian rather than Caucasian.

"Eurasian!" Shervington whispered to himself.

In the same second the man quite calmly shifted his gaze and turned away.

"You know that man, Mr. Shervington?" asked the girl in a tense voice.

"No," he answered slowly, "I have never seen him in my life before."

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE SHADOWER.

FOR a moment after Shervington had answered her question Janet Craydon sat quite still, a troubled look upon her face.

Then she said abruptly: "You are sure you have never seen him? He seemed tremendously interested in you."

Shervington glanced at his own rather faded attire. "Perhaps he wondered what I was doing here?"

"If so," answered the girl promptly, "he had the same wonder about Husky and me last night. I caught him staring at us more than once."

"Is that so?" As he asked the question Nick Shervington turned to look at the man, who now was talking to a richly appareled Chinese, and apparently oblivious of their presence.

But a second later Shervington discovered that the man was anything but indifferent to them, for at the side of the room there was a mirror. And in that while he talked the stranger was staring into it, watching their every motion.

As Shervington made the discovery he turned deliberately from the mirror. The fellow was clearly very interested in the Craydons and himself and, in view of what had so recently occurred, might bear watching.

"I wonder who the man is," Shervington said thoughtfully.

"Don't know," answered Craydon. "But he's a big gun all right. The way the chinkies jump to serve him when he is around is real marvelous."

Shervington nodded. The man under discussion was precisely the type that

exacts and receives the services of inferiors. He looked directly at the man again. As he did so he was conscious of a sudden sharp thrill.

The stranger who was still apparently continuing his observations through the glass, lifted his hands to light a cigarette—long slim hands, and ringless. On the little finger of one of them was the tattooed symbol of the lotus flower.

For a moment Nick Shervington could not believe his eyes. He watched, fascinated, until the man dropped his hands and, turning slowly toward him, stared with a fixity of gaze that was almost insolent. Shervington returned the challenging stare with interest for a moment then he turned abruptly to his companions.

"Craydon," he said in an urgent voice, "call one of the Chinese boys. Give him some sort of order and when he returns ask him who the man is. I should very much like to have the knowledge."

Craydon obeyed him to the letter. When the Chinese boy had delivered the tea and whiskies ordered, he put a whole dollar on the lacquer tray, and then asked the question:

"Boy, who is the gentleman over there, the one with the cigarette talking to the Chinese gentleman?"

The boy looked round, and then answered promptly: "Doctor Stargard, sir!"

"Does he live in Shanghai?" inquired Shervington casually.

"Me not know. Him stop here one, two, thlee nights."

"H'm! Then he is a stranger!"

"Stlanger. Yes, sir. Come here; an' go away to-mollow—maybe the day that afteh to-mollow."

"Thank you," said Shervington in sign of dismissal.

When the boy was out of earshot Miss Craydon asked a question. "Do you know the name, Mr. Shervington?"

"No! I never heard it before."

"Why did you want to know it, so urgently?" she asked.

Nick Shervington felt that for the moment he could not answer her frankly. The inferences to be drawn from that slim hand with its tattooed symbol were too incredible to be lightly spoken.

No one would believe him if he said that the elegant-looking man less than half a score of yards away was the man with the fan who had tapped out the coded message, which apparently had precipitated the attack on Husky Craydon scarcely an hour ago.

Without corroboration it would be folly to set forth his suspicion, so Shervington laughed carelessly as he replied: "Naturally I am interested in a man who displays so much interest in me, or should I say, in us. The doctor was watching us all the time in the mirror there. It would seem that he has something more than a merely curious concern in us."

"But what can it be?" inquired the girl thoughtfully.

Shervington shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know? That is a thing beyond guessing. Apparently, for the moment we have exhausted Doctor Stargard's interest. See, he is leaving."

The slant-eyed man had bowed to the Chinese gentleman and was moving toward the vestibule, the glass doors of which stood open. Shervington kept his eyes on the man, and saw him halt on the farther side of the doors.

As he did so, a thin young Chinaman in European dress came forward and apparently received some quick instructions from Stargard. He salaamed rather profusely, and then as the other went on his way, he slipped through the doors into the vestibule and dropped into a chair which commanded the exit.

Shervington was deeply interested. A suspicion occurred to him which he sought to prove, and he watched the young Chinese steadily. Craydon's voice, raucous and a trifle boastful,

sounded in his ears, but still he kept his eyes on the newcomer.

"Doesn't matter much anyway, does it, Shervington? After that scrap in the dive it would take more than Doctor Stargard to scare us, hey?"

Shervington's reply was a laugh, which he was glad to indulge in. Craydon had evidently forgotten his own abject behavior. There was no use in reminding him of it. But as he thought of the man whom the last words recalled, Nick Shervington's laughter checked.

About Doctor Stargard there were things that might awaken the starest terrors in such a weak spirit as Craydon. Those piercing eyes and that thin, straight line of a mouth indicative of a ruthless nature, were to be taken in account in any attempt to estimate the man. Certainly, he was not one for Husky Craydon to deride or to match himself against.

As these thoughts surged through his mind, Shervington received the proof for which he was waiting. The young Chinaman by the door turned slowly and, with an air of casualness that was a little overdone, allowed his eyes to fall on the trio.

As they did so—meeting Shervington's direct gaze—they were hastily averted. An amused light flashed in the American's eyes. He gave a short laugh which made Janet Craydon very curious.

"Something amuses you, Mr. Shervington?"

"Yes!" he answered, candidly, this time. "Doctor Stargard has left a watcher behind him—that young Chinaman in the gray-drill tunic. I wonder if he is keeping an eye on you or on me? I think I will prove which it is in a few minutes."

"In the meantime I will go to my rooms and Husky and you can thresh out matters together," the girl said. "But I shall see you again presently,

I hope. Husky, do you mind coming with me to the elevator?"

THE two moved away together, leaving Shervington to meditate on the changing tide in his own affairs. An hour ago he had been practically destitute in the street of a foreign city, and with no immediate prospect of employment. Now, it seemed that he was likely to be engaged for an enterprise of an adventurous quality.

He was conscious of a great sense of relief. To have been driven, for mere bread, to the stokehole of some ocean-going steamer was a thing almost beyond contemplation; but one which had been a looming possibility.

His mind wandered to the pair through whom deliverance was promised. The story he had listened to intrigued him deeply, and the interest was not lessened by the events of the night.

As the return of Husky Craydon was delayed, Shervington reviewed carefully the things he had heard and the events which had happened.

It was an odd thing that Craydon should have been lured to the dive in the native quarter by a specious promise of information; and more odd still that an attempt should have been made upon him.

It was no less odd that the girl's letter case should have been stolen; and that Doctor Stargard should have shown such an interest in the cousins and now in himself.

As Shervington considered this last thought his eyes wandered to the Chinaman by the doorway. The man had taken up a newspaper and was ostensibly reading. Was that man, or rather the man whom he served, linked to those terrible happenings on Rossal Island, hinted at by Miss Craydon?

It seemed impossible that the past and the present should so meet. A more feasible explanation occurred to him. Had the man who called himself

Stargard been attracted by Miss Craydon's unusual beauty? Did he cherish some design against her, in the furtherance of which he had attempted through his jackals to get rid of her cousin?

It was a far cry from an event at Rossal Island eleven years ago to the present in Shanghai. The obscurities between were impenetrable. This other explanation was vividly possible, and would account for the interest which the Eurasian—as he conceived him—had shown in Shervington.

Swift anger kindled within him as he reached this conclusion. If Stargard ventured to—

The thought was checked by the sight of the returning Craydon; who a moment later dropped into the chair he had recently vacated.

"Well, Shervington," he began with easy condescension, "you're no longer out of a job. Janet wants your help, and the dollars don't matter. You can have what you care to ask for. But five hundred dollars a month and all expenses is what is suggested, if that will satisfy you, as I guess it will, hey?"

Nick Shervington was nettled by the man's tone. He spoke as if he were engaging a lackey. It was easy to see that he thought that the other was lucky to get such terms.

That such was indeed the case in no way lessened Shervington's resentful feelings. To have favors flung at him as a bone is thrown to a hungry dog wounded his self-respect and moved him to assert himself.

"The money is all right," Shervington answered stiffly, "but there is something to be said on my side."

"That so?" asked Craydon carelessly. "Shoot it off."

"Well I want to know who is to have full charge of this business? Who is to direct affairs?"

Craydon grinned at the questions. "Well, I guess that's me."

Shervington nodded, and took a swift resolution. "Then I fall out of the game."

"But—" spluttered the other in amazement, then broke off, and began afresh. "You don't mean you want to boss the show you're being paid to conduct?"

"Why not?" asked Shervington sharply. "What do you know of China? You probably couldn't find your way to Che-to in a year. And beyond that you don't know Tibet. I do!"

"The search that you're on isn't going to be easy. It will be a tremendous undertaking. If I undertake it, I go in charge. My orders will go, and I shall have complete direction of affairs. Do you agree to that?"

Husky Craydon stared at him in open amazement. Then he said superciliously: "Mean to say I've got to take your orders?"

"Just that!"

"Of all the infernal cheek," blustered Craydon, "I'll see you to blazes before—"

"Then you can tell Miss Craydon that I decline the offer."

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE YELLOW MASK.

AS he spoke Nick Shervington rose to his feet. He knew that in taking this stand he was running great risks of slipping down to the steamer's stoke-hole.

But he counted on a conviction that Miss Craydon, rather than the weakling before him, was the senior partner in the affair. He turned as if to go, and a second later found his conviction vindicated.

"Oh; confound it! Sit down Shervington; and don't be such a firework. If you insist on bossing the show, I suppose you'll have to have your little way. After all, once off, we'll be fairly in your hands."

"I'm glad you realize that," answered Shervington, taking his chair again. "It will help you to understand the necessity of my single control."

Craydon frowned sullenly. It was quite clear that he was averse to that to which he was forced to consent, and that if he had dared he would have sent the other packing.

Shervington cared nothing for that. He had gained his point and that was sufficient for him. If the fellow had learned his lesson, his chagrin mattered nothing.

"Anything else?" asked the disgruntled man, grudgingly.

"Nothing except that I shall require an advance."

Nick Shervington laughed as he spoke, moved by the humor of having to ask a favor of the man to whom he had just dictated terms, so highhandedly. "I've been a little out of luck of late."

"Jan— I mean we thought of that. I'm going to book a room for you here, and here's your first month's salary."

As Craydon spoke he thrust a hand into his pocket and produced a little roll of bills in an elastic band, tossing them to Shervington.

Shervington laughed as he put them in his pocket.

"Bank of China bills for five hundred dollars. Doesn't it strike you that with this in hand I might clear out?"

"Well," owned the other with a naïveté that almost sent Shervington into laughter. "I did think of that but Janet believes that she can read character. She says you're no fly-by-night. And I reckon you won't run away from a soft job."

"I shall not. I assure you," Shervington said, laughing. "I am going out now to outfit; but I shall come back. And while I am away there's a thing I want you to do."

"What's that?"

"Keep an eye on the Celestial over there. I am sure he is watching us. I want to learn exactly in whom he is interested—Miss Craydon and yourself, or me. If he follows me we shall know."

"All right," agreed Craydon. As he lit a cigarette, Shervington moved toward the glass doors.

He passed the watching Chinaman at close range, staring hard at him to impress his features on his memory. The native, apparently deeply absorbed in his newsheet, did not so much as look up.

But Shervington was not deceived by this show of indifference. He did not turn his head as he passed the doors, and once in the street he walked quickly, until he passed a lighted window. In the comparative gloom on the other side, he turned his head quickly and looked back.

The street was full of loiterers; but he saw one hurrying figure moving in his own direction, and glimpsed vaguely a thin yellow face. At the sight of it he laughed softly. Apparently, Doctor Stargard's immediate interest was in himself rather than in the Craydons.

Assured of this, and speculating what lay behind it, Shervington marched forward without troubling further about the shadower. Presently he reached the place he was making for—a shop all in darkness, the door of which was shut.

A determined knock, several times repeated, brought to the door an Asiatic gentleman with a lamp in his hand. As he stood peering out into the night through the rather heavy glasses which he wore, Nick Shervington laughed:

"It's all right, Lo Ong. Only a late customer."

"My savvy you," answered the Chinaman, his fat, bland face creasing in a smile. "You wanchee me?"

"I want the clothes you sell and quick. Also, the use of your room to change in. When we're through with that I've a question to ask you."

Lo Ong stepped aside, and the American entered, and rapidly explained his requirements. Half an hour afterward, Shervington stood in the softly lighted interior of the shopkeeper's apartments, a very different looking figure from the man who had entered.

A neat gray suit showed his fine proportions, while the silk shirt and collar with a tie that matched the suit betrayed the touch of dandyism that is inherent in all fighting males. The brown willow shoes upon his feet helped his self-respect.

LO ONG beamed like an artist surveying the perfect work of his hands; beamed more when his customer set two of the Bank of China bills on a lacquered table. He looked at the white man curiously.

"You wanchee ask my question, you say?"

"Yes. Lo Ong, did you ever hear of a man called Doctor Stargard?"

Shervington watched the Chinaman closely as he asked the question. At the name he saw the light of curiosity fade from the dark eyes. The fat, yellow face lost its smiling blandness and became absolutely expressionless, more like a yellow mask than the living features of a man.

Then Lo Ong spoke dully, with a brevity that ought to have been convincing but was not. "My no savvy!"

Shervington knew that he was lying and that fact made him all the more anxious to learn the truth. He laughed, and taking the other by the shoulders shook him gently. "Tell that to the little fishes, Lo Ong. They may believe you. Who is Doctor Stargard?"

The dark eyes stared at him woodenly. "My no sav—"

"Lo Ong," interrupted the American, "do you remember a day when you fell from the river steamer at Nanking?"

"My lember!" replied Lo Ong, a gleam coming back in the beady eyes.

"And you remember that you could not swim, that twice you had touched the mud, when some one gripped you?"

"O-o-ey," answered Lo Ong softly.

"Then, since you remember, I ask you for a straight answer. Once again, who is Doctor Stargard?"

For a second the yellow face before him wore an expression of deep trouble, which an instant after gave place to an odd look of dignity.

Then Lo Ong answered whisperingly, as if afraid that the walls had ears. "On a time, my fiend you give me life; an' you ask no plice; now you ask what will bling me death should it be known that my have spoken of it you. Allee same, my life belongee you; and foh that lembelance, I tell you what is known."

He broke off, his manner grew more furtive, and his whisper sank to a lower key as he leaned forward.

"Doctor Sta'ga'd is Hong Chung Lu of the Tien T'ze Tong."

The words, though uttered in a whisper, that proclaimed the Chinaman's soul was shaking with terror, conveyed little other knowledge to Shervington.

"He is of your race then, Lo Ong?"

"He is the son of his mother, a most beautiful lady of Ching-Fu; but he is the son of his father also who was Gelman."

"German?"

"O-o-ey! A glate an' very wise scholar; as is Hong Chung Lu also."

"H'm! And this precious tong?"

Lo Ong's eyes closed, his face was blank as a wall. "Such things be not spoken. Death b'long a whisper, an' my not know-ee. No can tell."

LOOKING at those closed eyes and blank face, Nick Shervington knew that he would learn nothing further. Whether Lo Ong knew more or not was of little moment. He had reached the limit of revelation.

"All right, Lo Ong. I understand. I

will not strain the chain of friendship further."

The tailor's eyes opened, and Shervington noted that in them trouble showed nakedly.

"You will be vellee secler? Allatime you vill keeppee mouth shut vellee tight."

"The grave shall not be more secret, Lo Ong. Nor shall all the Tien T'ze Tong learn—"

The Chinaman lifted his hand in a gesture of fear. Respecting his feelings, Nick Shervington did not finish the sentence. Instead he turned to the common business that had brought him there.

"Those other things—send them along to the hotel in the morning."

"Me sendee," answered the tailor, his face genial again. "You have a dlink?"

"Thank you, no! I must be off. Where's that lantern of yours to light me to the door?"

The tailor found it, and escorted his customer to the door. The street had grown quieter. As Nick Shervington stepped out, Lo Ong lifted the lantern. By its clouded rays he saw a figure detach itself from the shadow of a neighboring doorway and, as it hurried past him, he glimpsed the lean face eager in pursuit.

The chain of friendship of which Shervington had spoken tugged suddenly at his heart. Forgetting his fears, he was about to cry a warning, when from the doorway below emerged another figure; that of a tall man whose face seen in the glow of the lantern, froze the words upon his lips.

Silently he fell back and pushed to his door. Not a word had been uttered, but Lo Ong was shaking with fear, for the second face that his lamp had illumined had been that of Doctor Stargard, whose eyes, as he passed, had gleamed like swords.

The second installment of this serial will be in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, on the news stands March 1st.

# A TALK WITH YOU

News and Views by the  
Editor and Readers

FEBRUARY 15, 1929

Before you read this "Talk," glance at the announcement below. You'll find there a brief description of our next issue. And—is your news dealer putting away a copy of every number of this magazine for you? You'd better tell him to!

LADIES and gentlemen of the magazine audience, we take great pleasure in turning over the "Talk" in this issue to Mr. T. J. Harris, of San Francisco. He will broadcast his opinions himself. Readers—Mr. Harris! Mr. Harris—Readers!

DEAR EDITOR:

Once I was an occasional reader of your publication. For years I'd bought it occasionally. After a few issues, I'd shop around, reading other magazines, then come back to you. There're a lot of readers like that, I believe.

For the last three years, though, I've

been a "regular." Haven't wanted to quit. Here's why!

Every issue of "our magazine" contains a surprise. Nothing cut and dried about it. The quality of the fiction is always O. K. Plus that high quality, I find freshness and novelty in the stories.

You strike a happy combination of new and old writers in every issue. Keep that up! I want the old-time writers in "our magazine," but I want the new ones, too. Give us stories by the old gang—Treynor, Phillips, Vic Whitman, Seaburn Brown. Also, let's have newcomers—writers we've never heard of before.

For years, I've been reading stories about cowboys, sheriffs, gun slingers, rustlers, and outlaws. I like good Western stories, but they're pretty rare—good ones, I mean. You've asked often for suggestions from readers, so here's mine. Let's have fewer Westerns, unless they're unusually good.

Instead of Westerns, let's have more airplane stories, World War stories, and sport stories. But don't you dare tamper with "our magazine" and spoil it! Leave it alone—you hear me? Just cut

*In the next issue of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE*

**THE ROUND-UP AT FISHTRAP**, by Edward Parrish Ware  
A splendid action-adventure story of the Arkansas hills, and what two wandering  
hombres found there.

**OFFICER HOGAN, HOMICIDE SQUAD**, by Vic Whitman  
A hard-boiled cop battles dangerous gangsters.

**MARBLEHEAD TO THE RESCUE**, by Davis Jones  
A shovel-headed mule gets balky, while bullets fly. A story of the World War.

**A RED EMPIRE DISAPPEARS**, by F. N. Litten  
"Ace" Dallas, of the Air Intelligence Service, flies his plane on a mystery trail.

**SERVICE**, by Reg Dinsmore  
Deep in the big woods, men show the stuff they're made of.

**HI YIP FER HOLLYWOOD**, by U. Stanley Aultman  
Getting into the talking movies.

**TWO GOOD SERIALS—AND ANOTHER AMERICAN  
ADVENTURERS ARTICLE.**

down on the Westerns gradually, so nobody'll notice it.

Variety in fiction is what we're getting, and that's what we want. Continue living up to your slogan, "Good Stories Always."

Good luck!

T. J. HARRIS.

WELL, what do you think of Mr. Harris' letter? Do you agree with him? The editors will be delighted to hear from you. Write your comments on the ballot below and send it in.

TWO quick-thinking, ready-to-scrap hombres, black pearls, and a mystery appear in "The Round-up at Fishtrap," a story of the Arkansas hills, which is the long novel in our next number. Edward Parrish Ware is the author, and a newcomer to our pages, but he knows how to write entertainingly.

Vic Whitman, whose "Battle of Music" you'll find in this number, has written a cop story for the next issue.

Whitman knows bluecoats by the score. In "Officer Hogan, Homicide Squad," he writes of a rookie cop who's after two enemy gang leaders. It's a thrilling story.

Up in the Maine woods, where Reg Dinsmore lives and hunts and writes fiction, he's known also as a guide, a woodsman, and a gentleman. "Service" is a story of the great outdoors—of a guide's problems when saddled with responsibilities—and it has a surprise ending that's worthy of O. Henry, that master of the twist at the end of a story.

You'll find a story of the air intelligence service in our next number. "A Red Empire Disappears," by F. N. Litten, is packed full of action and adventure. There'll be a yarn of the talking movies, "Hi Yip Fer Hollywood"; a war story, "Marblehead to the Rescue"; another American Adventurers article; and long installments of two good serials.

By the way, have you sent in a ballot lately?

### VOTE HERE

Editors, Top-Notch,  
79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Gentlemen:

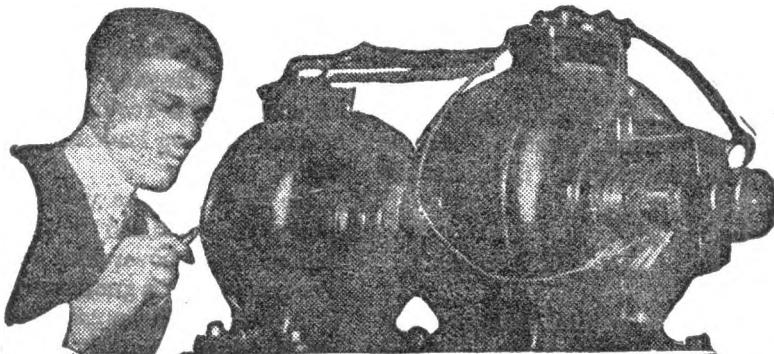
Here's my vote on the stories in this issue of TOP-NOTCH. I'm writing a "1" opposite the best story, a "2" opposite the next best, a "3" opposite the third best, and so on.

- Jungle Magic, by J. Allan Dunn
- Battle of Music, by Vic Whitman
- The Trout Cure, by Reg Dinsmore
- Zooming Ghosts, by Bernard Lee Penrose
- The Brand Changers, by Wolf Wilson
- A Horse for a Scar, by Sam Carson
- Knaves Three, by Wilton Matthews
- American Adventurers—Commander Robert E. Peary, U. S. N., by Boyd Taylor
- The Tangle at Tulai, by G. A. Wells
- Law of the Hills, by Otwell Binns

Let's have more stories by my favorite authors. My favorite authors are:

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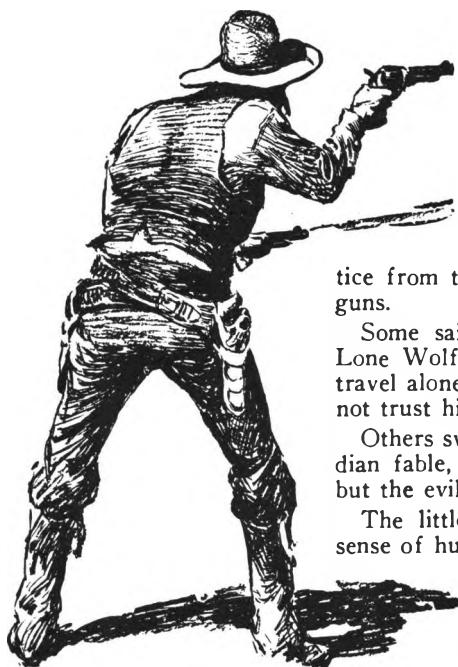
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