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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

The Beloved Traitor

by Frank L. Packard

Author of "The Miracle Man"

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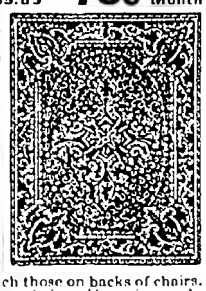

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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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The Beloved Traitor

by Frank L. Packard

Author of "The Miracle Man," "The Impostor," "Greater Love Hath No Man," "Madman's Island," etc.

THERE is a Valley called the Valley of Illusion, but beyond it, sun-crowned, is the Peak of Eternal Truth—and the Way from the Valley to the Peak is sore beset, for the Way is the Understanding of Things Real, and its Achievement is the Fulness of Life.

BOOK I.

Bernay-Sur-Mer.

CHAPTER I.

The House on the Bluff.

IT seemed to tear along the beach with the fury of a maniac, a fiercer gust than any that had gone before; impinge upon the corners of the little inn, whose joints, rheumatic with age, squeaked in its embrace; then swirl, and, whistling in a high, devilishly gleeful falsetto, shake the Taverne du Bas Rhône much after the fashion that a terrier shakes a rat. And with that gust, loosening the dilapidated fastening on the casement, a window crashed inward, shattering the pane against the wall.

"*'Cré bleu!*" shouted a man, springing smartly to his feet from his seat at a small table as the rain lashed him. "What a dog of a night for one to be abroad!"

Against the opposite wall, tilted back in a chair, Papa Fregeau, the patron, a rotund, aproned little individual, stopped the humming of his song.

"*Tiens!*" said he fatuously. "But it is worse than that, Alcide, since it is bad for business—hah! Not a

franc profit to-night—the Bas Rhône is desolated."

And he resumed his song:

"In Languedoc, where the wine flows free,
We drink to—"

"Hold your bibulous tongue, Jacques Fregeau, and get something with which to fix that window before we are as wet inside as you!"

It was Mme. Fregeau, stout, middle-aged, and rosy, already hurrying to the aid of the first speaker, who was wrestling with the dismantled fastening.

Usually the nightly resort of the little fishing village of Bernay-sur-Mer, the Bas Rhône—inn, cabaret, tavern, or café, as it was variously styled—now held but two others in the room that was habitually crowded to suffocation. One was a young man sturdily built with a tanned, clean-cut face, smooth-shaven save for a small black mustache, whose rumpled black hair straggled in pleasing disarray over his forehead; the other was older, a man of forty, whose skin was bronzed almost to blackness from the Mediterranean sun. Both were in rough fishermen's dress, sitting at dominoes under the hanging lamp in the center of the room.

On the table, pushed to one side, were the remains of a simple meal of bread and cheese; and from the inside of the loaf the younger man, somewhat to the detriment of his own game and to the advantage of his opponent, had plucked out a piece of the soft bread, which he had kneaded between his fingers into a plastic lump, and thereafter with amazing skill and deftness had been engaged in molding into little faces and heads and figures of various sorts as he played.

The older man spoke more slowly now:

"It is twenty years since we have had the like — you do not remember that, Jean? You were too young."

Jean Laparde, an amused smile lurking in his dark eyes as he watched Jacques Fregeau waddle obediently to his wife's side, shook his head.

"I was on the Étoile that night," said the other, pulling at his beard. "The good God dealt hardly with us — we lost two when we beached; but not so hardly as with the Antoinette—none came to shore from her. It was a night just such as this."

"Aye, that is so," corroborated Papa Fregeau, removing his apron and stuffing it into the broken window-pane. "It is, after all, small blame to any one that they stay indoors to-night and forget my profits."

"Profits!" ejaculated Mme. Fregeau tartly. "You drink them all up!"

She shook her short skirts, damp from her skirmish with the storm, and turned to Jean's companion at the table.

"Pray the blessed Virgin," she said softly, crossing herself reverently, "that there be no boats out to-night, Pierre Lachance."

"And God have pity on them if there are!" returned the fisherman. "But there are none from Bernay-sur-Mer, that is sure."

He played the last domino before him with a little triumphant flourish.

"Ah, Jean, count—you are caught, my boy! It will teach you to pay more attention to the game and less to the waste of Mme. Fregeau's good bread."

"She is used to that," smiled Jean Laparde good-naturedly as he faced his dominoes, disclosing the measure of his defeat, and, pushing back his chair, stood up.

"But," protested the other, "you are not going! We will play again. See, it is early; the clock has but just struck eight."

"Not to-night, Pierre," said Jean, laughing now as he began to button his jacket around his throat. "Play with Alcide there."

"*Chut!*" cried Mme. Fregeau, bustling forward, her eyes twinkling. "The little minx will not expect you a night like this — Marie-Louise is too

sensible a girl to be piqued for that. You are not going out to-night, Jean, *ma foi!*"

"And why not?" asked Jean innocently. "Why not, Mother Fregeau? What is a little wind and a little rain and a little walk along the beach?"

"But a night like this!" sighed Papa Fregeau dolorously as he joined the group, his forefinger laid facetiously against the side of his stubby little nose. "*Nom d'un nom!* What constancy—what sublime constancy!"

"Ah, you laugh at that, *mon petit bête!*" exclaimed Mme. Fregeau sharply, instantly changing front. "You are an old fool, Jacques Fregeau!"

"But I was a young one once, *ma belle*—eh?" insinuated Jacques, pinching his wife's plump cheek and winking prodigiously at Jean Laparde. "It is of that you are thinking, eh?"

"You are ridiculous!" declared Mme. Fregeau, blushing and pushing him away.

"You see, Jean?" said Jacques Fregeau plaintively, shrugging his shoulders. "You see, eh, *mon gaillard?* You see what you are coming to! Oh, *là là!* Once I was young like you; and Lucille, *ma chérie,* here, was like — eh? — like Marie-Louise. You see—eh? You see what you are coming to!"

There was a roar of laughter from the man at the table in the rear that was echoed in a guffaw by Pierre Lachance as Jean, leaning suddenly forward, caught Mme. Fregeau's comely, motherly face between his hands and kissed her on both cheeks.

"I'd ask for no better luck, Jacques!" he cried—and ran for the door.

Laughing, and with a wave of his hand back at the little group, he opened the door, closed it behind him with a powerful wrench against the wind, and then outside stood still for a moment as if taken utterly by surprise at the abandon of the night. He had not been out before that day.

Like all or nearly all of Bernay-sur-Mer, he had remained snugly indoors —for what was a fisherman to do in weather like that? Mend nets? Well, yes, he had mended nets. One must do that. He shrugged his shoulders, making a wry grimace. Nets!

But the night was bad—much worse than he had imagined. And yet—yes —the storm was at its height now, but the wind had changed—by morning, thank the saints, it would be better.

It was black about him, inky black —all save a long, straggling, twinkling line of lights from the cottage windows that bordered the beach, and the dull yellow glow from the windows of the Bas Rhône at his side. Around him a veritable bedlam seemed loosened—the wind like a horde of demons shrieking, whistling, and howling in unholy jubilee; while heavier, more ominous, in a deeper roar came the booming of the surf from where it broke upon the beach but little more than a hundred yards in front of him.

Jean Laparde stood hesitant. It was quite true; Mother Fregeau had been right. Marie-Louise would not expect him to-night, and it was a good mile from the village to the house on the bluff; and yet— He smiled a little, and suddenly, head down, struck out into the storm.

A flash of lightning, jagged, threw the night into a strange, tremulous luminance—the headlands of the little bay; the mighty combers, shaking their foam-topped crests like manes, hurling themselves in impotent fury at the shore; then spreading in thin, creamy layers to lick up wide, irregular patches of the beach; the sweep of the Mediterranean, so slow to anger, but a tumbling rage of waters now as far as the eye could reach; the whitewashed cottages; boats, dark objects without form or shape, drawn far up on the sand; the pale, yellowish-green of the sward stretching away behind the village; the road beneath his feet a pool of mud—and then blackness again, utter, impenetrable, absolute.

Jean passed the last of the cottages —there were but four on that side of the Bas Rhône—and kept on, following the curve of the beach toward the eastern headland. But now the lightness of spirit that had been with him but a few moments before was gone, and a restlessness bordering on depression took its place.

What was it? The storm? No; it could not very well be that, for it had come often to him before, unbidden, unwelcomed, that same mood—even in the glorious sunlight, even in the midst of song as he fished the blue, sparkling waters that more than anything else had been his home ever since he could remember. It seemed — and it was a very strange and absurd fancy, but it was always the same — that a voice, wordless, without sound, talked speciously to him, talked him into a state of discontent that robbed him of all delight in his work, his environment, and his surroundings, and, arrived at that stage, would suddenly bid him peremptorily to follow—and that was all.

Follow! Where? He did not know. It made him angry, but it did not in any way lighten the mood that was forced upon him in spite of himself.

And now, as it always came unsought and unexpected, this mood was upon him again; and as he plunged through the storm, drawing the collar of his jacket more closely around his throat against the sheets of rain, he fought with himself to shake it off. It was absurd. And why should he be unhappy for something that was absurd? That was still more absurd! He was not sick! There was nothing the matter with him. He was strong —none was stronger than he, and he had matched himself against them all in Bernay-sur-Mer.

True, it was a hard life, and there were not riches to be found in the nets; but there were friends; he was rich in friends; all Bernay-sur-Mer was his friend. There were the Fregeaus, with whom he had lived at the Bas Rhône for more than ten years now since his father had died. Mme. Fregeau was a mother to him, and Jacques was the biggest-hearted man in the whole South of France. And, *mon Dieu!*—he began to smile now—there were—should he name every family in the village—even to the children for whom he made clay *poupées*, the dolls that in their play-lives were in turn veritable children to them?

Ah, to be in ugly mind—it was no less than a sin! There were candles to burn for that, and the good Father Anton would have a word to say if he knew!

And, best of all, there was Marie-Louise. There was none—none, *pardieu*—in the whole wide sweep of France like Marie-Louise, with her eyes like stars and her face fresh as the morning breeze across the sparkling waters, and a figure so beautiful, so lithe, so strong! What charm to see those young arms on the oars, the bosom heave, to feel the boat bound forward under the stroke, and hear her laugh ring out with the pure joy of life!

"Marie-Louise!" cried Jean Laparde aloud, and the wind seemed to catch up the words and echo them in a triumphant shout:

"Marie-Louise!"

And it was gone—that mood. And now with the village well behind him, the lights blotted out and seeming to have left him isolated even from human proximity, another came, and he stood still—and this time it was the storm. And something within him, without will or volition of his, spontaneous, leaped out in consonance with the wild grandeur of the night to revel in it, atune with the Titanic magnificence of the spectacle, as one who gazes upon a splendid canvas and, innate of appreciation, is lost in the conception to which the master brush has given life.

And so he stood there for a long time immovable, his shoulders thrust

a little forward, the rain streaming from his face, his eyes afire, rapt, lost in the clashing elements before him—and fancy came.

The play of the lightning was more vivid now, and the coast-line took on changing shapes, as if seeking by new and swiftly conceived formations to foil and combat and thrust back and parry the furious attack of the breakers that hurled themselves onward in their mad, never ending charge; while behind again in sudden apparitions, like specter battalions massed in reserve, the white cottages appeared for an instant, and then, as if seeking a more strategic position, vanished utterly until a flame-tongue crackling across the heavens searched them out again, laying their position bare once more; and the headlands—vanguards where the fight was hottest—were lost in a smother of spume and spray, like the smoke of battle swirling over them—and it was battle; and the thunder of the surf was the thunder of belching cannon, and the shriek of the wind was the shriek of hurtling shells.

It was battle—and some consciousness inborn in Jean Laparde awakened and filled him with understanding, and in the terror and dismay and awe and strife and fierce elation was the great allegory of life, and suddenly he knew a lowly reverence for Him who had depicted this, and found a joy, full of strange, indefinable yearning, in the divine genius of its execution.

"It is the great art of the *bon Dieu*," said Jean simply.

After a little while he went forward on his way again.

The road led upward now in a gentle slope toward higher land, though still following the line of the beach. Near the extremity of the headland was the cottage that the village always called the "house on the bluff." In a moment now he should be able to see the light. There was always a light there every night in good weather and in stormy—and never in fourteen years had it been otherwise, not since the night that Marie-Louise's father, the brother of old Gaston Bernier, steering for the headland in a gale, had miscalculated his position and been drowned on the Perigeau Reef. From that day it had become a religion with Gaston, a sacred rite, that light; and in time it had become an institution in Bernay-sur-Mer; not a fisherman in the village now but steered by it, not one but that, failing to sight it, would have taken it for granted that he was off his course and would have put about, braving even the wildest weather until he had picked it up.

The light! Jean smiled to himself. He was very wet, but he had found a most wonderful joy in the storm; and besides, what did a little wetting matter? In a few minutes now Marie-Louise would cry out in delight at seeing him, and he would fling off his drenched jacket and pull up a chair to the stove beside old Gaston, and they would light their pipes, and Marie-Louise would prepare the spiced wine, and—he halted as if stunned.

He had reached the big rock where the road made its second turn and ran directly to the house—and there was no light! It was the exact spot from which he should first be able to see it—a hundred times, on a hundred nights, he had looked for it and found it there—by the turning at the big rock.

He dashed the rain from his face with a sweep of his hand and strained his eyes into the blackness. There was nothing there—only the blackness. He reached out mechanically and touched the rock as if to assure himself that *it* was there; and then he laughed a little unnaturally. There must be some mistake. For fourteen years that light had burned in the window, and it could be seen from this point in the road—there must be some mistake. Perhaps just another step would bring it into view!

And then as he moved forward something cold gripped at Jean's heart.

There was no mistake—the light was out for the first time in fourteen years! The light that old Gaston had never failed to burn since the night his brother died—the light that had become a part of the man himself—was out!

Was he ill—sick? Why then had Marie-Louise not lighted it? She had done it before, often and often before. But now neither one nor the other had lighted it; and they, just the two of them, were the only occupants of the house—Marie-Louise and her old uncle. Just the two of them—and the light was out!

Jean was running now, smashing his way along the road through the clayey mud and water, splashing it to his knees, buffeting against the wind; and with every step the sense of dread that had settled upon him grew heavier. It was no ordinary thing this! Old Gaston would have lighted the lamp while there remained strength in his body to do it; it was a sacred trust that he had imposed upon himself, which had grown more inviolable as the years had crept upon him as he had grown older.

It brought fear to Jean, and the greater stab at the thought of Marie-Louise. Things were wrong—and what was wrong with one was wrong with both. Was it not Marie-Louise who polished the great lamp-chimney so zealously every morning and filled the big, dinted brass bowl of the lamp with oil; and was it not Marie-Louise who watched with affectionate understanding each evening as her uncle lighted it?

A shadowy mass, the house, loomed suddenly out of the darkness before him. It seemed to give him added speed; in another moment he was at the door—and the door was open, wide open, blown inward with the wind.

"Marie-Louise!" he shouted as he rushed inside. "Gaston! Gaston!"

And again:

"Marie-Louise!"

There was no answer—no sound but the shriek of wind, the groaning of the house-timbers in travail with the storm. He pushed the door shut behind him, and something like a sob came from Jean's lips—and then he shouted once more.

Still there was no answer.

He felt his way to the kitchen, and across the kitchen to the shelf by the rear wall, found a candle, and lighted it. He held the candle above his head, sweeping the light about him, and, discovering nothing, ran back in the front room—and with a low cry stood still. On the floor the great lamp lay broken, the chimney shattered into splinters. He stared at it in a frightened, almost superstitious way. The great lamp broken! Did it mean that— No, no! It could not mean that! It was the wind that had blown it there in bursting in the door. See, there was no disorder anywhere!

He ran into Gaston's room. Nothing! Nothing anywhere to indicate that anything had happened—and yet apparently the house was empty—and that was enough! Out? They had gone out somewhere even in the storm, on some homely errand—to pay a visit, perhaps? Impossible! With the lamp for the first time in fourteen years unlighted and broken now upon the floor? It was impossible! While Gaston Bernier lived the light would burn!

He climbed the stairs and stood on the threshold of the little attic room, the flickering candle playing timorously with the darker shadows where the roof, in its sharp angle, spread into an inverted V. It was the first time he had ever looked into that room. It was Marie-Louise's room. It was all white—scrupulously white, from the bare floor to the patched quilt on the little bed. There was a freshness, a sweetness about it that seemed to personify Marie-Louise, to fill the room with her, and it swept him now with a sudden numbing agony; and his face, wet with the rain that dripped from the hair straggling over his forehead, showed

gray and set as it glistened curiously in the yellow, sputtering candle-light.

And then, half mad with anxiety, the sure, intuitive knowledge of disaster upon him, he rushed down-stairs again, and, hurriedly exchanging his candle for a lantern, went out into the night.

A search around the house revealed nothing. He then ran down the path to the beach to where, well up under the protection of the low bluff and away from the reach of the highest tide, old Gaston stored his boats and fishing-gear. And there, as Jean flashed his lantern around him, a low, strained cry for the second time came from his lips. Three boats old Gaston owned—who should know better than he, Jean Laparde, who fished with the other season after season—but of the three boats only two were there upon the beach.

As a man wounded then and dazed with his hurt, Jean stood there. They had gone out into that—Marie-Louise and old Gaston—and they had not come back. It was not true — it was beyond belief! No; it was not true—something only had happened to the boat—no man in Bernay-sur-Mer would have been so mad as to have ventured out!

Far to the south the heavens opened in a burst of flame, and, traveling far and fast, a zigzag tongue of lightning, like the venomous thrust of a serpent's fang, leaped across the skies. It lighted up the beach and, farther out over the waters a quarter of a mile distant, played upon the smother of spray that like a shroud flung itself over the Perigeau Reef; and the cry that came from Jean Laparde was wild, hoarse-throated now. What was it that he had seen?

It was dark again out there. He swung his lantern, signaling frantically—then, holding it high and rigid, waited for the next flash.

It came.

"Marie-Louise!" he whispered through white lips.

Far out on the extremity of the reef a figure stood silhouetted against the spray for an instant — and blackness fell again.

CHAPTER II.

The Keepers of the Light.

FOR a moment's space Jean stood there measuring, as it were, the sweep of waters, as one might measure the strength of some antagonist thrust suddenly upon him, and then, turning, he ran back to the boats and began to drag one down the beach.

No man in all Bernay-sur-Mer would dare to venture out. He had said that himself, but there was no thought of that now. Marie-Louise was on the Perigeau Reef. He was strong—strong as a young bull—and he tugged now at the heavy boat with the added nervous strength of a man near mad with desperation, heaving it swiftly across the sand.

At high tide even in calm weather the Perigeau was awash; in storm, far better to plunge into the water than to be pounded to death upon those *diable* rocks, lifted up and pounded upon the rocks, and lifted up and pounded again when the water should be high. At ten o'clock it would be full tide. Thanks to the *bon Dieu*, it was not eight o'clock when the water would be at its height, or else—

"*'Cré nom d'un nom—d'un nom!*"

Jean was grinding words from between his teeth. They came utterly without volition, utterly meaningless, utterly spontaneous from the brain afire.

It was the lee of the headland, and it was the mercy of the Sainte Vierge that it was so; otherwise—*baptême!*—no boat could live where a fish would drown. But it was the smoother water of a mill-race—in with the tide, out with the tide—between the headland and the Perigeau it was like that.

With a wrench Jean swung the boat around—he had been dragging it by

the stern—and, at the water's edge now, the dying efforts of a spent and broken wave wrapped and curled around the bow in creamy foam. Then, racing up the beach once more to the shelter of the bluff, he knelt there to plant his lantern in the sand, ballasting it securely with rocks, flung his jacket down beside it, and ran back to the water's edge again.

He shoved the boat farther out until it was half afloat, shipped the oars—and waited, steadying the craft with an iron grip on the gunwales. A wave lifted her, the water swirled around his knees, seethed behind him, rushed back, hissing sharply in its retreat — and Jean, bending, shoved with all his strength as he sprang aboard.

The boat shot out on the receding wave and, as he flung himself upon the seat, smashed into the next oncoming breaker, wavered, half turned, righted under a mighty tug at the oars, engulfed herself in a sheet of spray, and slid onward down into the bubbling hollow.

None in Bernay-sur-Mer was a better boatman than Jean Laparde, and Bernay-sur-Mer, in that respect, held its head above all Languedoc; for at the water-fêtes now for three years had not Jean Laparde secured to it the coveted *prix?* But to-night it was a different race he ran.

For a little way, while the lee of the headland held, a child almost, once the boat was free of the broken surf on the beach, might have held the craft to her course—but only for that little way. For fifty yards, perhaps, the boat leaped forward, straight as an arrow, heading well above the Perigeau Reef; and then suddenly the lighted lantern on the beach seemed to travel seaward at an incredible speed as the onrush of tide, wind, and sea through the narrows caught the boat, twisted it like a cork, and, high borne on a wave-crest, hurled it along past the shoreline toward the lower end of the bay—and the twinkling lantern was blotted out from sight. Tight-lipped, his muscles cracking with the strain, Jean forced the boat around again; the tough oars bent under his strokes.

There were two ways to the Perigeau Reef—he had thought of both of them. One, to go down in the shelter of the headland to the lower end of the bay, circuit the shore-line there until he was free of the mill-race through the narrows, then pull straight out for the Perigeau — only, the *bon Dieu* knew well, no man was strong enough for that; it was too far, for the bay on that side was deeper than on the other side of the headland by Bernay-sur-Mer; near two miles it ran inward, and to pull back that distance against the full force of the storm — only a madman would try it, and no boat would live! The other way was the only chance — the quarter-mile across the narrows.

A quarter-mile! He pulled on and on, minute after minute that were as endless periods of time; and whether he was making progress or losing it he did not know, only that with each minute his strength was being taxed to the utmost, until it seemed to be ebbing from him, until his arms in their sockets caused him brutal pain.

And it was all like a black veil that wrapped itself about him now, blacker than it had ever been before that night—the loss of that tiny guiding light he had left upon the beach seemed to make it so, and seemed to try to rob him of his courage because it was gone. The never ending roar of buffeting waves was in his ears until his head rang with the sound; the waves pounded his boat and tossed it like a chip upon their crests, and slopped aboard and sloshed at his feet—and they thundered upon the shore and upon the headland, and they were mocking at him.

The lightning came again; it lighted up the house upon the bluff, and with bitter dismay he saw that, too, was sweeping seaward; it flickered a ghostly radiance upon the dancing shore-shapes; it played upon a tumbling wall of water, onrushing, towering above

his head from where the boat quivered in the trough, far down below. And at sight of this, like a madman Jean Laparde pulled them—up—up—up—the crest was curling, snarling its vengeance before it broke—and then it seethed away in a great trail of murmuring foam that lapped at the boat's sides and crept in over the gunwales. And there were many more like that, so many that they were countless—and they never stopped, and they were stronger than he, and there was always another, and each was greater than the one before; and at last, in utter weakness, he sobbed over the oars.

Marie-Louise, Gaston, the Perigeau—all were living before him in a daze now; the brain became subordinate to the bodily exhaustion. There was only a jumbled medley of death and eternal struggle around him, and a subconsciousness that for him, too, the end had come—the good Father Anton would say a requiem mass for him—and Bernay-sur-Mer would tell their children that Jean would never make any more of the clay *poupées* for them—and the children would cry—and it was all very droll.

He pulled on mechanically, doggedly. His face was wrinkled where the muscles twisted in pain; drops that were not rain nor spray stood out in great beads upon his forehead; his back seemed breaking, his arms useless things that writhed with the strain.

Wild thoughts came to him. Why should he struggle there against the pitiless strength that was greater than his, until he could no longer even meet the waves with the bow of his boat, until they would turn him over and over and afterward roll him upon the shore, where Papa Fregeau perhaps would find him? See, it would be a very easy matter to stop while he had yet a little strength left to guide the boat, and run with the waves, and it would rest him, and by the time he got to the shore he would be quite strong enough again to fight his way through the breakers.

His lips moved, teeth working over them, biting into them, tinging them with blood. It came out of these storm-demons around him, that thought! Marie-Louise was waiting—was she not?—upon the Perigeau; and when the tide was high and the sea was calm one could row over the Perigeau, and sometimes see a *dragonet,* with the beautiful blue and yellow marking of its white, scaleless body, looking for food in the rock-crevices out of its curious eyes that were in the top of its head!

A flicker of light! Yes—yes—the lantern! He was abreast of it again. The good God had not deserted him! He was still strong—there was iron in his arms again—the torture of pulling was gone. He could feel the boat lift now to the stroke.

He pulled, taking his breath in catchy sobs. The boat swept downward into great trough, rose again, trembling, balancing on the next crest—and the light had disappeared. A cry gurgled from Jean's throat, impotent, full of anguish. It was a hallucination, a torture of Satan! No! There it was once more—he caught it on the next rise, and each succeeding one now. And he, not it now, was making headway seaward. He was across the tide-race; it was the Madonna who had prayed for him! And in another little while, soon now, just as soon as the lantern showed a little farther astern, he would get the lee of the Perigeau itself; it would be broken water, but it would be like a child's effort then. And that—what was that?

"Jean!"

It came ringing down with the wind, a brave, strong voice:

"Jean!"

It was Marie-Louise! His strength was the strength of a god again. He shot a hurried glance over his shoulder—it was done—but one had need for care that the boat should not thrash itself to pieces on the rocks. Yes; he saw her now—like a dark, wind-swept wraith.

"To the right, Jean—there is landing to the right!" she called.

"Aye!" he shouted back, and, standing, swung in the boat.

The bow touched the edge of the rocks, grated, pounded, receded, and came on again; there was no beach here, only the vicious swirl and chop of the back-eddy. But as the keel touched again, Jean sprang over into the water; and as he sprang a figure from the rocks rushed in waist-deep to grasp the boat's gunwale on the other side; and across the bow, very close to him, Marie-Louise's white face was framed in the night. It was very dark; he could not see her features distinctly; but he had never seen Marie-Louise look like that before. It was not that her face was aged—nothing, *bon Dieu,* could take the springtime from that face!—but it was very tired and frightened and glad and full of grief.

"Jean! Ah, Jean! You—"

The wind carried away her words. Then she shouted louder, a curious break, like a half-sob, in her voice.

"Uncle Gaston is hurt—very, very badly hurt. He is up there a little way on the reef. You must carry him. And if you hurry, Jean, I can hold the boat."

"Gaston—hurt!" he cried in dismay. "You are sure, then, you can hold the boat and—"

"Yes, yes, if you hurry, Jean—he is there, a few yards back, a little to the left."

"Guard yourself, then, that it does not pull you off your feet!" he cautioned anxiously, and began to scramble from the water and up the slippery, weeded rocks.

And then, a few yards back on the ledge, as she had said, just out of the reach of the spray that lashed the windward side of the Perigeau, he came upon an outstretched form—and, kneeling, called the other's name:

"Gaston! It is I—Jean Laparde!"

He bent closer—one could not hear for the *diable* wind!

"Gaston!"

There was only a low moaning—the man was unconscious.

"*'Cré nom d'une forte peine!*" muttered Jean with a sinking heart, and picked up the other tenderly in his arms.

But it was not easy, that little way back to the boat. Burdened now, the wind behind his back sent him staggering forward before he could find footing, and ten times in the dozen steps he lurched, slipped, and all but fell before, close to the boat again, he laid Gaston down upon the rocks.

"We must bale out the boat, Marie-Louise," he shouted, wading quickly into the water, "or with what we take in on the way back, she will not ride! See, I will hold it while you bale—it will be easier for you."

She answered something as she set instantly to work, but her words were lost in the storm. And Jean through the darkness as he gripped at the boat watched her, his mind a sea of turmoil like the turmoil of the sea about him. Gaston was hurt—yes, very badly hurt, it would seem. How had it happened?

How had they come, Marie-Louise and Gaston, to be upon the Perigeau?

And he, who had given up hope, who had thought to perish out there in that crossing, he, too, was on the Perigeau—the way to get back was to run straight in with the bay—it would not be so hard if they could outrace the waves—if the waves came in over the stern it would be to swamp and—God had been very good to let them live and—

Marie-Louise's hand closed over his on the gunwale.

"It is done, Jean—what I could do," she said. "I will hold the boat again while you lift Uncle Gaston in."

And suddenly Jean's heart was very full.

"Marie-Louise! Marie-Louise!" he said hoarsely—and while her hands grasped the rocking boat his crept around the wet shoulders for an instant and to her face, and turned the

face upward to his, and in that wild revelry of storm he kissed her; and with a choked sob he went from her then and picked up the unconscious form upon the rocks.

And so they started back.

There was no sweep of tide to battle with now — the waves bore them high and shot them onward, shoreward; and the storm was wings to them. But there was danger yet; on the top of the crests it was like a pivot, each one threatening to whirl them broadside and capsize them on the breathless rush down the steep slope that yawned below—that, and the fear that the downward rush, breathless as it was, would not be fast enough to escape the crest itself, which, following them always, hanging over them like hesitant doom far up above—trembling, twisting, writhing — might break in a seething torrent and, sweeping over them, engulf them. It was not so hard now, the way back; there was not the pitiless current that numbed the soul because the body was so frail; but all the craft Jean knew, all the strength that was his was in play again.

The boat swept onward. Marie-Louise was crouched in the stern, supporting Gaston's head upon her lap. Jean could not see her face. When he dared take his eyes for an instant from the racing waves behind her he looked at her, but he could not see her face—it was bent always over Gaston's head.

And a fear grew heavy in Jean's heart — the old fisherman had not moved since he, Jean, had found the other on the reef. Once he shouted at Marie-Louise, shouted out the fear that was upon him — but she only shook her head.

The rain had stopped — he noticed the fact with a strange shock of surprise — surprise that he had not noticed it before, as if it were something extraneous to his surroundings. And then he remembered that as he had stood outside the Bas Rhône he had seen that the wind had changed, and had told himself that by morning it would be better weather.

He glanced above him. The storm-wrack was still there; but it was broken now, and the low, flying clouds seemed thinner—yes, by morning it would be bright sunshine, and of the storm only the heavy sea would be left.

He gave his eyes to the tumbling waters again—and suddenly with a great cry began to pull until it seemed his arms must break. Roaring behind them a giant wave was on the point of breaking. Closer it came—closer. He yelled to Marie-Louise:

"Hold fast, Marie-Louise! Hold fast!"

And then it was upon them.

For a moment it was a vortex — a white, swirling flood of water churned to lather. It hid the stern of the boat, hid Marie-Louise and Gaston at her feet as it poured upon them—and the boat, lifted high up, hung dizzily for an instant, poised as on the edge of an abyss; then the wave rolled under them, and the boat swept on in its wake, the shipped water rushing now this way, now that, in the bottom.

It was an escape! The blessed saints still had them in their keeping! Jean sucked in his breath. A foot nearer when the wave had broken, and instead of the few bucketfuls they had taken, the boat would have filled! And now Marie-Louise, already baling at the water, cried out to him:

"See! It was a mercy!"

Her voice rang with a glad uplift.

"It was sent by the *bon Dieu,* that wave! It has brought life to Uncle Gaston!"

It was true. The deluge of water had, temporarily at least, restored the old fisherman to consciousness, for he raised himself up now, and Jean heard him speak.

After that time marked no definite passing for Jean. Occasionally he heard Marie-Louise's voice as she spoke to her uncle; and occasionally he heard the old fisherman reply—but

that was all. In nearer the shore, where the current, rushing through the narrows, had lost its potency, he edged the boat across the heavy sea, gained the comparative calm under the lee of the headland, and begun to work back to the upper end — it was easier that way, difficult and slow as the progress was, than to land and carry old Gaston along the beach.

An hour? It might have been that —or two—or half an hour—when he and Marie-Louise, in the water beside him again and close by where the lantern under the bluff still burned as he had left it, were dragging the boat free from the breakers and up upon the sand.

And then, while Marie-Louise ran for the lantern, Jean leaned over into the boat.

"Gaston!" he called. "See, we are back! Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Gaston answered feebly.

"Then put your arms around my neck, *mon brave,* and I will lift you up."

The arms rose slowly, clasped; and Jean, straightening up, was holding the other as a woman holds a child. Gaston's head fell on his shoulder, and the old fisherman whispered weakly in his ear.

"My side, Jean! Hold me—lower —down!"

"But, yes," Jean answered cheerily. "There—is that better? We shall get easily to the house like this, and Marie-Louise" — she was back again now—"will lead the way with the lantern."

Gaston's only answer was a slight pressure of his arm around Jean's neck — and now as the lantern's rays for an instant fell upon the other's features Jean's own face set like stone. The old fisherman's eyes were closed, and the skin where it showed through the grizzled beard, wet and tangled now, was a deathly white — and Jean, motioning to Marie-Louise, started hurriedly forward.

Only once on the way to the house, as Jean followed Marie-Louise up the path from the beach, did Gaston speak again; and then it was as if he were talking to himself, low, broken, almost like the sobbing of a child. Jean caught the words.

"René — René, my brother — the light is out, René—the light is out!"

And with the words something dimmed suddenly before Jean's eyes, and the path for a moment and Marie-Louise were as a mist in front of him. The light! For fourteen years the man he held in his arms had burned that light—and the light was out now forever!

He hurried on, and, reaching the house, laid Gaston on the bed in the little room off the kitchen that belonged to the other; then turned swiftly to Marie-Louise, for the old fisherman had lost consciousness again.

"Cognac, Marie-Louise!" he said quickly.

She ran for the brandy—and while Jean forced a few drops through Gaston's lips, holding up the lantern to watch the other, she went from the room again and brought back a lamp.

"Jean," she cried pitifully as she set it upon the table, "he is not—"

Jean shook his head.

"No; he will be better in a minute now. It is but a little fainting-spell."

She did not answer—barefooted, the short skirt just reaching to the ankles, her black hair, loosened, tumbling about her shoulders in a sodden mass, she came a little closer to the bed, her hands clasped, the dark eyes wide with troubled tenderness, the red lips parted, the white cheeks still glistening with spray; and the wet clothes, untrammeled in their simplicity, clung closely to her limbs and gloried in the chaste beauty of her form in its unconscious pose. And something stirred Jean's spirit within him, and for a moment he was oblivious to his surroundings, for as he looked she seemed to stand before him the living counterpart of a wondrous piece of sculpture — in bronze it was, marvelously

conceived — that he had dreamed of again and again in vague, restless dreams—the statue, for it was always the same statue in his dreams, that was set in the midst of a great city in a great square, and—

"Marie-Louise!" he said aloud unconsciously.

But she shook her head, pointing to the bed.

Gaston had stirred, and, opening his eyes now, fixing them on the glass still in Jean's hand, he motioned for more brandy. And Jean, his moment of abstraction gone as quickly as it had come, bent hastily forward and gave it to him.

The raw spirit brought a flush to the old fisherman's cheeks.

"Father Anton!" he said. "Go for Father Anton!"

"*Bien sûr!*" responded Jean soothingly. "I will go at once. It was what I thought of when I was carrying you up the beach. I said:

"'Since there is no doctor in Bernay-sur-Mer, I will get Father Anton, who is as good a doctor as he is a priest, and he will have Gaston here on his feet again by morning.'"

He moved away from the bed—but Gaston put out a hand and stopped him.

"Not you, Jean; I want to talk to you. Send Marie-Louise."

"Marie-Louise!" exclaimed Jean, shaking his head. "But no! You have forgotten the storm, Gaston—and see! She is all wet and tired, and she has been I do not know how many hours exposed out there in that cursed Perigeau."

A smile, half stubborn, half of pride, struggled through a twist of pain on the old fisherman's lips.

"And what of that? She has been brought up to it. A dozen times and more she has been longer in a storm than this. She is not of the milk-and-water breed, is Marie-Louise; she is a Bernier, and, the *bon Dieu* be praised, the Berniers do not stop at that! Is it not so, Marie-Louise?"

"Yes, uncle," she answered softly. "I will go; and I will not be long."

"Go then, Marie-Louise," he said. "I wish it."

She bent and kissed her uncle and picked up the lantern and shook her head in a pretty gesture at Jean as if half to tease him for the perturbed look upon his face and half in grave wistfulness to charge him with the sick man's care; and then she went from the room, and presently the front door closed behind her.

The lamp flickered with the inrush of wind from the opening of the door, flickered over a spotless, bare floor, an incongruous high-poster bed that had been a wedding-gift to Marie-Louise's father and mother from the man who lay upon it now; flickered over the rafted ceiling, the scant furnishings which were a single chair and a table; flickered over a crucifix upon the wall, and then burned on once more in a steady flame. It was like the shrug of Jean's shoulders, the flicker of that lamp; for with a shrug he resumed again his position over Gaston—it was true, after all; Marie-Louise would come to no harm; they were used to that, they, fisherfolk of Bernay-sur-Mer.

"*Tiens,* Gaston!" he said. "See, we will get off your wet clothes and you will tell me how it happened, this *misère,* and about the hurt. But first this, *mon Dieu,* but I did not guess it was like that; a clean bandage, eh? That is first—I will find something."

Jean had unbuttoned the other's jacket, disclosing a rent shirt, and on the left side a wad of cloth, blood-soaked now, where Marie-Louise evidently had made a pad for the wound with her underskirt and tied it in place with long strips torn from the garment. He began to loosen one of the strips; but Gaston, who until then had lain passive with eyes closed, caught his hand.

"Let it alone, Jean; you will only make it bleed the more."

"Aye," said Jean thoughtfully;

"perhaps that is so. It would be better maybe to leave it to Father Anton."

A wan smile came to Gaston's lips.

"Father Anton will not touch it either, Jean."

And then, Jean with a sudden start, stared into the other's eyes.

"It is destiny!" said Gaston slowly. "Did you, too, like Marie-Louise think it was for that I sent for the good father? It is the priest and mother church I need; there is no doctor that could help."

"But no," Jean protested anxiously. "you must not talk like that, Gaston. It is not so. Wait. You will see. Father Anton will tell you that in a few days you will be strong again. It is the weakness now."

Gaston shook his head.

"You are a brave man, Jean; but I, too, am brave, and I'm not afraid, not afraid for myself. It is for Marie-Louise; it is for that I kept you here and sent her for Father Anton. I know—something is hurt inside; I am bleeding there."

And now Jean made no answer—no words would come. The utter weakness in the voice, the feeble movements of the hands, the grayer pallor in the other's face seemed to dawn upon him with its full significance for the first time, and for a moment it seemed to stun and bewilder him.

"It is destiny!" said Gaston again. "Listen. It is fourteen years since René, my brother, Marie-Louise's father, was drowned on the Perigeau. I swore that night that no other should lose his life as René had, and for fourteen years I have burned the light and laughed at the Perigeau as it gnawed its teeth in the storm."

He stopped and touched his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"It is the hand of God," he whispered hoarsely. "The light is out—and it is the Perigeau again."

Jean pulled the chair closer to the bedside, sat down, and took one of Gaston's hands.

"It means nothing, that, Gaston," he said, trying to control his voice. "It is bad to think such thoughts; and of what good are they? You must not think of that. Tell me what happened—how you and Marie-Louise came to be out there to-night."

Gaston lay quiet for a little while, so long that Jean thought the other had not heard the question. Then the old fisherman spoke again:

"Marie-Louise will tell you. I have other things to say, and I have not strength enough for all. It is hard to talk. Give me the cognac again, Jean."

He drank it almost greedily this time. As Jean held up his head that he might do so the more readily, the grim old lips and unflinching eyes smiled back their thanks.

"Listen to me well, Jean," he went on earnestly. "Marie-Louise is very dear to me. I love the little girl. All her life she has lived with me—for two years after she was born in this house here, her mother and René and I, and two years more with René and me; and then after that it was just Marie-Louise and I alone. She had no one else, and I had no one else.

"I have taught her as the *bon Dieu* has shown me the way to teach her to be a true daughter of France, to love God and be never afraid"—he reached out his other hand suddenly and clasped it over Jean's—"do you love Marie-Louise?"

"Yes," said Jean simply.

"She will be alone now," said Gaston and his eyes filled. "She is a good girl, Jean. She is pure and innocent, and her heart is so full of love—there was never such love as hers! And she is so gay and bright like the flowers and like the birds—and happy—and sorrow has not come to her."

He stopped once more. The gray eyes searched Jean's face as if they would read to the other's soul.

"Jean," he asked again, "do you love Marie-Louise?"

Jean's lips were quivering now.

"Yes," he answered; "you know I love her."

The old fisherman lay back, silent, still for a moment; but he kept pressing Jean's hand. When he spoke again it seemed that it was with more of an effort.

"This house, the land, the boats, the nets they are hers—it is her *dot*. But it is not of that I fear—it is not of that—"

His voice died away. Again he was silent; and then, suddenly raising himself on his elbow:

"Jean," he asked for the third time, almost fiercely now, "*do* you love Marie-Louise?"

"But yes, Gaston," said Jean gently. "I have loved her all my life."

"Yes; it is so," Gaston muttered slowly. "I give her to you then, Jean. She is a gift to you from the seas—from the sea to-night. She loves you, Jean; she has told me so. You will be good to her, Jean?"

The tears were in Jean's eyes.

"Gaston, can you ask it?" he cried out brokenly.

"Aye!" cried Gaston, and his voice rang out in a strange, stern note, and his form as he lifted himself up once more seemed to possess again its old rugged strength.

"Aye! I do more than ask it. Swear it, Jean! To a dying man and in God's presence—see, there is a crucifix there—swear that you will guard her and that you will let no harm come to her."

"I swear it, Gaston," said Jean in a choking voice.

"It is well then," Gaston murmured, and lay back upon the bed.

For a little while Jean, dim-eyed, watched the other, a hundred reminiscences of their work together stabbing at his heart. Then he rose and began to remove what he could of the old fisherman's clothing.

"I will not touch the wound, Gaston," he said; "but the boots, *mon brave*, and—"

Gaston did not answer. He appeared to have sunk into a semistupor, from which even the removal of his clothes did not arouse him. Jean pulled a blanket up around the other's form and sat down again in the chair.

Once as Gaston muttered Jean leaned forward toward the other.

"It is destiny—the Perigeau—the light is out—René, it is—"

The words trailed off into incoherency.

The minutes passed. Occasionally with a spoon now Jean poured a few drops of brandy between Gaston's lips; otherwise he sat there, his head in his hands, tight-lipped, staring at the floor. Outside, that vicious howl of wind seemed to have died away. Perhaps it was hushed because old Gaston was like this. Marie-Louise had been gone a long time; presently she and Father Anton would be back, and—

He looked up to find Gaston's eyes open and fixed upon him feverishly, the lips struggling to say something.

"What is it, Gaston?" he asked.

"The light, Jean!" Gaston whispered. "It is—for—the last time. Go and—light—the—great lamp."

"Yes, Gaston," Jean answered, and went from the room.

But at the door he covered his face with his hands, and his shoulders shook like a child whose heart is broken as his feet, in that outer room, crunched on the shattered glass of the lamp that would never burn again. He dashed the tears from his eyes, and for a moment stared unseeingly before him, then turned and went back to Gaston's side again in the inner room.

Gaston's eyes searched his face eagerly.

"It burns?" he cried out.

"It burns," said Jean steadily.

And Gaston smiled, and the stupor fell upon him again.

And then, after a long time, Jean heard footsteps without, then the opening of the front door — and then it seemed to Jean that a benediction had fallen upon the room.

Framed in the doorway, a little,

worn, black bag in his hand, his *soutane* splashed high with mud, though it was caught up now around his waist with a cord, stood Father Anton, the beloved of all Bernay-sur-Mer.

And as he stood there and the kindly blue eyes searched the figure on the bed, the fine, old face, under its crown of silver hair, grew very grave—and without moving from his position, Father Anton beckoned to Jean.

"Jean, my son," he said softly, "make our little Marie-Louise here put on dry clothing. I will be a little while with Gaston alone."

Marie-Louise was standing behind the priest. Father Anton stepped aside for Jean to pass—and then the door closed quietly.

"Jean!"

She caught his arm.

"Jean—tell me!"

Jean did not answer; there were no words to answer her with.

"Oh, Jean!" she said, and a little sob broke her voice.

"Go and put on dry things, Marie-Louise," he bade.

"No—not now," she answered. "Give me your hand."

They stood there in the darkness. He felt her hand tremble. Neither spoke. Father Anton's voice, in a low, constant murmur, came to them now.

Her hand tightened.

"I know," she nodded. "It is the sacrament."

"He said he had taught you to be never afraid," rejoined Jean.

Her hand tightened again.

It was a long while. And then the door behind them opened, and Father Anton came between them and drew Marie-Louise's head to his bosom and stroked her hair and placed his other arm around Jean's shoulders. For a moment he stood like that; then he drew them to the window.

"See, my children," he said gently, "there are the stars, and there is peace after the storm. It is so with sorrow, for out of the blackness of grief God brings us comfort in His own good pleasure. He has called Gaston home."

CHAPTER III.

The Beacon.

IT was half clay, half mud; but out of it one could fashion the little *poupées*, the dolls for the children. They would not last very long, it was true; but then one fashioned them quickly, and there was delight in making them.

Jean dug a piece of the clay with his sheath-knife, leaned over from the bank of the little creek, and moistened it in the water. He dug another, moistened that, molded the two together—and Marie-Louise smiled at him a little tremulously as their eyes met.

The tears were very near to those brave, dark eyes since three days ago. Jean mechanically added a third piece of clay to the other two. Much had happened in those three days. All Bernay-sur-Mer seemed changed since that afternoon when Gaston — so Marie-Louise had told Jean—seeing a boat adrift, and fearing there might be some one in it, had tried during a lull in the storm to reach it with her assistance, and an oar had broken, and the tide on the ebb had driven them close to the Perigeau where they had swamped, and, somehow, Gaston had been flung upon the outer edges of the reef, and the boat, sodden, weighted, following, had crushed him against the rocks.

Jean looked at Marie-Louise again. She was all in black now — she and good Mother Fregeau had made the dress between them for the church that morning when Father Anton had said the mass for Gaston. But Marie-Louise was not looking at him. Her elbows were on the ground, her chin was cupped in her hands, and the long black lashes veiled her eyes. She had not told him any more of the story—Jean could picture that for himself.

How many times must she have risked her life to have pulled Gaston to the rocks higher up upon the reef!

A daughter of France, Gaston had called her. *Bon Dieu,* but she was that, with her courage and her strength! One would not think the strength was there; but then the black dress did not cling like the wet clothes, that other night, to show the litheness of the rounded limbs.

His fingers began to work into the clay, unnaturally diffident and hesitant at first; not with the deft certainty of their custom, but as if groping tentatively for something that was curiously intangible, that eluded them. Marie-Louise, as she had been that night, was living before him again—the lines of her form so full of grace and so beautiful, so full of the virility of her young womanhood, the shapely head, the hair streaming in abandon about her shoulders. It was like and yet not like that great bronze statue so often in his dreams, imaginary and yet so real, that was set in the midst of that great city in a great square. And then suddenly, strangely, of their own volition it seemed, his fingers, where they had been hesitant before, began now to work with a sure swiftness.

His eyes were drinking in the contour of Marie-Louise's face in a rapt, eager, subconscious way. There was something deeper there than the mere prettiness of feature—something that was impressing itself absorbingly, insistently upon him. Her face made him think of the face of that statue—there was a hint of masculinity that brought with it no coarseness, nor robbed it of its sweetness or its charm, but stamped it with calm fearlessness, like that massive face of bronze which towered high, which people with uplifted heads stood and gazed upon, which none passed by without a pause; and courage and resolve outshone all else, and alone was dominant there.

Marie-Louise sat up suddenly and turned toward him, her brows gathered in a pretty, puzzled way.

"Why do you look at me like that, Jean?" she demanded abruptly. "And what are you doing there? It is not the doll you promised to make for little Ninon Lachance—it is much too big."

She leaned forward.

"What *are* you making?"

"*Ma foi!*" Jean muttered with a little start—and stared at the lump of clay. "I—I do not know."

"Well, then," said Marie-Louise gravely, "don't do any more. I want to talk to you, Jean."

"How, not do any more!" protested Jean whimsically. "Was it not you who said, 'We will go to the creek this afternoon and make *poupées?*' And look"—he jerked his hand toward a large basket on the ground beside him—"to do that I shall, perhaps, not keep my promise to meet the Lucille when she comes in and bring a basket of fish to Jacques Fregeau at the Bas Rhône. And now you say, 'Don't do any more!'"

"Yes; I know," admitted Marie-Louise. "But I want to talk to you. Listen, Jean! To-morrow Mother Fregeau must go back to the Bas Rhône. She has been too long away in her kindness now. You know how she came to me the next morning after Uncle Gaston died and put her arms around me and has stayed ever since."

Jean shifted the lump of clay a little away from Marie-Louise, but his fingers still worked on.

"She has a heart of gold," asserted Jean. "Who should know any better than I, who have lived with her all these years?"

Marie-Louise's eyes traveled slowly in a half-tender, half-pensive way over Jean. His coat was off; the loose shirt was open at the neck, displaying the muscular shoulders, and the sleeves were rolled up over the brown, tanned arms; the powerful hands, powerful for all their long, slim, tapering fingers, worked on and on; the black hair clustered truantly, as it always did, over the broad, high forehead.

She had known Jean all her life, as many years as she could remember, and her love for him was very deep. It had come to seem her life, that love; and each night in her prayers she had asked the *bon Dieu* to bless and take care of Jean, and to make her a good wife to him when that time should come. It was so great, that love, that sometimes it frightened her — somehow it was frightening her now, for there was a side to Jean that, well as she knew him, she felt intuitively she had never been able to understand.

She spoke abruptly again, a little absently.

"I do not know yet what I am to do. There is the house, and Father Anton says I must not live there alone."

"But, no!" agreed Jean. "Of course not! That is what I say, too. It is all the more reason why we should not wait any longer, you and I, Marie-Louise."

A tinge of color crept shyly into Marie-Louise's face as she shook her head.

"No; we must wait, Jean. It is too soon after—after poor Uncle Gaston."

"But it was Gaston's wish, that," persisted Jean gently. "Have I not told you what he said, *petite?*"

Again Marie-Louise shook her head.

"But one is sad for all that," she answered. "And to go to the church, Jean, when one is sad, when one should go so happy! Oh, I want to be happy then, Jean! I do not want to think of anything that day but only you, Jean—and sing, and there must be sunshine and fête. But now for a little while it is Uncle Gaston. You do not think that wrong?"

"No," said Jean slowly, "it is not wrong, and I understand; but then, too, Gaston would understand, for it was his wish."

Marie-Louise bent forward with a strange, little, impulsive movement.

"That is twice you have said that, Jean," she said. "I—I almost wish Uncle Gaston had not said what he did to you that night. Jean, it—it is not what he said, nor what you said to him. That must not make any difference. Never, never, Jean! One does not marry for that—it is only if there is love."

"*Mais, 'cré nom!*" exclaimed Jean, suddenly setting aside his clay and catching Marie-Louise's face between his hands. "Why do you talk like that? What queer fancies are in that little head? Now, tell me"—he kissed her lips while the blood rushed crimson to her cheeks—"tell me, is that not answer enough? And have we not loved each other long before that night, and does not all Bernay-sur-Mer know that it will dance at the *noces?*"

"Yes," whispered Marie-Louise a little breathlessly.

"Ah, then," said Jean tenderly, "you must not talk like that. What, Marie-Louise, if I should say to myself, 'Now, perhaps, Marie-Louise has not loved me all these years, and—'"

She drew hurriedly away.

"Don't, Jean!" she said quickly. "It hurts, that! I love you so much that sometimes I am afraid. And to-day I am afraid. I do not know why. And sometimes it is so different! That night on the reef when I thought that soon the rocks would be covered and that there was no help for Uncle Gaston and myself, and that no one could come to us even if we were seen, I saw your lantern, and the *bon Dieu* told me it was you, and I had no more fear. I was so sure then—so sure then!

"Oh, Jean, you must be very good to me to-day! It—it was so hard"—the dark eyes were swimming now with tears—"to say good-by to Uncle Gaston. Perhaps it is that that is making me feel so strangely. But sometimes it seems as if it could never be, the great happiness for you and me; it is so great to think about that—that it frightens me. And I have wanted to talk to you about it, Jean, often and often. Does it make you very glad and happy, too, to think of

just you and me together here, and our home, and the fishing, and—and years and years of it?"

"But, yes; of course!" smiled Jean; and, picking up the clay again, he began to scrape at it with his knife.

"But are you sure, Jean?"

There was a little tremor in her voice.

"I do not mean so much that you are sure you love me, but that you are sure you would always be happy to stay here in Bernay-sur-Mer. You are not like the other men."

"How not like them?" Jean demanded, surveying in an absorbed sort of way the little clay figure that was taking on rough outline now. "How not like them?"

"Well—that!"

Marie-Louise pointed at the clay in his hands.

"That for one thing—that you are always playing with, that it seems you cannot put aside for a moment, even though I asked you to a moment ago. You are always making the *poupées;* and if not the *poupées* with mud and dirt, then you must waste the inside of Mother Fregeau's loaves that she bakes herself, or steal the dough before it reaches the oven to keep your fingers busy making little faces and droll things out of it."

Jean looked up to stare at Marie-Louise a little perplexedly.

"*Mais, zut!*" he exclaimed. "And what of that? And if I amuse myself that way, what of that? It is nothing!"

"Nevertheless," Marie-Louise insisted, nodding her head earnestly, "it is true what I have said—that you are not like the other men in Bernay-sur-Mer. Do you think that I have not watched you, Jean? And have you not said little things to show that you grow tired of the fishing?"

"But that is true of everybody," Jean protested. "Does not Father Anton say that all the world is poor because there is none in it who is contented? And if I grumble sometimes do not all the others do the same? Pierre Lachance will swear to you twice every hour that the fishing is a dog's life."

She shook her head.

"It is different," she said. "You are not Pierre Lachance, Jean, and I want you to be happy all your life—that is what I ask the *bon Dieu* for always in my prayers. And I do not know why these thoughts come, and I do not understand them; only I know that they are there."

"Then—*voilà!* We will drive them away, and they must never come back!" Jean burst out half gaily, half gravely. "See now, Marie-Louise"—he caught her hand in both of his, putting aside the lump of clay again—"it is true that sometimes I am like that, and I do not understand, either; but one must take things as they are; is that not so?"

She nodded a little doubtfully.

"Well, then," cried Jean, "why should I not be happy here? Have I not you, and is that not most of all? And as for the rest, do I not well with the fishing? Is there any who does better? Do they not speak of the luck of Jean Laparde?

"*'Cré nom!* Different from the others! Who is a fisherman if it is not I, who have been a fisherman all my life? And of what good is it to wish for anything else? What else, even if I wanted to, could I do? I do not know anything else but the boats and the nets. Is it not so, Marie-Louise?"

"Y-yes," she said, and her eyes lifted to meet his.

"And happy!" he went on. "Ah, Marie-Louise, with those bright eyes of yours that belong all to me, who could be anything but happy? *Tiens!* You are to be my little wife, and Bernay-sur-Mer and the blue water is to be our home, and we will fish together, and you shall sing all day in the boat and—well, what more is there to ask for?"

"Oh, Jean!"

She was smiling now.

"There, you see!" said John, and burst out laughing. "Marie-Louise is herself again, and—*pouf!*—the blues are blown away. And now wait until I have finished this, and I will show you something."

He picked up the clay once more.

"Only you must not look until it is done."

"Mustn't I? Oh!" with a little *moue* of resignation. "Well, then, hurry, Jean!" she commanded, and cupped her chin in her hands again, her elbows propped upon the ground.

It was playfully that Jean turned his back upon her, hiding his work; but as his fingers began again to draw and model the clay, and his knife to chisel it, the smile went slowly from his face and his lips grew firmly closed. It was strange that Marie-Louise should have known! It was true, the fishing grew irksome too often now; for those moods, like the mood in the storm, came very often—much more often than they had been wont to do. He had laughed at her, but that was only to pretend, to chase the sadness away and make her eyes shine again. It was true, too, as he had told her, that one must take things as they were. Whether he wanted to fish or not, he must fish—*voilà!* How else could one make the sous with which to live?

Oh, yes! He had laughed to make her laugh; but now—*pardieu!* It was bringing that mood upon himself. Where was that great city and that great square, and what was that great statue before which the people stood rapt and spellbound, and why should it come so often to his thoughts, and be as real as if it were a very truth and not some queer imagination of his brain?

There were wonderful things in the face of that bronze figure! He leaned a little forward toward the clay before him, his lips half parted now, his fingers seeming to tingle with a life, throbbing, palpitant, that was all their own, that was apart from him entirely, for they possessed a power of movement and a purpose that he had nothing to do with. He became absorbed in his work, lost in it. Time passed.

"Jean," Marie-Louise called out, "let me see it now!"

"Wait!" he said almost harshly. "Wait! Wait! Wait!"

"*Jean!*"

It was a hurt little cry.

He did not hear her. There was something at the base of that statue of his dreams that always troubled him—that the people always pointed at as they gazed—but he had never been able to make out what it was there at the base of the statue. It was very strange that he was never able to see that, when he could see the figure of the woman with the wonderful face so plainly!

He worked on and on. There were neither hours nor minutes—the afternoon deepened. There was no creek, no Marie-Louise, no Bernay-sur Mer, nothing — only those dreams and the little clay figure in his hands.

And then Marie-Louise, her face a little white, timidly touched his arm.

"Jean!" she said hesitantly.

Her voice roused him. It seemed as if he were awakened from a sleep. He brushed the hair back from his eyes and looked around.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he said. "But that was strange!"

And then he smiled, still a little dazed, and lifted around the clay figure for her to see.

"I do not know if it is finished," he added, staring at it; "but perhaps I could do no better with it even if I worked longer."

Marie-Louise's eyes, puzzled, anxious, on Jean's face, shifted to the little clay figure — and their expression changed instantly.

"But, Jean!" she cried, clasping her hands. "But, Jean, that is not a *poupée* you have made there. It—it will never do at all! Ninon Lachance would break the arms off at the first

minute. And it is too *charmante* for that! Oh, but, Jean, it—it is *adorable!*"

Jean was inspecting the figure in a curiously abstracted way, as if he had never seen it before, twisting his head, now to this side, now to that, and turning the clay around and around in his hands to examine it from all angles, while a heightened color crept into his face and dyed his cheeks. It was a small figure, hardly a foot and a half in height — the figure of a fisherwoman, barefooted, in short skirts, the clothes, as if wind-swept, clinging close around her limbs, her arms stretched out as to the sea. He laughed a little unnaturally.

"Well, then, since it will not do for Ninon Lachance, and you like it, Marie-Louise," he said a little self-consciously, "it is for you."

"For me—Jean? Really for me?" she asked happily.

"And why not?" said Jean. "Since it *is* you."

"Me!"

She looked at him in a prettily bewildered way.

"But yes," said Jean, holding the figure off at arm's length. "See, it is a beacon—the welcome of the fishermen home from the sea. And are you not that, Marie-Louise? And will you not stand on the shore at evening and hold out your arms for me as I pull home in the boat? Are you not the beacon, Marie-Louise—for me?"

Her hand stole over one of his and pressed it, but it was a moment before she spoke.

"I will pray to the *bon Dieu* to make me that, Jean — always," she said softly.

"My little Marie-Louise!" he whispered tenderly, and drew her close to him.

They sat for a moment, silent; then Jean sprang sharply to his feet.

"*Ma foi*, Marie-Louise!" he called out in sudden consternation, glancing at the sun. "I did not know we had been here so long."

He picked up the little clay figure hastily, placed it in the basket, threw over it his coat, which was on the ground, and, swinging the basket onto the crook of his arm, held out his hand to Marie-Louise.

"Come, *petite*, we will hurry back," he told her.

It was not far across the fields and down the little rise to the road that paralleled the beach; so in some five minutes, walking quickly, they came out upon the road itself by the turn near the rough wooden bridge that crossed the creek half way between the eastern headland and the white, clustering cottages of Bernay-sur-Mer. But here, for all their hurry, they paused suddenly of one accord, looking at each other questioningly, as voices reached them from the direction of the bridge, which was just around the bend of the road ahead.

"But, my dear"—it was a man speaking, his tone a sort of tolerant protest—"I am sure it is just the place we have been looking for. It is quiet here."

"Quiet!"

It was a woman's voice this time, in a wealth of irony.

"It is stagnation! There isn't a single thing alive here—even the sea is dead! It is enough to give one the blues for the rest of one's life! And the accommodations at that unspeakable tavern are absolutely appalling. I can't imagine what you are dreaming of to want to stay another minute! I'm quite sure there are lots of other places that will furnish all the rest and quiet required, and where, at the same time, we can at least be comfortable. Anyway, I'm not going to stay here!"

"But, Myrna, you—"

"There is some one coming," said the girl.

Jean and Marie-Louise were walking forward again.

"What are they saying, Jean?" asked Marie-Louise.

Jean shook his head.

"I do not know," he answered. "It is English. See! There they are!"

An elderly well-dressed man, gray-haired, clean-shaven, a little stout, with a wholesomely, good-natured, ruddy face, was leaning against the railing of the bridge, and beside him, digging at the planks with the tip of her parasol, stood a girl in dainty white, her head bent forward, her face hidden under the wide brim of a picture hat.

Jean's eyes, attracted as by a magnet, passed over the man and fixed upon the girl. At Nice, at Monte Carlo, so they said, one saw many such as her; but Bernay-sur-Mer was neither Nice nor Monte Carlo, and he had never seen a woman gowned like that before. *'Cré nom,* what exquisite harmony of line and poise. If she would but look up. *Bon Dieu,* but it would be a desecration of the picture if she were not gloriously pretty.

The gentleman, nodding pleasantly, greeted them as they approached.

"Good afternoon," he said smilingly, in French.

The girl had raised her head, gray eyes sweeping Marie-Louise with well-bred indifference; and Jean was staring at her.

"*Bon jour, m'sieu'.*" He spoke mechanically, lifted his cap mechanically.

His eyes had not left the girl's face. He could not take his eyes from it.

It was a wonderful face, a beautiful face, and something in it thrilled him and bade him feast his eyes upon it, to drink in its beauty. And his head thrown back, exposing the bare, rugged neck, the broad, sturdy shoulders unconsciously squared a little, the fine, dark eyes, wide with admiration and a strange, keen appraisement, the splendid physique, the strength, the power and vigor of young manhood outstanding in face and form, he gazed at her.

And her eyes, from Marie-Louise, met his, and from them faded their expression of indifference, and into them came something Jean could not define, only as the blood rushed suddenly unbidden to his face and he felt it hot upon his cheeks, he saw the color ebb from hers to a queer whiteness; and then her hat hid her face again, and he had passed by.

It was as if his veins were running fire. He glanced at Marie-Louise. Shyly diffident in the presence of strangers, her head was lowered. She had seen nothing. Seen nothing! Seen what? He did not know. His blood was tingling, his brain was confusion.

He walked on, hurrying unconsciously.

It was Marie-Louise who spoke.

"They are of the *grand monde,*" she observed in a sort of wondering excitement when they were out of earshot.

"Yes," said Jean absently.

"And English or American."

"Yes," said Jean.

"But the rich people do not come to Bernay-sur-Mer where there is no amusement for them," she submitted with a puzzled air. "I wonder what they are going to do here?"

Jean's eyes were on the road. He did not raise them.

"Who knows?" said Jean Laparde.

CHAPTER IV.

The Stranger Within the Gates.

"UNTIL to-morrow." The words kept echoing in Jean's ears as he hurried now on his way back to the Bas Rhône. "Until to-morrow."

Marie-Louise had called to him as he had left the house on the bluff after taking her home. Well, what was there unusual in that? Though he went often, he did not go to see Marie-Louise every evening, and it was not the first time she had ever said it. Why should he be vaguely conscious of a sort of relief that she had said "Until to-morrow" on this particular occasion? It was a very

strange way to feel; but then his mind was most curiously jumbled.

That meeting at the bridge of less than half an hour ago obsessed him. Where had they come from, these strangers? How long were they going to stay? Or, perhaps—an unaccountable dismay suddenly seized him — perhaps they had already gone! But Papa Fregeau, of course, would know all that. Therefore, naturally, he was impatient to reach the Bas Rhône and Papa Fregeau.

The empty basket on his arm—for Marie-Louise had taken the figure he had modeled, while for his part he had forgotten all about Papa Fregeau's fish—Jean paused as he reached the bridge. It was here that that look had passed between them. He would never forget that. It meant nothing. He was not a fool; it could mean nothing! It was only a look, only an instant in which those gray eyes had met his; but he would never forget it!

He hurried on again.

Perhaps he had imagined that expression, that flash, that spark, that something that was impellingly magnetic in those gray eyes. No! He had not imagined it; he had felt it, known it, sensed it. In that one instant something had passed between them that in all his life he would never forget. It left him like a man adrift on a shoreless sea with the startling wonder of it.

She was of the *grand monde*—Marie-Louise had said it. And he was a fisherman. She could have no interest in a fisherman; and what interest could a fisherman— Bah! It was pitifully laughable. But it was not laughable!

If he could only define that look. It was as if — *bon Dieu,* what was it? — as if she were a woman and he were a man. Yes; it was that! It was only for a moment, by now she would have forgotten it; but for that moment it had been that. Only where she would have forgotten, with him it remained.

It was curious—her form was even more like that dream-statue than was Marie-Louise's. If by any chance she should already have gone! The thought, recurring, brought once more that twinge of dismay. Was it strange that he should want to see her again? True, she would never look at him like that a second time; she had been off her guard for that little instant when there had been no *grand monde* and no fisherman; but she was still the same beautiful woman, glorious in form and face; and the allurement of her presence was like some rare, exquisite fragrance stealing upon the senses, enslaving them.

And now as he approached the little village and passed the first cottage with the Bas Rhône in sight beyond, he found himself eagerly searching the beach, the single street for sign of her. But there was no sign. Everything about the village was as it always was every early evening in Bernay-sur-Mer when it was summer and the light held late. Strewn out along the beach the men were at work upon their boats and nets; the children played about the doorways; through the open doors one could see the women busy over the evening meal—nothing else!

And surely there would have been some stir of excitement if the strangers were still there, at least among the children—it was an event, that, to Bernay-sur-Mer. They had gone then evidently.

Jean's eyes lifted from a fruitless sweep of the beach to fix on the figure of Papa Fregeau emerging on the run from the Bas Rhône.

"The fish, Jean! The fish!" the fat little man called out breathlessly.

"The fish?" repeated Jean—and then a little sheepishly stared into the empty basket.

Papa Fregeau, who had reached Jean's side, was staring into it, too.

"Yes — the fish! The fish!" he shouted. "Where are the fish you promised to bring back?"

And then Jean laughed.

"Why," said Jean, "I — I think I must have forgotten them."

Papa Fregeau was excited. He began to dance up and down, his fat paunch shaking like jelly.

"Idiot! Imbecile!" he stormed. "Have I not had trouble enough without this? *'Cré bleu de misericorde!* What an afternoon! And you laugh —*bête* that you are! And now what shall I do?"

"Do?" said Jean — and stopped laughing. "What is the matter?"

"Matter!" spluttered the patron of the Bas Rhône. "Matter! Have I not told you what is the matter? The fish!"

"Yes, but a few fish," said Jean, eying the other in a half-puzzled way. "What are a few fish that you—"

"You do not understand!"

Papa Fregeau was still dancing up and down as he kept step with Jean, who had now started on again toward the Bas Rhône.

"Listen! They are Americans of Paris, they say! They arrived in an automobile this afternoon—*mademoiselle* and her father, the maid and the chauffeur. It is fine; they stop at the Bas Rhône and engage rooms. Excellent! Nothing could be better. There is profit in that.

"I carry the trunks, the valises, a multitude of effects that are strapped all over the automobile to the rooms, and am on the point of sending for Mother Fregeau at Marie-Louise's. *Sapristi* — I do not pretend to be a cook! They started out for a walk, the *mademoiselle* and her father—and the *mademoiselle,* before they are out of sight from the window, returns to say that they will not stay; that I shall repack everything on that accursed car in readiness for their departure on the return from their walk. *Tourment de Satan!* Very good! I repack it! And now you bring no fish!"

Jean shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, since they are gone what does it matter?"

"Gone. *Tonnerre!*"

Papa Fregeau's face was apopletic, and his fat cheeks puffed in and out like toy balloons.

"Gone! Have I not told you that they are not gone!"

"You have told me nothing."

There was a sudden, quick interest in Jean's voice.

"They are gone—and they are not gone! What are you talking about?"

"I do not know what I am talking about!" snapped Papa Fregeau fiercely. "How should I know! It is first this, then that, then this, then that—it is a *badauderie!* She is crazy, the girl; the father is no better; the maid, Nanette, is a hussy—she slapped my face when I but paid her a pretty compliment; and Jules, the chauffeur, is a pig who lies on his back under the infernal machine and will not lift a finger with the baggage. Wait! Listen! Come here!"

He pulled Jean in through the door and across the café to the bar, where he hastily decanted a glass of cognac and tossed it off.

"See! Listen!" he went on excitedly, replenishing his glass. "I repack everything onto the machine again, which is out there behind the tavern. I climb the stairs and I descend the stairs three dozen times; there is always one more package. And then fifteen minutes ago *mademoiselle* returns from her walk alone, and waves her hands—pouf —just like that—and she says:

"'M. Fregeau, we will stay; take the baggage back to the rooms! *C'est insupportable, ça!*'"

Papa Fregeau flung out his arms in abandoned despair.

"And now there is no supper for them! *Sapristi,* I am no cook; but I could cook fish if you, *misérable* that you are, had brought them—heh! And it is too late now to send for Mother Fregeau."

Jean was paying but slender attention. They had not gone! They were going to stay!

"Get Mme. Lachance next door to help you," he said absently.

Then abruptly:

"*Mademoiselle* returned alone, you say—and what of *monsieur,* her father?"

Papa Fregeau made a gulp at his second glass.

"He is impossible!" he choked. "With him it is the sunset! Who ever heard of such a thing! He is on the beach to gaze at the sunset! *Nom d'un nom!* Is it extraordinary that the sun should set?

"But it is not him; it is *mademoiselle.* I am sure he knows nothing of all this, and concerns himself less. It is *mademoiselle's* doing. And I have had enough! I will not any longer be made a fool of!"

He banged his pudgy fist on the *comptoir.*

"Is it to stand on my head that I am patron of the Bas Rhône! *Sacré bleu!* I will not support it! I tell you that I will not—"

Papa Fregeau's mouth remained wide open.

"M. Fregeau!" a voice called softly in excellent French from the rear door. "Nanette is struggling with a valise on the back stairs that is very much too heavy for her, and perhaps if you—"

Papa Fregeau's mouths closed, opened again—and in his haste to make a bow the cognac-glass became a shower of tinkling splinters on the floor.

"But *immédiatement!* Instantly, *mademoiselle!*" cried Papa Fregeau effusively. "On the moment! A valise that is too heavy for her! It is a sacrilege! It is unpardonable! Instantly, *mademoiselle!* On the instant! On the moment!" And he rushed from the room.

She stood in the doorway; and from under her bewitchingly half-closed lids the gray eyes met Jean's. And under her gaze which was quite calm, unruffled, self-possessed now, the blood rushed tingling again through his veins, and again he felt it mounting to his cheeks. She wore no hat now; and with the sun's last rays through the doorway falling softly upon her wealth of hair it was as if it were a wondrously woven mass of glinting bronze that crowned her head.

Jean's cap was in his hand.

"Oh!" she said. "You are the—" there was just a trace of hesitation over the choice of the word—"the man who passed us on the bridge a little while ago, aren't you?"

There was something, a sort of indefinable challenge, in the voice and eyes, a carelessness that, well as it was simulated, was not wholly genuine. Jean's eyes met the gray ones, held them—and suddenly he smiled, accepting the challenge.

"It is good of *mademoiselle* to recognize me," he answered.

She stared at him for an instant, her eyes opening wide; and then with a contagious, impulsive laugh she came forward into the room.

"Of course!" she cried. "You would answer like that! I knew it! You are less like a fisherman, for all your clothes, than any man I ever saw."

"I?" said Jean in quick surprise.

It was strange she had said that! It was only that afternoon that Marie-Louise had said almost the same thing. Not like a fisherman! Why not? What was this imagined difference between himself and the other men in Bernay-sur-Mer?

"Yes; you," she returned briskly. "And now I suppose you will tell me that you were born here, and have lived here all your life?"

"But yes *mademoiselle.*"

He smiled again and shrugged his shoulders. "Since it is so. I have never been anywhere else."

"And since it is so it must be so," she nodded. "What is your name?"

"Jean Laparde," he replied.

"Jean!"

She repeated the word with deliberation.

"I like Jean," she decided, nodding her head again. "I like Laparde, too; but I will call you Jean."

Jean's eyes met hers a little quizzi-

cally. She carried things by assault, this beautiful American girl! There was a certain element of intimacy, an air of proprietorship adopted toward him that somehow at one and the same time quickened his pulse at the vague promise that they would not be strangers if only she would stay in Bernay-sur-Mer, and piqued his man-mind at the hint of mastery being snatched from him.

"All call me Jean," he said quietly.

"Then that is settled!" she announced brightly. "Now tell me—Jean: is there any other place in the village besides this impossible Taverne du Bas Rhône where we could stay for a week—a month—as long as we liked?"

"A week—a month!"

Jean leaned suddenly toward her, an incredulous delight unconsciously spontaneous in his voice.

"You are going to stay that long? But Papa Fregeau said you had no sooner arrived than you had decided to go again, and—"

"Your Papa Fregeau has a tongue that runs away with him," she interrupted quickly. "One may change one's mind, I suppose? This place will do for to-night; but afterward—surely there is some other place where we could stay?"

Jean shook his head.

"There is only the Bas Rhône," he said slowly. "I—I am afraid—"

"And now after all you are going to be stupid!" she exclaimed reproachfully.

What was it? What did she mean? It was not the words!—they were nothing. It was the tone, her eyes, an appeal in the exquisite grace of the lithe form bending toward him, the touch of the fingers laid lightly on his sleeve, that look again that leveled all barriers between them—until she was a woman and he was a man. His mind was in riot. He was a fool! And yet, fool or no, the thought would come.

Why did she want to stay now? Papa Fregeau had said that almost on their arrival they had decided to go on. It was on her walk that she had changed her mind? What had happened on that walk to make her change her mind? A walk in Bernay-sur-Mer was not full of incident. It was ridiculous, absurd, fantastical; but it was there, the thought, sweeping him with a surge of wild emotion—was it that meeting on the bridge?

But why? How? He was a rough-garbed fisherman, and she—

She laughed delightedly.

"What a frown! How fierce you are! Is it then such a terrible affair to help me a little—Jean?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Jean—and the words were on his lips with a rush. "But—no!"

"Oh!" she murmured, and drew back a little; and the color, rising, glowed pink through her cheeks. "You *are* impulsive, aren't you? Well then since you are to help me what are we to do?"

Jean's eyes were reveling in that pink flush. It was satisfying to the man-mind, that—even though she were of the *grand monde,* then, a woman was a woman after all. It was a sort of turning of the tables that added to the magnetism of her presence because it put him suddenly more at his ease.

But to help her—that was another matter. Bernay-sur-Mer was—Bernay-sur-Mer! *Voilà tout!* Apart from the Bas Rhône there was no accommodation for strangers, for there was nothing stranger than strangers in Bernay-sur-Mer. Since then there was no other place for them to go he could think of no other place. And yet, a week, a month—to think that she would spend some time in Bernay-sur-Mer! *Ciel!* Where were his brains?

"Well?" she prompted with alluring imperiousness.

It was the force of habit. In trouble, in perplexity, in joy, in sorrow, for counsel, for advice there was but one court of appeal in Bernay-sur-Mer—the good Father Anton. The rôle of Father Anton was not only spiritual—

it was secular. Bernay-sur-Mer was a child and Father Anton was its parent —it had always been so.

"I will ask Father Anton," said Jean.

"Father Anton? Who is Father Anton?" she demanded.

"He is a *curé*," Jean answered. "I do not know of any place, but Father Anton will know if there is any, and—"

"Splendid!" she broke in excitedly. "Let us go and ask Father Anton at once. Come along!" She crossed the café to the front door.

"Come along, Jean, and show me the way."

Yes, certainly! She carried things by assault, this American girl. She bubbled with life and vivacity. And he was to walk with her now to Father Anton's—half an hour ago he would as soon have dreamed of possessing a fortune! It was incredible! It must be a marvelous world that, where she came from—but no, even the women of her world could not be like her! The suppleness of her form, it was divine; the carriage, the poise, the smile—it was intoxication; it went to the senses!

"I am mad! It is as if—as if I were drunk with wine!" Jean muttered—and followed her across the room.

"Now where is this Father Anton's of yours?" as Jean joined her outside the tavern.

"There," said Jean, and pointed along the street. "Do you see the church—behind the second cottage? Well, it is there—just on the other side."

She nodded—and Jean, glancing at her, found that she was not looking in that direction at all. Instead she seemed wholly engaged in watching a boat start shoreward as it pulled away from the side of a smack anchored out in the bay. Father Anton might have been the last thing that concerned her. Jean's eyes, a little puzzled, followed hers. When he looked up again the gray eyes were laughing at him.

"Is it quite safe out there?" she asked, waving her hand.

"Safe?" repeated Jean in a bewildered way.

"Stupid!" she cried merrily. "Yes, of course—safe! If I am to stay here I cannot lie all day upon the beach and do nothing. You have a boat, haven't you, Jean?"

"But yes," said Jean.

"Then I am quite sure it will be safe," she decided. "I must have a boat and of course a boatman. You will be the boatman, Jean. Oh, I really believe that after all Bernay-sur-Mer will be possible. There will be places where we can go—little excursions and heaps of things like that. There, that is settled! And now I am more eager than ever to see Father Anton."

Yes; it was settled! It was a phrase of hers, that! To have demurred would have been as impossible as to have said no. And besides he had no wish either to demur or refuse. It seemed as if he were hurried forward captive into some strange, unknown land of enchantment. It staggered him, bewildered him, lured him, fired his imagination—and there was no desire to rouse himself from what seemed like a wonderful dream.

No woman that he had ever seen or imagined was like her. To spend a day where he could feast his eyes upon her! And did she not now talk of many days! Even a fisherman might lift his eyes as high as that—since she gave him leave. Afterward she would go away again; but *bon Dieu*, one could at least live in the present! It would be something to remember!

Her eyes were on him again. He felt them studying him. Her hand brushed his arm. There was a faint, enticing fragrance of violets about her.

"You are not very gallant, Jean!" she laughed out. "Aren't you pleased with the suggestion? Or would you rather—fish?"

They reached the church and turned.

"I was thinking," said Jean with unconscious *naïveté*, "that I was afraid Father Anton would not know of any place."

She looked at him quickly, a flash in the gray eyes—then the lids lowered. The next instant she was pointing ahead of her.

"But there!" she cried out. "There is M. le Curé's house, is it not?"

She clapped her hands in sudden delight.

"Why, it is a play-house—only a make-believe one! And how pretty!"

Behind the church was a little garden, full-flowered; a little white fence; a little white gate; and at the end of the garden a little cottage, smaller than any in Bernay-sur-Mer—where none were large. The cottage was white in color too, if one might hazard a guess for the vines that grew over it, covering it, submerging it, clothing it in a clinging mass of green until only a little stubby chimney peeked shyly out from the center of the slanting roof.

"Yes," said Jean; "and there is Father Anton himself."

A bare-headed, silver-haired form in rusty black *soutane,* a watering-pot in hand, was bending over a bed of dahlias; but at the sound of their approach he put down the watering-pot, and came hurriedly toward them to the gate.

"Ah, Jean, my son!" he cried out heartily and bowed with old-fashioned courtliness to Jean's companion. "I heard there were strangers in Bernay-sur-Mer, *mademoiselle,* but that they had gone on again. You are very welcome. Won't you come in?"

She leaned upon the gate, smiling, and shook her head.

"No, thank you, M. le Curé. I must not stay long or my father will be wondering what could have become of me. The truth is that I—we are in trouble and Jean here has brought me to you."

"Trouble!" exclaimed Father Anton anxiously, and his face grew suddenly grave.

She shook her head again and laughed.

"Oh, it is not serious! You see—But I must introduce myself. I am Myrna Bliss. My father is Henry Bliss—I wonder if you have ever heard of him? We have lived for years and years in Paris."

Father Anton was genuinely embarrassed.

"I—I am afraid I never have," he admitted.

"Oh, well," she cried gaily, "you mustn't feel badly about it. His is entirely a reflected glory—that is what I tell him. Art! Everything is art with him—painting, sculpture, literature; and as he can do neither one nor the other himself he endows a school for this, or a *société* for that, and money exists for only one reason—the advancement of art. And since he calls Paris the home of art we live in Paris. But now I am prattling like a school girl." She laughed infectiously.

The curé's old face wrinkled into smiles.

"It is very interesting, *mademoiselle,*" he said. "And here in Bernay-sur-Mer I fear we know too little of such things."

He reached across the fence and laid his hand affectionately on Jean's shoulder.

"But it is not quite all our fault; is it, Jean? The *sous* come hard with the fishing, and we do not have much time for anything outside our own little world. I should greatly like to talk with *monsieur,* your father. Is it possible that you are to stay a little while here?"

"If we do"—the girl's face was a picture of roguish merriment—"you will not be able to escape him, I promise you, M. le Curé, so beware! But that is your trouble. My father is on what he calls a little holiday—it is really that he needs rest and quiet. For a man of his age, what with his own affairs and his 'art,' he is far too active. Very well. Bernay-sur-Mer is ideal only—except—M. le Curé, I am sure, will understand—except the Bas Rhône."

"Ah, the Bas Rhône!" said Father Anton. "It is that, then—the Bas Rhône!"

"Exactly!" she smiled. "And so

Jean has brought me to you to suggest something else for us."

Father Anton joined his finger-tips thoughtfully.

"Yes; I see," he said. "My good friends, the Fregeaus, would do all in their power for you; they are most excellent people; but, yes—h'm—I see. It is a café much more than an inn, and for a café it answers very well; and after all it is not their fault that there are not proper accommodations for guests. Yes; I am afraid the accommodations must be very inadequate. But you see, *mademoiselle*"—Father Anton's voice had a quaint, gentle note of pleading—"we are quite off the main road, and it is rare that a stranger stops in Bernay-sur-Mer, and since they are poor they could not afford, even if they had the money, to make an investment that would bring no return. But something else—h'm! Truly *mademoiselle,* I do not know—there is certainly no other place to board."

"Well, a little furnished cottage then," she suggested. "I have my own maid, and if there were some one else to help a little, nothing would suit us better. Now, M. le Curé, you are not going to be so heartless as to tell me there are no cottages either!"

For a moment Father Anton did not answer—then his face broke suddenly into smiles.

"But no, *mademoiselle!*" he declared quickly, nodding his head delightedly at Jean. "I shall tell you nothing of the sort! One might say it was almost providential. Nothing could be better! And the finest cottage in Bernay-sur-Mer, too! *Mademoiselle* and her father will be charmed with it—and all day I have been worrying about what to do with Marie-Louise! Would it not be just the thing, Jean?"

"*Ma foi!*" gasped Jean in surprise, staring from one to the other. "The house on the bluff?"

"And what else!" cried Father Anton enthusiastically. "Listen *mademoiselle;* I will explain to you. It is the house out there on the headland, where Gaston Bernier lived with his niece, Marie-Louise. Three days ago in the great storm *le pauvre* Gaston was hurt, and that night he died. Marie-Louise can no longer live there alone—it is not right for a young girl. I thought to bring her here to live with me and my old housekeeper; but now she can rent the house to you and can help with the work, for she is a very good cook."

"Father Anton, you are a treasure!" cried Myrna Bliss vivaciously. "We will take the house. And the rent? Would, say, two hundred francs a month be right?"

"Two hundred francs?" repeated Father Anton incredulously, his eyes widening.

"Yes; and another hundred for Marie-Louise."

Three hundred francs! It was not a large sum of money—it was a fortune! Father Anton in his years of ministry at Bernay-sur-Mer could not remember ever having seen a sum like that all at one time; also it was out of all proportion to what he would have thought Marie-Louise should demand. The good *curé's* face was a picture with its mingled emotions—he was torn between the desire that this good fortune should come to Marie-Louise, and a fear in his honest heart that he should be privy to the crime of extortion!

Myrna Bliss laughed at him merrily.

"Then that is settled!" she announced. "Three hundred francs. There is nothing more to be said. The only question is, will Marie-Louise let us have the house?"

"*Mademoiselle,*" said the old priest, his eyes twinkling, "may I say it? You are charming! As for the arrangements, have no fear. I would go this evening, only I have some sick to visit. But very early in the morning I will see Marie-Louise, and by the time *mademoiselle* and her father have had breakfast the house will be at their disposal."

She reached her hand across the gate to thank Father Anton and bid the curé

good evening—but Jean no longer heard the word. His mind seemed to be clashing discordantly; his thoughts in dissension, in open hostility one to another. She was to live in the house on the bluff. Marie-Louise was to stay there too. One moment he saw no objection to the plan; the next moment for a thousand vague, fragmentary reasons that in their entire thousand would not form a concrete whole that he could grasp, he did not like it at all.

He answered Father Anton's *"au revoir"* mechanically as they started back for the Bas Rhône. Myrna was in a hurry now, all life, all excitement—half-running.

"Did I not tell you, Jean, that I would find just what I wanted?" she called out in gay spirits.

She had told him nothing of the sort.

"Yes," said Jean.

They reached the Bas Rhône, and there in the doorway she turned.

"I must find my father and tell him," she said.

There was a smile, a flash of the gray eyes, a glint from the bronze-crowned head, a quick little impetuous pressure on his arm, a laugh soft and musical as the rippling of a brook; and then:

"Until to-morrow, Jean."

And she was gone.

Until to-morrow! The words were strangely familiar. Papa Fregeau was hurrying through the café. Jean turned away. He had no wish to talk to Papa Fregeau—or any one else. He walked down on to the beach—and his eyes fixed on the headland across the bay. Yes, that was it! Until to-morrow—that was what Marie-Louise had said—until to-morrow!

He went on along the beach, his brain feverishly chaotic. She had been like a vision, a glorious vision suddenly gone as she had stood there in the doorway. Her name was Myrna Bliss. Why not, since Father Anton could not go that night, why not go to Marie-Louise himself and tell her about the house? Yes; he would do that.

He crossed the beach to the road again, and started on—walking rapidly. As he neared the little bridge his pace slowed. At the bridge he halted. Perhaps it would be better not to go—it would be better left to Father Anton, that!

"'Cré Bleu!" cried Jean suddenly aloud. "What is the matter with me? What has happened?"

But he went no farther along the road; for after a moment he turned, retracing his steps slowly toward Bernay-sur-Mer.

And so that night Jean did not go to Marie-Louise. But there at the house on the bluff later on Marie-Louise after Mother Fregeau had gone to bed took the beacon that Jean had made and placed it upon the table in the front room where before that other beacon, the great lamp, had stood. And for a long time she sat before it, her elbows on the table, now looking at the little clay figure, now staring through the window to the headland's point where sometimes she could see the surf splash silver white in the moonlight.

It had been a happy afternoon in many ways; but there was something that would not let it be all happiness, for there was confusion in her thoughts.

The house was lonely now, and Uncle Gaston had gone; it did not seem true, it did not seem that it could be he would not open that door again and come thumping in with the nets over his shoulders and the wooden floats bumping on the floor—and the tears unbidden filled her eyes.

And her talk with Jean somehow had not satisfied her, had not dispelled that intuition that troubled her, for all that he had laughed at her for it; and they had not after all settled what she was to do now that Uncle Gaston was gone, for instead of talking more about it Jean had forgotten all about her for ever so long while he had worked at the little clay figure.

Her eyes from the window fastened on the beacon with its open, out-

stretched arms—and suddenly confusion went and great tenderness came. He had made it for her, and he had said that—that it *was* her.

"Jean's beacon," she said softly.

And presently she went up-stairs to the little attic room and undressed and blew out the candle; and in her white nightrobe, the black hair streaming over her shoulders, the moonlight upon her, she knelt beside the bed.

"Make me that, *mon Père*," she whispered; "make me that—Jean's beacon all through my life."

CHAPTER V.

"Who Is Jean Laparde?"

THE mattress was of straw—and the straw had probably been garnered in a previous generation if not in a prehistoric age! It was so old that it was a shifting, lumpy mass of brittle chaff, whose individual units at unexpected moments punctured the ticking and nettle-wise stuck through the coarse sheet. It was not comfortable. It had not been comfortable all night. Truly the best that could be said for the Bas Rhône was that as Father Anton in his gentle way had taken pains to make clear its proprietors were well-intentioned—and that was a source of comfort only as far as it went!

Myrna Bliss wiggled drowsily into another position—and a moment later wriggled back into the old one. Then she opened her eyes and stared about her. The morning sun was streaming in through the window. She observed this with sleepy amazement. After all then she must have slept more than she had imagined in spite of the awful bed.

The *lap-lap-lap* of the sea came to her. Through an open window floated children's voices at play in the street; from down on the beach the sound of men's voices, shouting and calling cheerily to each other, reached her; from below-stairs some sort of a family reunion appeared to be in progress. She could hear that absurd Papa Fregeau talking as if he were a soda-water bottle with the cork suddenly exploded.

"Ah, *mignonne—chérie!* You are back! You will go away no more—not for a day! I have been in despair! It is the Americans! I have been miserable! *Tiens, embrasse-moi,* my little Lucille!"

There was the commotion of a playful struggle, then the resounding smack of a kiss—and then a woman's voice.

"Such a simpleton as you are, *mon* Jacques!"

It was as if one were talking to a child.

"So they have put you in despair, these Americans! Well then, I am back. And listen!" importantly. "What do you think?"

"Think?" cried Papa Fregeau excitedly. "But I do not think!"

"That is true," was the response; "so I will tell you. They are going away this morning."

"*Merci!*" exclaimed Papa Fregeau fervently. "I am very glad!"

"They are going to Marie-Louise's?"

"To Marie-Louise's!" incredulously. "You tell me that they are going to Marie-Louise's?"

"Yes; to Marie-Louise's, stupid! Father Anton came an hour ago to make the arrangements. They are to rent the house, and Marie-Louise is to remain there *en domestique*. Now what have you to say to that?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" ejaculated Papa Fregeau with intense earnestness. "That I am sorry for Marie-Louise!"

Myrna Bliss laughed softly, delightedly to herself—and then with a sudden little gasp sat bolt upright in bed. The whole thing, everything since yesterday afternoon had been inconceivably preposterous—and she herself preposterous most of all! If her father ever heard the truth of it what a scene there would be!

She got out of bed impulsively, walked to the window and leaned her elbows on the sill, her brows gathered

in a perplexed little frown. Just what *had* happened anyway? She had decided ten minutes after they had arrived in Bernay-sur-Mer that she would die of ennui if she stayed there. They had started for a walk, she and her father, and without saying anything to him she had turned back and taken it upon herself to inform this fat, effervescent little hotel-proprietor that they would go on that afternoon. She had intended on the walk to tell her father what she had done, and in fact had told him; and then on her return after that —yes, that meeting on the bridge—she had countermanded her orders, and not only countermanded them but had even rented the cottage!

Her father had seen nothing extraordinary in it, which was natural enough since he left all traveling arrangements to her. Indeed, on the contrary as Bernay-sur-Mer had seemed to appeal to him he had been rather taken with the idea—if perhaps a trifle skeptical as to the success of the housekeeping plan. In a word if the discovery of what she believed to be suitable accommodations had induced her to change her mind and stay in Bernay-sur-Mer it was perfectly satisfactory to him.

The brows smoothed out. As far as her father was concerned that was all there was to it. She had been the practical manager ever since her mother had died five years before.

The brows puckered up again. Her father would never give it a second thought; he would never for an instant imagine there was any ulterior motive for what she had done. How could he —when the real reason was so utterly absurd, ridiculous and something unheard of!

Fancy! What would that select and ultra-exclusive set in Paris say? What if it ever came to the ears of New York! Myrna Bliss to bury herself alive in a little Mediterranean village that was probably not even on the map, and all at a glance from the eyes of a —fisherman! They wouldn't believe it? Who would believe it? It was unimaginable!

Dainty little fingers reached up and drummed with their pink tips on the window-pane; the pucker became more pronounced. Well, she *had* done it nevertheless.

And why was it so absurd, so ridiculous, so impossible after all? She would do exactly the same thing over again without an instant's hesitation. It was quite true the man was a fisherman—but he did not look like a fisherman. He was magnificent!

It was not ridiculous at all—it was piquantly delightful. Neither was it so absurdly impossible—if she did not stay in Bernay-sur-Mer it would only be to choose some other place equally tiresome—and without even a "fisherman" to compensate for it.

What a face the man had! It was not merely handsome, it was—well, it was the prototype of what the artist coterie that buzzed around her father day and night were forever attempting to give expression to, but which until now she had never believed could exist in real life. He would be a refreshing change, this astounding man-creature, this Jean Laparde, after the vapid attentions of the vapid men who made up her life in the social whirl of Paris—Count von Heirlich and Lord Barnvegh, for examples out of a host of satellites who were constantly at her heels—because of course she was an heiress; satellites whose attentions she endured, because of course some day she must marry, and because of course again to marry anything less than a title, a name, fame, was quite out of the question. As for that no one expected anything but a brilliant match for her—and certainly she expected nothing less for herself. What a pity that they were not like Jean Laparde, those men of her world!

The fingers, from the window-pane, tossed back a truant coil of hair; the white shoulders lifted in a little shrug. Paris—New York! That was all the world she knew. New York once a

year—Paris the rest of the time. Expatriates—for art! That's what they were!

Art—her father was obsessed with it. It was a mania with him; it was the last thing in the world that interested her. As a matter of fact she couldn't seem to think of anything that particularly interested her. One tired quickly enough of the social merry-go-round—after a season it became inane. One surely had the right to amuse oneself with a new sensation—if one could find it!

The man had the physique of a young god. A fisherman—well, what of it? He was splendid. He was more than splendid. Even the crude dress seemed to enhance him. It was a face that had made her catch her breath in that long second when their eyes had met.

Yes, of course—why not admit it?—he interested her. He was rugged; he was strong; and above all he was supremely a man. Of course it was only a matter of a week, a month, the time they chose to stay there; but it would be a decided novelty while it lasted.

She laughed suddenly aloud—a low, rippling little laugh. Actually the man was already her slave! Imagine a man like that her slave! Certainly it would be a new sensation. What a strange thrill it had given her when she first caught sight of him on the bridge the afternoon before.

Well, why shouldn't it have done so—a fisherman with a face like that! It was amazing! Think of finding such a man in such a situation! Was it any wonder that she had thrilled—even if he were only a fisherman? In Paris of course she could not have done what she had done; it would have been quite out of the question; there were the conventions—but then in Paris one didn't see men like that!

"And since," confided Myrna Bliss to a little urchin running in the street below, who neither saw nor heard her, "we are not in Paris, but in Bernay-sur-Mer, which is quite another story, you see it is not absurd or ridiculous at all, and I and my fisherman—"

She turned abruptly from the window at the sound of a knock and the opening of her door. It was Nanette, her maid, with a tray.

"I have *mademoiselle's déjuener*," announced Nanette. "M. Bliss has already finished his, and asks if *mademoiselle* will soon be ready. He is waiting with M. le Curé for you."

"Waiting—with M. le Curé?"

Myrna's eyebrows went up in well-simulated surprise.

"To visit the cottage *mademoiselle* has taken," amplified Nanette, and her retroussé nose was delicately elevated a trifle higher.

Nanette very evidently was one at all events who was not in favor of the plan.

"Oh, the cottage—of course!" exclaimed Myrna, as if suddenly inspired. "I had forgotten all about it. Dress me quickly then, Nanette."

Nanette tossed a shapely, dark head.

"Is *mademoiselle* going to stay here long?"

Nanette at times felt privileged to take liberties.

"Gracious, Nanette!" complained Myrna sweetly. "What a question! How can you positively expect me to know?"

Nanette arranged the tray perfunctorily.

"There was a man who left a message with that imbecile proprietor for *mademoiselle* early this morning," she observed. "*Mademoiselle* has engaged a boatman?"

"A boatman? Certainly not!" declared Myrna Bliss. "Not without seeing the boat—and I have seen no boat!"

"But *mademoiselle* engages a cottage without seeing the cottage," murmured Nanette slyly.

"That will do, Nanette!" said Myrna severely. "There was but one cottage; there are dozens of boats. It is quite a different matter. What did the man say?"

"That he was obliged to go out for the four o'clock fishing this morning," said Nanette, pouting a little at the rebuke; "but that he would go to *mademoiselle* at the cottage early in the forenoon."

A row of little white teeth crunched into a piece of crisp toast.

"Very well, Nanette."

Myrna's brows pursed up thoughtfully.

"You may get out that new marquisette from Fallard's; and, I think"—she glanced out of the window—"my sunbonnet. And, Nanette"—suddenly impatient—"hurry, please—since father is waiting."

Myrna's impatience bore fruit. In ten minutes she was ready, and, running down the stairs, emerged out on to the street, where her father and the *curé*, deep in conversation—on art undoubtedly, since her father was doing most of the talking!—were pacing to and fro as they waited for her.

Her sunbonnet was swinging in her hand; the big, gray eyes were shining; the glow of superb health was in her cheeks.

"Good morning, Father Anton!" she called out gaily. "What a shame to have kept you waiting!"

The old priest turned toward her with unaffected pleasure as he held out his hand.

"Good morning to you, *mademoiselle*."

He was smiling with eyes as well as lips.

"What a radiant little girl! It makes one full of life and young again; you are, let me see, you are—a tonic!"

She laughed as she turned to her father.

"'Morning, dad! Sleep well?"

Henry Bliss removed his cigar to survey his daughter with whimsical reproach; then he patted her cheek affectionately.

"Fierce, wasn't it?" he chuckled. "Those beds are the worst ever! I was telling the *curé* here about them."

"It is too bad," said Father Anton solicitously. "It is regrettable. I am so very sorry. But"—earnestly—"you must not think too hardly of the Fregeaus. Since no guests sleep here I am sure they can have no idea that—"

"No; of course not!" agreed Henry Bliss heartily, and laughed. "The hard feelings are all in the beds—and we'll let them stay there. Now, then, Myrna, are you ready to inspect this new domain of yours? And shall we walk or take the car? Father Anton says it is not far."

"We will walk, then," decided Myrna.

It was the walk she had taken yesterday, at least it was the same as far as the little bridge; and for that distance she walked beside her father and the *curé*, chatting merrily. But there she loitered a little behind them. Half impishly, half with a genuine impulse that she rather welcomed than avoided, she told herself that it was quite unfair to pass the little spot so indifferently.

Was it not here that this most bizarre of adventures had begun? She had stood here by the railing and he had stood there across on the other side, and—the red leaped suddenly flaming into her cheeks. She had never looked at a man like that before; no man had ever looked at her like that before. And it had been spontaneous, instant, like a flash of fire that had lighted up a dark and unknown pathway which, in the momentary blaze of light, was full of strange wonder, and which—because it was an unknown way and because the glimpse had shown so much in so brief an instant that the brain fused all into confusion and nothing was concrete—resulted, not in illuminating the way, but when the flash of light had gone again, in transforming the pathway only into a bewildering maze.

She laughed a little after a while, shaking her head. Such an absurd fancy. But what an entrancing, allur-

ing little fancy. Decidedly it would be a new sensation to be lost in a maze like that—for a time. She would tire of it soon enough; the thrill probably would not even last as long as she would want it to. No thrill ever did!

She bit her lip suddenly in pretty vexation. It was stupid of the man to go off fishing. Had he done it to pique her? The idea! He certainly could not have the temerity to imagine that it lay within his power to pique her.

The sunbonnet swung to and fro abstractedly from its ribbon-strings. Wasn't it strange that he had—piqued her!

She went on after her father and the *curé*. They were quite a way ahead now, and she hastened to catch up with them. As she drew near she caught her father's words:

"—Peyre on the *Histoire Générale des Beaux-Arts*, M. le Curé; I recommend it to you heartily. It is a most comprehensive little volume, embracing in a condensed form the story of the arts from the time of the Egyptians down to the present day, and—"

Myrna, in spite of herself, laughed outright, at which both men turned their heads. Her father, incorrigible, was at it again; and once started there was no stopping him. Poor Father Anton. For the rest of the way he would listen to art.

"Did I not tell you to beware, Father Anton?" she cried out in comical despair, and waved them to go on again.

She had no desire to listen to art, its relations to nature, its relation to science, its relation to civilization, nor above all to a dissertation on the modern school. She had heard it all before; and if it had not passed as quickly through one ear as it had come into the other, her head, she was quite sure, would have driven her to distraction. Besides it was much more important to think about something else—no; not what she had been thinking about a moment ago; but, for instance, to be practical, about this household whose wheels, without knowing whether they were oiled or not, she had impulsively set in motion.

Would the cottage be at all habitable? Would this Marie-Louise be at all suitable? Would Marie-Louise and Nanette get along together? Nanette was insanely jealous of the chauffeur, Jules—nothing but the fact that Jules was with them would have induced Nanette, to whom Paris was the beginning and end of all things, to have come on such a trip. Yes, there was a very great deal to think about—now that it occurred to her. Myrna fell into a brown study, quite oblivious to her surroundings.

When she joined her father and the *curé* again they had stopped at the edge of a little wood on the headland, and a cottage, almost as prettily vine-covered as Father Anton's, lay before them.

"Well, Myrna," her father called with a smile, "I must say your plunge in the dark looks propitious so far."

"No, no! Not a plunge in the dark!" protested Father Anton quickly, his eyes, full of expectant pleasure, on Myrna. "That is not fair, M. Bliss. It was on my recommendation, was it not, *mademoiselle?* And now, eh—what does *mademoiselle* think of it?"

It was like the imaginative conception of some painter. The cottage, green with climbing vines, spotlessly white where the vines were sparse, nestled in the trees; in front as far as the eye could reach the glorious, deep, unfathomable blue of the Mediterranean; nearer, the splash of the surf like myriad fountains on the headland's rugged point; while a tiny fringe of beach, just peeping from under the edge of the cliff at the far side of the cottage, glistened as if full of diamonds in the sunlight.

"Father Anton, you are a dear!" Myrna cried impetuously.

Her eyes roved delightedly here and there. There was a little trellis with flowers over the back door; that little outhouse would do splendidly as a garage. And then the front door opened, and her eyes fixed on a girl's figure on the threshold; and somehow the figure was familiar.

"Who is that, Father Anton?" she demanded.

"But it is Marie-Louise; who else?" smiled the priest. "I will call her."

"No," said Myrna; "we will go in."

Of course. How absurd. She recognized the girl now. It was the girl who had passed them on the bridge—Myrna's sunbonnet swung a little abstractedly again—with Jean Laparde.

Father Anton bustled forward.

"Marie-Louise," he said as they reached the door, "this is the lady and gentleman who are to take the house, and—"

"Oh, but I think we have seen each other before," interposed Myrna graciously. "Was it not you, Marie-Louise, who passed us on the bridge yesterday afternoon?"

Marie-Louise's dark eyes, deep and fearless, met the gray ones, and dropped modestly.

"Yes, *mademoiselle*," she said.

"Certainly," said Henry Bliss pleasantly. "I remember you, too—ah!" With a sudden step, quite forgetting the amenities due his daughter, he brushed by her into the room, and stooped over the clay figure of the beacon.

He picked it up, looked at it in a sort of startled incredulity, as if he could not believe his eyes; then setting it down, went to the window, threw up the shade for better light, and returned to the clay figure. And then he began to mutter excitedly:

"Yes, undoubtedly, of the flower of the French school — Demaurais, Lestrange, Pitôt — eh, which? And yes, here—within a day or so—it is quite fresh!"

He rushed back to the doorway to Father Anton.

"Who has been in the village recently?"

Bliss's words were coming with a rush; he had the priest by the shoulders and was unconsciously shaking him.

"Was it a man with long, black hair over his coat-collar and a beak nose? Was it a little short man, who always jerks his head as he talks? Or was it a big fellow, very fat, and yes—if it were Pitôt he would probably be drunk? Quick, which one was it?"

Father Anton, jaw dropped, dumb with amazement, could only shake his head. This American! Had he gone suddenly mad?

"Good Heavens, dad! What is the matter?" Myrna cried out.

He paid no attention to her.

"You, then!"

He whirled on Marie-Louise, grasping her arm fiercely.

"Who has been here?"

"But — but, *m'sieu*," stammered Marie-Louise, shrinking back in affright; "no one has been here."

Myrna pressed forward.

"Dad, what *is* the—"

She got no further.

"It is true; I am a fool. I was wrong. Look, Myrna."

His face flushed, his eyes lighted with the fire of an enthusiast, Bliss was at the table lifting up the little clay figure of the fisherwoman with outstretched arms, the beacon, in his hands again.

"Look, Myrna. No, I am not mad; I am only a fool! I who pride myself as a critic was fool enough for a moment to think this the work of perhaps Demaurais or Lestrange or Pitôt when no one of the three, even in his greatest moment of inspiration, could approach it. There is life in it. You feel the very soul. It is sublime!

"But it is more than that—it is a stupendous thing, for since it has been freshly done, and no stranger to these people has been here, the man who did

it must be one of themselves. Don't you understand, Myrna? Don't you understand? The world will ring with it! It is the discovery of a genius.

"I make the statement without reservation. *This is the work of the greatest sculptor France will have ever known!*"

Father Anton had come forward a little timorously, lacing and unlacing his fingers. Upon Myrna's face was a sort of bewildered stupefaction. Marie-Louise, her breath coming in little gasps, was gazing wide-eyed at the man who held in his hands her beacon, the clay figure she had seen Jean make.

"Is—is it true—what you say?" she whispered.

Henry Bliss looked at her for a moment, startled, as if he were for the first time aware of her presence.

"You—yes, of course—you must know about this," he burst out abruptly. "You know who made it?"

"But, yes," said Marie-Louise, and now there was a sudden new note that struggled for expression in her voice. "It was Jean Laparde."

"Laparde—Jean Laparde?"

Bliss's voice was hoarse in its eagerness.

"Quick!" he cried. "Laparde—Jean Laparde? Who is Jean Laparde?"

A flush crept pink into Marie-Louise's face.

"He is my fiancé," she said.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

When Bristol Smote His Bloomin' Lyre

By Tom S. Elrod

WALLACE BRISTOL was deficient in the arts. At least Jane Lane thought so, and what really mattered with Bristol was what Jane thought and said and did and acted, and so on to the end of the calendar, for Bristol and Miss Lane were engaged. He was a senior at Kirkwood University, and she was the only daughter of Horatio Lane, professor of archeology and widely known as an authority on Egypt and things Egyptian. So tall and stooped was he that frivolous students had been heard to remark that he was the exemplification of the saying, "It is a long lane that has no turning," while others said he merely was following his natural bent and making an honest effort to keep pace with his nose in its desire to poke into dusty tomes or dreary tombs.

But back to Bristol, who could

anoint a baseball with saliva and propel it through the air until its gyrations caused batters to retire when they attempted to chastise it; who could run one hundred yards in something or other flat, and who was known as the nerviest, speediest, and most resourceful quarter-back Kirkwood ever had boasted.

And yet Bristol was deficient, because of poetry he knew but little. True enough, he could recite rimes by the hour; but they were not of the kind on which Miss Lane had been reared. When she spoke of Ruskin he flipped a pebble at a robin hopping before the campus-seat where they were sitting. Spenser was to him a closed and mysterious secret; others who exerted their particular appeal on Miss Lane were unknown to him. And yet the slow dusk of a spring evening having fallen, the robin having hopped away to find his night's lodging, and the particular locality being deserted for the time being, Bristol reached over and kissed her.

"That's about all the satisfaction I get from lecturing you," she said rather resentfully. "My efforts to improve your mind appear to have been uniformly unfortunate."

Then, as he sought to repeat his previous performance, she pushed him away and arose.

"No," she announced. "I've turned over a new leaf. I've been intending to do something to punish you all this term, and that will be it. No more kisses until your condition is removed and you march up to me with your diploma in your hand. My father doesn't like you, and objects to our engagement simply because you are so slipshod in your methods at school. In athletes you are the most proficient man in the university, but you never bother about the vital things."

Bristol regarded her with an expression of surprise, reached for her hand, and began to recite:

"There was an old hen and she had a wooden foot,
She built her nest in a mulberry root;
She ruffled up her feathers, just to keep her foot warm,
And another little kiss won't do us any harm."

"There you go!" the girl cried angrily. "More of that drivel! And yet you expect me to keep on loving you and looking forward to happiness in future years! You should be ashamed of yourself, heartily and utterly ashamed; but instead you constantly insult me with such atrocious things as that!"

Bristol grinned, but retained his hold on her hand.

"I fancied that wasn't so bad," he replied. "It contains a noble sentiment, you'll admit, and it's easy to say. It's even better than that other one I recited you the other day. Remember? It went something like this:

"The only girl I love
Has a face like a horse and buggy;
I met her leaning up against a lake,
Oh, fireman, save my child!

"Of course," he explained, blind to the look of disgust she gave him, "the only girl I love does not remind me of a horse and buggy. She has eyes like the morning, hair like dusk, a mouth like meal-time when a man is famished, and—"

"You're wasting breath," she calmly announced, withdrawing her hand. "The ultimatum is made, and I'm going to stand firmly by it. Not another kiss until you remove the condition my father imposed in his department. You can't possibly do that with commencement only ten days away unless you work — something I am positive you've never done since Kirkwood first saw you."

Pleading availed Bristol naught. Miss Lane was as determined when she announced a decision as was her father. He never had been known to change his rulings in the twenty-seven years he had been in the Kirkwood faculty. He disliked Bristol, was surprised that his daughter had fallen un-

'der the spell of the young athlete's dominance, and vaguely wondered what sort of a husband the young man would make.

And then Bristol had flunked in an examination on ancient Egypt. After that Professor Lane's mind was made up. He positively knew that no man who did not know his Egypt could hope to provide for a family. In his little note-book Lane made an entry to break his daughter's engagement when he had an opportunity. Just now, with the end of the school year coming and so many themes to grade, he feared he did not have the time to devote to it.

But as they were ready to part in front of her home Jane relented a little.

"Will you promise to read a volume of verse if I loan it to you?" she asked.

"I'll read Hebrew in the original if you want me to, and you know it," he replied.

Bidding him wait, she sped into the house, and returned with a book in her hand.

"Here is a volume of Kipling," she told him. "Surely you can get interested in the things he writes about. He is a man's poet, anyway. Now read this—read it through—and then tell me what you think about it."

Bristol slipped the volume in his coat-pocket and went on to the room he shared with Valentine, a studious young senior, who was one of the editors of the *Kirkwood Quarterly Review.*

Valentine was immersed in a job of proof-reading when Bristol burst in, singing a song of his own making, and threw the volume on a table.

"There!" he sang out. "You tall-browed guys from the knowledge-works needn't think you've anything on me. I've taken up poetry as a side line. 'Wallace Bristol, poet and pitcher. Special attention given to sonnets and signals.' How would that look on a letter-head?"

Valentine regarded Bristol with a slow smile, his finger marking the place he had been reading.

"If you ever intend to turn serious now is almost the time," he advised. "You told me yourself you had been conditioned in Professor Lane's department, and you should know him by this time. Either you come up with a thesis on Egypt or he will see that you never have to bother about where you have mislaid your diploma when packing-time comes. And, besides, it seems to me you should make a special effort on account of his daughter. What sort of an opinion do you suppose he has of you? And what does she think?"

"Oh, bosh!" Bristol exploded. "All of you fellows sit around here and preach about studying. What good will a knowledge of some dead man's grave do me when I have to get out and hustle for a living? What do I care about Egypt? What do I care about poetry? That sort of stuff's not going to do me any good in after life."

"It trains the mind," volunteered Valentine, returning to his proof-reading.

"Well, it isn't the mind that needs training in my case," was Bristol's rejoinder as he clattered down the stairway and hurried across the campus to the training-table and dinner.

Gleefully he remembered that the last baseball game was only two days away, and then training would be broken. Smoking would be allowed again, and pie and cake and a lot of things that were tabooed just now.

So the next few days passed with dances, parties, this, that, and the other—all the hurry and bustle of the term's end, and the condition still hanging over Bristol's head.

True enough, he pitched a winning game against Kirkwood's most hated athletic rival and let the losers down with one scratch hit. But Egypt hovered over him, and Miss Lane's condition remained in the same force as did that of her father.

"Surely," he contended as he walked home with her from a fraternity dance —"surely you're not going to make me go home to-night without a single—"

"I am not going to *make* you do anything," she interrupted. "If you think enough of me to want to continue this engagement, then you must demonstrate that you have some ability in your head as well as in your arms and legs. We can't live on your reputation for college athletics."

"No," he agreed; "but we could get along splendidly, I suppose, on Egypt. Who would care about a little thing like food in the house when one could read of Egypt and her long-dead past?"

"Be facetious if you like," the girl said; "but this means a great deal more to me than simply having you remove a condition. I've spent a great deal of time worrying over you, and we very nearly have reached a parting of the ways. It isn't that I don't love you; you know better than that. But I must look out for myself. If running along the lines of least resistance and shying at the hardest problems instead of meeting and solving them is your idea of the future, then our honeymoon would not be long in waning."

Bristol was sobered as he walked home a little later. One of the things he liked most about Miss Lane was her strength of character, and he had to admit that was one of his own weaknesses.

Could he blame her for throwing him over? Could she trust him after he had flunked in something that was comparatively easy? Yes, he told himself; she would be strong enough to do it.

And on the next afternoon he must take the examination. By his efforts then he was to stand or fall. With that condition removed, with his diploma in his hand, he could march up to the girl he loved so much, take her proudly in his arms, and assert that he had made good, after all.

Over the protests of Valentine, long since asleep, he turned on a light in their room and began to rummage through his text-books. There at the bottom of the pile he found a volume that dealt extensively with Egypt and the Egyptians.

Turning the lamp-shade so the glow was away from his roommate's face, he hunched himself down in a chair, opened the volume, and began to read. There was little of interest to him in the opening chapters. Then he noticed a subtitle which said:

What Egypt Means to Me

"I know what Egypt means to me," he mused sleepily. "Egypt means a name to put on cigarettes; Egypt means an excuse for making me sit up here until sunrise, trying to beat something into a head that nods for lack of sleep; Egypt means three men on bases, nobody out, and two strikes on the batter. Now I've got to pitch ball if I get through to-morrow."

And as he sat there trying to absorb a hurried knowledge of Egypt and what she meant to him, a funny thing happened. At least Bristol thought it was funny, because there he was, ringing a bell at the ornate entrance of the biggest pyramid in Egypt, and when a mummy came to the door he asked if Rameses I was at home.

"No," the mummy replied. "Rameses I is out playing golf at the present time, but Rameses II is here. Would he do?"

Bristol was easily satisfied. One Rameses more or less made not the slightest difference to him.

"Excuse my shroud," remarked Rameses II as he came forward to greet his guest and extended a tightly wrapped hand. "This thing of having been dead and embalmed a few ages has its drawbacks after all. But the people would be terribly upset if I were to remove my trappings. You see, they have grown used to seeing me this way, and it would cause dissension if I were to adopt modern garb. Besides,

if I took off this shroud, tight fitting as it is, one of my wives would be wearing it before I could dress again. Sit down and have a cigarette," extending the box.

Bristol and the old ruler sat smoking and talking a time, the young man entering into the conversation without the slightest hesitancy. He was moved to mirth when Rameses endeavored to stoop and pat a pet scarab on the head.

"This costume of mine is not unlike some worn by your modern society girls," Rameses remarked. "I barely can bend over in this straight-front shroud."

Bristol eagerly accepted the invitation of Rameses for a chariot-ride. The prancing horses were brought to the door by a mummy who wore his whiskers cut square in the fashion Bristol had learned to recognize in all the ancient Egyptian carvings. They mounted the chariot, and the horses were off. Evidently they had been stabled a long time, because they were on their mettle. They shied and pranced, dodging to the side of the road even when a playful wind made a miniature whirling dancer of the sand.

Rameses had been a good driver in his day, but the horses seemed to realize that he was a little rusty with the reins. Suddenly they dashed off the highway, headed for a steep cliff and bolted. The reins, centuries old, snapped with the pull that Rameses put on them. Bristol felt that he was looking destruction in the face.

The chariot began to whip back and forth. The young man vaguely wished for antiskid chains on the wheels. He noted the look of terror on the face of Rameses. Then they went over the cliff.

Bristol got up from the floor where he had fallen from his chair and rubbed the place where his forehead had struck.

Disgusted with life in general and with himself in particular, he flung the book on Egypt across the room. His gaze fell on the volume of Kipling's poems, unopened since the girl had lent it to him.

"Next thing she'll be asking me which one I liked best," he said aloud, "and of course I'll get in worse than ever if I have to admit I don't know one from the other."

Opening the book at random, he glanced through first one page and then another, his interest dull, his eyes drooping.

Below his window, some one gave his fraternity whistle. He reached for a piece of proof to mark his place. Having held a whispered conversation with his friend below, he returned to the table, reopened the volume, and idly glanced at the long proof-sheet his roommate had been reading. Something about Egypt caught his eye; he tossed the sheet aside.

Then he turned another page and started to read:

When 'Omer smote 'is bloomin' lyre,
  He'd 'eard men sing by land an' sea;
An' what he thought 'e might require,
  'E went an' took—the same as me!

"There's some logic in that," said Bristol, and read on:

The market-girls an' fishermen,
  The shepherds an' the sailors, too,
They 'eard old songs turn up again,
  But kep' it quiet—same as you!

They knew 'e stole; 'e knew they knowed.
  They didn't tell, nor make a fuss,
But winked at 'Omer down the road,
  And 'e winked back—the same as us!

Suddenly Bristol reached for the proof-sheet he had tossed aside, scanned it in a rush, glanced around to see if Valentine still slept, and then pulled all of the proofs to him. As he read he kept repeating to himself:

An' what he thought 'e might require,
  'E went and took—the same as me!

"By Cleopatra, I'm saved!" he said under his breath, hurrying across the room for a bunch of paper and a pen.

Then, with the proof-sheets of an

article by Professor Percival Heatherington on the innermost secrets of Egypt before him, "'e went and took" —about one thousand words of the very thing he needed most.

The sun was peeping over the hills in the east, but Valentine had been up late the night before, and still slept. Rapidly Bristol cribbed what he had to have. Finally, with a sigh of relief, he placed the proof-sheets of the article that was to appear in the next issue of the *Kirkwood Quarterly Review* where he had found them, blotted the last page of his thesis, and hurried to the bath-room, where he soused his head with cold water.

"I don't know just what the rule-book says about this," he sputtered, "but all's fair in love and archeology and war and geometry and such like, and here's where I make the biggest bluff of my young life."

That afternoon Bristol boldly marched into the study of Professor Lane and placed the thesis before him.

"I'm mighty sorry I was late with this," he apologized; "but, you see, the baseball season was just closing, and there were so many other things claiming one's attention that I must have neglected it. But I realized you meant what you said, and so the thesis was prepared and—and I hope it meets with your approval."

Lane nodded and resumed his work.

As Jane Lane was dressing for the evening she heard her father's hurried step on the stairway and then his knock at her door. When he entered he was holding Bristol's theme in his hand.

"Most extraordinary!" he was saying over and over. "Most extraordinary case that has come to my attention in a very great many semesters."

Jane questioned him with a look, for her mouth was full of pins.

"This young—young — ah — Bristol," he said—"this young man who wants to marry you, my dear child—wonderful, perfectly extraordinary!"

"What in the world has he done now?" she demanded.

"Why, my dear," the professor went on, "he has written the most learned thesis about Egypt it has been my good fortune to read in years; in years, my dear child—in a very great many years."

"And so you are going to remove the condition?" she asked, joy beginning to shine in her eyes.

"Remove the condition!" Professor Lane fairly exploded. "Well, I should think I will remove the condition! My dear child, it will be an honor to have such a brilliant mind in the family. A little stilted, perhaps—his language, that is—just a trifle vague at one or two points; but the insight, my dear child, the insight!"

And she heard him talking to himself as he went down the stairway, shaking his head in the wonder of a new-found genius.

"Here's your volume of Kipling," Bristol announced as he sat down beside Jane on their porch, a few hours later.

"And you liked it?" she questioned.

"Yes," he admitted. "I liked it pretty well, especially some parts of it. Of course, I'm pretty crude when it comes to things literary, and, besides, I didn't have time to look into this book very extensively, but I liked what I read pretty well. I imagine he must have a pretty fat batting-average in the poets' league."

"Still," she said, and her hand sought his, "the styles in poetry change, you know. I find myself caring for things now that once were mere doggerel to me."

"What, for instance?" he demanded.

"Well"—and her lips were close to his ear as she whispered—"I like that one you recited to me about 'another little kiss won't do us any harm.'"

It was an hour or so later that he volunteered a learned opinion.

"After all," he declared, "the value of poetry is what you get out of it."

Love in Fetters

by Richard Marsh

Author of "Adventures of Judith Lee, Lip-Reader," etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

RONALD DENTON, alias Robert Dennett, is being returned to England to stand trial for murder when his train is wrecked near Lyons, France, killing the detective and allowing him to escape. Mme. Madeline de Constal makes him virtually a prisoner as well as a guest in her beautiful, sinister Château d'Ernan, where he falls in love with the lovely orphan, Alice Hudson, who is also a quasi-prisoner. Her foster-mother, Mme. de Constal, is vainly trying to induce her to marry the shady M. Léon Perret.

In the middle of the night Denton is awakened by a tumult, amidst which he hears Alice screaming to him for help. He finds himself locked in.

CHAPTER X.

Achille.

RONALD yelled in his impotent rage:

"You brutes! You hounds! You curs! You cowards! Let me out! Come and unfasten the door! You shall pay for it if you don't!"

It seemed as if his voice must have been heard. It was followed by a silence which after the tumult of a moment ago seemed almost magical. Nothing was audible except the throbbing engine of the motor-car.

What was taking place on the other side of the house? Who was it they were putting in the car?

Suppose it was Alice? For the first time he spoke of her, even to himself, by her Christian name. Suppose she was being borne off against her will to an unknown destination which she had only too good reason to fear. The thought maddened him.

He yelled out threats and objurgations without any notice being taken of the noise he made. Returning to the doors of his room, he banged at them with his fists, with articles of furniture, without making any visible impression on their solidity, or apparently even being heard without. That he had made himself audible, however, seemed clear from the fact that the tumult had entirely ceased. When he went back to the window he had a notion that he could hear voices speaking in subdued tones; but of that he was not sure.

One thing, however, he presently did hear, and that was the motor moving off down the long, winding road which led to the gates. He had never been down that road himself. His hostess had made it clear that that

road was private—not for him to walk on. And since even the entrance to it was barred by fantastic iron gates it had not struck him that its privacy was worth intruding on. At last, since it seemed that no good purpose was to be gained by his staying out of bed, he returned between the sheets, and sleep, with that perversity which is so often hers, must instantly have claimed him for her own.

The next he knew was that Achille, the *valet de chambre,* was standing by his bedside with his morning coffee.

"*Monsieur* has slept well?" was Achille's invariable morning greeting.

He did not omit it on this occasion. The young man, looking up at him with sleepy eyes, suddenly woke to a consciousness of what had happened in the night. He sat up in bed.

"Why did you lock my door last night?"

The man's amazement at the unceremonious fashion in which the question was hurled at his head seemed genuine.

"Pardon? What did *monsieur* say?"

"Some one locked my door last night; or fastened it somehow. Was it you?"

To judge from his looks the man's amazement only grew.

"I do not understand, *monsieur.* I have only just come in. The door was not locked."

"Yes; I dare say—because you opened it. It was fastened last night—locked or bolted, or both. I know that I was shut in. Do you mean to say that you don't know it?"

The man smiled, as if the other had been talking in his sleep.

"*Monsieur* dreams. How does *monsieur* know that it was fastened? Did you not sleep?"

"No nonsense, Achille, if you please; I'm not a fool. When that row began it woke me. I tried to get out of the room, but both doors were fastened, as I have no doubt you are perfectly well aware. I want to know who fastened them."

Achille smiled still more.

"Has *monsieur* not observed these doors? There is no lock to either, and no bolt. Neither door can be fastened either from within or without. Does not *monsieur* see?"

Monsieur did see. Achille had the door open and was demonstrating the fact that except for the catch which was actuated by the handle there was no means of even shutting it. Now that he looked, Denton realized that he had previously noticed the absence of even a keyhole or any visible means of keeping any one either out or in.

"I don't know how it was done," he said, "but it was fastened last night so that I couldn't get out of the room, that I'll swear; and it was kept fastened all the time that row was going on."

"Row?"

Achille raised his eyebrows.

"What row? Did *monsieur* hear a noise in the night?"

"Didn't you? Look here, Achille, you really must think I'm a simpleton. I'm not going to ask you what it was all about, but when you ask if I heard a noise—well, I'm quite sure the din must have disturbed the whole countryside—it's as funny as when you try to make me believe that my door wasn't fastened."

Achille shrugged his shoulders, still the soul of deference.

"I trust *monsieur* will excuse me, but I cannot but think that *monsieur's* sleep was disturbed by bad dreams. How could the door be fastened when there is nothing with which to fasten it? And it never has been fastened.

"As for the din of which he speaks, I am a light sleeper; to sleep lightly is part of my profession; the least sound disturbs me. I assure *monsieur* that I heard nothing."

With a smile for which Denton could have thrown something at him, yet with an air of the most perfect deference, Achille left the room.

Hurrying through his dressing, directly his toilet was finished, Ronald

Denton went down-stairs earlier than was his wont. After the uproar which had marked the small hours he had a hazy impression that he might find everything in disorder — furniture broken or disarranged, telltale signs of one kind or another. His vague anticipations were not realized; everything was as it had been; there was nothing to show that anything unusual had taken place.

As he seemed to be the first person down, he pottered aimlessly about, waiting for the appearance of Miss Hudson. He might be able to glean information from her. The minutes passed; she did not come. The clock told him that it was getting on for noon; such tardiness was not like her. As a rule, she was down before he was. He met Achille in the hall.

"Can you tell me if Miss Hudson has descended?" he asked.

"I am unable to inform *monsieur.*"

"I don't believe she has come down. Where's her room? Can't some one run up and see?"

"I know nothing about *mademoiselle;* her room is not in my department."

"In whose department is it, then? I want some one to go up with a message from me. Where's Antoinette?"

Antoinette was the extremely smart young woman who seemed to occupy the position of Mme. de Constal's personal maid.

"I cannot inform *monsieur.*"

"What do you mean? I suppose you can tell me where Antoinette is? Do you wish me to go to the servants' quarters and find out for myself? Where is M. de Girodet? Where's every one? No one seems to be about."

"I beg *monsieur* to have the goodness to understand that I am concerned with my own duties only; for the proper performance of those duties I am responsible to Mme. de Constal alone."

The man's manner was perfectly respectful, though his words conveyed an unmistakable snub.

"Does that mean that you have been instructed not to answer any questions?"

"What it means is very simple, *monsieur;* if *monsieur* will permit me to attend to my work—"

The man withdrew, Denton letting him go, since there seemed to be no valid excuse for detaining him. Yet Ronald was left with a sense of uneasiness — a feeling that, after all, there was something unwonted in the air. He saw nothing of Miss Hudson or of Mme. de Constal or of Antoinette or of any one. M. de Girodet's comings and goings were so irregular that his absence did not count. He wondered what had become of "the jailer," Mme. Lamotte; she had returned to the house only the day before, as he had understood, for a stay of some duration.

Among the many things about the house which were odd was its construction. He had told the girl one day that it seemed to him to have been built on the principle of a modern ship in water-tight compartments. Each set of rooms seemed to be segregated from all the others; unexpected doors had a trick of appearing in all sorts of unlikely places.

His bedroom was in a corner on the first-floor landing. The corridor leading to the other apartments was screened by long and handsome green silk curtains. Since there seemed to be no one about to give him information, having ascended the stairs, he drew aside the curtains, intending to seek some for himself, and to his amazement found himself confronted by a heavy oak door.

He had been along that corridor several times, and had never suspected the existence of such a thing. He was aware that there were such doors about the building. Miss Hudson had informed him that Mme. de Constal's private apartments were shut off by such a one, and that there were others which caused the girl sometimes to wonder what might be behind them.

But where that particular door had come from in a single night was a mystery to Ronald Denton. He stared at it in what was very much like stupid bewilderment.

Its significance was obvious; his presence was not desired along that corridor. No inquiries were to be made; the most effective steps had been taken to secure his entire seclusion. The door was fastened, as he learned by trying the handle.

He rapped against the panels three or four times; either the wood was of unusual solidity, or else it was cased with metal; his rappings went unheeded. Returning to the hall, he pursued his investigations in other directions. He would visit the servants' quarters and hunt up Antoinette.

The approach to their domain was screened by another green silk curtain; those curtains were all over the house. If his surprise when he discovered a second door behind that curtain was not so great as when he had found the first, it was because he was beginning to have at least a hazy perception of the actual state of affairs.

The only part of the building he was free to enter, he presently learned, was the small group of reception-rooms which opened off the hall, and the door of the largest of these, the *salon,* was locked against him. His was a case of isolation; he was to hold no communication with the rest of the house; and seemingly with the exception of Achille, the rest of the house did not intend to communicate with him.

He was in the hall when he arrived at this state of perception, and was asking himself what he was to do next when Achille, the urbane, appearing, made a deferential announcement:

"*Monsieur,* luncheon is served."

Denton looked at the man with a certain grim amusement.

"Oh, so I am to have luncheon, am I?"

He went into the dining-room; the table was laid for one.

"I am to have it alone, am I? Is it any use, Achille, my asking you to inform me what has become of Mme. de Constal and of Miss Hudson?"

"*Monsieur* will have soup?"

That was the only answer Achille gave as he stood by the tureen.

"No, Achille; I will not have soup."

The man offered him a dish of smelts, grilled a delicate golden-brown.

"You are so full of information, Achille, that I am aware that I have only to hint at a desire to know how you get backward and forward from the kitchen, to say nothing of the dishes, for you to tumble over yourself in the desire to flood me with answers."

"*Monsieur* will have white wine or red?"

"I wonder what would happen if I were to break your head with a bottle. Is it the intention that I am to regard myself as a prisoner and you as my jailer?"

"*Monsieur* finds the smelts well cooked?"

Ronald Denton put down his knife and fork; he eyed the imperturbable attendant with the consciousness that the man's coolness was making him warm.

"Let us understand each other, Achille, if such a thing be possible. Something happened in the small hours of this morning which could not but convey a sinister significance to the most unsophisticated mind. If murder was not done, it was not for the want of trying. I heard shrieks and oaths, the sound of people fighting, struggling, exchanging blows; three pistol-shots were fired; women shrieked as if in mortal pain and terror.

"When I asked you what all these things meant you said that my sleep must have been troubled, and that I dreamed them. You say that you never heard an unusual sound. Achille, you are a liar!"

He regarded his plate.

"Give me some more smelts; they are good."

The man brought him the dish, nothing in his demeanor suggesting that he was in the least degree ruffled. The young man continued:

"There was a motor-car. I heard it come and go. I heard some one being forced into it against—her will; I say *her* will, Achille. This morning I discover that the house is empty with the exception apparently of you and me. Mysterious doors appear in unexpected places, locked against me.

"I want you to tell me what those doors mean; what is behind them, and what has become of the ladies, especially of Miss Hudson. Be so good as to understand, Achille, that I am putting these questions to you, and await your answers."

"*Monsieur* will have some roast chicken? It is a little one—what we in France call a *poulet de grain.* I think *monsieur* will find it good."

"Yes, Achille; I will have some chicken while you consider your answers to my questions. Well? I wait. Are you going to answer?"

"*Monsieur* will have more wine?"

"Look here, Achille, you are going to answer. I fancy you are a stronger man than I am; but, all the same, you are going to answer—and before you leave this room."

"*Monsieur* found the *salade* to his taste? You will have cheese? There is Brie and there is Chambert; there is cheese of the country."

"You are going to answer at least one of my questions, Achille. What has become of Miss Hudson?"

Denton took the valet by the arm as he offered the cheese.

"*Monsieur* wishes for no cheese?"

With a quick little movement Achille slipped his arm away, returning to the sideboard with the cheese, leaving the young man looking rather foolish. His tone suggested that he was rather nettled.

"Does that mean that you do not propose to answer? I tell you you will before you leave this room."

The valet had all the component parts of the meal on a big silver chafing-dish. Having arranged the coffee-pot, cup and saucer, and sugar on a little tray, he bore them to Ronald.

"*Monsieur* will have coffee? I will give *monsieur* all the information which is in my power after he has drunk his coffee, while he smokes a cigarette."

He poured out a cup.

"*Monsieur* will have one lump of sugar? I trust that *monsieur* will find that the coffee is good."

Denton was raising the cup of coffee to his lips—he had almost got it there—when a thought occurred to him. Returning the cup to the saucer, rising suddenly to his feet, he took the valet by the shoulder.

"Achille, will you do me the favor to drink this cup of coffee?"

The man looked Denton squarely in the face with his usual air of unruffled serenity.

"*Monsieur* does not wish for any coffee?"

"I wish, Achille, that you should drink it."

Achille, picking up the cup, replaced it on the tray, which he was still holding.

"I did not understand *monsieur* did not wish for coffee."

Denton tightened his grip.

"Achille, you will do me the favor to drink that coffee."

"Will *monsieur* have the goodness to remove his hand?"

The two men eyed each other as if they were measuring each other's strength. Denton gripped the man's shoulder harder still.

"Are you going to drink that coffee?"

"Why does *monsieur* wish me to drink the coffee which was intended for himself? It is not part of my duty to eat and drink what *monsieur* does not want. *Monsieur* seems to be under the impression that all sorts of things come within my province which are no concern of mine."

"I believe that coffee is drugged,

and you drugged it. You can only make me believe that it isn't by drinking it yourself. It is owing to a little accident of that kind that I am at present in the Château d'Ernan, as I have no doubt you are aware.

"I do not mean, if I can help it, to walk into the trap again. Once bit, twice shy. Are you going to drink that coffee?"

He held the man's shoulder with both his hands.

"*Monsieur* will allow me to observe that I do not permit any one to handle me as he is doing. If *monsieur* does not wish to suffer inconvenience he will take his hands away."

"I believe, Achille, that you are an infernal scoundrel. The conviction is growing on me stronger and stronger every moment. You will find that there are limits to my endurance, and that I do not intend that you should drug me with impunity. Are you going to drink that coffee?"

Ronald Denton raised his head as if to listen.

"What noise was that?"

"It sounded like a bell."

"It was a bell. Who rang it?"

"It is possible that I rang it. If *monsieur* will look carefully at the floor he will see that there is a little, round mark; when it is touched by the foot in a particular manner it causes a bell to ring. *Monsieur* perceives that little, round spot?"

Ronald Denton bent forward, the better to enable him to see to what the other referred. As he did so, some one approaching from behind threw over his head a cloth, which was saturated with some sickly smelling stuff. He struggled, but, taken unawares, was at a disadvantage. The cloth was drawn tightly about his head and pressed against his face.

The last thing he remembered was what he believed to be the sound of Achille's laughter, and a voice, which might also have been the valet's, though it was pitched in tones which were new to him, exclaiming:

"The English fool! But it was necessary."

CHAPTER XI.

Château d'Enfer.

"I TRUST that *monsieur* feels rested?"

Ronald Denton could not make out where he was; then he realized that he was lying on the couch in his bedroom, and that Achille was standing with respectful mien at his side. The young man put his hand up to his head.

The room seemed to be swimming round him; he felt generally queer. No one could have been more solicitous for his well-being than the *valet de chambre*. Comfortable words streamed from him in soft, purring tones.

"If *monsieur* would but be reasonable, all would be so pleasant. My duty is to see that *monsieur* wants for nothing, that all his tastes are studied. If *monsieur* will only permit me to do my duty, *monsieur* will perhaps find that a cup of tea will relieve his head."

Achille took himself out of the room on those noiseless feet of his and shut the door. Denton, eyes closed, was scarcely conscious of his going. When he looked round he perceived that the equipage for tea was on a little table close at hand. Presently, putting his feet on the floor and pouring out a cup of tea, he tried to collect his scattered senses.

What precisely had happened it was not easy to determine, but it was borne in on him by degrees that the ingenious Achille had proved more than his match, and that on the lines in which he had tried to move the valet always would be.

He did not go down again that night, although Achille assured him that an excellent dinner awaited his attention. The anesthetic had been stronger, perhaps, than was necessary; he felt sick and giddy, with no stomach for food. The valet charmed in vain.

That night, however, he slept well

and without interruption until Achille's appearance at his bedside with the inevitable coffee told him that it was time to wake.

There were no signs of the ladies when he went down; apparently he was still alone in the house. It was a fine morning; he was inclined for a walk, if only to learn how far his liberty went. He walked right across the grounds, no one trying to stop him.

So far as he could see, he had the whole place to himself. What his sudden solitude portended he had no notion; he missed his usual companion to a degree which surprised himself. The whole place, the winding walks, the nooks and dells, the ups and downs—all these were hateful to him. With her at his side, they had seemed so pleasant! Black care was his sole companion; nameless terrors walked behind; a prospect of horror loomed ahead.

He came to an extraordinary fence, about eight or nine feet high, formed of strands of barbed wire only a few inches apart. He walked along it. Open fields were on the other side. Presently he came on a man who was slouching across one of these fields with some tools over one shoulder. Denton hailed him in rather unceremonious fashion.

"Hi! You! Come here! I want to speak to you!"

The man, turning, answered from where he stood:

"What do you want?"

"I want you to give me some information. What's the name of the place I'm in?"

The man stared as if he did not understand; then he grinned. He was an unkempt, surly looking individual of about fifty. Denton set him down as being possibly a small farmer.

"Don't you know what place that is? That's the Château d'Enfer—Hell Castle."

It was the young man's turn to stare. The answer was not what he had expected.

"Isn't that rather strong? Why do you call it that?"

"Why? Because it is. That's what it's known as all over this part of the country."

The man hesitated, then came closer; the two stared at each other through the fence.

"If you are a foreigner, and an honest man, you'll take yourself out of that as fast as ever you can and go back to your own land. That's a den of thieves, that's what that is; and if you're not one of them, and don't want to be skinned, that's no place for you."

"You use vigorous language, my friend. What grounds have you for saying such things?" demanded Denton.

"I could tell you tales about that place which would take your breath away. There isn't one this side of the fence who would go that side for anything you could offer."

"I doubt, my friend, if you're entitled to talk like that. Do you know anything about Mme. de Constal?"

"Do I know anything?"

The man spat on the ground.

"Isn't it she who has made the place what it is? If law was justice, her head would have been off her shoulders long ago, and all decent folks would have rejoiced to know it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you know what I mean? Perhaps that's how it is you come to be where you are if you're as ignorant as that, and the sooner you get out the better. Don't you know that she killed her husband?"

"I take it that you are jesting. You should be more careful of your words."

"If you call it jesting, you've your own notions of a joke; and as for being more careful of my words, all France has said it. Didn't M. de Constal, like the old fool he was, marry her when her name was a byword? And when he found out that she was even worse than she had been painted, didn't she poison him? And wasn't she tried for her life? And, as I say, if law was jus-

tice they'd have found her guilty, and her head would have been off her shoulders long ago.

"But some say it was one thing, and some say it was another, and by the exercise of some of her arts she managed to get off, and back she came to her husband's house, the house which he had left her before he found out what she was—back she came to it with a face of brass. And if only a small part of the tales which are told are true, hell's a paradise compared to the hell that she's made of it. The Château d'Enfer, that's what it is."

The man shook his clenched fist toward the house with a passionate gesture.

"And there never was a fouler murderess than the one that lives in it. She knows what I think, and what all the world thinks; but what does she care?" All at once the man's tone changed.

"So it's you, you black face, is it? Every time I don't see you for a few days I hope they've got you back in jail again. It only shows what things have come to that they should let you run loose so long."

The man was speaking to some one behind Denton, who turned to see who it was. Mme. Lamotte was moving toward him with her stiff, ungainly, long-legged strides.

"Had not *monsieur* better return to the house?"

The words, put in the form of a question, in reality conveyed a command. He understood this still more clearly when he saw loitering among the trees a figure which he recognized as that of an individual who acted as a gardener, and whom he had heard addressed as Durand.

"I wondered what had become of you, Mme. Lamotte. I have been trying in vain to get information from Achille. Our friend out there uses some very plain language; perhaps you heard some of it."

The expression on the woman's face made it very plain that she had. Her reply made it even plainer.

"That man's name is Joseph Coton. He was once in *madame's* employ. When she found him behaving improperly she dismissed him. Ever since he has filled the air with lies."

Denton was moving by her side in the direction of the house. The man on the other side of the fence shouted after them:

"What story is she telling you? She is a thief, that woman, and has been in half the jails in France; beware of her. If you are not cut out of the same stuff as she is, you will give her a wide berth.

"I have something here which will cut wire; let her say what she likes, I will tear down this fence in front of her face to enable you to get through. As for Durand, among the trees there, let him try to stop me if he dare! Only say the word, and the thing shall be done."

Ronald would have liked to say the word, a fact which Mme. Lamotte's words made clear that she perceived. She gave him what she clearly meant to be a warning.

"If you are wise, you will not listen to that fool; you will close your ears to him."

She raised her voice:

"Durand! Durand! Here is Joseph Coton threatening to cut down the fence before my face; it is time that you should talk to him."

When Donald regained the house he found Mme. de Constal in the hall, warming her feet at the great log fire. She was dressed for traveling, and looked as if she had just returned from a journey. She greeted him with a smile.

"How is Mr. Dennett? I hope you are warmer than I am. I've been shut up in a motor-car for hours and hours since before even it was day, and oh, it was so cold! In a motor-car, it seems to me, nothing will keep out the cold. If I had my shoes and stockings off, you would be able to feel that my feet are like lumps of ice, and when my feet are cold I am cold all over."

He was thinking, as he eyed her, of what the man on the other side of the

fence had said about this woman. It seemed incredible. In her furs she looked so stately, so dainty, so every inch a great lady.

It was impossible that she could ever have been tried for her life—that people could think of her the things the man had spoken of. Throwing her veil farther back off her face, she regarded him with her curious, laughing eyes.

"You are pleased to see me; is it not so? I am pleased to see you."

"Where is Miss Hudson?"

The abruptness with which he put the question seemed to tickle her.

"Miss Hudson? I return after a long, tiresome, and oh, such a cold journey, wanting to be made a fuss of, to be warmly welcomed, to be received with rapture, and all you say is, 'Where is Miss Hudson?' And you say it as if it were a stick with which to knock me down.

"Since the first moment I met you, Mr. Dennett, you have shown that you have the gift of saying the right thing, in the right way, at the right time.

"Have you found the house a little dull? Perhaps that is it; loneliness has weighed upon your spirit."

"I have had Achille for company."

"Achille?"

She laughed outright.

"He is not always very gay; his conversation is not always of the liveliest. Say, Mr. Dennett, that you have missed me, although I have been away from you, after all, such a little time."

"I have missed you, Mme. de Constal."

"That is better; we advance. And next?"

"Because I wished to ask you what has become of Miss Hudson."

"That is why you have missed me?" Mme. de Constal laughed. "That is the only reason? What a master of compliments! Miss Hudson seems to have made on you a very great impression, since you seem so very plainly to have missed her."

"I am aware that I am only a puppet in your hands, and not only in yours, but also in the hands of your servants, or your associates—I do not know which they are. Is it necessary that you should persist in playing such an elaborate farce? You have robbed me of my money; I am your unwilling guest; there is only one creature in this singular place in whom I take the slightest interest.

"Is there any reason why you should not tell me what has become of her? She also, unfortunately for her, is a puppet in your hands. Have you good cause for not wishing me to know in what manner it has pleased you—to pull the strings?"

It was some seconds before she spoke. She was disengaging herself from her furs. The great chair at her side was covered with her wraps.

"May I ask you to help me to get out of this coat, as it is heavy, and my maid is not just at hand?"

He did as she requested. She continued to talk as she slipped out of the sleeves:

"Do you remember how, that first night, I was so unwilling that you should come near enough to touch me? Now I do not mind your near neighborhood in the least; I rather like it. I do not even mind your rudeness. You are such a good-looking boy!

"And even when you try to be rude you cannot hide the fact that you are a gentleman. Does it make you angry when I tell you that you are good-looking?"

He was placing her great fur coat on the back of a chair. When he turned his cheeks were flushed, a fact on which she instantly commented.

"You do look cross, but then you are so easily cross! See what things you have been saying of me; and am I cross? Not at all. And what things Joseph Coton has been telling of me, do I not know? I know them all. Yet—I only made smile; my temper is so good."

"How do you know that Joseph Coton—if that is the fellow's name—

has been speaking to me at all? There was not a soul anywhere within sight or sound. Certainly you weren't."

She admonished him with the forefinger of her right hand, which was almost covered with rings.

"My dear Mr. Dennett, there is nothing I do not know. The air itself is like a telephone; at Château d'Ernan, or as Coton prefers to call it Château d'Enfer the air itself acts as a telephone which conducts to my ears everything that is said.

"But what do I care? I care nothing for what Joseph Coton says because he is old and ugly, and I care nothing for what you say because you are young and handsome."

"All this shows that you are a very wonderful person, which I never doubted," said Ronald. "I had the best of reasons for knowing it, but it is no answer to my question: What has become of Miss Hudson?"

"Mr. Dennett, I will tell you something which you do not deserve to be told. Open your ears; lose not a word. One of the reasons why I am back so soon is to talk to you about that young lady. But since what I have to say to you is of a very delicate nature—everything about Miss Hudson is of a delicate nature—it is therefore of importance that we should be very private, as in this place we perhaps are not. It is desirable that we should be somewhere where privacy is assured. I am very tired, Mr. Dennett; have pity on me."

She made a graceful little gesture expressive of fatigue, which he thought became her very well.

"I am not fit to talk on such a subject as Miss Hudson with the delicacy which the subject demands. Let us postpone our conversation for a little while.

"After a long journey I like to change all my clothes—to put myself into things which are sweet and clean and fresh. Then I like to have something to eat and drink; afterward I am ready to talk. So with your permission I will go to my own room. We shall meet again at lunch and then we will discuss Miss Hudson."

CHAPTER XII.

The Devil's Advocate.

MME. DE CONSTAL and Ronald Denton lunched together, the ineffable Achille ministering to their wants. During the meal little was said. Afterward they adjourned to the oak-paneled chamber in which Denton had first seen his hostess. Mme. de Constal, insisting that she had not yet recovered from the chill of traveling, installed herself on a great couch, over which had been thrown a fine piece of old tapestry.

"This tapestry," she informed Ronald, "tells the story of the love of a high-born damsel for a humble squire. It was worked by ladies of the Constal family, whose ashes even exist no more, which shows what a venerable institution love is.

"Draw the couch in front of the fire, arrange these cushions under my head, place my coffee just where I can reach it, make me comfortable altogether, and then — then we'll discuss Miss Hudson."

As he obeyed her orders she put out her hand and caught him by the wrist, gripping him with fingers which were stronger than they looked.

"Kneel by my side; look me in the eyes. Can you see nothing there which pleases you? You silly boy! Why won't you kneel? I won't let you go till you do.

"Why, how you have flushed! Is it temper, or what is the matter with the child? Oh, go away; I never did have any use for boys."

She threw his hand laughingly from her. He crossed the room with a shamefaced air to an easy chair. Arranging himself in its comfortable recesses, he glowered at the lady on the couch.

"Now perhaps you'll tell me what has become of Miss Hudson?"

"You dear, simple youth! Is she for him the only woman in the world? Frankly, Mr. Dennett, it was thought advisable to withdraw the young lady, at least for a season, from the Château d'Ernan—because of you."

The young man sat up straighter in his chair, glowering more than ever.

"What do you mean by that? I want an answer to my question. Where is Miss Hudson?"

"If you will have a little patience, young gentleman, I will give you as straight an answer as you can desire. Only do try and realize that there may be another point of view besides your own. It never occurs to you, I presume, that a young lady might stand in need of protection from you."

"Miss Hudson certainly did not."

"You think so, really? How odd! How blind one can be to one's own little weaknesses. You were continually in Miss Hudson's society, morning, noon, and night—often alone with her. I know that in England there is a certain freedom in such matters, but you know as well as I know that there are limits even in England. It is a delicate question for one of my age, because I am not yet ancient, to have to put to a young gentleman, but I have to put it.

"Since, her mother being dead, I have to stand to the girl in the place of a parent, what might your intentions be regarding Miss Hudson, Mr. Dennett?"

He got on to his feet, glaring at her with clenched fists and flashing eyes.

"What on earth are you driving at? I ask you a plain question and you try to slip out of answering it, like this. Where is Miss Hudson?"

"You needn't shout. I can hear you without your raising your voice, you funny boy. Miss Hudson is in safe keeping, where you can't get at her, and there she will remain till you have made it safe for her to return to the Château d'Ernan by giving me your assurance that you intend to make her your wife."

The young man presented a picture of puzzled amazement which tickled her so that she had to lay her head back upon the cushions to enable her to give vent to her amusement. He bit his lip, as if to keep back words which it might be unbecoming to use in the presence of a woman. When he spoke it was with an air of coldness which was evidently but a cover for the fire which raged within.

"When you have quite done laughing may I ask you to explain to me exactly what you mean?"

Looking up at him from the scarlet silk cushion on which her head was pillowed, she returned him question for question.

"What kind of girl do you take Miss Hudson to be? Will you tell me that?"

He hesitated, clearly because he was at a loss for appropriate words. Finally he said:

"You may laugh at me again if in view of what we know of each other I tell you I am unwilling to say anything which may hurt your feelings, if they can be hurt; but quite frankly, I decline to discuss Miss Hudson with you."

"That means, I presume, that you have simply been amusing yourself at her expense; that you really do not care for her one snap of your fingers; that you don't consider her a fit and proper person to make your wife, and that, anyhow, you don't mean to marry her?"

"You talk about my marrying—you—that—that—"

"That rather pretty girl," Mme. de Constal put in. "You must own that at least she is rather pretty."

"You speak of her as rather pretty, she who is one of the loveliest beings that ever walked this earth!" Ronald burst out. "As if she were only 'rather pretty,' she who is the soul of truth and faith and innocence, the soul of all things good and pure, as high above the people into whose hands she has fallen as heaven is above the earth;

and you talk of her as being rather pretty!"

Mme. de Constal had been looking at him, her eyes opened to their widest capacity.

"So he can speak, after all; he can say something besides yes and no. What eloquence, what an unexpected command of language, what a gift of discriminating observation is unexpectedly revealed. Listen to me, my simple youth, and answer one simple question: If Alice Hudson returns to the Château d'Ernan, will you marry her?"

He looked as if words were about to burst from him; then, as if conscious that he might regret them after they were spoken, he turned away, and, crossing to the window, stood looking out at the grounds. Where he stood, since he was at the back of the couch, she could not see his face, which was possibly one reason why he stood there. For some moments his candid countenance was like a mirror, betraying the tempestuous emotions which stormed within. When, after a prolonged interval of silence no answer came, she asked:

"Well, have you run away to hide? Brave lad! Poor, innocent, tender-hearted Alice! That she should have been made the plaything of a cruel man! She deserved a better fate. I suppose the doors of the Château d'Ernan are closed to her forever. And I was so happy with her beneath my roof!"

The lady sighed—with what degree of sincerity the lady only knew. She put her handkerchief to her eyes—a minute, filigree thing which would have been damped by a single tear.

"I did not think, Mr. Robert Dennett, that with all your faults your nature was quite so cruel as it is," she cried.

"If it amuses you to mock at me, go on. I suppose a woman can do this kind of thing when a man can't."

"A man! You don't call yourself a man! Men — real, true men — don't treat women as you have treated Alice Hudson."

All at once the lady's manner changed. Raising herself to a more nearly upright position on her couch, she assumed quite a different air.

"Come, Mr. Dennett, let's get to business. You compromise this girl—"

"I compromise her? I?"

"Yes; you—you. I am a better judge of what compromises a girl than you are, you beardless booby, and I tell you that you have compromised her. There is only one reparation you can make her, and that is marriage. You may take it from me that whatever injury you have done her, she is a girl who will do any man credit as his wife."

"Do you think I need you to tell me that?"

"Then what do you need? Is she personally offensive to you, Mr. Dennett?"

"Offensive to me? What a notion! When her presence has made the Château d'Ernan seem paradise!"

"Come, Mr. Dennett, be frank. If that is the attitude of your mind, tell me candidly why you won't marry her."

"I really am unable to decide whether you ask that question seriously or not; it's—it's past believing."

"Disabuse your mind of all nonsense, Mr. Dennett. Never was a question more seriously asked of any one than I ask that question of you. Why don't you marry her?"

"Has it escaped your memory what kind of person I am?"

"Nothing escapes my memory, as I should have thought your presence here made quite clear. I don't see what could make it clearer. Why do you ask?"

"You are aware that I am what is called 'wanted for murder'; that I have been arrested once, and that probably before this a second warrant for my arrest has been issued to take the place of the first."

"I doubt it. I cannot see how they

can have any positive information; but I fancy that your death has been taken for granted."

"Even supposing that to be the case, what difference does it make?"

"I should say a good deal of difference, if you think it out. Since I am the only person in the world who has even a faint suspicion that you are alive, and I'm the most unsuspicious creature that ever lived, it appears to me that you are really dead. Certainly the person who bore that objectionable name is dead—Mr. Robert Dennett is alive.

"It is Mr. Robert Dennett whom I am asking why he will not marry the young girl with whose reputation he has made such havoc."

"I deny it; what you say is false."

"You may deny it. You may appear to be that sort of person; but that makes no difference to the fact. The girl is compromised—by you."

"I would sooner cut my right hand off than do her the slightest injury, or approach to an injury," he protested. "So far from destroying her reputation, I would be perfectly willing to sacrifice my worthless life in defense of it; one day I shall be in a position to prove it."

"Tall talk — flummery—bunkum—flapdoodle — piffle — tosh — I believe that some of those words are English. For the last time I ask you: Are you willing to marry Alice Hudson?"

"Willing? What a way to put it! Of course I am willing!"

"Then that's enough; if you had said so at the beginning some unpleasantness might have been saved."

"Hear me out! Let me finish!"

"I would rather you did not finish. I have heard all that I want to hear. You say you are willing to marry Alice Hudson. Good! That is equivalent to an assurance; you will keep to your word. Miss Hudson's return to the Château d'Ernan shall be presently arranged, and on her return the position shall be regularized.

"You must excuse me; there are several matters which claim my attention. You have already detained me longer than I intended."

She moved toward the door. He interposed himself.

"You misunderstand me entirely; you twist my words. You give them a construction they were never intended to bear."

"You must allow me to interrupt you, Mr. Dennett, and to request you to favor me with no more of your flapdoodle. You have expressed your willingness to marry Alice Hudson. That expression is all I require. You shall. Be so good as to let me pass. Open the door."

He opened it almost without intending to. She went through it. He stared after her as she crossed the hall and, ascending the staircase, passed out of sight.

CHAPTER XIII.

Alice's Adventure.

DURING the days which ensued Ronald Denton would not have found it easy to say if his state was one of torment or of rapture. The idea of marrying Alice Hudson would never have got into his head had not Mme. de Constal put it there. But since she had, he could not get it out. Had all things been well with him his notion of perfect happiness would have been marriage with the girl who had made even the Château d'Ernan seem at times a paradise. But things were not going well; they never would —they never could. Each day brought him nearer to a shameful end.

He was this woman's catspaw. This Mme. de Constal had but to snap her fingers to squeeze him out of existence. He was as much a criminal under sentence of capital punishment as if he had been already tried and sentenced. That at least was his point of view. To him it seemed to be the only possible one.

That a wretch circumstanced as he

was, blood upon his hands, the gallows staring him in the face, should associate himself, even remotely with a young girl into whose few short years so much unhappiness had been crowded and for whom the future should hold such promise of love, joy, and all sorts of pleasant things—it was unthinkable! He might be a criminal, but he was not such a thing as that.

Yet the rapture when his eyes were closed and projecting a mental picture —holding her in his arms so close that he felt the sweet contours of her dear form, her breath upon his cheeks, her soft breathing as her lips touched his. If only it had been possible to make such a dream real! But, instead, the one thing for which he waited was the policeman's tap upon his shoulder, a crowded court gaping at the prisoner in the dock, with worse to follow!

Shudderingly he tried to drive such visions from him. In what was left to him of life there was no place for her. Why Mme. de Constal had thought of such a thing was a puzzle —unless it was because she loved evil for evil's sake. It was a crime so foul that it beggared imagination to propose to link this girl's fate with his.

Surely this woman had method in her madness, reason in her dreadful plans! She must have some weighty motive which prompted her to make such a heinous proposition. What could it be?

Three days passed. So far as he knew, save Achille, Mme. de Constal and he were the sole inmates of that great house. Nor did his hostess favor him with overmuch of her society. She found him, as she plainly told him, extremely dull, her own society more cheerful.

" You sit opposite me," she said on the third day when they had finished luncheon and Achille had left them together to drink their coffee, " with that kind of face which is the cook's worst enemy—it makes every dish taste as if there were something wrong with it. How can one enjoy the most perfect *plat* with something worse than a skull and crossbones glowering at one from the other side of the table?

" And as for conversation, you were better dumb; silence would be infinitely preferable to the kind of remark you make when I do succeed in making you say something. I am most anxious to do my duty as a hostess, but I don't want to feel every time I see you as if I were the chief mourner at a funeral. You give me what in England I believe you call the ' creepy-crawlies '; please enjoy yourself alone."

And the lady flitted from the room. The young gentleman, with an expression which certainly was not gay, went out to take the air. A more suggestive picture than he presented of a mind ill at ease as, with bent shoulders, downcast eyes, and heavy feet, he dragged himself listlessly, hopelessly, through the castle grounds it would not have been easy to find. He went in this direction and then in that, seeming not to care or heed whither he was going. At last his steps were turned in the direction of the glen known as the Safe Retreat. He had been there many times each day since the girl had vanished, as to the altar which some heart-broken worshiper has raised to the memory of a lost saint.

The memory of her presence seemed to sanctify the place. How often had they been there together! His feet kept step with hers as he followed her down the narrow, winding path. He went down it then without aim or design, with a feeling on him that he must go somewhere; and when he gained the grassy hollow at the end he found her lying on the ground.

At first he thought his imagination must be playing him a trick—it had played him more than one of late. Then he held his breath and gazed. His heart seemed to stand still. Something seemed all at once to have happened to the world.

She was lying on her face in a frock of russet-brown. He had told her

once, jestingly, that each fresh color she wore he thought became her best, but he was almost sure that the best of all the best was russet-brown. It went so well with the tint of her hair, her fair skin, with all sorts of things. And there she lay upon her face in a russet frock and never moved.

It *was* she! It was not this time a trick of the imagination.

How came she to be there? What was the cause of her attitude, her silence? What was the matter? Was she sleeping? Was she hurt? Had she stumbled and lain where she had fallen? Or was she—

No! He would not even ask himself if she was dead. He called to her:

"Alice!"

It was the first time he had addressed her by her Christian name; perhaps that was why it acted on her as if it were some magic spell. In an instant, with the suppleness of youth, with a single movement which was so rapid that one could scarcely follow it, she was on her feet, and, turning, saw him.

It seemed possible that, as had been the case with him, her first thought was that he might be the creature of a dream. She stood still as if afraid that a movement might cause the dream to vanish. He stood still also; why only he knew. Then, as if drawn by some irresistible magnet, he went farther down, she came toward him, and —he had her in his arms.

He had vowed to himself over and over again that under no circumstances whatever would he sully this young girl by so much as a touch; he had been vowing it to himself only half a dozen seconds ago; now he had her in his arms and pressed her close.

And she had her arms about his neck, her head upon his shoulder. How she trembled, quivering and shivering so that he had to hold her more tightly to keep her safe!

How long they stayed like that, incapable of speech, incapable of anything but what they did, they never knew. The spell was broken by her utterance of what she supposed to be his name. There came from her first a long sigh, which seemed to bear with it a burden from her bosom. Then she whispered "Robert!" as if she cried to him.

It was not only not his own name; it was one which he disliked. It was a note of pathos, fortunately sounded just in time to make him realize how fate or circumstances had caused him to fall away from the high standard which he had set himself.

He relaxed his hold; and as if it were a signal, instantly he became conscious that she was crying, that her whole body was being shaken by her sobs.

What was he to do? Few men know how to manage women when they weep, a young man scarcely ever. This young man had very seldom seen a woman cry. His feeling as he realized her state was almost one of fear. He had to continue his hold, if only to support and comfort her. When he tried to soothe her with words his voice seemed forced and harsh and broken.

"What is the matter? Tell me," he begged. "Are you hurt? What is wrong? Try not to cry. Alice! Don't cry! You—you—make it so hard for me."

Perhaps it was the appeal contained in the last words which influenced her more than anything else—the suggestion they conveyed that because things were hard with her they made it hard for him. She drew herself a little away, raised her head, and with the little flimsy square of cambric which serves a woman as a handkerchief she did her best to dry her eyes.

"I'll—I'll try not to cry," she said brokenly. "I know it's silly, but—Oh, if you only knew!"

And the flood-gates were opened again. He stood within a foot of her, helpless; longing to take her in his arms again, conscious even that she

was longing to come, yet straining every nerve to resist temptation.

"Alice!"

The name burst from him and left him dumb. Words would not come to him.

By degrees her crying grew less demonstrative; she began to try to gulp back her tears, to remove their traces from her cheeks. Then words came to her—of a kind; stammering words.

"My—my handkerchief's quite wet; it's—it's a silly little thing."

In an instant he had thrust his hand into his jacket-pocket and was holding out his.

"Won't—won't you have mine? I—I think you'll find it all right."

She looked at the proffered handkerchief and then at him, and she smiled—such a crooked, wavering, unhappy little smile.

"It's—it's very kind of you. I'd—like it very much—thank you."

She took it from his fingers. As she raised it to her eyes she turned away as if to hide from him the havoc which had been made. Still tongue-tied, he continued to watch her, some instinct telling him that the first words had better come from her lest the intensity of his sympathy, born of his passionate love, constrained him to commit himself in a fashion which he might always regret. Presently she spoke again:

"I'm—I am afraid I've made myself a dreadful sight; tears never do become a woman, and they make me frightful; I don't know how it is, but they make me positively smudgy. I always have to wash my face before I'm fit to look at after crying."

"I assure you that—that there's no necessity for you to wash your face—just now."

She peeped at him over her shoulder with a glance which was almost roguish.

"What a silly thing to say! I couldn't wash my face here if I wanted to ever so much; how could I?"

"I'm—I'm sure I don't know. I only wanted to point out that I didn't—that I didn't think you need. I hope you are feeling better."

Possibly the last words were not so tactful as they might have been. The girl drew herself up straighter; her manner became more strained, with quite a different sort of constraint.

"Thank you, I never felt ill. I—I was in a little trouble, that's all."

"That's all? As if that wasn't everything! As if I wouldn't rather anything happened than that you should be in trouble! That's a very weak way of putting it; but the plain fact is that I'd give my life to save you from trouble. Not that my life is worth anything, anyhow."

She was still using his handkerchief as if it had been a towel; now she peeped over the top of it.

"Isn't it?" she asked. "Why isn't it worth anything? At any rate, it's worth more than mine. My life is worth so absolutely less than nothing that only a very little while ago I was thinking of committing suicide. I believe I should have done it if there had been anything to do it with, just before you came; and—and before that, too."

Again her manner suddenly changed; it became quite warm.

"What have you been doing since they took me away?"

"So they did take you away, did they? I thought so," he observed.

"Of course. Do you think I should have gone if they hadn't—at any rate without telling you? You must think I'm a nice sort of person—I don't know why."

"Where did they take you?"

"They took me—I don't know where they took me; they took me—I'll tell you all about it; at least I'll try to, because things have happened to me which I don't in the least understand, and I've been taken I really don't know where; so I don't suppose that what I'm going to tell you will seem very clear. That won't be my fault, anyhow."

She used his handkerchief to wipe away a final tear or two; there were little gasping sounds in her throat as if she were struggling for composure, for breath enough to enable her to tell her story. Then she began:

"Antoinette came to me in the middle of the night and told me to get up, and when I asked her why, she wouldn't answer, and she dressed me and took me down-stairs. I was only half awake, and I was frightened by her manner, and—and I don't know what; I was just awake enough to feel sure that something dreadful was going to happen. And when I got down-stairs there was M. Perret—"

"The deuce there was! Where was the scoundrel? Was he alone?"

"He was in the hall; no, he wasn't alone. There was a whole lot of people there. I've not the faintest notion who they were. They seemed to have been fighting, and they were still quarreling, shouting, and going on like anything.

"And when they saw me some of them made a dash at me; and then the others made a dash, and I thought they would have torn me to pieces between them. And—I screamed."

"I heard you! Oh, if I had only been able to get at the blackguards!"

"You wouldn't have been able to do any good if you had—there were too many. I was so frightened that I couldn't imagine what they wanted. One half of them seemed to want to get me from the other half. I was quite sure that they were none of them my friends. Then Achille—"

"So Achille was there? The beauty! The liar! If I ever get a chance to get even with that gentleman!"

"He had a revolver in his hand. He pointed it at one of the men who was holding me by the arm, and told him that if he didn't let go of me he'd fire. I was terrified half out of my life, and I screamed again."

"Oh, I heard you. Oh, yes, I heard you. But I was like a rat in a trap. They had fastened me in my room. I couldn't get out; I was helpless."

"I thought that he was going to fire at me, but he fired at the man instead, and hit him; I don't know where he hit him, but the man gave a great shout and loosed hold of me and went reeling across the hall, and I think he fell. Then his friends rushed at Achille, and he fired again and hit two more of them—and oh, the noise they made! And in the confusion the others got me out of the hall.

"One of them picked me up and carried me as if I were a child.

"There was a motor-car outside the door, and they put me in it. Then all at once I became aware that Mme. de Constal was in the car, and she said:

"If you make that noise again, my child, I'll squeeze your windpipe!"

"She said — that? Really Mme. de Constal?"

"She said it in a way—I don't want to exaggerate, I just want you to understand—she said it in a way which frightened me more than anything which had gone before. It frightened me into silence. So I sat still and never said a word, and the car started."

Her attitude suggested that in fancy she was living through that moment again, and those other moments which followed.

"The car went on and on, I thought it never would stop."

"Who was in the car with you besides Mme. de Constal?" Ronald asked.

"M. Perret and a little wizened man whom he called Jules, but whom I afterward heard him speak of as M. Monteil. M. Perret sat opposite me and oh, if you only knew how careful I was to draw myself as far away from him as possible! I felt sure that it was all because of him that they were taking me away. And next to him was M. Monteil.

"It was quite a big car and we were not at all in each other's way; there was room in it for more than four.

"I thought it never would stop, but

at last it did, just as it was beginning to get day. I know we went through a gate and along what I took to be a drive and stopped at the door of what seemed to be a big house, and Mme. de Constal said:

"'My child, we are arrived. If you are wise you will make no scene, and above all no noise; you have still your windpipe.'

"If I could only make you understand how she said it. I don't believe that after all I could have uttered a sound if I had tried.

"We all got out and Mme. de Constal took my arm. I really needed it. I don't think I could have walked without. She led me into a big, bare hall up a flight of stairs, into a large, scantily furnished room, in which there was a bed and scarcely anything else. And she said:

"'Now, my child, get into bed and sleep until I wake you. Shall I undress you or will you undress yourself?'

"She began to undo my things and take them off. I don't believe I should have been able to undress without her help, I was in such a state of tremor. I got between the sheets. She said:

"'Now stay there until I bring you your breakfast in the morning.'

"Then she went out of the room and I heard her turn the key in the lock."

"You have no idea where this place was or how far it was from here?" Ronald queried.

"None; I can only tell you that we seemed to be hours in going, and that the car, which was a very big one, seemed to be going at top speed. We never stopped on the way.

"Of course I never slept. I didn't even dare to close my eyes. I couldn't think where I was or why I had been taken there or what was going to happen; I was in such a state of terror that I could not think. I was only conscious that the presence of M. Perret in the house meant—oh, I did not dare to try to think what it meant."

"You poor"—"darling" he was going to say; but he substituted "child." "And that scoundrel Achille wished me to believe that nothing had happened! I knew he lied."

"I don't know how long they left me the next morning. It had been daylight for a very long time when Mme. de Constal came with a cup of coffee."

"She brought it herself?"

"Oh, yes. At first I don't believe there was any one in the house except her and M. Perret and M. Monteil and perhaps the chauffeur, though I never saw a sign of him. She told me to get up and dress in the clothes I had come in. Then she took me to a room which seemed to be on the other side of the house, and she paused at the door, and she said:

"'Now, my child, I must give you one word of advice. It is this: Don't be a fool. It is not necessary, because you are a young girl, that you should be a fool; I beg you to believe it. So, once more, my word of advice—don't be a fool.'

"She opened the door and I went in and the moment I was in she closed the door behind me and again I heard her turn the key in the lock; and in the room there was no one but M. Perret."

CHAPTER XIV.

One Way of Love.

AT this point in her story the young lady's mood seemed once more to change. She straightened her back, raised her chin, clenched her fists, and bore herself with what quite amounted to an air of defiance.

"The discovery that I was alone with M. Perret, with the door locked, had on me an effect on which I do not think he had counted. I fancy that he expected me to be cowed, broken, depressed, terrified out of my senses.

"I do not deny that I was afraid, but I flatter myself that I did not let him see it, because I was not only afraid, I was angry that he should dare to behave to me in such a way—

a man to whom I had spoken with all possible plainness on so many occasions. So before he got a chance of speaking, I told him what I thought of him. I hope I'm not boring you with my story."

"Boring me? If you only knew how I hang on every word! What wouldn't I give to be left alone for half an hour with M. Perret?" gritted Ronald.

"I don't think you'd gain much if you were; he's taller than you, and broader — bigger altogether, and I should say much more used to fights and scenes and that sort of thing than you are."

"He may be able to break me across his knee, but I should still like to have the chance of speaking my mind to him."

"I shouldn't wonder if you do; I think it's quite possible that he's coming here."

"You speak as if you would like him to come!" Ronald exclaimed.

"I am perfectly indifferent, as, if you will let me get on with my story, I think you will understand. Directly I saw him I said:

"'So it's you once more—after the lots of times I've tried to be rid of you. You stay where you are or you'll find that I am stronger than you suppose. I've got sharp nails, and if I should have to use them on your face you'd bear the marks of them for many a day.'

"I could see he was taken aback; he had not expected that sort of address at all. He said in his greasy way—whenever I have seen him he has always been either greasy or truculent—I don't know which way I like him least — 'If Miss Hudson will take a chair she will find that she has misunderstood the motive which has induced me to solicit this interview.'

"'Solicit?' I said. 'I didn't know you had solicited it. If you had I should have refused at once, so perhaps you will open that door.'

"'I did not lock the door,' he said. 'It was *madame*.' 'At your request, I have no doubt,' I countered.

"Then we began to spar. I was getting angrier and angrier every moment."

The young lady stamped her foot as if to give her auditor an idea of the rage which had possessed her. Ronald Denton could not but feel that however wildly her fury might have raged, such a person as she described M. Perret to be would scarcely have been awed; but as he noted the color which came into her cheeks and how her eyes sparkled he told himself that rage became her.

"He began to tell me a long story, that man, which I am pretty nearly certain was all lies; how there was a shameful secret about my birth which it was absolutely necessary to conceal; that the only way to do it was for me to get married; and that no one would marry me who knew the secret of my birth except himself, because of the regard he had for me.

"So the old business began all over again—would I be his wife?

"I told him that I wouldn't, that he knew I wouldn't, that I'd sooner drown, that I didn't believe a word he said, and that so far as he was concerned the only thing I wanted was never to see him again. This did not seem to please him."

"I'm surprised at that," Ronald put in.

"You are laughing at me. Oh, you can laugh; but I tell you I wasn't laughing then, nor was he. He actually began to call me names. He said I was a little idiot—actually! That I was incapable of understanding the meaning of my own words or the integrity of his intentions, to say nothing of appreciating the honor he did me.

"And after a good deal of that sort of thing and my storming at him back he broke all at once into a white heat of passion and, speaking much more quietly than he had been doing—he had been simply raving—he came to the point. He politely informed me that

I was not going to leave that room until I had promised to be his wife. Not only so; I was to marry him at once, as I gathered in the course of the next two or three days. All the arrangements for the marriage had been made; all that was required was that I should enact the part of the bride.

"We were to go for a honeymoon—he actually spoke of that!—to the Pyrenees; and then we were to return on a little visit to Mme. de Constal at the Château d'Ernan before entering into occupation of the house which he had provided for me in Paris.

"Wasn't that a program?"

"Delightful! This M. Perret has a way of making his own arrangements well in advance—"

Leaving his sentence unfinished, Mr. Denton flew off at a tangent.

"Wouldn't I like to kick him!"

"That's what I felt. But I didn't like to, considering his size and mine. He might have kicked back. He was quite capable of it. I told him that if that really was the state of affairs I should have to spend the rest of my life in that room, because never, never, never, would I consent to do what he wanted. He and Mme. de Constal between them might kill me if they liked, but they'd never get from me a different answer.

"Then he made a dash at me, and I ran away. And he rushed after me. It was a big room and there wasn't much furniture, but there was enough to help me to keep out of his reach. I was quicker than he was, and I knew that if he once got hold of me—I did not dare to think of what might happen if he once got hold of me."

She was breathing great breaths. Ronald could see how her bosom rose and fell—the look of desperation in her eyes. With emotions to which he was incapable of giving utterance he saw with the eye of the mind the scene which she so vividly depicted.

The girl continued:

"There was a great, bare, heavy wooden table in the center of the room. I got behind it. He chased me round this way and that. I was too quick for him. He tried to get across at me and under it. I always managed to keep out of his reach.

"The language which he used and the rage that he got into. Then he gave the table a sudden push and pushed me over. He rushed at me. I slipped under it and was on the other side before he got to me.

"Then he dragged the table away and stood it up on one side of the room and I thought that I was done for.

"There was an old sideboard on one side, on which there were some plates and glasses and decanters and odds and ends. I got to it, and, as he came I threw a big dish at him with both hands with all my might and the edge of it struck him right across the face. You should have heard him yell!

"He put his handkerchief up to his face, and began to stamp about and bellow and roar, saying that I had killed him and that he'd kill me—and I hit him pretty badly, because the blood was all streaming down his cheek.

"Then he came at me again—such a sight, all covered with blood, and the blood still flowing; I believe he was half-blinded with it. I threw at him everything there was time to throw—plates and glasses; then I tore away with a decanter in each hand.

"I hit him again with some of the things I had thrown—I don't know with what and I don't know where, but you should have heard the noise he made; I declare he was like some wild beast beside itself with rage and pain."

The young lady paused as if to take breath. So excited was she that she might have been enacting her part in that strange contest again.

"Once more he came at me—a more dreadful sight than ever; the blood was still coming from wherever I had struck him on the face. It had got on to his clothes, his hands were wet with it. I was as mad as he was, though really inside me I was frightened nearly out of my life. I screamed at him.

"'If you come near me I'll kill you with these decanters! I will, I will, I will!'

"I sprang to one side and I hit him first with one decanter and then the other. I kept hitting him, and he kept coming after me.

"Then I didn't see where I was going, and I got into a corner of the room, and in spite of the decanters, one of which was broken, he got hold of me—and, oh dear, oh dear, how I screamed and yelled and struggled! I got the broken end of the decanter up against his face, and I cut him with it; I jabbed at him—and the roars he gave!

"He got me down on the floor and wrenched what was left of the decanter out of my hand, and I do believe he would have killed me because I should have fought him while I had life.

"But just when I was expecting him to jab me with the jagged end of the decanter some one caught him by the arm, and there was Mme. de Constal; and I realized that the door must have been unlocked while we were too much engaged to notice. Then there was a scene between them—shall I ever forget it!"

She held out her hands in front of her as if calling Heaven to witness that she never could.

"He wanted to pay me out, and she wouldn't let him. He was simply stark, staring mad. He called me the most frightful names; he swore he'd be revenged on me; and Mme. de Constal caught him by the arm and told me to get up. I didn't want telling twice.

"Jumping up, I tried to rush out of the room, but I couldn't, because there was M. Monteil standing in the doorway. Although he seemed old and wizened, I had a feeling that he might prove more than I could tackle, that in a way he might prove more dangerous than M. Perret. And I daresay that I was not far wrong; for when M. Perret and Mme. de Constal were fighting behind us—they were literally fighting—he said quite quietly, 'Madeline, come and look after this—' I won't say what he called me; he meant me—' and I'll attend to Leon.'

"And somehow she got away from M. Perret, caught me by the shoulder, swung me out of the room, and just as M. Perret came raging after me M. Monteil slipped between us, and I heard him say—just as quietly as he had spoken to Mme. de Constal:

"'You see this? If you move another step forward you will regret it, Léon.'

"I saw that he was holding something up in his hand, but what it was I couldn't see—it didn't look as if it were a revolver or any sort of weapon; but whatever it was, M. Perret knew, for he stopped dead.

"Mme. de Constal tore me along the passageway to that bedroom and when we had got there she looked at me, and she said:

"'Who would have thought there was so much fight in you? Perhaps after all you're not so much of a fool as you look.'

"And out she went and locked the door; and you can fancy the state of mind in which she left me. Though as a matter of fact I don't believe that any one could possibly do that. Oh, oh! When I think of it!"

"Had the blackguard hurt you?"

"I was bruised all over—I am now—when he caught me in his great hands; but I rather fancy that he was hurt more than I was."

Ronald observed:

"I have heard that when it comes to the scratch women are pluckier than men; but I never knew what it meant till now."

She stared at him as his words were beyond her understanding.

"It wasn't pluck! You don't call that pluck? I would have run away from him for thousands of miles if I could have done it, but I couldn't. There was nothing I could do except what I did. That isn't pluck. Even a tomtit will fight for its life; I fought for mine.

"If it hadn't been for Mme. de Con-

stal and M. Monteil he would have killed me, perhaps worse. But it's some consolation to think that so far as we've got I've hurt him more than he's hurt me."

"What happened next?" Ronald demanded. "Was that the last thing you saw of him?"

"I can't tell you what happened after I'd got out of that room, but I fancy there was a warm three-handed argument. No, I saw nothing of him again. They kept me locked up in the bedroom. In the middle of last night Mme. de Constal woke me as Antoinette had done before. I was taken down-stairs, and there was the motor-car and they brought me back to the Château d'Ernan, only this time we had the car to ourselves; it was better than when we went, but she never spoke a word to me the whole of the way. But what I can't understand is, what does it all mean? I don't believe a word of what he told me of the shameful secret connected with my birth."

She began to try, after a fashion of her own, to arrive at some solution of the mystery, while Ronald Denton continued to play the part of an eager, interested listener.

"Of course I can't remember being born, but I can remember nearly as far back. I was born in a little village in Sussex, called Steyning. My mother was staying with her parents, who were farmers. My father was away at sea. The farm was called Furnace Farm—in the old days when there were mines in Sussex iron had been smelted there.

"I stayed there off and on till I was twelve years old. When I grew older I went for lessons to a Mrs. Adams, who took a few pupils in her old-fashioned house outside the village.

"When I was twelve years old my mother's father died. Her mother, who was an invalid, gave up the farm, and we went to live at Worthing. There my father's mother and sister came and took a house quite close to ours; my father, who was then in command of a steamer which went backward and forward from Morocco, the Canary Islands, and Madeira, kept coming and going.

"Then my mother's mother died, and within a week or two my father's mother. His sister came to live with us. She was the only relative who was left to him—I heard him say so over and over again—and my mother had no kin left in the world.

"Then my aunt, my father's sister, married an elderly person named Johnson. I was the only bridesmaid at the wedding. Not long afterward both of them were killed in a railway accident in the north of England. I remember my mother going to identify the bodies.

"Then my mother and I were left alone, and we went to live in France so that I might learn French. Then my father fell out with the firm with whom he had been associated for years, and took service with another firm, who put him in command of a new ship, and his first voyage was his last. It went down in the Indian Ocean, and only five passengers lived to tell the tale."

Again the girl stretched out her hands in front of her with that eloquent gesture of appeal.

"These are just plain facts, so where can M. Perret's mystery of my birth come in? I say it's just stuff and nonsense. And that makes it more mysterious still, for why can M. Perret be so anxious to marry me, and Mme. de Constal take such extraordinary steps to help him? If it comes to that, why does Mme. de Constal keep me in the house at all? I am quite sure that M. Perret doesn't care for me one scrap. I mayn't be absolutely ugly—"

"I shouldn't say myself that you were."

"You weren't asked. But if I were the most beautiful creature in the world I don't believe that would be the least inducement to M. Perret when it

came to his choosing a wife; and that it should be so strong an inducement as to make him behave as he has done —it's simply perfectly incredible. If you knew him you'd say so, too.

"So we come back to the same point again. Why does the man want to marry me, and what makes the woman so anxious to help him?"

A voice spoke—not in reply to her question—in harsh-sounding French. It would not have been easy for an unaided ear to decide what was the sex of the speaker.

"My dear Alice, I've been looking for you everywhere. Had you not better come up to the house—and M. Dennett?"

They looked round; above them on the winding path stood Mme. Lamotte.

CHAPTER XV.

A Consultation.

MME. DE CONSTAL was in her own private sitting-room. A very fine apartment it was. A lofty arched ceiling, covered with allegorical paintings; walls paneled with fine carved old black oak; three deep, embrasured windows; rare and beautiful old furniture—hangings, pictures, curios, carpets; these things suggested an apartment in a palace rather than a mere sitting-room for a simple private lady.

On one side of the room was a huge open fireplace, the opening measuring perhaps eight feet across. In front of it at the table covered with papers and documents of the most businesslike looking kind sat the mistress of the castle.

In the fireplace stood a short, wiry, grizzle-headed man, whose cheeks were so lean as to be almost cadaverous. In a great armchair on the opposite side of the table was a big, burly, black-visaged man, whose head and features were almost hidden by wraps and bandages.

The little man in the fireplace was speaking, the whole conversation which is here reported being carried on in French.

"I can't stop! I daren't! It's no use talking; it's not a question of will or won't; it's just a question of can't. I've no wish for a further taste of New Caledonia, nor to exchange Numea for Paris."

His manner assumed a significance which was not altogether friendly.

"There's another point. If I go it won't be alone, I'll be something if I will. I'll not leave you here in clover."

"My dear Jules, why do you threaten us? It is in such bad taste, especially among friends," Mme. de Constal protested. "Say in two words exactly what it is you want."

"I can say it in one—money."

"It is true that that is only one word, but to explain what you mean by 'money' you will require to use at least one other. Having an eye upon the situation exactly as it is, what do you mean by 'money'?"

"Enough to live on, say a couple of years, until the storm has completely blown over."

"And what is your idea of living? One can live on twenty francs a week."

"You can't."

"I don't know; I think I might if I tried; you must not be too sure. I have done some very strange things."

"That true—no one knows that better than I do. But you've never done that. The question I have to ask myself is, where shall I go, and how shall I get there?

"In these days of wireless messages it is not easy to go anywhere if the police have got their eyes widely enough open; and when you're there they can still bring you back. It so happens, however, that I'm not afraid either of the wireless or of being returned to the police if I am relieved of all anxiety in the way of money."

"And how much will relieve you of all anxiety? Do not be afraid to be outspoken."

The grimace which distorted the

man's lean visage might have been meant for a smile.

"You have never been able to bring an accusation against me on that score. It is not that I am afraid or nervous. It is simply that the question is not an easy one to answer. I should like a hundred thousand pounds."

"No doubt you would also like the moon."

"Not long ago it seemed assured that I should get at least that sum."

"But now is not 'long ago,' now you are certain that you won't. Your ingenious little scheme has failed; you must remember that its failure has meant loss to me."

"How many other 'ingenious little schemes,' as you phrase it, have you got? How many of them are likely to be successful? How many are being successful every day? You gain a hundred francs for every one you lose."

"You are mistaken. At the present moment I am actually pressed for money."

"I believe it!"

The man gave vent to a sound which might have been meant for a laugh.

"*You*—pressed for money! I never knew a time when, according to you, you were not pressed for money—when you had sacks full."

"If it pleases you to think so, my dear Jules, I would not destroy one of your delusions. Let us come to the point. I will make an effort; I will let you have a thousand pounds."

"You will let me have five thousand."

"It is impossible."

"You will let me have five thousand pounds within a week. At the end of that time my arrangements will be made. You will give me the money and all will be well; you will not let me have the money and all will not be well. It is not that I threaten; you know better. I must lie by for at least two years; that cannot be done with absolute safety on less than five thousand pounds. If the police take me because you do not think it worth your while to assure my safety their catch will not only consist of one."

"Let him have the money."

The voice came from the man with the bandaged head, who sat in the great armchair.

The lady said:

"It's very easy for you to talk, my dear Léon; but how's the money to be found?"

The big man continued, speaking with a curious gruffness:

"There is something in what he says; I doubt if what he speaks of can be done on less. Let him have the money."

The lady sighed. Leaning back on her chair, she looked up at the gods and goddesses above her on the ceiling.

"Very well; if I must I suppose I must, but I give you my word that I could as soon fly as give any one five thousand pounds now. I doubt if in spite of what Jules says I have five hundred pence in actual cash.

"But this I will say: I will endeavor to find the money within a week. Suppose, Jules, the sum is a little short; cannot the balance be sent to you afterward?"

"It cannot. I propose to be safe from you as well as from the police; for two years no one shall know my address except myself. Then perhaps it may be discreet for me to reenter the world.

"But I must have every farthing of five thousand pounds by this day week, and that is putting it off to the very last moment. I do not think I can complete my arrangements in less time; if I do it would be prudent for me to have the money ready the moment I am.

"Also another word. Although for all our sakes it will be the part of wisdom that you shall not know my address I shall know yours. I am almost as well acquainted with some of your little schemes as you are yourself. You will not forget that in some of them I am a partner. You will not forget that after the two years have gone?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Mme. de Constal. "Am I a safe person to threaten or an easy one to blackmail? Do you know so little of me as that?"

"I repeat that I do not threaten; I merely remind you, that is all. We have been good friends and colleagues so long that I do not wish since it is possible that we shall not see each other again for two years to say one word which could make my memory to you a bitter one. I but remind you, that is all."

When the little man had not only come out of the fireplace but left the room, Mme. de Constal had a long and rather interesting conversation with the bandaged gentleman in the chair.

"It's all very well for you," she began, "to talk of finding five thousand pounds within a week, but how do you suppose I'm going to do it?"

"There is no necessity that you should do it if you can't. All that was necessary was that you should promise."

His words must have conveyed a meaning that was not on the surface, or Mme. de Constal would scarcely have looked at him with such a sudden startled stare.

"Léon Perret! Not that; never again. I've had enough."

"I also have had enough; do I not look it?"

He gave his head a twitching movement as if he were in pain.

"You move too fast. I suggest nothing. There are two things we cannot afford—one that the police should take Jules Monteil, and the other that he should try to make his peace with them by letting them take us. To save us from either of those misfortunes five thousand pounds would be cheap. We will get him the five thousand pounds if we can. If we can't—

"Well—"

Mme. de Constal got up quickly from her chair.

"I will not have you finish your sentence. I tell you I will not; never again! There's Bébé; those friends of his should be worth more to us than five thousand pounds."

"That's what I have in my mind. Why so excited? This American—this George P. Stacey—he's a millionaire; his wife is also rich; it seems it is not certain which is the bigger fool of the two. Then this Englishman—this Augustus Chorlston—his income, they say, is a hundred thousand pounds a year. You are going to have a very nice house-party, my dear Madeline."

"You do not suppose that five thousand pounds is all that is wanted?"

"I do not suppose anything so foolish. We want all that we can get, and the intention is to get it."

She stood by the great fireplace, her skirts drawn aside with her left hand, kicking the flaming logs with the tip of her shoe. She looked down as if to read something which she saw in the flames.

"You will do me the justice to admit that it is not my habit to look upon the black side of things—to expect bad luck. All the same I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that this is a hazardous experiment which we are about to make, with the assistance of Bébé, our dear Count Girodet. Some of our best timed coups have not come off recently. To illustrate that one need go no farther than your little affair with the Hudson girl."

"May the Hudson girl be dipped into boiling oil and then thrown into a caldron of molten lead!" gritted Perret.

"What would be the good of that? What benefit should we receive? I cannot but feel, my dear Léon, that Miss Hudson has dealt a very serious blow to your self-conceit. There was a time, and as Jules said not so long ago when you thought that no woman could resist you. *She* can!"

The expression of so much of Mr. Perret's face as could be seen was of the most uncompromising kind. His voice kept it company.

"Do you want to start afresh, to be-

gin all over again? Why do you want to say to me a thing like that—now?"

"I do not want to say it; that is just the point; but one must recognize facts. It seemed so simple; according to you it was so simple—you had but to marry this ignorant little piece of female flesh — and than that you said nothing could be easier—and we are on velvet. I intend no insinuations, but—we're not on velvet, neither you nor I. It does not look as if we ever shall be in that way. We have had our last throw, and lost.

"You might have killed her, but, as I said just now, how should we gain if you did that? No, Léon, you have had your innings — that is how the English put it; now comes the turn of the Englishman. He may put us on velvet, after all."

She turned and confronted M. Perret. One of his eyes was prominent enough; a green shade protected the other. He pushed this shade aside. The pair eyed each other. Then he said, with a grin which made him seem more horrible than before:

"I am not sure that I would not rather he than I. One can buy a wife too dearly, as other men have found before me."

"Thank you, Léon, for the allusion. It becomes you."

She spoke this sentence with a smile which was sweet—even dangerously sweet.

"You gave me one; why shouldn't I give you another? When will you understand that you and I cannot afford to rap each other's knuckles?"

For some moments the pair eyed each other steadily. If they were trying to see which could stare at the other longest, he was the winner, since she was the first to yield. Returning to the table, she picked up a packet of papers, tied about with tape.

"Very well, then, Léon, let's do it; let's be sensible children. Providence, after all, has its own way of doing things, as illustrated by the case of Ronald Denton. If Providence hadn't tossed him into our hands, our position would be really serious; as it is, we still have hope. With him as Alice Hudson's husband, we shall be in almost as good a position as if you had married her yourself."

"And I shall be in a better. As I live, I'd sooner she were Mrs. Ronald Denton than Mme. Léon Perret—that is, if you've got your facts all right. That is of the first importance."

"My facts are all right; they're here."

She held up the packet of papers.

"After all, the position has only assumed another phase; pressure, persuasion—that is a better word—has only to be applied in a different direction—on the gentleman instead of on the lady. Mr. Ronald Denton has to marry Miss Alice Hudson; it is very essential to us that he should. I think that we have here certain little arguments which will persuade him."

"He won't need much persuasion if what you say is right."

"Léon, this young man worships the very ground she stands on; that's a well-worn statement, and in this case it's a true one, and because of it persuasion will be most needed. He loves this girl, and because he loves her he would do her no injury.

"He is under the impression that he would do her an injury by marrying her. So he will—the greatest injury a man could do a woman; how great an injury he does not even guess. It's our affair not to let him guess, and to make them man and wife before he has even a suspicion of the truth. Afterward it will be easy."

"You are quite sure of that? We should be in a pretty situation if your calculations were to go astray."

"Sure?"

She laughed.

"I was never so sure of anything in all my life as that if we once get them safely married the rest will be easy sailing. You must take my word for it. She's as much in love with him as he is with her. She'd marry him to-

morrow if she had the chance, and having married him, there's nothing she wouldn't do to save him from—well, we know what.

"The whole position is so droll! He loves her; she loves him; he does not wish to marry her because he fears that by marrying her he will do her an injury. I believe her love to be, in a sense, greater than his, because if I were to tell her the whole truth I believe that she would still marry him; perhaps all the more, in a spirit of self-sacrifice—she is that sort of creature!

"Having married him, the more of the truth I tell her, the greater sacrifices she will make for him. So that either way it will be all right for us.

"If he doesn't prove sufficiently pliable—and he's a mulish young gentleman who, sooner or later, will be sure to kick—when the time of his kicking comes we've only to go to her to find her, where he's concerned, pliability itself. I know the girl right through. Being once his wife, she'll pay a thousand pounds to save his little finger from an ache; then what wouldn't she pay to save him from—we know what?"

"And she'll have something to pay with. Honestly, Madeleine, it's not only because I'm a fox that's lost its tail that I'm become a philosopher; if the matter is only properly managed, I would sooner it were marriage with him as husband than with me. If she were my wife and I wanted a thousand pounds, I'd have to beat her before I got it; of that I'm pretty sure. And as for more—"

"And as for the—shall we say millions?—which we propose to get—"

"Don't make the fatal mistake at the beginning of letting your imagination run away with you. Don't begin by putting the figures too high. If for our services in bringing these two together and seeing that they are properly joined, we get forty, thirty, even twenty thousand pounds a year, I shall consider that we are decently paid. I for one would not accuse them of ingratitude. Why, my dear, with a comfortable, regular little income like that, we might make of the Château d'Ernan—positively!—an asylum for the virtuous."

"No, my dear Léon; please not that—the virtuous are so dull."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

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THE LANDLOCKED MERMAID

BY JACK BURROUGHS

SHE cannot do the trudgen,
The breast-stroke, or the crawl,
And Neptune, old curmudgeon,
Says she cannot float at all.

She's afraid to try the "jack knife,"
The back dive, or the "swan,"
And she couldn't do a "dutchman"
If she tried from dawn to dawn.

Still, she makes us all take notice
When she poses on the beach,
For she wears a stunning costume,
And believe me, she's a peach!

Private Jennie Wren

by Mary Hedges Fisher

WHEN a trio of giggling little urchins clambered on the rear of the "Votes-for-Women" automobile during the progress of the district meeting, the peace and poise of the orator were seriously impaired. As the speaker was none other than Mrs. Daniel Hunt Barclay — *the* Mrs. Barclay, of New York and Newport, it devolved upon somebody to interfere lest that temperamental lady straightway take her doll-rags and go right home—along with the influence and the prestige that accrued to the suffrage cause from the support of the Barclay name, backed by the Barclay millions.

Perceiving the exigency, Miss Jane Renshaw scurried to the spot and shook a warning finger. "Boys! Boys!" she said in a shrill whisper. "Come right down off that car!"

"Boys! Boys!" mimicked the offenders, showing no inclination to budge. They were not in the least afraid of that little old woman—what could *she* do?

The situation was becoming desperate; Mrs. Barclay's discourse grew jumbled, and her perfect profile showed signs of annoyance. Where was that protector of the peace and sworn enemy to small boys—in other words, a policeman?

He came not; but just in the nick of time the leader of the district bore down upon the scene, as relentless as a steam roller, and the small boys scattered without further parley. Dr. Alma Pierpont Smith was only a woman, it is true, but something about her portly figure, her Roman nose, her gold-rimmed eye-glasses with the long, black cord, brooked no interference.

Little Miss Renshaw heaved a sigh of relief and faded away in the crowd; it was not her part to administer authority or to quell riots; but she was a faithful distributor of suffrage literature, and as such had her uses.

The speaker resumed.

While her logic at times might be open to argument, her appearance could withstand severest scrutiny; and to the crowd that loitered on the outskirts of the park those warm evenings in quest of fresh air and diversion, the personality of a woman speaker was half the battle. Conscious that the battery of eyes upon her could only think her charming and that she held the male portion of her audience —the only part that counted—in the hollow of her white-gloved hand, Mrs. Barclay was never more gracious, never more at ease.

"Think of it, gentlemen," she drawled with just the faintest suspicion of southern accent, "Senator

George Randall Hamilton, chairman of the coming Constitutional Convention, has denied an audience to a delegation composed of the most able women of the city—because, forsooth, they believed in votes for women! That was their crime! Friends, I ask you this: Were we voters, who could make, or break, his career at Albany, would he have bidden his butler say 'Not at home'?"

She paused rhetorically, finding sufficient reply in the sea of sympathetic, upturned faces.

"Say the word, lady, an' I'll shoot him up!" hiccuped a well-wisher from the rear line. The crowd roared and turned their attention to the policeman who appeared on the scene to cart the offender off, still protesting his gallantry.

Little Miss Renshaw gave out leaflets one by one, most of which were pocketed for future reference without a second thought to the distributer herself.

A more colorless, inconspicuous human being than Miss Jane Renshaw it would be hard to find. She was somewhere between forty and fifty years old; she was pale and wizened; she wore outlandish clothes, the legacy of the same eccentric relative who had bequeathed Miss Renshaw four years before a tiny annuity.

Tiny though it was, to Jane Renshaw it spelled not only independence, but affluence. It released her from years of industrial slavery in a newspaper clipping concern at less than a living wage; it left her free to consecrate her life, her energies, her enthusiasm, all for the suffrage cause.

Up at headquarters of the Woman Suffrage Army her superior officers regarded Miss Renshaw with a species of good-natured tolerance. They dubbed her Jenny Wren, and piled on her willing shoulders all the tiresome, inconspicuous jobs that no captain or lieutenant wants to do—such as acting as factotum behind the scenes at Carnegie Hall, addressing postal cards by the million to registered voters, or taking up a collection at street meetings.

Though her poor little feet ached in her square-toed shoes, it never occurred to Miss Renshaw to cease her activities until the speaker, flushed and elated with success, whirled away in the automobile, and Dr. Alma Pierpont Smith officially declared in stentorian, impressive tones that the meeting stood adjourned.

Then the leader, peering anxiously about her, appeared to be looking for some one, and Jane Renshaw hurried to the spot, anxious to be of service.

"Here you, Jennie Wren," said Dr. Smith good-naturedly. "Here's the banner; you'll be responsible for it till next meeting?"

With the heavy pole pressing against her shoulder Jennie Wren trotted home in the moonlight, unmindful of the amused glances bestowed upon her by everybody she passed. It was not until she turned the key in the hall-door of a rooming house in West Eleventh Street that the little woman realized how tired she was.

Then there were three long flights of stairs to climb in the pitch darkness. Jennie Wren trudged upward, still carrying the banner and feeling very forlorn indeed, until a gleam of light streaming through a doorway on the last landing caused her sagging spirits to rebound. Her neighbor, Mrs. Howell, from across the hall, had sat up for her.

From the couch between the windows a young woman looked up and smiled a welcome.

The flare of the unshaded gas-jet showed up pitilessly dark circles beneath her brown eyes and the too evident hollows in her graceful throat. Repressing an impulse to exclaim: "Child, how dreadful you look!" Miss Renshaw set down the suffrage banner and commenced to remove the pins from her black chiffon hat adorned with a molting parrakeet.

"Bobby sleeping?" she inquired casually.

Bobby's mother nodded. "Yes—after a session lasting a full hour. I couldn't wonder — that room is so small and stuffy. He tossed, and fretted, and simply wouldn't go to sleep; and finally" — the young woman flushed guiltily—"he begged so hard for your Toby jug that I weakened and let him have it. If he breaks it I'll never forgive myself."

"Never mind if he does," said Miss Renshaw very gently, donning a hideous purple wrapper. "It seems good to have a little boy around to break things. Now, tell me about everything. Any luck to-day?"

Mrs. Howell's expression clouded. "Not a bit! It seems all the stars in the profession are stampeding for the movies; so what chance have I? My little streak of luck with the Excelsior Film people turned my head, I guess. When I was a girl—I mean, before I was married; not so many years ago—I was rated as an all-round athlete. But to-day at the studios one has to outswim Annette Kellerman, outdance Mrs. Castle, outshoot that Indian girl at the circus before one can awaken a ripple of interest on the face of a director. And my looks — only this afternoon that nice Mr. Sprague at the Excelsior warned me my bones would show up terribly on the screen."

Miss Renshaw, in the wicker rocker, with felt-slippered feet scarcely touching the floor, made no response, while she contemplated the young woman who lay on the couch nervously fumbling her wedding-ring.

"What is it?" exclaimed the girl at last. "What are you thinking of, Jennie Wren?"

The little old maid deliberated still further before she ventured, "You've got to get out of the city for the summer. You and Bob."

"Lovely!" mocked the young woman on the couch. "What would you suggest — a cruise through the Great Lakes—or a personally conducted trip to the Canadian Rockies?" Then, with a complete change of tone, she buried her head in an embroidered sofa-pillow. "Money, money, money," came a muffled voice. "Money—that I used to despise!"

Jennie Wren hesitated, then crossed the room to lay a tender hand on the girl's dark hair.

"My child," she said, then paused, remembering something about the class of persons prone to rush in. But a glance at the heaving shoulders gave her courage. "Forgive me for being a meddlesome old woman, who cares a lot for you and Bob. You haven't told me much — and I don't want to pry into your affairs. But—but—don't you think you've stuck it out long enough all alone—isn't it time now to give in—for Bob's sake—and let your friends know where you are?"

Mrs. Howell's lips tightened.

"Never!" she snapped. "Never! They said the man I loved was not worth while; so I slipped out one night and married him. We went abroad—on the money I had drawn from the savings bank — and he adored me so long as it lasted. I haven't seen him since. Families have a way of being right, haven't they?"

Presently, as the older woman made no sign, the girl went on: "But I can't go home and tell them I was wrong! Somehow, in this big city I ought to get a foothold, and make a living for myself and Bob. Then I will write home and ask them to forgive me. In the mean time, I'll keep my nose in the help-wanted columns for dishwashing —scrubbing—*any* honest work that will tide us over till something better turns up!"

Mrs. Howell had arisen, and was returning to her own quarters across the hall, when she paused, wavered, then with an impulsive movement leaned over and flung her arms about the little old maid in the wrapper. There was the pressure of warm, fresh lips to a faded cheek, and the sound of a murmured endearment. "Jennie Wren! You're the best friend a girl ever had!"

Some two weeks later Miss Renshaw sat before her desk addressing suffrage postal-cards, meanwhile keeping a watchful eye on the maneuvers of young Bob Howell, who sat at her feet playing "choo-choo."

Bob was an engaging youngster of some three summers, whose daily promenades to Washington Square were varied by his insistence on making friends with every living creature that came his way, also his habit of pausing to peer into every ash-barrel or garbage-can *en route*.

Too many hours of Bob at a time drove his nervous young mother almost to the point of hysterics, and of late Miss Renshaw had quietly preempted unto herself the custody of Bob, thereby affording Mrs. Howell more time for pursuing the ever elusive "job."

The endless pile of postals was seeming to diminish, and little Bob had fallen asleep on a pile of suffrage bunting, still clasping the tin "choo-choo" in a little fat fist, when there was a hasty tap at the door, followed by the appearance of an Irish head.

"It's a gintleman wants to see you, Miss Rinshaw," came a voice laboring with suppressed excitement and curiosity. "A gintleman — and an automobile. Says you put an ad in the paper."

Miss Renshaw gathered together her thoughts that had been concentrated upon suffrage and the voters' list. "Oh — of course," she stammered. "I'd forgotten all about it. A gentleman, did you say? Ask him to come up, please."

While Bridget scuffled off down the stairs, Jennie Wren took a hurried peek into the mirror and tried to fluff out her hair. Then, in another instant, she plumped up the sofa-pillows, she adjusted the window-shades, she straightened the chairs to conceal the worst-worn spots on the ingrain carpet.

And Bobbie slept on, with parted lips, and dampened curls clinging to his warm little cheeks. Then a ponderous footfall was heard on the stairway, a pause, followed by a hesitating knock at the door.

"Come!" she called, and a tall, elderly gentleman stood before her on the threshold.

"Miss J. Renshaw — who advertised in the *Ceramic Review?*"

Jennie Wren inclined her head primly. "Won't you step in?" she suggested.

As she proffered the one easy chair for his acceptance, Miss Renshaw could not fail to note that her caller appeared to be sizing-up the surroundings with some trace of amusement, judging from the twitching of lips beneath the iron-gray mustache.

His keen gray eyes took in successively the Votes-for-Women standard in the corner, the various suffrage pennants on the wall, the party-colored leaflets in neat little piles on the floor, the yellow bunting beneath Bobbie's head—and lastly they traveled back to the mistress of the premises, whose backbone grew rigid as she sensed the presence of an enemy nigh.

"I gather you must be a suffragist," he vouchsafed pleasantly enough. "Perhaps I won't have to introduce myself, after all—my name is Hamilton."

Miss Renshaw straightened to her full height of five feet one. "Senator Hamilton—who blocks every movement of the army?"

Standing on her own ground, she had the point of vantage, and the Senator was surprised into taking the defensive.

"In opposing the movement," he heard himself saying, while his better judgment assured him of his foolishness in justifying his position, "I have been governed solely by my high esteem for women. In their sacred sphere—as wives—as mothers—"

"It isn't given us all to be mothers," interposed Jennie Wren, with a glance at the sleeping child. "Some of us can only be—aunts."

Somewhat nonplused and taken aback, the Senator thumped his hat against his knee, while his hostess trotted across the room to the mantel.

"You have come to see my Toby jug," she said in a businesslike manner. "This is it," and she placed in the Senator's hands a piece of chinaware in the image and likeness of a thirsty old gentleman, with red coat, green trousers, and a most ingratiating bibulous smile.

The Senator's fingers closed lovingly over the jug, while his face lighted up with the enthusiasm of the collector who has happened upon a prize.

"It has been in my family for five generations," said Miss Renshaw in a voice devoid of emotion. "I can produce proof, if necessary, that it is genuine Staffordshire."

The Senator examined it inside and out, a perfect specimen without flaw or blemish, and with lingering touch replaced it on the mantel.

"Miss Renshaw," he said, trying to repress his eagerness, "I shall be glad to buy it at the price you set—but, to be perfectly frank, in normal times this jug would fetch twice the sum. Must you part with it now? Pardon me, but—is it necessary?"

"It is very necessary," said the woman quietly. "The ready cash—*now*—means that this baby"—two pairs of eyes turned to Bobbie, who stirred and sighed in his sleep—"that this baby and his mother can have a summer outing. Otherwise—they can't," she explained.

"Your—nephew, I take it?" floundered the Senator.

Miss Renshaw shook her head. "There isn't a human being in the world who belongs to me," she said. "But across the hall there lives this little boy and his mother, who sometimes seems as much of a baby as he is. She's only twenty-three; but she's all alone, with a child to support.

"Somebody's got to lend a hand—I used to think," she went on half to her caller, half to herself; "it was tough luck, there being such a lot of us old maids in the world. But I see now that we're good for something—that we really are needed to help take care of women with young children.

"But this doesn't concern you, Senator Hamilton," she interrupted herself apologetically. "Did you say you would take the jug?"

The Senator drew out his check-book and a fountain pen, while Jennie Wren from the closet shelves produced a sheet of brown paper. During the progress of the wrapping arrangements, Bobbie, roused by the rattling sound, opened his eyes, smiled vaguely, and gradually obtained his bearings.

"Aunt Jennie—what you doin' wid my Toby jug?" he demanded with surprising clearness.

Miss Renshaw's hands twitched, and she tried to capitulate. "Bobbie dear—wouldn't you like to go out into the country, with all the pretty flowers and the green grass—and ride on a horsie—"

Bobbie refused to permit the clouding of the issue. His sturdy little legs carried him across the floor, and with a scream of agonized protest he flung himself against Miss Renshaw's skirts.

"If you let dat bad man take away my Toby jug," he wailed in ever-rising crescendo, "I'll—tell—*my*—mother!"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the Senator, somehow feeling himself the meanest wretch unhanged. "Don't cry like that, little chap," trying in vain to make his voice heard above the din. "Everything will be all right. Oh, where's his mother?"

There was a whisk of skirts and a pale young woman in shabby street dress brushed by the Senator, and, all unheeding the presence of a stranger, sank to her knees and gathered in her sobbing little son. "There, there!" she crooned in comforting tones that mothers have used since the world began. "Mother's here—and he mustn't cry."

With her lips pressed to the child's

curls, the young mother, all absorbed in her own affairs, rose to her feet until her indifferent gaze fell on the stranger. Then Jennie Wren, standing by, was startled by a simultaneous kindling of recognition in the eyes of both, passing like lightning from an expression of stunned astonishment to one of joy and rapture indescribable.

There was a muttered exclamation on the part of the Senator as he sprang forward with arms outstretched to the girl, who flung herself, crying, on his shoulder.

"Daddy—my darling daddy!"

"Margaret—my little daughter!"

All unheeded, Miss Renshaw stole away to the little bedroom across the hall. Bobbie and his mother had no need of her now; they would be well cared for, and she had left her suffrage and her Toby jug in undisputed possession.

She was very, very glad she reasoned—and knew all the time she had never been so lonely and so miserable in her life. She chided herself again and again for being a mean old thing, and had succeeded in working herself into a more complaisant state of mind by the time they came to seek her out.

The faces of the Senator and his daughter bore traces of happy tears, but that of Bobbie was wreathed in smiles unalloyed, for under his arm he bore the Toby jug.

"Miss Renshaw," said the Senator, "Margaret has told me of all your kindness—kindness that we can never hope to repay. I am taking them away with me to-night to my home on Long Island—that home, by the way, which is yours for so long as you will condescend to honor it. And if there is anything in the world you would like—anything I can do for you—"

"Senator Hamilton," spoke up Private Jennie Wren, "will you receive a deputation from the woman suffrage army?"

The suffrage fête at Oyster Bay, held on the grounds of Senator George Randall Hamilton, the erstwhile enemy to suffrage, was featured in the photographic Sunday supplements of all the great metropolitan dailies.

On the left of the host stood his beautiful young daughter (responsible, Dame Rumor had it, for the rescue of her father from the talons of the antis); next to her, General Alma Pierpont Smith, Colonel Lydia Barclay (Mrs. Daniel Hunt Barclay), *et cetera.*

But in the post of honor, on the right of the Senator, appeared a little lady whose identity had previously been unknown to the newspaper world. She wore a wonderful new frock, and her arms were laden with a huge bunch of golden flowers.

It was Private Jane Renshaw—but they called her Jennie Wren.

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THERE AIN'T NO SICH ANIMAL

BY JANE BURR

AND simpletons would like to feel,
"One love and only one is real!"
There are as many loves for each
As stray within our eager reach;
And he or she who longs anon
For faithfulness and sweet romance
Must cast himself or her upon
A desert isle without a chance.

The God of the Invincibly Strong Arms

by Achmed Abdullah

Being Chapters from the Memoirs of Stuart Vandewater

FROM Benares to Paris—from the worship of blood-bathed Doorgha to a deal involving something like a ton of gold — that is the jump taken in the campaign to bring to naught *Hussain Khan's* plotted revenge upon the white usurper of Oriental rights. It is to be noted that the author uses the term "white man" as meaning Europeans or the full-blooded descendants of European emigrants. These stories take place after the general war which broke out in August, 1914. If you like them let us know.

IV—THE AFFAIR OF THE MILLION FRANCS GOLD

MAYOL was drawling in that inimitable way of his as he danced across the boards of the Scala, singing:

"C'est la tout', tout', tout' p'tit' chose,
C'est la chos' qui nous aguiche."

Sergius, Rose la Rosse, and a bevy of lanky, fuzzy-haired chorus girls took up the arrogant refrain as the drop descended on the finale of the first act.

It was a gala night, the premier of the new Scala revue, "On en Rigole." I was glad that I had let the night porter of my hotel persuade me to purchase a ticket at a slightly enhanced rate.

I needed recreation—needed it bad. The mad tale which Mascasenhas, the Goanese renegade, had told me, that afternoon in his apartment of the Villa des Ternes, had played the very deuce with my nerves. I was loaded up to the Plimsoll mark with uncanny, goose-fleshy expectations.

To be sure, I had seen the half-caste since then. He had promised to stick by me, to assist me by every means in his power. But more and more I understood with what forces I had to contend.

Perhaps my imagination was a bit out of focus; but I read a sinister meaning into the two cable despatches of the day before: Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, had been assassinated by a Brahman priest, who escaped; and a train which carried a certain fire-eating Congressman from Alabama and four officers of the En-

This series began in the All-Story Weekly for September 18.

gineer Corps on their way to Hawaii, where they were going to inspect the new fortifications at Pearl Harbor, had been derailed near Salt Lake City. Nobody had been killed. But there were indications of a peculiar nature along the tracks.

It seemed to me that the God of the Invincibly Strong Arms was living up to his name. I knew that Hussain Khan, the suave central Asian who was the master spirit of that organization of Oriental "patriots," would strike at me as soon as he found out that I was an enemy worth reckoning with. I had had several indications in the past that he suspected me of knowing more than was good for him—or for me.

And I was afraid — miserably afraid.

After all, I was fighting in the dark, ignorant how and at whom I should strike, burdened with a brooding secret which I could not communicate to any sneering, bald-headed diplomatists without being considered a harmless lunatic. I was alone, with nothing to protect or guide me but chance, the blind oracle of the gambler and the detective. Hussain, on the other hand, had an organization at his beck and call which would strike me when and where he gave the word. Then there would be a cheerful little cable item in the American papers that Stuart Vandewater, of Washington, D. C., formerly a clerk in the State Department, had been murdered by Paris apaches while on a slumming-tour to the Rue de Venise.

I didn't relish the prospect.

So I was in the position of a man who has just filled in to a big inside straight and is up against the dealer's pat hand—and that dealer a man who used to perform card-tricks on the big time. Or, as my friend Joe Carter, of the Larchmont Yacht Club, would express it, I was like a nervous skipper on a dark night with a lee shore close at hand and no bearings to steer by.

Well, here was at least an hour's respite from worry. I blessed Mayol, Sergius, and the other lambent exponents of French wit, and gave them a good hand.

I had a fair enough seat in the parquet, well to the front and up against the wall. The stage-box rose directly above me, sheltering me with its gilt Louis XV curves so that I was invisible to its occupants.

When the curtain descended there was a momentary silence over the house—that usual interval between the last sporadic hand-clappings and the silken rustle of the women rising to take a turn in the foyer.

A voice from the stage-box above me cut through the stillness like a knife:

"Europe bases her imperialistic, her conquering program on brilliant strokes of diplomacy, on sudden, clashing feats of arms. But we base ours on the fanatical support of our whole people, on our common mystic faith in our racial destiny."

It was the voice and the sentiments of Hussain Khan. I was neither startled nor surprised. He was as much a social lion in Paris as he had been in Washington, and it would have been strange had he missed a Scala premier.

Judging from the voices, there were two people in the box besides the central Asian. One was doubtless a Frenchwoman; the other a man who spoke splendid French, but with the peculiar metallic accent of the Levantine. I listened for all I was worth. And I thought that the Levantine's voice, though bland with suave innuendo, held a quiver of nervous fear.

When the curtain rose on the dark-ended house I quietly left my seat and hurried to the up-stairs *promenoir*, where I had a perfect view of the right-hand stage-box. My opera-glasses were up and focused the moment the drop descended on the second act.

There was Hussain, as I had expected, and a good-looking Frenchwoman. The other man was unknown to me. He was large, fat, and sallow-skinned,

with a mouth like a gaping sword-wound, lecherous, saturnine eyes, and a neck that would have disqualified a yearling ox. His face was vaguely familiar to me—from newspaper cuts, I suppose. But I could not place it at the moment. A casual inquiry, reenforced by ten sous, gave me the information I was after.

"The big gentleman in the stage-box?" the program-girl asked. "Why, that's Alcibiade Baltazzi — the great Baltazzi. I thought everybody knew *him.*"

The girl was right. Everybody did know him. His was a name to conjure with in certain circles; nor the meanest circles at that.

I studied him through my opera-glasses. So that was Baltazzi! I had never seen him face to face before.

Many years ago he had come out of Africa, and had taken an immediate spotlight on the gay stage of Paris. For he had bought, cash down, the ill-famed marble palace in the Quartier d'Europe which Fürst Trachenberg-Hatzfeldt, the Silesian "coal milliardaire," had built. There was talk of silver bath-tubs and door-knobs studded with precious stones. When the young German was finally ruined, Baron Doria, the Portuguese, had bought it. There had been more scandal, another noble name dragged through the slime of disgrace.

Then came Baltazzi's turn. There were, of course, some croaking ravens of ill-omen willing to lay odds that the new proprietor would travel the road of his predecessors. But in the course of the years all such talk ceased. Instead of being ruined, Baltazzi quadrupled his fortune at the time of the first boom in the Kafir market. Shortly afterward he went into partnership with Lucien Perquel, son of the wealthy *agent de change,* and commenced to make financial history, both on the Stock Exchange and on the *coulisse.* There was no doubt any more of his financial stability, his huge resources, his steel-ribbed honesty. And though the Faubourg and the diplomatic corps had frowned at first on the social aspirations of this adventurer with the nondescript Levantine name, they had speedily taken him to their bosoms when his daughter married Prince Jean Bonaparte.

But every once in a while you would hear a whisper of the gray old tales which had floated to the surface when he first set foot on Paris soil.

That had been in the days before Stanley and the Belgians beat the Kongolese Arabs into obedience and chastened manners.

Of course people had made fortunes in Africa since the days of Carthage. But Baltazzi's fortune was too bloated, too indecent, too sinister in its bulk.

There was talk of evil-smelling deals in "black ivory" — slaves — down the Chari, the Chad, and toward Ubanghui and the lower Kongo. There had also been whisperings of a white chief of the Baketes, of his treachery toward his adopted tribe and of his subsequent leadership of the Bassundis, when the latter came out of the north and raided and burned the Kongo as far as Comba—as far as Brazzaville even. It was said that this mysterious white chief had made an alliance with Mabiala Minganga, "the great Mabiala," that black Napoleon who had his Marshal Ney in his nephew, Mabiala N'Kinké, "the little Mabiala." And when M. Laval, the French administrator of the interior country was murdered, nailed to a cross in front of his official residence, it had been told by a Senegalese *tirailleur* who had escaped the general massacre, that the white chief had given the command for the foul murder.

Finally there had been a revolution by three of the lesser chiefs—Fulambao, Lilamboa, and Makabendilu; and the white chief had disappeared with about four thousand Loango porters, each laden with a hundred pounds of ivory and gold-dust. He had made toward Bornu and Timbuctu, where

he had treacherously sold his Loangos into slavery to the Tuaregs, and had then left the African stage.

But nobody knew for certain. And if the French government had more precise information, they kept it shelved. After all, Baltazzi was a rich man, a powerful factor in financial circles; and in the late Great War he had shown his love for his adopted country.

Of course, there was no reason in the world why Hussain should not know him, or why he should not be Hussain's guest at a Scala premier. But I had more than what is colloquially known as a hunch. I could not forget the nervous tremolo in Baltazzi's voice when he spoke to Hussain, nor the latter's remark about "the mystic faith of Oriental people in their racial destiny." Hussain, dangerous as a snake, had also the snake's one virtue—he never struck without giving warning, even if the warning was a little indirect or obscure.

He was up to some deviltry. Of that I was reasonably certain. But for a while it seemed that my hands were tied, that I was powerless to discover or to circumvent it. I could not march up to Baltazzi and give him warning of a fantastic danger, the very nature of which was unknown to me. Nor could I rise in my seat and bawl aloud to the audience that there was a mysterious Asian in their midst about to choke one of Paris's leading financiers in his coils. I simply stood there in the *promenoir,* watching through my opera-glasses and wishing for a dictaphone. I practised resignation, and I practised it as a man takes physic—with a wry face.

When the curtain rose on the last act I suddenly made up my mind. I did one of those mad, impulsive things which are so typically American, both collectively and individually, and which, historically speaking, have done us so much good—and so much harm.

The night before there had been a charity performance at the Scala for the benefit of the orphaned children of the Champagne country, the province which had borne the brunt of the fighting in the first phase of the Great War. There were still a good many flags and tricolor pennants and buntings wound about pillars and the railings.

I watched my moment carefully. When Mayol danced on again with another rip-roaring song, and the attention of everybody, even of the *blasé* ushers' and program-girls' attention was centered on the stage, I snatched rapidly at a lot of red-white-and-blue bunting which decorated the pillar directly behind me. About six feet of it came off.

I rushed down the staircase. Opening my coat I festooned the giddy stuff around my waist in the manner of the French commissioners of police when they are on official duty. Then I buttoned my coat again and walked leisurely through the parquet.

I came up the small stairway which leads to the stage-box. The attendant stopped me promptly with a demand for my ticket, and I just as promptly opened my coat and gave him a glimpse of my usurped badge of authority. It had the same thorough and rapid effect as the flash of a deputy sheriff's brass star has in our own West. The attendant collapsed.

I told him in a quick, severe manner to show me to a place where I could watch the Baltazzi box without the knowledge of the occupants. He complied at once. Two seconds later I was stationed in a small closetlike room to the right and in back of the stage-box, with two narrow openings, one toward the stage and the other toward the box itself. I don't know what its real use was. But it answered my purpose perfectly.

The woman in the box was taken up with what was happening on the boards. But the two men talked feverishly, earnestly. I listened, catching a word here and there. I strained every nerve in my center of

hearing. The blood was pulsating in my ears like brook-water drumming into a still pool.

At first the words came indistinct, hazy, chopped, meaningless. The din of the orchestra at my feet, rising in waves, drowned the beginnings and the ends of the sentences. There was, of course, my own imagination to supply a missing link. But it hindered instead of helping me. For I was intent on the one subject which was uppermost in my mind, thus being rendered prone to pounce on a half-intelligible phrase and clothe it with wrong meaning.

Finally I thought of an old trick of mine. I used to be very fond of the violin, and during my years in Washington I attended religiously all the symphonic concerts. In the course of time I trained my ear to follow the melody and the intricate variations of the first and second violins through all the mazes and arabesques of the accompanying instruments. It would take me a few moments before I could disentangle the skein of those two lonely violins. But I always succeeded, even with Strauss and Debussy. Now I did the same thing with the voices of Hussain and Baltazzi.

The first complete sentence which I caught came from the lips of Hussain Khan:

"We must have the entire amount by Thursday night. No use hedging, my friend."

Baltazzi's answering basso boomed out with a low throb of choked, impotent fury.

"I tell you it's impossible! One million francs in gold! *Pensez-vous!* In gold! It cannot be done. Gold is scarce. It has been scarce ever since the end of the war. All the world is clamoring for the precious metal—the United States, Australia, the Argentine."

Here a riotous clash of drums and braying of brasses and reed instruments surged up from the orchestra and drowned the two voices. Once I heard Hussain's voice—"Mabiala Minganga"; just the two words. I recognized the name of the black Napoleon of the Kongo, who was said to have been one of the Levantine's associates.

When next I heard Baltazzi's voice it was steely, truculent.

"What of it? The French government has forgotten and forgiven."

"Possibly. But what about the other dainty things? What about the murder of M. Ponel, the mutilation of Adjutant de Prat? What about the little mischance which happened to the Genil expedition south of Brazzaville in ninety-five?"

"All forgotten! To-day I am Baltazzi, of Baltazzi & Perquel, a power in the land. My very name is changed."

The Levantine laughed—a cold, free laugh of relief. He seemed to feel that he was holding the whip-hand, for he continued in an arrogant manner:

"No, no, my dear Hussain! If that's all you know, the little blackmail scheme of yours won't bear fruit."

"Do not be too sure of it."

The other's voice came sharply with a staccato inflection, cutting like a dagger.

"And suppose I tell you that your real name is De Lara?

"Suppose I send a little cable to the Côte d'Ivoire, and tell a certain Loango friend of mine the new name and address of the man who sold those four thousand porters into slavery?

"How long do you think it would take one of these black gentlemen to reach the coast, then to Marseilles, on to Paris—to a little marble palace in the Quartier d'Europe?

"And how long would M. Alcibiade Baltazzi live then?"

I had my eyes glued to the narrow opening. Under the haggard shaft of light from the stage I saw Baltazzi turn as gray as a dead man's bones. He tried to look indifferent. But it was a springless, putty-hearted fop-

pery of make-believe indifference. It did not deceive me; nor did it deceive Hussain Khan. I was sure that the man was caught. Hussain had shown his hand, and it was all trumps.

Just then the woman turned and engaged the two men in conversation. Shortly afterward the curtain descended on the last act, and they left the box. The attendant was helping the woman on with her wrap, while Hussain Khan and the Levantine stopped for a moment directly in front of the little closet where I was hidden.

"Thursday night at eleven o'clock," Hussain whispered. "Don't fail me. I shall send one of my servants. He will be dressed in the robe of a Brahman priest—a little fancy of mine."

He laughed.

"And to make sure of his identity he will have a scarlet mark painted on his forehead. Pay, my friend! It's the cheapest thing you can do.

"Another thing, Baltazzi. Set no trap. Send your servants away. Any pretext will do. But you will be alone in the house."

He turned to the woman, speaking in a louder voice:

"Pardon me, *madame*. I know it's wretched manners to talk business after business hours. But in such pressing circumstances as these—"

He offered her his arm, bowing deeply; and they walked on, Baltazzi following.

Thursday night, at eleven o'clock, at the house of Baltazzi in the Quartier d'Europe! I would forget neither the date nor the place.

It was now Monday night, nearer Tuesday morning. I had barely three days ahead of me to do—what? Good Lord, what was I really to do?

There was exactly one thing which stood out in crass relief.

Baltazzi was going to pay one million francs in gold. I knew Hussain to be a wealthy man. He was generous with his money — indeed lavish. He was what is commonly called a good spender. But even the best of good spenders is hardly ever in a situation where he needs a couple of hundred thousand dollars on the spur of the moment—and in gold.

Of course some vices are expensive. But Hussain was most decidedly not a sensualist, a voluptuary; rather the opposite. He was one of those sneering ascetics whom Islam has bred through the centuries — a latter-day Wahabi, with a purity of personal morals which John Knox might have envied.

So it was reasonable to deduce that he needed this money for a particular object. The fact that he was going to send a servant dressed in a Brahman robe and with the scarlet mark of the God of the Invincibly Strong Arms painted on his forehead, made Hussain's purpose doubly clear — and doubly sinister. He needed the money for the furtherance of the fanatical schemes which was more to him than the breath of his nostrils. But the amount was huge. The date for its receipt was sharply defined. He had stipulated gold.

Here were three points which proved to me that he needed this big lot of cash for a crime which would be expensive; which had to be finished on a certain date; which—for otherwise he wouldn't have stipulated gold—would be executed by people afraid of drafts, bank-notes, or any other legal tender which is easily traced.

Even crime costs money. And big crime costs big money. One million francs! Two hundred thousand dollars! I began to wonder, to figure out how many human lives such an amount would account for.

Early on the following morning I communicated with Mascasenhas. We met, as usual, in a little dairy restaurant of the Bois de Boulogne. It was such an innocuous little place, open to the eyes of all the world—the very thing for a clandestine meeting.

In a few words I explained to the half-caste.

He shook his head.

"I don't know anything about it," he told me.

"Was there no recent gathering at the temple of Marly-le-Roi?"

"To be sure. We always meet twice a week. You know that, Mr. Vandewater."

"That's so," I agreed. "But can't you think of anything? No suspicious features whatsoever?"

"Well, there was just one thing. Three nights ago, at our last gathering, after the usual ceremonies were over, Hussain, Komoto, and Abderrahman Idryssieh el Touati, a new arrival from Morocco, had a private meeting in one of the smaller rooms. They asked me to wait. Afterward Hussain gave me a letter. He told me to deliver it at a certain address. There would be no answer. I did as he directed me."

Here was a possible clue. I asked Mascasenhas if he remembered the name and the address.

"Why, yes," he said. "But I imagine it was only some private affair of Hussain's—invitation to dinner or the theater, or something of that sort. You see, the man I gave the letter to was Admiral Segantin."

I asked the Goanese to meet me again at the dairy restaurant in the afternoon at half past five. Then I hailed the first passing taxi, and offered the driver double fare to speed it up to No. 34 Faubourg Poissonnière. I remembered that the largest and most efficient press-clippings bureau in Europe was located there.

The manager was less surprised at my request than I imagined he would be. There are so many political currents and undercurrents even in army and navy circles; there are so many conflicting interests and factions; there is so much spying going on in this beautiful land of France, spying and counterspying, beginning in the very kindergartens and winding up in the Elysée Palace, that my order did not strike the manager as odd or suspicious.

He bowed and smiled.

"Very good, sir. It will be easy. You said anything of a nature regarding the Admiral Segantin?"

"Yes. Personal and official and semiofficial stuff. All gossip and rumors. Anything at all. Not only in the Paris papers, but even the provincial dailies. And don't forget the little weekly papers—the— Oh, you know!"

The manager winked at me.

"I understand perfectly. You mean the little blackmailing sheets — the mongers of scandal."

"Exactly."

"Very well. You shall have it. Shall we say about a week from tomorrow?"

"No. I give you exactly three hours."

The manager lifted his slim, white hands in a gesture of genteel despair. But he changed countenance when I gave him a look at the inside of my pocketbook.

"Name your own price, my dear sir," I told him. "But I must have the clippings at my hotel inside of three hours."

They were there on time. It took me nearly two hours to glance through them, to sort and tabulate them. Then I got busy with pen and paper. Here is the result:

MATTERS CONCERNING THE ADMIRAL SEGANTIN OF THE FRENCH NAVY.

I. Son of Roland Segantin, cabinet minister under the Empire, and his wife Héloïse, née De Lubersac, of the old nobility.

II. Rapid and brilliant naval career. Has invented a new torpedo, also steel net to protect battle-ships against submarine attacks. Is an expert on high-power explosives.

III. Married to Mlle. Angèle Ducastel. Divorced. Has had several notorious affairs. One five years ago with Mme. Ottilie Defresne of the Folies Marigny is said to have crippled him financially.

IV. Threatened with court-martial. came near being cashiered from service because of debts. Family paid them.

V. Saw service during late war; acquitted himself splendidly. Chiefly at naval battle of Pola. Received the Grand Cordon of the Légion d'Honneur. Returned from war, sort of national hero.

VI. Is an expert on Moroccan affairs. Is said to speak Arabic fluently, and to have many friends among the natives.

VII. His flag-ship is the Waldeck-Rousseau.

VIII. Was appointed admiral-in-chief of both the transports and the naval vessels for the expedition to Morocco which government has decided to send.

IX. Invented new explosive very deadly even in smallest quantities. Government has taken it up; will use it in Moroccan campaign. Explosive will be stored on board the flag-ship.

X. Fleet and transports will sail Friday at noon. Admiral in ill health. May not go with fleet.

XI. Had recently affair with Mme. ——. Scandal threatening. Said to have contracted enormous debts for her. Has played for huge stakes at the Cercle Richelieu. Won several million francs. Received payment. Suddenly talk that he had cheated at cards. M. —— threatens exposure unless money is returned to him. Several blackmailers on inside of affair.

XII. *Scientific Weekly* has article by Compton Morse, the great Canadian chemist, in which he claims that the new explosive of Admiral Segantin is positively too dangerous; that it can be touched off even at long distance through contact with certain waves, such as wireless waves. Segantin ridicules and denies this. Government upholds him. Explosive will be stored on the flag-ship. See Note IX.

XIII. Segantin finally obtained sick leave. Lepelletier to command in his place. Explosive, guarded and protected, has been stored on board the flag-ship. *Figaro* eulogizes Segantin because in spite of ill health and being bedridden he is in continuous contact by wireless telephone and wireless telegraph with the flag-ship of the expedition.

XIV. Besides Lepelletier, flag-ship will have on board the Generals D'Amale, Paoli, Lesueur, Macdonald-Dubois, the minister for the colonies, the first and second assistant secretaries for the colonies, and the entire staff of the army of occupation. Everything points to the fact that government expects to settle the Moroccan question once and for all.

XV. It is rumored that M. —— of the Cercle Richelieu, and the professional blackmailers who are on the inside of the card-cheating affair, have given Admiral Segantin until Friday forenoon to pay the amount which they claim, and that this amount totals up to one million francs.

The whole thing was startlingly clear. It was simple, ingenious, and fiendish. It bore the earmarks of Hussain from first to last.

There was the date, Thursday evening, on which Hussain would receive the one million francs. On the following day Segantin would have to turn over the identical sum to M. —— and the blackmailers or else stand disgraced in the eyes of France.

On the same day the fleet of naval vessels and army transports would set sail for Morocco. Segantin, who remained, would be in contact by wireless communication with the flag-ship which carried the explosive. This explosive, according to the article in the *Scientific Weekly*, was in danger of being touched off through contact with wireless waves.

Finally as an afterthought came the fact told me by the Goanese, that at the last gathering in Marly-le-Roi a newcomer had made his appearance, Abderrahman Idryssieh el Touati—from Morocco. And the flag-ship carried those military and civil officers whose strength of purpose and craft would spell the end of Moroccan independence!

I did not stop to sermonize to myself about the moral turpitude of the admiral. Who was I to judge?

I simply made up my mind to drive some sort of spoke into Hussain's wheel.

It was clear that Segantin would not touch off the explosive until Friday morning after he had received the money. The night before Hussain would send one of his associates to the house of Baltazzi, presumably in a motor-car; one million francs in gold weigh a good deal. It was up to me to side-track the amount between Thursday night and Friday morning.

A warning to the authorities would be useless. There was absolutely nothing but my bare word to impli-

cate Hussain. And if the fact that Baltazzi had actually withdrawn the indicated amount in gold from the bank corroborated my suspicions they would only point at Baltazzi. And Hussain would laugh up his sleeve.

I found Mascasenhas waiting for me when I returned to the dairy restaurant in the Bois de Boulogne.

I did not take him fully into my confidence. The man's nerve was utterly broken. Hussain had seen to that. The only living thing about him was his unquenchable hatred of Hussain and the blind, pathetic belief that he was all white—that his Hindu blood was in abeyance. It was none of my business to disillusion him. On the contrary, the more firmly he was convinced of the responsibilities which he owed to his father's race and blood the more secure was my hold upon his loyalty.

Still, I was not going to give him a chance to ask me any embarrassing questions, nor to permit the yellow streak in him to get the upper hand. I went straight to the point.

I asked him to procure for me just as soon as he could the regulation costume of a Brahman priest from head-covering to leather socks and sandals.

"I'm in a deuce of a hurry," I added. "I've no time now to explain. But I need it, I tell you. It will help me to fight that evil influence which threatens the best and finest of our race—your race and mine. I need it to fight Hussain—the man whom you hate."

A murderous glimmer came into the half-caste, purple-black eyes.

"Hussain Khan—the man I hate—the man who has stolen my life and sent my soul to eternal punishment!"

His voice choked into an inarticulate gurgle.

"Never fear! I shall send the costume to you to-night or to-morrow morning. There are plenty of them at the temple of Marly-le-Roi."

True to his word, he sent it to me the next morning. Then I went out and bought a little tube of scarlet paint and a fine brush.

The plan which was germinating in my brain was desperate. But it needed a heroic effort to slide to base.

I was rather pleased with the completeness of my preparations. I seemed to have thought of everything. Suddenly I remembered with a laugh that I had forgotten the vital part—an associate whom I could trust, a dead-game sort of sport who wouldn't be afraid. Chances were that the messenger would come alone. But suppose he didn't?

And whom could I take into my confidence? Mascasenhas was out of the question. For a moment I was wishing for a magic lamp. I would have liked to rub it and to transport to Paris certain denizens of New York from around the Gas-House district. There's where I would have found a fit instrument for the matter of a drink and five dollars.

I dressed carefully and walked over to Voisin's, where I had a leisurely and very excellent dinner.

The next day would see me in a desperate venture, playing leap-frog with fate. I would need all my strength and ingenuity. So why stint the inner man the night before? I remembered an old saying I had heard in India:

That which binds the heart is a span of fat.

I saw to it that in my particular case the span of fat should be of the very best, from the purée Mongole to the duck à la Rouennais.

At an advanced hour I rose from the table, too late to take in a show. So I strolled along slowly. It was a perfect night. Spring was in the air, and the pavement of Paris was calling me out. Very well! Let to-morrow go hang! To-day was another day.

The thought amused me; I laughed out loud. A man who was walking a few feet ahead of me turned and looked me up and down. He murmured:

"Espèce d'idiot! Espèce d'Américain fou!" ("Sort of idiot! Sort of American crazy man!")

Then he spat through his teeth in a care-free, nonchalant manner, showing his contempt of all foreigners, chiefly crazy ones who laugh out loud with no reason at night in the streets of Paris.

I looked at the man.

He was a typical Paris apache from his high, peaked cap, pushed back on his round, close-cropped skull at a rakish angle, to his peg-top trousers which tightly encircled the ankles. The pointed shoes gave the finishing-touch of effeminacy to this parasite of society.

I hurried on. He stopped, gave a half-turn which brought his back against a building and watched me, suspicious, alert. The fitful shafts of the electric light overhead gave me a fairly clear view of his features.

He was decidedly not prepossessing. From his protruding jaw to the shifty eyes and low forehead it was evident that he had been born in a circumambient and all-penetrating ether of crime and vice. He was the original abysmal brute with the morals of a hyena, the acquisitive instincts of a pirate, and the compassion of a Bengal tiger.

I kept on coming nearer. He stood quietly watching me. A few minutes before I had wished for one of the denizens of the Gas-House District. I wondered if this was a tip straight from the Makers of Providence.

When I came abreast of him I offered him a cigarette—a neverfailing calumet in Latin lands. He accepted, lit up, and tried to screw his vicious features into a semblance of geniality.

"Eh bein, bourgeois?" he murmured.

His clipped words carried less curiosity than direct challenge. He knew quite well that well-dressed strangers do not rub acquaintance with the scum of the Paris underworld without ulterior motives. It was clear from his semifriendly manner that he would listen to a reasonable proposition.

I suppose my first question was rather foolish. It would have been perfectly proper with one of the knights of the round table. But with this pride of the outer boulevards—

This is what I asked:

"How would you like a little adventure?"

He stared at me.

"Tu plaisantes, citoyen." ("You're jollying me, mister.")

His tone was villainously familiar.

"Pour ma part, je préfère l'aventure à l'amour." ("Personally I prefer adventure in love.")

Here he winked at me in a scandalous manner. Then I plunged right in. I had not too much time to spare.

I held his attention from the first. Inside the next ten minutes he had fifty francs of my money in his pocket with a promise of ten times the same amount on the following (Thursday) night under certain conditions, to which he agreed with a laugh.

"Rien de plus facile, mon petit bourgeois!" ("Nothing easier, old square-toes!") he assured me. "Yes, yes. Three doors this side of the Palace Baltazzi. Sure I know the building. A quarter to eleven. All right. I'll be there."

I asked another timid question. Again he laughed.

"Qu'est-c'tu penses?" ("What d' ye think?") "I'd croak fourteen boobs for half the money. And him! Why, you only want him beat up a little bit, and kidnaped and gagged for the matter of a few hours! That's nothing. Don't worry. I'll be there —Gentle?—Sure. I shall be gentle—very gentle!"

He insisted on shaking hands with me, winked at me once more in his shameless manner, and slunk off into a side street with a genial:

"À demain, mon bougre." ("See you to-morrow, old toppo.")

The next morning I was up and about and busy with the peep o' day.

A Parisian friend — may Heaven forgive him for the unjust suspicions which lurked in his smiles—helped me to find and rent a little temporary lodging near the Conservatory of Music.

I hated the smirk on the fat landlady's face when she assured me that she was not the one to ask indiscreet questions. Why, yes, she understood perfectly. There were so many costume balls, so many gallant adventures—and, *bon sang,* if I wanted to enter the flat dressed as an inspector of *gendarmerie* and leave it as a dead image of Tartuffe she did not care one little snap of her fingers.

A million sincere thanks for the money! *Monsieur* was most generous. It was indeed right and proper that young gentlemen should amuse themselves. She herself—when she was younger—

Finally I got rid of her.

I unpacked my suit-case and changed. I studied myself in the long, cheval glass. A perfect stranger seemed to stare at me from the shining surface. The long, flowing folds somehow added inches to my stature, and the turban lent a certain somber and austere dignity to my countenance which would have surprised my friends at home.

I gave a little involutary shudder when with a paint-brush I applied the scarlet mark of Siva on my forehead. I felt more at ease when the unclean thing had dried and I had hid it from view by a downward pull of my turban.

I still had plenty of time. So I sat down to smoke and to think.

To tell the truth I felt certain qualms of conscience. Not that I had any scruples about fighting a vicious, mysterious, hidden foe with weapons which were, to say the least, illegal. What other weapons could I have used? When a man hits you below the belt it doesn't do him any good to slap him on the wrist.

But here I was about to knock a man on the head, to gag, and kidnap him—and to do it all by proxy. I had hired a professional ruffian, a gangster, a bravo, to do my dirty work for me. Of course, I never did consider myself a Bayard in courage and heroism. But then I had never imagined myself to be more of a coward than the average man.

Decidedly unpleasant thoughts! And I am inclined to be a little self-conscious, anyway.

Finally I absolved myself. Even given the necessary moral and physical pluck to attend to the thing myself, I simply could not afford to run the risk. I had consecrated my life, my energies, my strength, and my knowledge to fight Hussain and the God of the Invincibly Strong Arms whom he served. I was certain that the ends justified the means. Minor considerations did not count. I had the right, I had the duty to use the tools closest at hand.

When I left the house I turned due south. The hour was near when Baltazzi was expecting the messenger of Hussain—and when, incidentally, my apache friend was expecting the same person.

At first I felt uncomfortable and conspicuous in my borrowed plumes. But, luckily, Paris is used to figures which would cause a riot and a call for the reserves on Broadway. Paris is the metropolis of all the world, the Orient included. Indeed, the same Oriental who while in London will out-English the English in stern, sober correctness of garb will play understudy to a rainbow and a gold-flecked Himalaya butterfly when he strikes the banks of the Seine. The reason for this metamorphosis may be found in the smile of the Frenchwoman.

At all events, there are not only the picturesque figures of the French-Colonial native levies flitting about the streets — Spahis, Turcos, Senegalese, and Tongkingese—but also Hindus, Arabs, Singhalese, and grave, contemptuous, hawk-featured Moors, and many of them in their native costumes.

So I passed along quietly enough, endeavoring to imitate the quick, shuffling gait of the man used to wearing sandals.

When finally I was within sight of the Palace Baltazzi, the whole situation flashed on me with the sudden force of a revelation. It was all so fantastic, so incongruous, so un-American!

Spring had come early, and the silver of the full moon was dancing about the bursting foliage of the trees in fleeting arabesques. Through their tracery I caught a glimpse of Baltazzi's marble palace, cool and white and gleaming; pagan in its simple Greek simplicity, like the glad, old days when the world's heart was young with laughter and big-eyed children danced to the fluting of Pan.

Inside the house was a Levantine adventurer, a former slave-trader, an ally of acrid, murderous Galla chiefs. I imagined him sitting there in the library of that cursed mansion which had ruined two great families and staring at the sacks filled with gold which he must pay out at the soft crook of another man's fingers because of the burden and the palsying fear of former crimes. And here was I in the street, hiding in the welcome shadow of a portal—a decent young American, of fair education and excellent family, dressed in the robes of a Brahman priest, the scarlet mark of an obscene Hindu deity smeared on my forehead; and farther down the street (we had seen each other and had exchanged the prearranged signal) a Paris apache, the refuse of the outer Boulevards—and my paid accomplice!

The thing was fantastic enough to please the author of the craziest grand Guignol melodrama. But it was real, real, real! And my heart seemed to plump into my shoes when I saw the face of the full moon look down at me from the heavens with a haggard, sarcastic surmise.

Punctually at eleven o'clock a limousine whirred around the corner, a white-robed, turbaned figure at the wheel. I looked rapidly up and down the street. Luckily it was empty.

The car curved up gracefully to the entrance of the Palace Baltazzi, where it stopped. The driver stepped out.

Even I, who knew what was coming, could hardly make out the exact sequence of the events which followed.

Suddenly a lithe, black shadow seemed to detach itself from the wall. There was a jump, a low, stifled outcry, the quick, screwlike movement of the garrote when it is used by an expert. The next moment a lifeless bundle was thrown unceremoniously into the tonneau of the car. Two seconds later my apache was at the wheel, as if he belonged there by right of service. He motioned me to come on.

I looked in. The Hindu was on the floor, gagged and tied, and breathing with difficulty. His turban had become loosened in the struggle. I could see his shaven head and the baleful caste-mark of Siva on his forehead. I paid the five hundred francs to the bravo.

"*Merci, citoyen*" ("Thanks, mister"), he grinned. "To-morrow morning I shall release him. Any particular time?"

"About noon."

"Good."

"And listen!" I went on. "Hurry up and bring this car back as soon as—"

He interrupted me with a laugh.

"The car? No, no, no! I sha'n't bring it back. I shall keep it as a little tip. *Monsieur* is most generous."

He was off and around the corner before I could stop him.

Here was an ugly mishap which I had not foreseen.

All along I had been somewhat undecided as to what I would and should do once I found myself in the presence of Baltazzi. I had thought first of playing the part of the Brahman messenger straight through to the end—of taking the money, loading it into the motor-car, and using it for the purpose of fighting the very organization which it was meant to serve. There

was a suggestion of grim humor in this which pleased me.

There was the other alternative of appearing to the old Levantine in my true colors and counting on the man's gratitude, using him as a valuable confederate in my future battles with Hussain Khan. Not only that; it was also clear that Baltazzi was afraid for his life, afraid of Hussain's threat to send an avenger of the Loangos on his trail. I would persuade him to join forces with me. All the time I had been wishing for a confederate whom I could take fully into my confidence. And here was the very man!

But I knew that, whatever my decision, the motor-car should be in readiness and waiting on the street outside. How did I know that Hussain himself, anxious because of the huge amount of gold and the colossal plans involved, might not patrol the neighborhood, and even assist the messenger when it came to taking the gold away? Two hundred thousand dollars in gold! I made a rapid calculation. It would weigh nearly a thousand pounds.

The more I thought of it the clearer it became to me. The fact that Hussain Khan did not call for the gold himself, but sent an associate, proved that he would be in readiness somewhere to lend a helping hand. Perhaps he was afraid that the Levantine, with the courage of the cornered jackal, might show fight after all, might spring a trap. So here would be his Hindu servant to fight in the first trenches.

Now the car had disappeared. Hussain Khan would smell a rat when he passed by. He would feel convinced that Baltazzi had sprung a trap. He would get into the house.

The only thing I could do would be to finish the whole thing as quickly as possible.

I hurried up the steps and rang the bell.

Baltazzi himself opened the door. He glanced at me; then, motioning me to follow, waddled ponderously up the stairs. On the second floor he opened a door. He pointed inside.

"In there," he said. "Wait."

I entered.

It was the sort of room I had imagined I would find—dark, massive, rich, imposing. An Anatolian silk rug in claret color, shot through with palest blue and tawny orange, covered the floor. The walls were hung with ancient, priceless Cordova leather; and the chimneypiece was covered with exquisite glazed tiles from Turkish mosques.

Fit surroundings for a prince of finance, I thought. Suddenly a flash and gleam from the left-hand wall riveted my attention. I looked closely; and I was amused at what I saw.

It is said that there is a morbid curiosity which forces the murderer to view the place of his crime. Some psychic reason of the same sort may have caused the Levantine to decorate one of the walls with a shimmering, cruel mass of African curios — *sjamboks, assagais,* knives, and knobkerries. They looked strangely out of place in the midst of the splendid, old-world furnishings; and they told their own grim tale.

Two minutes later Baltazzi came softly into the room through a small, tapestry-covered door which I had not noticed before.

He looked at me in silence. He took me all in, from my flowing robe and my sandals to the scarlet mark of Siva on my forehead. A gleam of uncertain, writhing evil was in his saturnine eyes.

Without speaking a word he touched a button to the left of the tapestry door. Quickly, noiselessly, the wall split in the center and rolled away to both sides.

In its stead there was now a huge, shining steel door with an intricate lock—his private vault.

He turned his back to me, and busied himself with the manipulation of the lock. The heavy steel door swung open. He touched a button.

An electric light flared up. There inside of the vault was a row of sacks. He touched one with his foot. There was the bell-like clank of minted metal.

He turned to me. When he spoke his words were harsh, low, grating.

"There, there! Take the stuff away!"

He was a beaten man — beaten for the first time in his life, I imagined. And I could not help feeling pity, and even sympathy, for the blood-stained old sinner. There was a certain grim dignity about him. I could well picture him in his former rôle—the uncrowned, self-made satrap of wild, uncharted lands, ruling with flame and sword and gibbet; a leader in that brooding, black Africa which since the beginning of things has been prey to a gigantic play of passion and brutality and bloodshed.

"There, there!"

He pointed at the gold in the vault.

I did not answer. He spoke again, raising his voice.

"Don't you hear me? There's the cursed stuff!"

His voice gurgled into a savage shriek.

"Take it! Take it!"

When afterward I remembered the scene I called myself all manner of weakling and idiot. But I simply did not know what to do or what to say.

Should I take him into my confidence?

Or should I telephone as quickly as possible for an automobile and carry off the gold? It would be a precious and welcome war-chest.

Meanwhile, the seconds were swinging past, and Hussain Khan might be near.

I did not know how to decide. I walked over to the row of gold which stood there just inside the vault. I opened one of the sacks. It contained paper-wound rolls of gold-pieces. I stooped over as if to count one of the rolls—just to gain time.

Baltazzi was looking at me with stony, opaque eyes. The silence was like a sodden pall—unearthly, unreal, clogging. You could have heard the breathing of a humming-bird, the dropping of a loosened poppy-petal.

And still the precious minutes were slipping past.

My mental attitude was puzzling. Here I was on the very threshold of substantial success. A decision one way or the other would mean my first real triumph in the fight against the God of the Invincibly Strong Arms. All I had to do was to make up my mind. And I stood like a schoolboy caught in the act of smoking a cigarette—not only tongue-tied, but absolutely mind-tied, unable to think coherently.

I had risked a good deal to get here; and suddenly my cursed weakness, my inability to decide, piled up before me like a mountain. I felt like a man transferred without warning from the familiar surroundings of New York to the environs of Peking.

A sharp, savage ring at the front-door bell, twice repeated, jerked me into consciousness, into realization of the situation I was in. Baltazzi rose. I remembered Hussain Khan having stipulated that there should be no servants in the house. The Levantine would go down-stairs and let him in.

It was then that my power of speech and thought came back to me.

"Mr. Baltazzi!"

I spoke feverishly, earnestly.

"Listen! I am not a messenger of Hussain's. I'm an American. My name is Stuart Vandewater."

I looked at the banker. He had fallen back into a great Florentine armchair. He sat immobile, like a statue, his head a little to one side. It was as if all his muscles had suddenly been frozen taut into icy rigidity. It startled and frightened me.

But I heard another savage ring at the front-door bell. Again and again the bell sounded, arrogant, challenging, threatening. A moment later there came the sound of an angry voice. I continued hurriedly:

"This gold — if I can save it for you—"

The Levantine was still sitting motionless. But at my last words a look of gray, cold contempt came into his staring eyes. A demoniac grin curled his broad, thin lips as on a Tibetan devil-mask. He spoke in a peculiar, thick, staccato voice.

"Gold? The gold? What do I care —for—the gold?"

His words snapped off in the middle of a rising, questioning inflection, as if a sharp instrument was cutting into his larynx.

"Yes, yes!" I cried.

My words tumbled over each other.

"I know what you mean. Call it gold or call it power. Call it a big man's hatred of being beaten, robbed, held up."

From down-stairs there came a crash of breaking glass—the sound of a body entering through the window of the ground floor. Hussain Khan! He was coming up the stairs.

I spoke quickly, my words tangling into each other. I gave him a rapid outline of my situation, of Hussain Khan's fanatical plans, of my own plans, of my reason for being here in his house, disguised as a Brahman priest.

"For Heaven's sake, Baltazzi — stick to me—trust me!" I rambled.

The Levantine was still staring at me. There was a strange expression on his masklike face. His eyes seemed to have lost their luster. His right eyelid drooped oddly. His arms twitched; his mouth sagged in a pitiful, downward curve. I cursed him in my heart for a yellow-blooded coward. I said to myself that whatever the next minutes would bring, I'd have to fight through them single-handed.

Then the door was pushed open. Hussain Khan entered.

He stepped quickly into the room, a magnificent, fighting figure of a man, every nerve and muscle ready, tense, steely for swift action. He saw that fat, amorphous mass in the Florentine armchair, quivering like a jellyfish on dry ground. He took a step toward it.

Baltazzi tried to rise from his chair.

"Hussain Khan—Hussain Khan— you—you—"

He spoke with a curious, choked effort. His words seemed to draw themselves out of his mouth as if some strange power was trying to hold them back.

"I—I—"

His words died in his throat. His head fell on his chest.

Hussain Khan glanced at him with a curious, impersonal look.

"Paralyzed, eh?" he commented.

Hussain looked at him again in that same cold, impersonal manner. Asia does not know the feeling of pity, and Hussain Khan was the quintessence of the spirit of Asia.

He turned to me. His first words showed that he had not yet suspected me—that he still believed me to be the Hindu messenger.

"What's the matter, Chatterjee? Where is the motor-car? And what—"

Suddenly he stopped his flow of words. A fantasmal film seemed to pass across his keen, brown eyes as of wonder, amazement, doubt. He stepped up close to me. Instinctively I backed up against the wall, and just as instinctively I raised my arms. But he was too quick for me. He jerked off my turban, which fell to my shoulders in loose, writhing folds.

"Vandewater!" he shouted. "May the hand of Ali protect me! Vandewater! So you know—you know—"

There was such an expression of startled, incredulous amazement on his face that I could not restrain my laughter.

"Yes, yes!"

I was half hysterical.

"I know — you and your precious god — the god who is invincible — invincible!"

I laughed again.

It was the last straw. He forgot everything—his carefully laid plans,

the stake for which he was playing, Admiral Segantin, the flag-ship stored with deadly explosives, the gold; everything, everything. The only thought in his soul was hatred—hatred and the desire to kill the man who had stepped across his path.

He came on with the rush of a maniac, arms wide open, fingers crooked, ready to clutch my throat. I gave a quick, imploring look at the helpless mass in the armchair. But the man was paralyzed. No aid there!

Then my old knowledge of the noble art of self-defense came back to me. I was in for the fight of my life. I knew that. I drove viciously with right and left. It stopped him. I danced back to the wall, ducked, guarded with my right, while my left swung straight from the elbow to the point of his chin.

He dropped, but was up again in a jiffy. I tried to stop him as before, alternating my swings with vicious short jabs to the ribs. But I had not reckoned with the man's terrific physical strength, with his incredible ability to take punishment.

On he came like a juggernaut, relentless, resistless.

Suddenly he was upon me. He ducked. Just as my right arm was descending on his head he caught it near the elbow with the open palm of his left hand, at the same time placing his right leg behind my left. I tried to jab with my other arm when suddenly he ran his free arm under mine, drew it up around the right side of his neck, and back to the upper vertebræ of his spine. At the same time he let go of my right elbow, pressing his free fist into my kidneys.

It was all the work of a second. It was a master trick of jiu-jitsu.

He pushed me back against the wall, steadily increasing the leverage on my left arm and the pressure on my kidneys. I saw stars. My eyes bulged. My throat felt parched. I was gasping and choking like a drowning man.

I knew that I was near death.

Yet it was death itself that saved me.

For suddenly there was a shriek. Not exactly a shriek; a gurgling, rattling noise, climbing up to a fiendish, sharp, high note, and then cut off in midair as it were. It was an eery, unearthly sound, as if from beyond the grave.

It shook even the Asian's nerves—those tough piano-wires which the Oriental has in the place of nerves.

He released his grip. I jumped away, rushed to the opposite wall, and seized one of the murderous African *assagais* which the financier had brought from the Dark Continent.

Hussain Khan walked over to Baltazzi, calmly turning his back to me. The man was without fear.

He looked at the sunken mass in the chair.

The Levantine was dead. That wailing shriek had been the last wail, the agonizing protest of the body cut away from the soul.

The dead man's staring eyes were turned on Hussain Khan. I shall never, never forget the gleam in those unwinking eyes — the cruel, mocking, satanic gleam. They seemed to look beyond Hussain Khan, through Hussain Khan, and at me.

Were they trying to flash a message into my brain?

Was Baltazzi's soul still fluttering about the room, trying to send into mine some of the cunning and craft it had possessed while still it throbbed within the fat, amorphous body?

I listened—listened. Then I walked over to the open door of the vault.

Hussain turned away from the dead body. He looked at me, saw the *assagai* in my hand, and burst into roaring laughter.

"Preparing to sell your life dearly, eh?" he jeered. "My friend, a second ago you stood on the threshold of ultimate oblivion. It was the death of that unclean dog over there which saved you. But even now I could kill you. See!"

He opened his coat. I saw a heavy revolver strapped to his waist.

"I could kill you," he resumed. "It would be a small matter—a matter of nothing at all."

He sat down, lit a cigarette, and continued with utmost calm:

"But I've decided to let you live—for the present. You may live a day, a month perhaps—who knows—half a year? But assuredly not longer than half a year.

"You see, my friend, you amuse me. I shall play with you a little before I kill you. There is no hurry at all. Not at all."

There was a short, tense pause. He yawned. Then he spoke again:

"Also I do not kill without preparing well the killing. If I kill you now, the chances are that the little matter of your death might be traced to me. The God of the Invincibly Strong Arms leaves no traces. I shall arrange for your death presently. Do not be impatient. For the moment you are safe."

He laughed.

"And so, my American, my Caucasian, my Christian, my white, my very, very clever friend, will you kindly leave this room at once? I have a little work to do—take that gold away, you know."

He pointed lazily at the sacks inside the vault.

I was furious. His cold arrogance had maddened me. Perhaps I was also a little afraid. I shouted:

"No! No! You shall not have the gold! No!"

He laughed again. He took up the telephone which stood on the desk in front of him. With his left arm he drew his gun, covering me.

"Stay there. Do not move. I shall telephone to my friends. It may be that they will not be as gentle with you as I am."

I looked at the staring eyes of the dead man. Again they seemed to flash a silent message. I turned square to Hussain, at the same time backing yet more against the open door of the vault.

"Very well, Hussain Khan. I shall go away."

"You swear it?"

"I swear it."

"Very well. I believe you. I know Americans keep their words."

He let go the telephone and dropped the revolver into its holster.

And then suddenly with all my force, with all my energy of despair, I threw myself against the door of the vault. I threw myself against it with every ounce of my weight. The door moved. It slid, snapped, locked, settled into place.

I had won. I had put the gold beyond the reach of Hussain Khan, beyond the reach of the God of the Invincibly Strong Arms.

Hussain Khan had jumped from his chair when he heard the steel door clang into place. Now he stood perfectly still. The man was magnificent—a splendid loser.

"Oh, yes," he drawled. "Presently I shall arrange for that small matter of your death."

My success had emboldened me.

"Unless I kill you first," I mocked.

"Even that is possible. Who knows? It says in the Koran that what is sown is sown, and what is fallow is fallow. Azrael, the angel of death, has his rope round the heels of all of us—and at the appointed time he pulls. Indeed it is possible that you may kill me. And what of it?"

He walked to the door.

"My friend, even from beyond the grave you would hear from me. Even from beyond the grave I would kill you. The matter is assured."

And he was gone.

The Regeneration of Frenchy

by Ernest Bishop

FRENCHY LA FOREE crouched on the edge of the tumbled bed in his bare, grimy room over the Myrage Saloon. The August sun streamed in through the unshaded window in a blistering flood, but Frenchy did not feel the heat. So engrossed was he, he would hardly have noticed it had his soiled bedding burst into flames under him.

He was examining his left arm—examining it with feverish interest, as if it were something he had never before seen. Just above the elbow a dried, dead looking gray blotch, half as large as a silver dollar, marred the smooth white skin.

Presently Frenchy raised his head. His boyish, beardless face was twisted as with horror and fear, and he stared with unseeing eyes out into the blinding, shimmering sunshine.

Before coming to this arid, sun-tortured land he had seen, while cruising among the islands of the Gulf, outcasts whose skin looked like that, and he knew what was before him. Isolation; shunned by his fellow men as an unclean, poisonous thing, and in the end a slow, hideous death.

A bawling hail came to his ears from below. Frenchy rolled his sleeve down over that damning spot and, like a man dazed by a blow, stumbled down the narrow, rickety stairway into the stifling, rum-soaked atmosphere of the saloon to take up his duties as all-round handy man.

Frenchy La Foree was a coward. No one knew it better than he. He would shrink and whimper under the threat of an upraised hand like a whipped cur.

When he first came to this roistering frontier town, an emigrant for reasons he did not divulge, from his native bayous, he had donned a belt and gun, and tried to imitate the men who swaggered up and down Mesquite's one street and through the doors of her three saloons. Came a time when he should have drawn that gun to avenge the insult of a vile name, but the gun had remained in its holster, and Frenchy's opportunity to take his place as a man among men was gone.

Big Pete, bully and self-styled bad man, now wore the gun that had been Frenchy's on his own belt. He had made no offer of purchase; he had simply taken it—remarking, with a wealth of lurid profanity, that "A —— —— cur that don't know what a gun's for can't wear one in this town!"

Frenchy had never procured another gun, but under his loose-fitting shirt a razor-edged knife lay in its sheath close against his left side.

When the little porter entered the barroom in answer to the bartender's call, Big Pete was in the place, standing with his foot on the polished brass rail, a brimming glass of amber-colored liquor in his hand.

"O-ho! See our brave gunman!" he bawled, lurching forward and grasping the slight figure by the shoulder. "What do you mean by coming in here and spoiling a decent man's booze, you—" And he shook the cringing man and heaped drunken curses upon him until lack of breath forced him to desist.

Frenchy had suffered this sort of treatment many times since that humiliating affair when his gun was taken from him. Some of the patrons of the Myrage used him as a safe object upon which to vent their tipsy humor whenever they felt in a sportive mood. He made no effort to defend himself now, but waited patiently for the drunken bully to tire of his amusement and release him.

Then, like a flash of white fire in his brain, thoughts of that gray, dead spot on his arm rushed over the despised coward.

He was condemned to death in a hideous form. Far better that he meet that death now, quickly and painlessly. As if something unclean had been cast out of his slight body, fear left him, and an overwhelming rage—rage at this brute of a man who used his great strength to abuse him, at the sentence fate had pronounced upon him; at the injustice of it all—took its place.

With a twisting jerk he tore himself loose from the huge hand that gripped his shoulder. His right hand darted inside his shirt and grasped what it found there. He lunged forward and upward, and a thin, glittering blade sank hilt deep in Big Pete's corded neck.

The bully, trained by long years of violent living, did the best he could.

His hand went to his belt and came away clutching a gun stock. But a film was gathering over his eyes, and he could not see his small assailant. He fired blindly.

The long mirror behind the bar was shattered, and the white-coated dispenser of thirst eradicators ducked down out of sight. Then Big Pete, gunman and all-around bad man, crashed down on the dirty barroom floor, twitched convulsively, and lay still; dead by the hand of a man half his size whom he had held in contempt, and had kicked and cuffed whenever the notion struck him for months.

Frenchy stooped swiftly and possessed himself of the revolver that had fallen from the dead man's relaxed hand.

He felt no fear. His only sensations were of surprise that his tormentor should be dead, and that it was just as easy to do a thing of this kind as to cringe and take abuse.

Gun in hand, tensely ready to fire at the first hostile move, he faced the bartender and the two quiet-eyed cowmen who had been drinking down near the end of the bar. Then, alert and watchful as a coiled rattler, he stooped again, removed the dead man's belt, and buckled it around his own slim waist.

As he backed to the door and passed out into the deserted street, he heard one of the cowmen say softly: "Pete's been ripe for killin' a long time, but I sure never thought Frenchy would be the one to harvest him!"

Next door to the Myrage was Mesquite's one store.

Frenchy went in, gun in hand, and helped himself to a goodly supply of eatables. Five minutes later, on a saddled cow pony that had been standing sleepily in front of the store, he rode rapidly southward toward the mountain range that, ten miles from the town, pushed itself jaggedly toward the sky.

At the foot of the mountain range he dismounted, removed the bridle from the pony, and, with a slap, started it back toward its owner. With his sack of provisions slung across his

shoulders, he disappeared into the boulder-strewn foot-hills.

Three days later Frenchy La Foree lay in the shadow of a boulder on the mountainside, only half a score of miles from the town in which he had extinguished the flame of life in Big Pete.

Not far from his hiding-place a trickle of water oozed out from among the rocks and formed a crystal clear pool in a little basin. Game was plentiful farther back in the mountains, and when he needed other provisions he planned to go down at night and draw upon the town he had left.

He felt safe here, and here he would finish out his life, retreating into the solitude of the piled-up granite masses if any human being should chance to come his way.

Through sleepy, half-closed eyes he gazed lazily out over the scene below him. Down in the foot-hills the stage trail, a narrow, twisting ribbon of brown, appeared here and there, and led away in a straight line across the desert toward Mesquite.

The town itself, a dim, writhing blot through the quivering heat-waves, would be visible for a few minutes at a time, and then would disappear behind a whirling curtain of brown as a puff of hot wind licked up a miniature sand-storm.

A dozen feet in front of where Frenchy was lying a thick, venom-stuffed rattler dragged itself out upon a flat rock and lay sunning in the blistering heat. A Gila monster, its black and dirty yellow body almost invisible among the fragments of black granite, moved near the coiled snake, and the fat old rattler sent out a metallic buzz of warning.

To the man watching the two reptiles there came a feeling that he, the rattler, and the monster were akin; each of them a loathsome, poisonous menace to humanity.

Suddenly Frenchy's hand slid to his belt. He raised his head and listened intently. Footsteps had sounded on the other side of the boulder that concealed him.

Were they after him for what he had done down there in Mesquite? He waited, every nerve alert, hardly breathing.

"The stage 'll be along in half an hour; we'd better get down to the trail," growled a voice.

"Are you sure the gold goes through to-day?" another voice asked.

"I worked for the Gold Hill Company over a year. They always ship on the 16th," the voice that had spoken first asserted impatiently.

The voices and footsteps retreated.

La Foree, from his hiding-place, saw three men picking their way down the rough slope. Two of the men were Americans. The third, big-hatted, swarthy, was a Mexican. All three wore braces of revolvers on their cartridge-stuffed belts, and one of the Americans, black-haired and almost as dark as the Mexican, carried a repeating rifle.

The man under the rock watched them indifferently. A hold-up! Little he cared. He would stay up there in concealment and see how the thing was done. Then a new thought flashed into his mind, and he scrambled hurriedly out into the open.

Those men would rob the stage of its gold, and within a few hours the mountains would be aswarm with man-hunters.

They would find his retreat, and he would be dragged out. The penalty for the killing of Big Pete he did not fear; the provocation had been great, and the men in this border country had a code of justice all their own; but there was an imprisonment worse than death awaiting him if he were caught.

He must prevent that hold-up at any cost.

Frenchy La Foree, only a short time ago the unresisting butt of curses and blows, drew his revolvers from their holsters and twirled the cylinders to see that they were filled; and, with not

a thought of the danger that attended the thing he was going to undertake, started stealthily down toward where three desperate men bent on a lawless mission were crouched in a mesquit thicket near the stage trail.

He had no definite plan of action when he left his hiding-place. But his mind worked swiftly as he crept along over the broken ground, and before he had advanced fifty feet he saw that there was but one thing for him to do—get them covered before they saw him—and a grim smile twisted his face at the thought that if they saw him too soon he would not need to fear the man-hunters—force them to remain inactive until the stage had passed.

Tense and silent he wormed his way forward over the sharp, many-edged rocks. And now he was so close to the place where the three men had disappeared that he strained forward, peering into the bushes and trying to locate the skulking figures.

Suddenly, almost under his hand it seemed, there sounded the buzzing whir of an angered rattler, and involuntarily, with an exclamation that was stifled before it was half uttered, Frenchy sprang to his feet.

There was a startled oath from the mesquit clump. An evil, scowling face arose above the shielding brush, and a pair of fierce eyes glared into those of the unwelcome intruder.

The bandit's gun and La Forree's flashed, and the two reports blended into one. Frenchy felt a stinging stab along his left side. The bandit crashed face downward into the thorny thicket.

Frenchy never could tell exactly what happened after that first exchange of shots. He knew he was standing erect, a banging revolver in each hand; but he was not conscious of aiming or firing.

Spurts of flame darted toward him from the two figures that had appeared above the bushes. What seemed to be a red-hot knife seared into his leg. Something struck him a terrific blow on the shoulder and sent him staggering back.

He vaguely sensed, after what seemed an age-long time, that the uproar in front of him was slackening. Came a stunning, splitting blow on the side of his head. He knew he was falling, and fired blindly once, and then again straight before him; then he seemed to float softly down, down into a bed of thick darkness.

Ages later, so it seemed to him, his senses began to come slowly back to him. It surprised him in a dim, uncertain way to find that he was lying on something hard and smooth instead of among the jagged rocks where he had fallen. Around him he heard footsteps on an uncarpeted floor and gruff, low-toned voices.

His eyelids were inconceivably heavy, but he managed to raise them a little, and discovered that he was lying on a pool-table in the back room of the Myrage. Gathered around him were the bartender, the stage-driver, a number of sombreroed cowmen, and a black-coated man that he decided was a doctor.

"And you say he done for Big Pete with a knife?" The voice that asked the question held amazed disbelief.

"Yes, and he lit in and cleaned out Black Frank's gang single-handed! Frenchy! I'll be damned!" came the exclamatory answer.

The black-coated man, who had been bending over the blood-soaked figure on the table, straightened up. "Nothing but flesh-wounds," he announced. "He's all shot to ribbons and has lost a lot of blood, but he will pull through."

Here a fourth voice—a voice Frenchy recognized as being that of a cattle baron whose word was law in the border country—broke in with: "I reckon this county 'll have use for that little wildcat when he gets on his hind legs again."

It gradually seeped into the clouded

mind of the man lying on the pool-table that they were talking about him. A troubling thought—something he could not just grasp—began to form, and he wondered dimly why he had done those things. Ah, yes—the fog that enveloped his brain was gone, and he remembered it all: That accursed spot on his arm.

With a mighty effort he raised his head and gasped a few words. "Keep away from me; I am a leper," he said.

The men around him drew back, startled. The doctor, who had been on the stage when it came up just in time for its passengers to see the last of that battle on the mountainside, bent over him.

"Where is it?" he asked tersely.

"Left arm," the wounded man answered faintly.

The sleeve had been ripped away, and the doctor examined the gray patch closely. When he straightened up his face bespoke extreme wonder.

"If there were any swamps in this country, I—" he began slowly; then he asked: "Where did you live before you came to Arizona?"

"On the south coast of Louisiana," answered La Foree with an effort.

The doctor laughed. "You've got no more leprosy than I have, man. That"—he touched the blotch that had caused the little porter so much mental agony—"is what is called fish poison."

The wave of relief that swept over him as he heard those words was almost more than Frenchy in his weakened state could stand. As one in a dream he heard the soft, drawling voice of the cattle baron. "Thought he was a leper! No wonder the little cuss went loco!" Then, with that respect in his voice that all men give to the man who has faced long odds unafraid, he went on: "Frenchy, we need a man about your size for sheriff in this county."

But Frenchy had fainted, and did not hear.

But in a certain border county of Arizona lives a slim, undersized little man whose duty it is to guard the public peace, and he guards it well. Law-abiding people respect him. The lawless fear him, and give his territory a wide berth.

Those who know this man well call him Frenchy, but he is known from one end of the border to the other as Sheriff La Foree.

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THE DIFFERENCE

BY HAROLD SUSMAN

I'D rather be like
Old McGupp,
Who came from nothing,
Up!
Went
And

Than be instead like
Young McClown,
Who came from something,
And
Went
Down!

Captain Velvet's Farewell

by Edgar Franklin

Author of "A Forty-Story Fugitive," "Born to Trouble," "The Ladder Jinx," etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

ROBERT POLLARD, James Evans (the Snake), and William Ryan (the Spanish Brute), having ignominiously failed in their latest attempt to "trim" their long-time enemy, Captain Velvet, find themselves in sore straits in New York, being hunted by both the police and a gang of gunmen they have offended. A nice old gentleman, Mr. Rugton, who turns out to be an up-to-date crimp, "kindly" comes to their rescue and assists them to ship on an outgoing steamer. It proves to be a dynamite ship; six days out it catches fire and makes a run for shore. When close to land the three steal the only boat and desert, but the ship blows up before they get far, and their boat is destroyed. They are rescued, and to their dismay find their rescuer is Captain Velvet himself, the accident having taken place off the coast of the South American republic of Santa Chanza, where the captain is practically dictator.

To give them a last chance the captain turns them loose with the threat that if they do not turn good and go to honest work he will have them shot out of hand. Instead, however, they take up with a band of malcontents known as the "five"—all wealthy business men who resent the captain's protection of the common people from their exploitations—who hire the three for a million dollars (twenty thousand down), to kill Velvet and the nominal president of the republic, Señor Pacato. They agree, but stipulate that Velvet shall not be killed at once, but confined in a dungeon of an old prison. While looking over the ground at Captain Velvet's house they are hailed by him, invited in and to dinner, and treated with every courtesy, the captain evidently fully believing their protestations that they are sorry for their past misdeeds and have turned over a new leaf. In the house the three renew their acquaintance with three girls with whom on their previous visit to Santa Chanza they had been half in love. This does not deter them from their plot, however, and at two o'clock in the morning, revolvers in hands, and more or less dread in their hearts, they silently force their way into the house.

CHAPTER X.

The Incredible.

NOT one minute back it had all seemed natural, almost comforting. Yet now, as the door closed, a sudden, gravelike chill struck into the Snake. His brain spun wildly; his quick ear caught the Spanish Brute's heavy breathing, which resembled the exhaust of an engine more nearly than any human sound.

"We ain't ever going out of this house alive!" Mr. Ryan whispered, brokenly. "I got a feeling in my bones."

"I'll prove that you're right if you speak just one more unnecessary word!" Mr. Pollard's hissing, nearly

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inaudible voice assured him. "I've got Mendez's light here; it was in his pocket, and we needed one. I'm not going to flash it unless I have to. Snake, you keep a hand on me. Bill, you keep a hand on the Snake. Come!"

He waited until the Snake's touch had settled on him. "Through the kitchen first," he ordered; "then the back stairs. Then there's a turn in the corridor, and his room's at the front."

His lithe body slid away. The Snake, teeth set, shuffled soundlessly after it, sympathetically aware that the fingers on his own shoulder trembled. Two yards they moved straight ahead through pitchy stillness; then, as they turned to the right, the impenetrable gloom was broken by the merely black outline of a window across the room.

Onward they moved again — and suddenly, from beside them, echoed a clang that might well have roused the dead!

There was a minor clatter, too, and a sound of something rolling; and it stopped only when something hit the opposite wall and—

"*What'n hell was that?*" gasped Mr. Pollard.

"My head hit an iron pot hanging on the wall!" the Spanish Brute explained in a thick whisper. "I was looking to see if—"

"When Velvet begins to shoot, I'm going to kill you first!" hissed their leader.

And, as concerned further sound, he might have passed from existence. Nor was there even the noise of breathing from his two aids; rigid as rock they stood and waited for the tramping above and the flash of fire.

They waited through a long, dreadful minute and another and another. The tomb stillness still blessed Captain Velvet's home, and Robert Pollard, shakily, filled his lungs.

"If my luck 'll stand that it'll stand anything!" he breathed. "Come!"

He was moving again. The Snake, with that frantic desire to giggle which so frequently crops up at funerals, moved after him. Behind came William Ryan; and, just as the hint of a sound, the Snake could hear him stroking his head.

Mr. Pollard's sense of location was no less than astounding. Seconds only, and they caught his murmured:

"Dining-room. Stairs beyond. Be careful."

And they were gliding again, three undefined shapes through a sea of volatilized ink. Here, at least, there were no iron pots. The Snake, shaken past bearing, felt the giggle reaching his lips.

He snatched the hand from Mr. Pollard's shoulder and clapped it to his mouth. Mr. Pollard, he was somewhat startled to find, had been swallowed by the blackness on the very second. He had gone over that way, of course; the Snake, reaching out, moved swiftly after his chief. And a small, modest thrill went through the Snake—a thrill of pride.

William Ryan, like a child lost in a storm, was thrashing about in the gloom for the shoulder that had slipped from him, but the Snake, writhing directly after Mr. Pollard, made not a sound.

And just then through Captain Velvet's dining-room echoed a crash that shook the walls. Glass tinkled on the Grand Rapids sideboard; something rapped the floor sharply, and there was a little cry!

"What—" escaped Mr. Pollard, and his voice broke to audibility.

"Just — me!" the Snake gasped. "I—fell over a chair, Robby. I think I broke both arms."

"I hope to Heaven you've broken your neck!" his leader snarled with a viciousness hardly human. One highly intelligent hand, gripping out, snatched the Snake's collar even as that unfortunate staggered to his feet; the other caught William Ryan's sleeve. "Quick!" Mr. Pollard hissed pleasantly. "Over here, you two wild asses! Now stop! You're behind the

sideboard. We may be able to pot him before he can locate us; we'll have to shoot him down now, or—"

Sheer emotion choked him off. They heard the click of his automatic as he set it for the first shot. There was a similar click from the Spanish Brute's quarter; in the Snake's hands nervous force turned the same click to a hammerlike rap.

Mr. Pollard, whose fingers were on James Evans's neck, dug in with them until something crackled ominously. Hot tears ran from the Snake's eyes, but he emitted no sound — and thus, again, they waited, unbreathing.

The captain, of course, was awake long before this; and since he must be coming to investigate, there was something hair-raising about the stealth with which he moved! Through the whole house not so much as the creak of one board sounded; heavier grew the stillness and heavier still, through five terrific minutes—until finally a quick breath left Mr. Pollard and he whispered:

"He's not up. I don't know why, but that—that didn't wake him either!"

Once more he listened carefully; the silence persisted. A full square away sharp hoof-beats told of the passing of some belated vehicle—and that was all.

"It's fate, I guess!" the guiding mind murmured. "But the next slip —come!"

He glided out into the room; they followed, certain that the first move would bring a flood of light and a hail of bullets. Nothing of the sort occurred. The little column swerved, following Mr. Pollard, and passed to the corridor, encountering nothing, and, happily, shattering nothing.

Mr. Ryan's elbow, having struck a tall glass vase, slid back and permitted the hand to catch it before the thing could even jingle; and when the Snake's heel slipped on the waxed maple, when for an instant he fancied that he was going to drop backward and take the Spanish Brute with him, he caught himself before he even kicked Mr. Pollard's feet from under him. And still protected by the kindly powers, they were ascending a broad staircase now and—

"What was that went past us?" breathed William Ryan.

"Rats, I think," said his chief, and they noted a sharp catch in his voice.

"It's more than rats—it's thumping!" the Snake said agitatedly. "Turn on that light a second—"

It was on, even as he spoke. And in its brilliant little circle, striking the stairs, a huge snake-head reared and blinked questioningly at them—a huge, lithe body, rippling downward, paused.

"That's enough for mine! Good night!" William Ryan cried, almost aloud.

And he turned to flee, and only Mr. Pollard's steel grip stayed him as he hissed:

"That's a tame snake, fool! They keep 'em around to catch mice and—he's gone! Steady, Bill!"

"I'm—steady!" the Spanish Brute chattered. "I'd give a million dollars to be out of this hole alive! I'd give ten years of my life to—"

"You'll give your whole life, right here, if you don't shut up!" the master mind informed him, pressing his lips to the Brute's not altogether shell-like ear. "The next time either one of you explodes I'm going mad and shoot up the whole establishment on the spot, and you'll go first!"

Murder was in Mr. Pollard's whisper, if ever it sounded in human voice. The Spanish Brute nodded assent so energetically that Mr. Pollard's lips passed to the high-scented hair-tonic he had specified at the barber-shop and brought a gulp of savage disgust from their leader.

Once more they moved to the level of the upper floor and along it—past an open door from which came a heavy snore, and toward another door at the far end, revealed for the tiniest instant by the lamp. And once more Mr. Pollard paused and his sharp whisper reached them:

"This is his room. That's his nigger snoring back there. I'll enter first; I know just where the bed stands, for I had a good look at him when he was asleep this afternoon. I hope to catch him before he wakes up and have the gun under his nose. He may fight and I may have to shoot. I don't think he will if I've sized him up right.

"But if he does start anything, come in and help, and don't kill him unless we have to," the leader wound up cheerfully. "Give me your hand, Snake. That's the electric switch. Stay beside it and throw it on when I give the word. You come with me, Bill, and be ready to pin him down if he starts up."

Some two or three seconds the pocket flashlight turned on the ceiling throwing a soft glow on the room below. It shattered the last hope of at least two of the invaders, too, for there had been no error: this was indeed Captain Velvet's bedchamber, and the good captain was among those present.

More brilliant than usual in silk pajamas, he slumbered soundly in the bed, one hand behind his head and a far-away smile on his frequently hard lips, giving something the effect of an innocent child tired of its play.

At his side stood a chair with a fat, yellow-leather wallet and two enormous pistols. They knew those pistols well, did William Ryan and the Snake; they caught their breaths at the sight of them—and the light went out.

Still through the gloom came Captain Velvet's gentle, regular breathing. Mr. Pollard, silently as any ghost, slipped across to his bedside and, with a quick swish, removed both pistols and handed them to William Ryan. The wallet dropped into his side-pocket, and once more Mr. Pollard flashed his light upon the ceiling.

The unfortunate captain slumbered on. A queer little tremble ran through Mr. Pollard; he bent closer to examine the elderly gentleman who, after all their suffering, was finally at their mercy. He even risked touching the captain; and the sleeper stirred for an instant and then slept on.

Mr. Pollard, with a hand that was not quite steady, gripped his automatic and, kneeling on the bed, lowered its point to within an inch of the captain's forehead.

"Turn on the light, Jim," he ordered.

Gasping, the Snake obeyed—and ducked. Now, of course, the big battle would be on and, privately, the Snake intended to lead the retreat by many yards. Now furniture would begin to smash and bullets to fly!

Now reenforcements would flock in and begin a general bombardment, and— He stopped in the corridor and peered cautiously around the edge of the door.

And of all the tame proceedings that had entered a turbulent lifetime, the one in Captain Velvet's room impressed James Evans's wondering eyes as the tamest.

The captain, it seemed, had wakened without a jar and was staring straight at Robert Pollard. Amazement was upon his kindly countenance, to be sure, and a quantity of chagrin; yet—why, Robby, contrary to reason, must have been right. The fire had gone out of the old fire-eater!

He was lying there with his hands above his head, mouthing incoherently; the Snake cleared his throat and walked straight back into the room.

"You move one muscle now and you're dead!" Mr. Pollard stated clearly.

A thin, helpless sigh escaped Captain Velvet.

"I kin—see that, Robby," he said. "What in time—"

"Your guns are gone and there are three of us here to keep you covered!" the master mind pursued. "You're going to get up and dress now, and then you're coming with us—understand? And the first move you make toward a weapon, the first sign you show of anything but absolute obe-

dience, something unfortunate will happen, and *you'll* never know what it was!"

A most unpleasant smile flitted across Robert Pollard's lips.

"You've been able to get away with a lot of idiotic things in your time, you ancient, two-cent swashbuckler," he added; "but you've hit something this time that can't be bawled and blustered out of the way. Get up there, and do it quick!"

For an instant it seemed to the Spanish Brute that a flare of the old vigor had returned to their victim. His fingers clutched spasmodically at the pillow and slid about queerly; but the unlucky captain relaxed as quickly and groaned aloud.

"You've got me, Robby," he said almost querulously. "It had t' happen some time, I suppose; but—I didn't look for this from you."

"Never mind what you looked for; get up and dress!"

And then for another instant as he rose stiffly, it seemed to the Snake that something in the glance Captain Velvet shot at their chief—something somehow in that glance was all out of the picture.

The Snake stared and opened his own eyes, but the captain was only stretching and staring at the floor and shaking his head.

"I never, never expected this night to come—never till the day I died!" he said brokenly. "I never thought the man lived that could—sneak in on me like that! I sorter trusted you fellers this time, Robby!"

"Well, you made an awful break, you old fool!" the leader of the trio said abusively. "Get into those shoes!"

The captain, slightly shaking, bent with some difficulty to lace them. He straightened up again after a time and directed his miserable, stricken gaze at Mr. Pollard's sneer.

"Gimme them pants and that coat and I'm ready," he said weakly. "I—I guess I'm getting old and ready t' quit, Robby. I'm gettin' old or this 'd never have happened. You tell me what it is you want, and mebbe I can let you—let you have it here, Robby. If it's only money, there's a lot o' that down-stairs in the dining-room safe—the one behind the reddish panel just beyond the sideboard. I'll open that for you and—"

"Oh, you'll do a lot more than that before we're through with you," the master mind said crisply. "We're not after your money just now; we're just going to give you a little vacation from that bombast stunt of yours. We're going to put you where you can talk to yourself for a while without bothering any one else. Get up!"

Clad, the captain obeyed slowly. He looked again at Robert Pollard; and the guiding intelligence noted that he was struggling hard for his old savage front; and noted, too, that the effort was too much, and Captain Velvet had turned limp again.

"By—by ginger! I *am* gettin' old or I'd—why, I'd blow you three right offen the earth!" he whimpered. "I—why, there was a feller once, back in the winter o'—"

"There's your hat, cap," Mr. Pollard said briefly as he adjusted it and grinned nastily. "And just keep that 'winter of seventy-five' an 'summer of eighty-one' stuff for the rats where you're going. They'll enjoy it a lot more than I ever did, believe me."

He jabbed his wicked little weapon into the captain's ribs and took his arm.

"Forward, march," he said genially.

"Where you—takin' me, Robby?" poor Captain Velvet faltered.

The master mind did not bother to answer. With a push he steered the bulky form of the fallen conqueror toward the door; and William Ryan and the Snake, staring and thunderstruck, fell in behind. Because it *had* happened! It was happening then, before their very eyes!

And now they were going down-

stairs, all four of them, and the captain's servant still snored and no secret traps had opened to swallow them, no concealed bombs had popped up at their feet. They were in the dining-room again and Mr. Pollard had turned on the electrolier. Captain Velvet looked around wretchedly.

"I—suppose it'll be some time before I see all this again, mebbe?" he choked.

"I suppose it will," his conqueror agreed cheerily. "It'll be a hundred years at least if my health keeps up. Well, you've seen it times enough before; move along here. Back door this trip!"

The captain's heavy steps dragged on—to his kitchen, through his kitchen, into his garden. He paused an instant and clung weakly to the side of the door; he mumbled helplessly and the Snake thought he caught a sob and, be it said to his credit, something almost like a conscience-pang came to him.

But Mr. Pollard, with an impatient snarl, had dragged the victim loose and was moving him down the path in the back garden; and the curious thing was that, even here, men did not swarm out of the bushes and fall upon them.

They came to the gate and passed to the still street; and there, having become acclimated to conquest already, as it were, Mr. Pollard yawned languidly and looked about. Not more than fifty feet away, well in the shadows, stood what seemed to be an automobile.

The guiding mind trained his light upon it and hitched poor Captain Velvet forward once more. Also as they approached, the guiding mind wondered at the figure on the front seat with the immense, thick, black whiskers—the figure which ducked its head in the brilliant light and, seeking to speak, merely propelled between rattling teeth a strange:

"P-p-p-p-p-p-p—"

Squinting, at least, the face was unfamiliar; and mentally Mr. Pollard cursed Señor Ferra as he opened the door and, motioning the Spanish Brute to enter first, pushed Captain Velvet's unresisting form after. And then, with the light full on their driver, it pleased Mr. Pollard to be facetious.

"That's a splendid imitation of an engine," he said; "but there's no need of it. You know where to go."

Their driver bowed energetically. For the fraction of a second the great, black whiskers slipped and revealed the white profile of Señor Ferra; and even before the master mind could take his finger from the button the whiskers were slapped back to place with a stifled shriek. From the interior of the machine Mr. Pollard fancied that he caught a momentary chuckle; it had all died away when he entered with the Snake.

The leader of the sinful trio sat back with a sigh.

"If you're really convinced you're licked there's no need of keeping this gun against you," he suggested.

Captain Velvet sighed bitterly.

"I'd oughter be convinced by this time," he said thinly. "I— Oh, I dunno. I seem to be all sorter tangled up and confused like. I dunno why this happened, anyway. By ginger! I dunno why it happened! Why, I uster wake up if a cat moved in the house years ago. I uster—"

His voice trailed off to stricken silence. Nor did Mr. Pollard encourage reminiscence; leaning back with weapon handy, he watched the lights whisk by on the deserted streets as they passed to an unfamiliar section of the suburbs and through them to a black road.

Little did the brown-skinned hysteriacs in those silent houses know what was whizzing by as they slept! Little did the collection of harmless explosives which represented Santa Chanza's population dream that their bawling, spectacular, and generally tiresome idol was being plucked from their midst and escorted, helpless, to—

Why, they seemed to have reached there now!

The guiding mind opened the door as the car stopped and, with a kick, instructed Mr. Evans to precede him. He laid a hand on the silent captain's arm and drew him after; and he chuckled at Captain Velvet's horror-stricken:

"My land! It's the old Spanish jail!"

"That's it. This is the gateway, eh?" grinned Mr. Pollard as a uniformed keeper, plainly well-instructed beforehand, opened the huge gate without comment and permitted them to pass to the great, black courtyard with its inefficient dozen of old-time oil-lamps hung here and there.

The gate clanged dismally behind them. Beside it the person who had admitted them shouldered his rifle again and resumed his monotonous tread back and forth, back and forth. Out of the fitful shadows another little military figure came up and, saluting silently, beckoned Mr. Pollard toward a yawning, black doorway; and he followed, pleasantly aware that Captain Velvet, the absolutely impregnable, was clinging to his arm and pleading:

"Say, Robby! Don't put me in this place. This place ain't sanitary—ain't been for a hundred years. I—I been working to have this tore down and—"

"Too bad you didn't succeed sooner, isn't it?" laughed the conqueror, as a mighty iron door clanged after them. "Good gracious! It's damp in here, isn't it?"

"Damp, *señor*, but very safe," their guide informed him unexpectedly. "From this prison, it is told, no man ever escaped alive."

Mr. Pollard nodded pleasantly and moved on with his victim. They had passed a little stone room with two remarkable old desks and several chairs; they had passed into a corridor, damp, cold, blood-curdling, and another heavy gate had closed behind them, and another man with a rifle was before it.

Now, passing down a corridor of solid, wet rock, they came to a third gate, with stairs beyond; and their guide produced a huge key and wrestled with the rusty fastening as he whispered:

"It is to the dungeon below that Señor Mendez directed me to—"

"Go on! That's the place!" Robert Pollard said briefly.

The gate came open, and they stumbled slowly down slippery steps—stumbled to another long corridor, with branches here and there and a lantern hanging in each branch.

Uneasy groans rose now and then, and lifted William Ryan's hair; down that particular black channel, an unseen unfortunate, catching the sound of their steps, burst into wheezing, murderous abuse; and if they could not understand one malediction, they were glad when he choked to snarling silence.

And now, having unhooked a lantern, the keeper found another key and rattled at another gate. They passed it, and stood in a chill, stone room, with a pallet on either side and a chair and a massive table, on which stood a single candle.

Up in the far corner of the terrible place a tiny, thick-barred window gave all the air; and having shivered delicately at the horror of so much, Mr. Pollard's wicked, cautious heart throbbed at the sight of the thick iron shackles, anchored in a huge iron ring on the near wall.

"Those fasten on the feet?" he asked.

"One uses them no longer, *señor!*" the guard shuddered visibly.

"I think we'll put 'em on *his* feet, though," the guiding mind said serenely. "There's no use taking chances at this stage. Sit down there, cap!"

"Robby," the captain cried heartbrokenly, "ain't it bad enough to—"

"It ain't bad enough for me—yet!" the master mind said wickedly. "Sit down!"

He dropped the pistol into his pocket. Hands on hips, he watched as the guard fastened about the captain's ill-starred ankles shackles that would have held an elephant.

And he thrilled through and through, for the old blusterer's spirit was smashed at last—smashed in a million pieces—for he was sitting with the bushy gray head in his hands, and Mr. Pollard's fancy supplied several hot tears trickling through the fingers.

"I'll take the key to those cuffs," he said crisply. "I'll have the key to this cell, also. Anything here for him to eat?"

"Only bread and water, *señor*," the guard said as he surrendered the two weighty bits of metal.

"That's enough for him," observed the master mind. "Let's get out of this; I can feel myself catching cold."

One backward glance he cast toward the broken figure in the candle-light; then, while the imperturbable guard held the lantern, with his own fingers Mr. Pollard locked the massive, barred door and dropped the key into his pocket.

Whistling delicately to himself, he motioned the guard to lead them thence. In the bobbing yellow circle, they roused the heavy echoes of the solid stone corridor once more. The unseen raver caught their steps and raved again, until ice-cold wiggles played a game on William Ryan's spine. At the head of the staircase the gate creaked open and clanged shut once more, and they tramped on toward the outer air.

In the lurking shadows of the outer courtyard something stirred. The face of Ferra appeared around the corner of the building and looked at them palely; it vanished for an instant, and Mendez, too, peered at them and then stepped forth, with Perito at his side.

Damba, having also looked over the court for his own satisfaction, coughed importantly and stepped into view with swelling chest, and last of all came Aripo. The fire-eating gentleman who looked so much like the evil one stared hard at the entrance, and with distinctly scared and wondering eyes, and he, too, walked into the open. Beads glistened upon his forehead, and his color was very bad, but he walked straight to Robert Pollard and placed a hand on his shoulders as he turned to the rest.

"Thus, *señores*," he cried, and waved his cigarette—"thus have *we* this night freed Santa Chanza!"

CHAPTER XI.

The Busy Day.

THE Snake knew it for a dream, because Dolores had wound her lovely arms around his neck and was whispering soft nothings to him. Yet it was such a beautiful dream that he refused to open his eyes for a little.

He merely lay there and chuckled; he had fancied that he and Robert Pollard and old Bill Ryan were back in the funny South American republic; they had taken Captain Velvet, as if such a thing were possible, and thrown him bodily into jail somewhere or other.

At that the Snake laughed outright.

"You've had all the rest you need," stated the voice of his chief. "Get up now!"

The Snake's eyes opened suddenly. Brilliant morning was upon them; but for Dolores it was all real. He rose on one elbow and stared; Mr. Pollard, fully dressed, was polishing his nails with a little chamois pad, while William Ryan, in the flesh, plastered down his hair before the mirror.

"Did that—all happen?" asked James Evans.

"That all happened," his chief said impatiently. "Just dress and listen at the same time, will you? This is going to be one of the busiest days we ever had, and so long as neither of you died of fright, you might as well understand what I'm about." He surveyed his

thumb-nail at a distance and went to work again. "You know, I presume, just what I'm after here?"

"Uh? No!"

The guiding mind stared and shrugged his shoulders and ceased polishing. His smile flashed into being, and it was a strange expression, vibrating with suppressed, terrific excitement. There was an exalted light in his eye, too, which impressed Mr. Evans as not quite sane.

"With this old lout Velvet, this penny balloon I pricked last night," the guiding mind said tensely, "the great trouble always has been that we've been after too small game. In all my days I've never tackled a job that looked worthy of *my* tackling till last night!"

"His head's kinder hot, Snake," the Spanish Brute injected gravely.

"But last night I found the job that measures up to what *I* can do!" Mr. Pollard cried impressively. "I've tried to swindle Velvet, and slipped up because it was too petty. I've tried to blackmail him right down here, and slipped up because nature stepped in to help him. But this time I've got him where I want him, and even nature can't step in!"

"Why not, Robby?" the Snake asked mildly.

"Because I'm going to steal even nature—or as much of it as lies in this region!" declaimed Robert Pollard. *"I'm going to steal his whole republic in one chunk!"*

"Well, do—you mean—"

"I mean this!" stated the master mind. "Hurry up, will you? I want to get breakfast and take hold of things in earnest. I mean that to-day, without any publicity or excitement or revolution, I'm going to pick up this government and stick it in my pocket! I'll take charge of this republic, and run it as long as it pays me a million dollars a month—and it can be made to do that easily enough. And when I'm through with it I'll sell it to somebody!"

"And not hand a cent to the horrible five—huh?" asked Mr. Ryan.

Robert Pollard turned on him impatiently.

"How long do you think that horrible five will stay outside the horrible Spanish prison when I'm through with them?" he asked. "I may have to keep them about for a week or ten days, till things are running properly. No horrible five gets anything out of this stunt! *I* put Velvet out of business and this whole deal is *mine!*

"You two can stick to me and furnish the chorus when I need one, and you'll come out millionaires several times over; but all the medals are pinned on *me!* Hustle now; I'll go down and order breakfast, and we'll start out."

"I can't start with you," the Snake smiled firmly. "And I want five hundred dollars of that money, Robby!"

"Eh?"

"I'm going around to see Dolly, and I want to take her a few flowers," the Snake pursued, and his eyes grew dreamily ecstatic. "After that I'll stick with you, Robby, because this millionaire stuff is what I've got to have pretty quick. You couldn't ask a girl like Dolly to frizzle delicatessen stuff over a gas-stove in four-and-bath. The way I was planning to myself last night, we'll have a solid marble house with a sort of fancy plate-glass vestibule, and nice mornings Dolly 'll come walking out to the car and—"

"You'll do no calling this morning, Jim; we're too busy," the guiding mind said, and his tone was strangely gentle. "Later in the day I may have—er—something to say in the same vein myself. Be patient."

He was gone, and the Snake, smiling at the too ornate pattern of the carpet, sighed and sighed again tremendously. Several times the Spanish Brute sighed with him, but somewhere near the thirtieth sigh he caught himself and reverted to a query that was becoming far too common with him lately:

"Say, *is* Robby crazy, or ain't he?"

"What?" The Snake awakened and looked at his friend. "I give it up, Bill. He's got his nerve back, and nerve means money, and I need the money. Bill, did you notice one thing about Dolly's hair?"

Breakfast had been rushed to the best table in the dining-room when they descended. While waiters were about, they chatted mainly of things remote from Santa Chanza, but toward the end of the meal Mr. Pollard leaned forward with a kindly:

"Now, please remember that the danger's all over, boys. There's no need to turn pale when anything happens, because we're bossing this republic now—or we will be before night. It was all over with Santa Chanza when Velvet went into that cell; keep that in mind when we get to the palacio and just look natural."

"We going there first?" the Brute inquired.

"Yes."

"Why not Velvet's? He said he had money in the house in a safe behind the reddish panel beyond the sideboard in the dining-room. How much was in the wallet?"

Mr. Pollard stared for an instant, and smiled his brilliant smile.

"Only a couple of thousand dollars, Bill — and you may be right about cleaning up his house first," he said. "There's no use letting his nigger steal anything we may need. Ready? All right!"

The faithful taxicab was waiting. It whirled them through busy streets, where Santa Chanza, so long the personal property of Captain Velvet, walked about briskly; all unaware that it had changed owners. It whirled them to the big white house with the incongruous porch, and it camped at the curb as they hurried up the broad approach.

The captain's dark-brown man stared at them with anxious eyes and shook his head.

"He is not at home," he reported with difficulty.

"He's not coming home; we're going through the house!" Mr. Pollard said briskly.

"He is—dead?" the man gasped.

"So far as you're concerned, yes. You'll never see him again. Does he owe you more than—this? No? All right! Go look for another job."

"But the—the *señores* have bought the house?"

"Yes, and everything in it!" snapped the guiding mind as he passed to the drawing-room. "Those look to me like good paintings."

"See this 'Corot' on this one?" the Snake asked quickly. "Well, that's worth money. I pinched one once."

"And these rugs cost a heap," William Ryan contributed. "We might roll 'em up while we're here and stick 'em on the cab."

Mr. Polard frowned for an instant and grinned.

"Nonsense! We can get a van around when we have time and take what looks best. The rest of it we'll sell off at auction; everybody knew him, and it 'll bring sixteen kinds of prices. Where's that safe?"

He stepped briskly after the Snake, and be it said that he had small expectation of finding any vault. Yet even as the thought passed through his mind it was chased out by the certainty that the poor old captain had reached the doddering stage; for he had told the simple truth. Even now the Snake was clicking away at a little combination in the wall.

The door came open with absurd ease. Beyond it lay a spacious steel box, and the Snake reached in and brought out a single, huge bundle of bank-notes, loosely tied with twine. He picked at the twine, too—and just then Mr. Pollard seemed to acquire the bundle automatically, for he was sitting and it was opening on his knees. More, Mr. Pollard's eyes opened, and a little gasp of pleasure escaped him.

"Do you — know how much is here?" he cried.

"Did I have a chance to find out?" the Snake asked.

"One hundred thousand dollars in thousand-dollar bills, boy!" his chief cried brightly; and there his better nature took whole possession of him. "Here, you two can't go around with nothing in your pockets," he said. "Take one of these, each of you."

For the rest he folded it and, having tried two pockets and found them bulging with money, he thrust the collection into his trouser-pocket as the Brute asked with some asperity:

"You're sure you won't need this, Robby? We might get separated."

"Do you want more?"

"I could stand the feel of it."

"Take that," his chief said carelessly, and tossed him the yellow wallet. "And I suppose you'll have to have some, too, eh?" He grinned impatiently at the Snake as he brought out the capital the five had furnished. "There—Lord! There's three thousand in smaller bills for you, Jimmy. Don't lose it. That's all here, I think."

The brown man, having accepted his trouble calmly, was bowing.

"You have purchased also the lamented captain's automobile?" he asked.

"Is it a good one?" said Mr. Pollard.

"Of the finest."

"Yes, we bought that, too," the guiding mind agreed cheerfully. "Where is it?"

"Waiting, *señor,* as it always waits at this hour," sighed the little brown man. "I go to tell Juan."

They were at his heels when he ceased talking to the black chauffeur, and he had not lied. The ill-starred captain, apparently, had taste in motor-cars as well as in other things. This four-wheeled stretch of luxury was not six months out of the United States, and the sight of its upholstery brought a smile of pleasure to Mr. Pollard's expressive mouth.

"You talk English?" he asked the chauffeur.

"*Si, señor!*" the man replied by way of proving it.

"Go to the palacio next," the guiding mind said crisply as he stepped in and settled on the cushions with a deep, heavy sigh.

The beautiful thing rolled away. At the curb, far behind, the driver of their taxicab shaded his eyes and gasped aloud as he saw them go. In the car itself the Snake said keenly:

"Say, this looks very much like a trap to get us somewhere that we won't want to go!"

"Does it?" smiled Mr. Pollard. "Well, when we see the first sign of the trap there'll be a dead nigger thrown out of this car, and you'll have the high privilege of driving the rest of the way, Snake. Anything else you want to worry about?"

"Nothing," said James Evans, and started up. "Is that Dolores in that drug-store?"

"No." Mr. Pollard laughed his condescending amusement. "You're hard hit."

"Hit?" cried Mr. Evans with a glorious, wholly empty smile. "Robby, a railroad-train could hit me without making the dent that kid has! I've seen 'em that looked pretty good and that I liked pretty well, but—nothing like Dolly, boy! Nothing on the old footstool just like Dolly!"

"And at the same time I don't know how far they're to be trusted," his chief muttered in a flash of moodiness.

"Well, you wouldn't know, of course, because—well, because everybody isn't like Dolly." the Snake said intelligently. "You see, with Dolly it's like this."

He was still talking when the car drew up before the palacio steps, and Mr. Pollard was still smiling indulgently—for it did not matter now. Nothing, in fact, mattered greatly, save the fact that he, practically single-handed, had hacked a way to the biggest achievement of his sin-soaked lifetime!

The smile faded out and cold dignity took its place as Mr. Pollard led them into the official center of all that represented government in Santa Chanza. An attendant, approaching, bowed low.

"President! Pacato's his name, isn't it?" Mr. Pollard snapped. "Where's his office?"

"At the end of the corridor, *señor*. I shall announce you and ascertain if audience is convenient for him to grant and—"

He had been brushed out of the way. With cold, hard mouth and wicked eyes, the somewhat unusual Mr. Pollard was stalking down the corridor with his friends behind. He reached the door, and opened it with a single twist—and the president of the republic started up to face the most insolent stare he had ever viewed.

He started, too, did Señor Pacato, and leaped from his chair. It seemed, in fact, that he was reaching for a button on the wall when Mr. Pollard said very crisply:

"Just sit down again. Nothing violent's going to happen."

"*Señor*, I—"

"*Señor* nothing!" chuckled Captain Velvet's conqueror. "You know me—eh?"

The president of the republic inclined his head.

"Yes. But I had thought—"

"Never mind what you thought, Mr. President," the visitor smiled. "You've resigned! Did you know it? You resigned when I walked in that door."

"But in the name of—"

"You've resigned because Velvet's out of the way and I've taken the job of running his milk-fed republic!" Mr. Pollard said swiftly. "You've resigned because there's nobody behind you. I'm boss of this place hereafter, and I'll take hold peacefully if possible, and otherwise if necessary.

"What occurs to me as the proper procedure is for you to make your resignation public to-day and at the same time appoint me as your successor, commending me to the people as about the best thing that ever happened to them. Does that appeal to you?"

"But — Velvet —" Señor Pacato repeated in bewilderment.

"Velvet's gone for good," the president-elect said harshly. "Gone—just plain *gone!* You understand that, don't you? You've no ambition to go after him, have you? Because there's room for more."

The chill, threatening note appeared to stab the gentle Señor Pacato. Wide-eyed he looked at Mr. Pollard as he rose unsteadily; yet there was a good deal of character in Santa Chanza's president, for he squared his shoulders as he said:

"My — my poor old friend! I do not ask of him because I know, *señor*, that did he live you could not stand here. If he is gone — if he is really gone, I must bow to a fate beyond my understanding."

"You'll bow to a good many things beyond your understanding if you'll stay around these parts a while," Mr. Pollard said pertly. "That means you're ready to quit on the spot?"

"Yes, since it must be."

"You're doing a wise thing, Pacato," the country's new master assured him very quietly. "And remember this: I don't know how long I'll stay here, but while I stay there will be peace and prosperity—peace for the populace and prosperity for me. The first time you or any one else feels like starting up one of the conventional revolutions you or they will be sent immediately after Velvet, and the peace will continue."

Pacato, catching his breath, shut his lips and bowed.

"And the time for walking out is now," Robert Pollard concluded serenely. "The door lies directly to your left, Pacato, and if you happen to stop for a chat with any one before you leave the grounds there will be just one shot from *this*—see it?"

"But the cabinet, *señor!*" the departing executive cried wildly. "It is in session and—"

"Where?"

"But in the cabinet chamber, of course, and I must explain that—"

"I'll hand the cabinet their resignations. Good-by!" said Mr. Pollard.

And while the Snake stood by the side of William Ryan; while their bulging, incredulous eyes watched it all and their brains refused flatly to give credence, the president of Santa Chanza dragged slowly through the door, and the cold, smiling person who had ousted him settled gracefully into his chair.

As gracefully, though, he rose again, even before the door had closed.

"I suppose I'd better fire that cabinet and get it out of the way before I look things over," he mused. "You wait here a minute or two."

Side by side they stared at one another as he went. Mr. Pollard's brisk steps died away. For a long time they listened, and at a distance they caught a tone or two of his sharp voice.

"He — he got away with it!" the Spanish Brute said huskily.

"I saw it, Bill," muttered James Evans, and wagged his head queerly. "I saw it!"

"And he must have kicked out the whole cabinet, now!" William Ryan went on excitedly. "There's people walking out."

"And people are coming here, too!" the Snake cried, almost wildly. "And what gets me is the way he puts it over on 'em! I never saw even Robby put up a bluff like that before! They go up against it and they bounce straight back! There's no rioting out there or—"

He subsided, gulping, as the door opened again. Mr. Pollard, smiling as ever, stepped in, and after him came a thin native gentleman, whose eyes were startled and round. The new ruler closed the door.

"Cabinet's resigned, too," he said laconically. "This gentleman's the minister of finance, or was until two minutes ago, and he insists that the treasury's almost empty. I tell him that he's wrong."

"But *señor,* I have said—"

"Yes, but you lied about that," smiled Mr. Pollard. "I know that by this time there's a reserve fund piled up somewhere." And his smile vanished, and into the pit of the bland person's stomach went the muzzle of the too-handy automatic. "Now, you heard the proposition I made to the others!" snapped the conqueror. "I'm willing, and perfectly willing to reappoint the whole crowd and double their salaries if they're straight with me. So—where's that reserve?"

Painfully genuine terror leaped to the bland gentleman's countenance; twice he tried for speech before:

"It is—see, *señor!* It is in this very room! I shall—lead you to it!"

And he turned recklessly and crossed to the innocent-appearing closet. He snatched back the door and revealed a massive steel portal beyond, with familiar combination dials in the center. Just once he glanced at Mr. Pollard's armament, and a slip came from his pocket and he was working the dials.

The door swung open, then. Behind it, ranged in compartments, their eyes settled upon little bags of gold, ranged in neat rows—upon little piles of paper money, nicely bundled and stamped—upon larger bags at the rear.

"You, *señor,* have penetrated a great truth which not ten people in all our country suspect!" the minister of finance chattered. "Here lies Santa Chanza's precious four million dollars, United States!"

Oddly Mr. Pollard ran a finger around his neck under his collar, and his voice had lost just a shade of its chill as he said:

"All—right. I'll take that combination slip, please. Thanks. You quite understand what I said about keeping quiet for a week or two and then taking back your old job?"

"Quite, I think, but—"

"This is a 'butless' proposition, from one end to the other," the conqueror informed him, lightly as before. "Get out and behave yourself, and maybe some day I'll let you dip, modestly, into this private reserve. Do you take my meaning? I thought you would. Good-by for the present, minister!"

The one-time head of Santa Chanza's finance department moved slowly, dazedly, from view. Mr. Pollard, having watched him go, smiled serenely, shrugged his shoulders and consulted the clock, thereafter elevating his eyebrows delicately.

"How time does fly when one is busy!" he mused. "It's nearly noon now. Well, let's see. What's next?"

"Getting that wad of money out of this and onto a truck!" the Spanish Brute exploded joyously. "Maybe I ain't so bright, but I wanter suggest that—"

"Don't excite yourself; that money's perfectly safe where it is," Mr. Pollard said absently, and sat back with crossed legs and a perfect Pacato cigar between his teeth. "This is my private office, now, you know. Just push that button, Bill, and see who answers. It may be some one I want to interview."

Smiling, he waited, while William Ryan's cold, hypnotized finger jabbed at the electric button. Smiling, too, he sat up as quick steps approached their door and—

"Why, you little scoundrel!" Mr. Pollard cried. "You're Bentino, the big little chief of secret police!"

Bentino, having reeled a little at the sight of him, glanced quickly at William Ryan and the Snake and stammered:

"It—it is told, *señor,* that you—have seized the reins of our poor government!"

"Not seized—just picked them up benevolently," said Captain Velvet's successor. "And it isn't your 'poor government,' because I'm going to hand this public an administration that'll tickle 'em to death! Now, Bentino—"

"And the excellent, adored Captain Velvet?"

"He has just passed out!" Mr. Pollard stated with a sinister smile. "Want to ask any more questions about him?"

"No, *señor,*" the chief said faintly. "He—he was a great and good man, *señor!*"

"He may have been, but he outlived his usefulness," Mr. Pollard said, carelessly. "Anyhow, I'm boss here now, and I've come to stay. I'd like to retain you, Bentino, in your present job."

"If the *señor* wishes—"

"And I'd like to make dead sure you're faithful, too!" grinned Mr. Pollard as he peeled four bills from the collection Captain Velvet's safe had contributed. "That ought to buy the faithful service of the whole town—eh?"

"It has bought mine, *señor!*" the chief said enthusiastically as he tucked the wealth in his pocket. "Until the stars grow cold and fall as dust upon the earth—until the sun, extinguished, leaves all in blackness—until the last poor drop of blood shall flow from these unworthy veins, I am yours, *señor!* Yes, even when the—"

"That's enough; I'm convinced," the master mind said briefly. "Now listen. The administration here is going to change so quietly and comfortably that before people know what happened they'll wake up to find a grand new era on the whole shooting-match! I suppose the best way to break the news is through the papers."

"Yes, *señor!*"

"How many are there?"

"Two, *señor.*"

"Can I buy them to print what I want?"

"Oh, yes, *señor.*"

"Then call up each one and have it rush the star reporter to me here—quick! Understand?"

"I go, *señor!*"

"And another thing," Mr. Pollard said suddenly. "Is there a state dining-room somewhere in this shack?"

"Of the very finest! It lies above, *señor*."

"And a really first-class caterer in town, perhaps?"

"Malbino, *señor*, of the Calle de la Langosta, came here from Paris. It is related that in all South America no more exquisite entertainments can be provided than by the incomparable Malbino!"

"Fine!" said the republic's new owner. "Telephone him and have him rushed up here immediately. Get about that now, and—wait a minute! Is there a private telephone in here beside this one?"

"In the booth in the next room, *señor*," Bentino beamed.

"That's all—hustle."

The chief of secret police vanished. Mr. Pollard, sitting far back, removed his cigar and smiled kindly tolerance on his old friends.

"Dinner for eight will be served upstairs this evening," he said. "Afterward there will be a reception, at which you will witness your gifted leader in the act of dumfounding Santa Chanza's better element with the realization of what a really fine thing has happened to it in—*me!*"

"Eight?" asked the Spanish Brute.

"The horrible five and ourselves; I'll have to do something to keep 'em in a good humor till we get all the money they'll hand out and I'm ready to throw 'em into jail," Mr. Pollard explained cheerily. "At this dinner, I think, I'm going to announce my engagement to Mercedes Rodriguez!"

"Is it settled?" gasped the Snake.

"It will be settled in about three minutes," their chief smiled complacently as he headed for the next room.

Ever so faintly a telephone tinkled. For far more than the specified three minutes they waited, muttering to one another, but each thinking his own thoughts; then Mr. Pollard returned suddenly and his eyes were sparkling.

"Well, it's settled now!" he stated with forced calm. "It will be announced!"

"Where's that telephone?" the Snake inquired explosively. "Wait a second!"

He dived straight across the office and through the door, slamming it after him. Ten full minutes had dragged into the past before he reappeared, and he glanced at them with a complacency to equal Mr. Pollard's own.

"There'll be more than one engagement announced this evening!" he said simply.

"Snake—" stuttered the Spanish Brute.

"I can't believe it, but it's fact, nevertheless!" James Evans almost shouted. "Dolly! Think of it! She—"

"Forget it!" the Spanish Brute cried, and he, too, hurried into the adjoining apartment.

He was back within five minutes, bright red, rather moist, and breathing heavily.

"You can make that—that announcement three!" he cried bewilderedly. "Say, can you beat it? Carmen said—"

"Never mind what she said, Bill," Mr. Pollard interrupted, and the crispness was all back in his tone. "We understand and we congratulate you. Somebody's coming to see me now, I think. I hear Bentino talking. You two start out and make a complete examination of this house—understand? Look it over from top to bottom, inclusive. Find out how many people are in it; whether any one is loafing around who can't explain his presence; see whether the dining-room is elaborate enough to please me and all the rest. Skip!"

The door opened. Bentino, entering, favored Mr. Pollard with a servile bow.

"The reporters, *señor*," he announced.

William Ryan and the Snake drifted

out as three dark-skinned, well-dressed little persons drifted in. They were plainly excited, for all talked at once and all shrugged their shoulders; further, all came to a standstill at the sight of Robert Pollard pensively counting out three little piles of money on the desk before him—and there the door closed.

"Will we inspect this house?" the Spanish Brute asked.

"Let the house go chase itself!" the Snake chuckled. "I'm going to sneak around and see Dolly a minute."

"I'd like to go with you," William Ryan sighed; "but we'd better stay here just now, Snake. There's no telling when Robby might need us."

"He's got his gun and—"

"I wasn't thinking of what any one else would do to him," the Brute explained with real concern. "*Only that guy ain't right in his head!* Maybe his head's swelled so his brains have busted their connections, or maybe it's something else; but it wouldn't surprise me a little bit to hear him start screeching at telling people he was the Emperor of Japan or a man-eating cockroach, or something like that.

"We'll stick," he concluded gloomily. And stick they did, going to the upper floor, where there was a suggestion of a breeze, and glancing at the dusty state dining-room as they passed to a balcony on the shady side of the house.

The palacio seemed actually deserted, but it might have been filled with armed men and attracted no attention from the pair in the big reed chairs. Eyes on the overpowering blue above, they dreamed blissfully and in silence, when once William Ryan had convinced James Evans that rambling speeches about Dolores were distracting and tiresome to one who wished to think thoughts of his own.

They were dreaming still when Bentino appeared, long, long after, and murmured:

"The—what shall I say?—the ruler desires the presence of the *señores.*"

They found Mr. Pollard just bundling several state papers and snapping a rubber band about them. He smiled brilliantly.

"Dinner's all fixed. It'll cost one hundred dollars a plate; but it 'll be worth it, I think, from what Malbino said. Very intelligent chap, Malbino, too. He'll decorate the state ballroom and furnish both orchestras—one for the dinner and one for the reception. I've telephoned the five and they'll guarantee me a brilliant crowd for the reception. The girls are coming to that."

"Go on—go on," said the fascinated Brute.

"Why, that's all except—wait until you see the afternoon papers. I paid the price and they'll pass out a full front page about me that'll have the whole blasted population cheering before six o'clock. Everything that ever needed reforming in this or any other country is going to be attended to here next week; I've sworn it!

"I don't know, of course," concluded Mr. Pollard, and his complacency was beyond credence; "but I fancy that before to-morrow noon I'll be about nine times as popular here as that elderly ape ever dreamed of being. I think so!"

"And now—"

"Now I'm tired," their leader said, and, rising, stretched with the grace of a Greek god and a trifle more hauteur than any god would have felt warranted in displaying. "I'm thoroughly tired out with all this, and I think we'll just roll back to the hotel, have a very light luncheon, and then sleep a little. I want to be at my very best to-night. It will be one of the most trying evenings of my whole life."

It was a most curious little freak, of course; but a puff of wind passing through the room just then disturbed the papers on the president's desk. One of them fluttered to the feet of William Ryan; and he started violently as he stared down at it, for the

thing was an old, unmounted photograph of Captain Velvet, smiling, and aiming a rifle directly at the camera.

"It—it might be at that!" the Spanish Brute agreed.

CHAPTER XII.

The Lull.

THEY created a mild riot by pausing at their furnishing-store. It was only to purchase evening clothes this time and leave an address at which the rest of their new belongings were to be delivered instantly, and it hardly scratched the roll Captain Velvet had so kindly contributed.

Yet when they had left the store the partners, with tears in their eyes, embraced and kissed each other even before they ordered the truck to back up to the curb and be loaded.

Later, reclining on his couch, Mr. Pollard crossed his new, glowing silk socks and delivered a monologue to two from whom speech seemed to have been taken:

"You might frisk around a little and say how much you appreciate just what I've accomplished this day," he said. "Not that this thing of standing around like a pair of wooden Indians depresses me, but I'd like to feel that you were intelligent enough to appreciate what real Yankee nerve has done."

"It's all right, Robby," the Spanish Brute murmured.

"For one thing, I've snatched the republic! You'd have called that impossible, wouldn't you? You're congenitally unable to grasp that; but you can grasp this, I think: In my pocket, nicely distributed and with that twenty thousand from the five untouched, I'm carrying over one hundred thousand dollars.

"You two, if it comes to that, are carrying more real money than you've had for years. And in the safe at the palacio we have just four millions more waiting! *That's one day's work!*" The guiding mind waved his hand gracefully. "One day's work!" he declaimed. "What the deuce are you wiping your eyes about, Bill?"

"I think I got cold," said the Spanish Brute. "I'm going to lie down."

He shuffled into the next room. Presently the Snake followed and closed the door carefully, and he stared at his old friend with corrugated brows. The Spanish Brute spoke very softly:

"Is he sleepin'?"

"He's going to sleep, I guess."

"Jimmy, it breaks my heart t' see poor old Robby going on like that!" William Ryan stated. "And he used to be so bright. He used to be such a good feller!"

The Snake reclined on the bed and the lines between his brows increased.

"It's a queer stunt," he muttered. "I can't seem to believe—"

"Nor me," William Ryan agreed, with growing agitation. "*It ain't natural!* The whole affair's crazy, from one end to the other. How was it we could walk into Velvet's room and catch him like that and take him to prison without a struggle—huh?

"How was it we could go to his house and steal his money? How was it Robby could walk in and fire out the president of the country and get away with it—huh? How was it we were put right next to the whole treasury?" His voice choked. "Snake, I wanter tell you—it ain't natural! *There's something awful wrong here!*"

"What is it?"

"I dunno what it is," the Spanish Brute shuddered; "but it's there all right."

He glanced at Mr. Pollard's room and took to biting his nails.

"I picked that combination slip out of Robby's pocket," the Snake mused. "If it wasn't for Dolly I'd go up and clean out the treasury and—"

"We wouldn't leave Robby," said the faithful Brute.

The Snake's lines vanished, and his

pallor. Color returned and his voice rose.

"But for a girl like Dolly a feller takes chances!" he cried. "Why, if their whole army lined up here—"

"Never mind Dolly just now; think o' Robby," the Spanish Brute urged. "This is how it looks to me: We gotter let him have his dinner or he might get violent. Well, before the dinner you'n' me'll clean up the treasury—see? And as quick as this dinner's over we'll snatch the girls and pick up a priest and take a train out of here before—" William Ryan, looking around wildly, rose with a queer, nervous jerk. "I gotter get out of this for a while and get some air," he stated.

He went and the Snake, whose hands were clasped, whose eyes were vacant, whose lips were smiling, was no more than aware of his going. Thus sat James Evans for a long time—or until William Ryan rushed in once more and shook him.

"I was right!" he said. "Come in with me. I gotter tell Robby!"

"What about?" James Evans gasped, wakening suddenly.

The Brute, however, was already shaking his dozing chief. Mr. Pollard turned over annoyedly in time to catch a feverish:

"Hey! Wake up! I was just down-stairs!"

"Well, what the devil do I care if—" their gifted leader began.

"Listen! Pacato was down there! The whole cabinet was down there, too, I guess, sitting around a table in a private dining-room off the big one. They were drinking champagne and laughing fit to kill, Robby!'

"Well?"

"And when they saw me they looked kinder startled, and one little chap went over and looked at the register and hustled back. Then they shut up suddenly and all filed out, and when they were on the street they started laughing again!"

"Well?" asked Mr. Pollard.

"Well, is that how a president would act when he's been chucked out of a job that pays him—I dunno how much it pays him?" William Ryan demanded wildly.

Mr. Pollard pressed his forehead with one well-shaped hand.

"I wish you wouldn't bawl like that," he said. "Yes, that is just how I should imagine the president of a crazy little country like this would act when he realized that all the cares of state had been lifted from his shoulders. Well, what were you going to say when you waked me?"

His annoyed brows went up again. Twice the Spanish Brute sought to plunge into a flow of words that should carry conviction; his best was a gurgled:

"I—I give it up, Robby. I—just give it up!"

"Then get out!" snapped the master mind as he rolled over once more.

The Snake, it seemed, had not followed. He was on the bed still, frowning over his cards. And all the lines had returned to his brow as he looked up and cried:

"Bill! Look!"

"What?"

"I can't make it out, the way they've been running lately. See those three? They mean black doom! They've come up twice!"

William Ryan merely shook his head.

"Don't tell Robby about it. He don't care," he said. "I'm going out again."

"Where?"

"Search me! Hunting more clues, I guess," the Brute said bitterly.

He was gone this time until dusk was nearly upon them. When he entered the pretty suite James Evans had taken to walking back and forth, and his lower lip was bleeding in two places.

"You're right about there being something wrong here, Bill. I thought it was all a beautiful dream, but you're right. These cards—"

William Ryan laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"There's worse than cards around here," he said. "Robby!"

"What?" snapped at him from the next room.

"The girls are gone!" rumbled the Spanish Brute.

"Where?"

"How would I know? I was walking just to calm down, and I struck their dinky little white railroad station just as a big machine came along." His agitated gaze settled on the guiding mind, who had strolled, frowning, to the door between rooms.

"There was three girls and two men in that car, Robby," he went on. "They had on veils, and they hopped out like a streak of lightning and into the station. It was our three, and the men were Bentino and somebody else. Well, I yelled at 'em, and they never turned — and I went in after 'em, quick! They were gone. A guy at the gate said the night express for some place down the coast had just gone."

"Well?"

"So I hid behind a post and waited," the Spanish Brute rushed on. "Pretty soon out comes Bentino and the other man. They slid for the car, and it was going before they sat down. *What about that?*" concluded William Ryan.

"I think you've gone mad," Mr. Pollard said disgustedly from the doorway as he turned away. "Mercedes herself told me—oh, bosh!"

"Yes, and many another good man ten thousand years before you were born was told the same thing by the same kind o' swell dame, and—" Mr. Ryan cried.

"Bill," said the master mind sharply, "I mean to get ten minutes real sleep if I have to call the porters and have you thrown out."

Two seconds the largest member of the trio looked dumbly at his chief.

"You—don't have t' throw me out, Robby," he said bitterly. "I'm going out. There's a lot to see in this town for a guy that wants to grow old as much as I do."

Glorious black night was upon the city of Relampago before he returned and entered the room where the Snake sat, fingers tightly interlocked, breathing jerkily, with cards littering the floor all about him.

"I guess there's no hope, Bill," he cried softly. "Every time—"

"You might be right, Jimmy," the Spanish Brute said gravely. "Here's the evening papers."

"What do they say about us?"

William Ryan groaned softly as he spread two inky sheets upon the bed and pointed at their front pages.

"They couldn't say less about us if we'd never been born!" he choked. "*There ain't one word!*"

"But Robby said—"

"I can't help it. I dunno much Spanish, but look at this. That big item there's about a fire forty miles from here. That's in both. This next one tells about somebody that's planning to put up an American office building—and this one here is about some one that brought in a ship-load of Arabian horses. *That's all!*"

The Snake arose and wrung his hands.

"Well, is it possible that nobody but us knows this republic's changed hands?" he cried.

"Or has it changed hands or—" William Ryan began.

"Yes, it has changed hands," said the serene voice of Mr. Pollard from the doorway again. "They said it was just possible that the big news might not catch the evening editions. One of the chaps said that they hadn't large enough type to feature the event properly, and they might possibly wait till morning to spring it, and have some foot-long type made up in the mean time. When you're done frothing at the mouth and having those spasms get dressed, please. It's later than I thought."

Mr. Pollard himself, whistling blithe-

ly, turned back to his own apartments, and they caught the quick and businesslike swish of many papers. William Ryan leaned weakly on the foot of his bed and looked after him. The Snake, catching sight of one group of cards on the floor, just suppressed a frightened little cry — and again Mr. Pollard was with them, this time with an aggressively white shirt in one hand and studs in the other.

"You know, there are some people who can't look like anything but waiters in evening clothes, and others who resemble gentlemen. Before the evening's over you will have met and chatted with all that's best in this town, including, probably, all the foreign ministers. Damba said he could get them together when I telephoned his invitation. Just dodge the waiter effect and hurry. I'm afraid we're late now."

He rustled off again.

"He's forgotten all about them papers even now," muttered William Ryan. "I've heard they do that."

The Snake shuddered and snapped the string on a great package all done up in violet paper.

"We'll stick to him till to-night's show is over," he said. "Then—"

He was lost in a billow of haberdashery in which he took no proper pride. Sighing, he selected his own raiment and laid it out; sighing, he examined his chin, and regretted that he had not examined it earlier.

Sighing also, and with many covert glances at Mr. Pollard, busy and happy in the next room, William Ryan labored earnestly to disguise himself as a gentleman about to launch upon a strictly high-class social evening.

Both were rather successful. They faced each other after a time, and smiled wanly; and they were smiling still when Mr. Pollard hurried in with loose overcoat on his arm and his silk hat on the back of his head.

"Get your hats on. I want to look at them!" he snapped. "There! Well — you'd never be mistaken for any of the Newport set, but you'll do well enough here, I imagine. Come along. I telephoned down for the car."

Captain Velvet's machine was waiting at the curb. With a sweep they crossed the pavement and halted traffic while some dozens of interested Santa Chanzans stopped and stared. Yet beyond this the attention they attracted, all things considered, was astonishingly small.

On the sidewalks none started at the sight of them and pointed them out, as might have been expected. At one corner a balky mule halted them for a moment; but the interested crowd after one careful stare gave all its attention to the mule again — and this was strange because, no matter how carefully you steal a country, somebody is sure to gossip about it and advertise you.

Mr. Pollard, in fact, had gone to considerable pains to have himself well advertised long before this, and it was very annoying to glide along without even a muttered curse hurled after the car.

Nor when they reached the palacio itself was there any eager mob to greet them with cheers or any other expressions of emotion. If anything, the palacio seemed quieter than might have been expected on an ordinary evening. There were lights on the upper floor, to be sure, but down-stairs almost funereal gloom seemed to be the order. In the doorway stood Bentino, all alone, like something left behind by the former tenant.

"Any one here yet?" Mr. Pollard snapped.

"The waiters, *señor*—the dinner—the orchestras! Ah, when the exalted *señor* shall view the ballroom! My soul agitates itself with anticipation—"

"Well, the rest of you can agitate itself turning on some of these lights and giving an air of festivity to the place," said Santa Chanza's new owner. "This isn't a funeral!"

"No, *señor?*" queried Bentino.

"Why did he say that just like *that?*" queried William Ryan. "Did you hear him when he said 'No,' how he—"

"He said it to make you worry, fool!" Mr. Pollard informed him furiously. "Now grin! D'ye hear? *Grin!*"

"I am!" groaned the Spanish Brute.

Up-stairs there was at least motion. Dark, lithe waiters were gliding about the state dining-room, which had been dusted and primed to a degree. A circular table stood in the center, with eight places set and an array of silver and cut glass, of flowers, and delicately shaded candles that soothed Mr. Pollard's soul.

An instant he paused to peer into the dimly lighted ballroom, with its clusters of rare palms and its cloud of heavy perfume from tropical flowers; and then he strolled into the dining-room and tossed his coat to the tremendously dignified person who hurried to meet him.

"You're in charge, eh?"

"That high honor is mine, *señor,*" the dignified one confessed humbly.

"Very well. Just let me look this all over and make sure that you haven't twisted things," the master mind said crisply.

William Ryan looked steadily at the Snake.

"While you're doing it we'll get a little air, Robby," he said. "It's pretty hot in here."

The guiding intelligence of the trio, deep in an inspection of the table, did not even hear him. Mr. Ryan, therefore, with an exaggerated careless ease, slipped his arm through the Snake's and led him slowly to the distant stairs.

"I've got the best idea!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Well?"

"Robby's getting worse every minute; he might not last out the evening; he's likely to go off completely any second, from what I've heard of them. We'll have to take a chance on this dinner part; but as soon as it's over we'll get him out, if we have to throw him down and tie him up."

"Out of the country," the Snake assented.

"Anywhere out of sight of this town, so as to get his mind off it!" William Ryan said with deep feeling. "Then, when we get him to a quiet place, we've got the price to call in specialists and see if he can't be fixed. So the best thing to do now is to slide down and empty that safe, Jim. I thought maybe we could hide the stuff somewhere near the back door, where we could snatch it quick?"

James Evans nodded quick assent.

"Something like that is all I've been able to hit," he agreed. "I've been thinking about it this last hour, Bill. We'll finish up the safe part before he takes some new freak and stops us. I've got the combination in my pocket."

Light-footed as of yore, he led the way, and William Ryan kept close, with wary eyes darting here and there. There was, it appeared, none to interfere. Down the dusky lower corridor they went and into the black office of Santa Chanza's president, and the door closed just as Mr. Ryan turned on the single light nearest the closet.

"If it was anybody but Robby, we could take this and leave now," the Spanish Brute sighed.

"Well, as it is, we can't waste any time getting it hidden," the Snake muttered nervously, as he snatched open the closet door and smiled swiftly at the entrance to the vault beyond. "There used to be a little back porch out there somewhere. Dump a dozen of those letter-files into the waste-basket, and we'll slip the stuff in 'em and hide it out there. Look around for a piece of thin rope, so we can tie 'em together, too, Bill. Now — forty-seven—"

Under his slim fingers the nicely lubricated dial twirled soundlessly. Mr. Ryan, having upset the only filing system Santa Chanza's government ever owned, piled the empty folios be-

side the safe and waited. And still waited—and kept on waiting until, for the fourth time, James Evans came to the end of the slip.

"What's wrong?" grunted Mr. Ryan.

"I give it up!" breathed the Snake, and his upturned face was glistening and contorted. "I never made the same slip four times in sucession, but—wait! Here goes again. Watch the numbers, Bill."

William Ryan, crouching beside him, obeyed. Slowly—very slowly, and with a nice care far beyond the demand of any ordinary safe—they went at Santa Chanza's state vault once more. Slowly they came to the very end; and they looked at one another; and then, with lips compressed, the Snake rose slowly.

"There's no use kidding ourselves, Bill," he said briefly. "Somebody's changed the combination!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Dinner for Eight.

ON the floor above them a stringed orchestra had been tuning up for several minutes. Now, in the most soothing manner, it drifted into a dreamy Viennese waltz that merged exquisitely with the lovely Santa Chanzan night—yet not one whit of its soothing power penetrated to the pair in the president's office.

"They—couldn't have changed it!" the Spanish Brute submitted brightly.

"Why not?" Mr. Evans shrugged his shoulders. "It isn't ten minutes' work on some of 'em, if a man knows how. That's not what worries me, Bill, but—*why* did it happen?"

"Did the minister of finance—"

"Not if Robby has him as much to rights as he thinks he has!" A shaky little smile crossed the Snake's lips. "This 'll jar him, anyway!"

Out of the president's office they sped, and to the upper floor once more. The orchestra was playing on in highly commendable fashion; waiters darted in and out the state dining-room, and there were brighter lights in the ballroom now, and other men seemed to be waxing the floor for the dancing that was to come.

They encountered Mr. Pollard's benign and self-satisfied smile just leaving the latter apartment, and the smile vanished at the sight of them.

"What in—" the master mind began angrily.

"Wait! Don't cuss yet!" the Snake breathed. "That 'll do in a couple of minutes. Somebody's been monkeying with the safe, Robby!"

"How do you know?"

"We just slid down to make sure it was all right, but it won't open. We ran through the combination five times in succession and—"

"And you're such a pair of dazed, blithering idiots that you're not even good enough to open a safe when you have the combination in your hands!" Mr. Pollard hissed savagely. "Upon my soul! If anything could spoil the one evening of a man's life, you're *it*, multiplied by two. Come down and I'll open that door for you and let you look, not because there's any sense in it, but because I'm going to have smiles around me to-night, if I have to break my neck to get them!"

His high-bred face was thrust into William Ryan's ai the Snake's.

"And when I've done this fool thing," he added, "by Heaven, you'll stop making faces and grin, or I'll throw you into that Spanish prison till you learn how!"

His long stride made straight for the stairs — straight through the corridor and into the dusky office.

"Give me that combination, ass!" said Mr. Pollard. "How do you happen to have it, anyway?"

"You—er—dropped it this afternoon," the Snake said. "The first number there is forty-seven and—"

"I can read!" their chief snapped.

Two minutes they listened to his heavy breathing and watched his twirl-

ing fingers. They watched Mr. Pollard grip the handle of the safe and tug; heard him grunt in some astonishment and saw him squat before the dials again; and waited for another two minutes of twirling and another tug.

"Well—either the combination has been changed or something has slipped inside," their guiding mind said with less vigor.

"Robby, that safe was made and sold in New York City, and you've seen hundreds of 'em. Did you ever see anything slip inside of one?" William Ryan asked gloomily.

"If it comes to that — er — no! But—" Mr. Pollard broke off suddenly before the Snake's thin, significant smile and turned back to the offending box. "Just a moment! I'll open her!"

He was working again, this time with the deft fingers and the quick ear of the true artist, and with no regard at all for the combination. Head pressed against the steel, he twirled slowly, eyes narrowed — and grinned suddenly and twirled in the other direction, while the orchestra above finished its first selection and began tuning once more.

Again came the smile and again the turning of the knob; and then, rising, Mr. Pollard said complacently:

"Open her!"

There was excitement in the fingers which William Ryan wound about the shining handle; there was too much force in the pull he gave. For the door whizzed open so suddenly that the light of the lamp shone directly into the spaces behind, and the whole shock came at once.

"Empty!" choked James Evans.

"It's—it's—" Mr. Pollard faltered.

"It's empty!" the Snake repeated bitterly. "Four million dollars gone that we could have spent!"

Erect again, after one long, terrible stare, Robert Pollard swayed for a moment and looked about blankly; and then, being palpably the born conqueror he had proven himself, regained his wits suddenly.

"I don't understand it, but I shall understand it mighty quick!" he thundered as he tore open the door of the office. "Bentino!"

There was no real reason for assuming the chief of secret police to be within hearing; yet Bentino appeared conveniently from the black entry of the palacio, looked about for an instant, and glided to his side, with a swift:

"Yes, yes? The *señor* desires—"

"I want to know who's been in here this afternoon!"

"No one, *señor!*"

"How do you know?"

"I have been within sight of the door since you left."

"That's a lie, because I saw you—" William Ryan began.

"I have been within sight of the door since you left, *señores,*" the chief repeated steadily. "By all my ancestors, I swear that—"

"He may be telling the truth; you never can tell!" snapped Mr. Pollard, with agitation that grew despite himself. "Bentino, that safe has been robbed!"

He had expected a start; yet he had not expected the high-keyed shriek that left the chief nor the melodramatic reel with which he struck the wall and clasped both hands to his brown forehead. In fact, Mr. Pollard's face turned almost kindly as Bentino cried:

"If this has happened, *señor,* slay me, for I am no longer worthy to live!"

Above, the orchestra began again, more soothingly than ever.

"Well, I'm not going to stop the festivities even for four million dollars," the master mind said. "Bentino, I want the man who stole that money caught before to-morrow morning."

"He shall be captured, *señor,* if I arrest every man in the city. This I swear! Also do I swear that of all our secret investigators, the finest—"

"Stop swearing and act!" snapped

Mr. Pollard as he hurried out with an old friend gripped in either hand. "And as for you two, listen!" he hissed when they were at the foot of the stairs. "I think you brought this on us by fuming; but I'm not prepared to say that some of the blame isn't mine for not leaving one of you to guard the stuff. However that may be, it doesn't matter much, because I'll tax that four million and forty million more out of their beastly little country inside of one month. *Now forget it!*"

One of the most expensive handkerchiefs in the city dabbed at his brow and he smiled again as he led them up-stairs. Waiters seemed to be hurrying about even more energetically than before; glasses were clinking, and there came from somewhere a steady clatter of china. The dignified individual in charge bowed low before the conquerors once more.

"The Señor Mendez—the Señor Ferra—the Señor Perito—they have arrive!" he stated.

Mr. Pollard nodded and stepped into the state dining-room. His smile broadened with real relief, too, for they had not come disguised. Quite their natural selves, immaculate and smiling, they hurried forward to wring his hand and those of the Snake and Mr. Ryan.

The orchestra played on; the ceaseless motion of waiters persisted. William Ryan, noting dimly that the plump man with the scar on his ear had picked up the olive dish, walked out with it and brought it back, five times in succession, wondered apologetically within himself at the strange customs of formal dinners.

"Aripo and Damba?" Mr. Pollard was querying.

"They will be late, *señor;* they are always late!" Mendez chuckled. "It is more impressive and—what of it? We may indulge them now, I think, for have they not been of the intrepid five which shall go down in history as the liberators of Santa Chanza?"

"I suppose they have," Mr. Pollard grinned lazily as the dignified one prostrated himself in the doorway and announced:

"The Señor Aripo — the Señor Damba!"

They entered majestically, Aripo with his eternal cigarette, his black beard a little more pointed than before, his wicked eye a trifle more wicked—Damba with the executioner smile more firmly fixed and a bulky roll of manuscript under his arm.

Their host greeted them kindly; he could afford to greet them kindly, for when he had treated them to this and a few similar functions, he would thrust them into prison for a decade or so and pluck Santa Chanza all alone!

The orchestra, having done its duty for a time, subsided. They gathered about the table and were seated, all save Damba. Waiters swarmed more furiously than before; the dignitary stood on tiptoe, waiting Mr. Pollard's signal — and then and there the formal function would have begun but for the extremely firm, loud voice of Señor Damba at the right.

"*Señores!*" he cried. "Before passing to the more animal delights provided by our so-gifted and honored host, it is very fitting that we dwell for a time upon the high purposes, the lofty ideals which have brought us together and linked us with bands more powerful than the strongest steel. Upon this solemn and still joyful occasion, dear Señor Pollard, I ask your indulgence, and the indulgence of the others. May I be permitted to say a few words?"

Mr. Pollard shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose so."

"May I suggest, also, that for a little we occupy this room alone?"

The master mind glanced at the dignitary, who snapped his fingers and herded his racing underlings together. They paused, breathless, and then filed through the door and disappeared; and the manuscript came open with a swish.

Just for an evil second or two Señor Damba's cold smile flitted triumphantly; then he cleared his throat and glanced at the page before him.

"*Señores!*" he cried, and gestured quite impressively. "I speak, not to one or another, but to all of you! From the deepest nook of a heart so lately boiling with bitter rage against one hated by all true patriots; from a heart that has ceased to boil and now glows gloriously with joy beyond any measure—from a heart, in short, *señores*, which—"

He stopped and glared toward the door through which an inconspicuous little waiter had hurried, passing straight to Señor Mendez. He bowed low and proferred a note, and when the discoverer of Mr. Pollard had perused it, he sighed and rose.

"You will pardon me for a minute—perhaps for five minutes?" he asked. "A friend waits for me, asking a moment's speech on a matter of business. Pray continue, Damba."

He bowed to them and hurried away in the wake of the waiter. Aripo, waving his cigarette at his gigantic friend, said:

"Continue!"

"I shall continue when our most excellent Mendez returns!" Damba said acidly, after a prolonged and suspicious stare at the closed door. "Strange that he should have been called away just as I—" His lips closed tightly.

"Well, we could eat while we're waiting," the Spanish Brute suggested nervously. "They could keep his on the stove and—"

"We, *señor*, with the kind permission of the honored Señor Pollard, will eat, as you say, when I have spoken and not before!" Señor Damba said angrily.

Aripo smiled ruefully at the electrolier overhead.

"And if that must wait for Mendez, we starve!" he murmured. "For Mendez is a sagacious man! Would that I possessed his foresight!"

"And if that speech, *señor*, is intended as a slur upon the few humble words I purpose uttering—" Señor Damba began, with his most dangerous smile, and his fingers closed absently about the handle of his butter-spreader.

"Nothing of the sort was intended, I'm sure," Mr. Pollard said impatiently and with a slight flush. "This is a state gathering, gentlemen; don't make it ridiculous!"

The orchestra, happily, struck up, just then, and it had chanced upon a popular air so catchy that, having caught the tune, the Spanish Brute beamed recognition and began to sing.

It was not an elegant performance, perhaps, and it caused Mr. Pollard's color to rise higher—but at least it was a diversion, for the tune seemed to have caught Aripo and eradicated his sneer, and even Damba was cooling as he listened.

Twice the unmusical thing was repeated after the first rendition; and when the orchestra wound up with a crash, the door seemed to have been jarred open and the little waiter propelled into the room on the last bars. Once more he glanced about, and then he hurried to Señor Perito and handed him a card. Perito read it and passed it to Señor Ferra; and together they rose as the latter said:

"It is with grief, *senor*, that we, too, leave you for a moment—Mendez has requested our presence. It is the matter of a silver mine in which we three are interested. We return swiftly."

They hurried away, and the apologetic little waiter closed the door after them gently. Señor Aripo looked after them for many seconds before shrugging his shoulders again and smiling at Mr. Pollard.

"Two more are numbered among the rescued, *señor!*" he stated. "Let us rejoice for them."

"*Señor!*" thundered Damba.

"Gentlemen!" implored Mr. Pollard.

This time the orchestra did not come to the rescue. Stillness, indeed, bore heavily upon the state dining-room, and conversation became as dead as the first Rameses. William Ryan, looking covertly and anxiously at his chief, trembled more than once at the way his color rose and fell and at the high-strung manner in which his shining finger-nails drummed out a tune on the table.

The Snake could not forbear a nervous little wink at Señor Aripo; and Damba, catching it, turned just in time to catch the diabolical gentleman's answering wink. Señor Damba, lips drawn so tightly that the outlines of his splendid teeth showed through, controlled himself with terrific effort —and thus ten long minutes dragged by.

Aripo rose suddenly.

"I sympathize, yet we, too, merit some consideration!" he stated flatly. "Hunger is gnawing within me; I go to persuade our friends to a swift return, even if a little force become necessary!"

He strode out and slammed the door after, and Mr. Pollard heaved a small sigh of relief, for there was a business-like quality in that slam which promised to rescue his state dinner from its impending slide to fizzledom! At just about this time wine should have been sparkling, the rarest of imported viands should have been whisking in and out in bewildering variety.

Instead, with waiters tramping about somewhere out of sight, with cooks fuming, doubtless, and incomparable food going to ruin, and even the orchestra silent, the state dining-room was growing downright oppressive.

Another terrible ten minutes was gone!

"This, *señor,* is intolerable!" Damba stated.

"Oh, well—tastes differ," Mr. Pollard said vaguely.

The executioner person breathed heavily.

"It is rarely that I consent to speak in public, *señor,*" he said stiffly, "yet upon these rare and happy occasions there should be no two opinions about the speeches I make!"

"There don't seem to be!" the Spanish Brute said, unfortunately.

Señor Damba started and stared at William Ryan and shook visibly. Glasses beside him tinkled slightly, too—and then the dreadful smile came, more dreadfully than usual, and Señor Damba rose. Also, perhaps unconsciously, he tucked back his cuffs as he fixed Mr. Pollard with his eye and said hoarsely:

"Insults of the most detestable, *señor,* can well be ignored by the truly great nature. Yet there are some affronts which even the truly great nature cannot overlook!" He expanded his chest and smiled more horribly. "If you will instruct, *señor,* that dinner be served within two minutes, I shall undertake to have our guests present!"

The room shook under the tread which took him to the door. The lighting fixtures swayed as the door closed after him. In the broad corridor they heard Señor Damba converse briefly with some one unseen; heard him tramp away; and then, while the Snake giggled hysterically, William Ryan leaned back and gave vent to mirth that surged up from his very soul and reminded one of the angry bull's roar.

"Robby," he cried happily, "that's the first laugh I've had since the ship caught fire."

The master mind ignored him.

"I'll bet they didn't eat all day getting ready for this; but as soon as that big guy springs his speech, it's them for the little old quick-lunch counter, and quiet! Say—"

"Why didn't you put 'Please omit speeches' on your invitations, Robby?" the Snake inquired wheezily.

Mr. Pollard, having risen with a jerk that overturned his chair, glared at them savagely.

"This dinner's been jackassed enough by those five clowns," he stated. "It doesn't need any assistance from you, however capable!"

He turned away and strode to the sideboard by way of putting distance between himself and his friends. There for a time he stared at the display of glassware and silver, and contemplated gathering it in his arms and hurling it to the floor as some relief to the rage within him. He refrained, however, and was quite calm before the Snake's:

"He's a long while licking them."

The Spanish Brute chuckled.

"They're probably fighting like madmen, Jim," he mused. "They know these speeches better than we do, I guess. Well, Robby?"

"Well?"

"Is this a dinner or is it an endurance starvation match?"

"It is supposed to be a dinner," said the master mind with a bitter smile, "and a good part of the blame is mine, very likely, for assuming that five idiots like that could sit down like gentlemen. Do you suppose they're actually fighting?"

"Either that or running away from him," the Spanish Brute grinned.

"Well, I never heard five men scrap with so little noise," the Snake said sagely. "That's funny, too, because when there's anything going on in this part of the world every one gets together and yells like sin. In here you can't even hear the waiters walking around any more."

"And the orchestra's quit, too," William Ryan chuckled. "They're all outside watching the fight."

Mr. Pollard shrugged impatiently and turned away.

"Well, don't be absurd just because it comes easy," he said wearily. "I wish that—"

"Where is it?" cried the Snake.

The guiding mind turned and stared at him.

"Where's what?" he snapped.

"Your big roll of money, Robby!"

"In my pocket and—"

"I know it was. It made a big bulge there," Mr. Evans said excitedly. "It isn't there any longer!"

He leaped from his chair, but he was not even on his feet before Mr. Pollard's hands had clapped behind him. And his jaw dropped and his cheeks whitened as his hands fumbled; and a small, thunderstruck yelp escaped Robert Pollard:

"*It's gone!*"

"It's just dropped to the floor, Robby," William Ryan began quietly. "It—"

"It did nothing of the sort. I had that package fastened with safety-pins till it was all but riveted to the cloth!" Mr. Pollard said wildly. "I bought 'em this afternoon for that very purpose an— Where's my gun?"

"And where's mine?" the Snake demanded as his own fingers slid swiftly into pockets. "And that little roll of money—"

William Ryan, too, had tottered to his feet.

"Well, say—if it comes to that—" he gasped.

"Have you been cleaned out, too?" the master mind asked thickly.

"Even my handkerchief, Robby!" the Brute stammered. "I—I dunno—"

"Look again, both of you!"

"I don't have to look again," the Snake faltered in bewilderment. "I stuck my pack of cards on top of the money, and they're gone, too!"

He faced his chief and so did William Ryan; and their chief faced them. And while the Arctic snows could have been no more blank than the expressions of the two minor members of the trio, an odd, new light came suddenly into Mr. Pollard's eyes. Some seconds he regarded them very steadily indeed; then drawing nearer, his teeth bared as he said:

"How much do *you two* know about this?"

"Huh?" William Ryan's mouth remained open.

"That's just what I said," Mr. Pollard assured him. "There has been a tremendous absence of enthusiasm in both of you these last few hours, and I've been blaming it to thick-headedness and a general lack of nerve. But now that I come to think it all over, that trick of leading me down to look at an empty safe looks *queer!*"

"Why—Robby—" the Snake stammered.

"And all this thing of finding myself cleaned out looks even queerer. I don't know how good their pickpockets are down this way; but I am strongly inclined to believe, Snake, that you're about the one citizen living who could stand a chance of picking my pockets without being caught."

His eagle eye bored into them.

"Yes, and that might be a very slick little way of covering up your own tracks," he announced. "That might be a nice, easy little game to get out of splitting that four million with us two, that have stuck to you through enough craziness. I'd never have thought it of you; but by—"

"Yes, and I'd never have thought of it myself if I lived to be a thousand years old!" William Ryan shouted suddenly as realization of the Snake's words penetrated to his brain. "I'm pretty thick, but I guess I can see now, too. I thought it was funny when I looked at that safe, all cleaned out, but I—I'd never have thought it of you, Robby," he ended brokenly.

Before their obviously real emotion Mr. Pollard relaxed; and there was something almost soft in his grim smile as he said briefly:

"Well, you needn't think of it now, because I didn't do it."

"You said—" the Snake shrilled.

"I know I did, Jim, and I take it all back and beg your pardons," the master mind apologized. "But that doesn't alter the fact that the stuff's gone and—"

"It was Mendez and that crowd that cleaned us up then," William Ryan choked.

An instant Mr. Pollard considered, and his head shook.

"No. There's nothing to back that idea. They were too ready to give up money — their twenty thousand's pinned inside my shirt between my shoulders, Bill. And I got their funny little commercial rating volume at the hotel last night and looked all five up. They're all wealthy." His eyes narrowed wickedly.

"But we'll get to the bottom of it in a hurry," he snorted; "and when we do I'll give this republic an object lesson in lightning justice that'll start every crook in the country on the run. Did we have the stuff when we came in here?"

"Yes." The Snake rose from a quick, hopeless survey of the floor. "I had mine in my pocket when we came up from down-stairs."

"It's one of the waiters, then! "We'll have the whole crowd in. There's nine all told, and I'm pretty sure I remember all their faces."

"And we'll have 'em in one by one," the Snake suggested. "Y' know we're not armed just at present and—"

"And the simplest thing is to take each one by the neck and chuck him on the floor as he comes in!" the Brute added, twitching up his sleeves and smiling unpleasantly. "If he's got nothing on him we can choke the truth out of him; and if there ain't any in him we can keep him here till we give the next one the third degree and so on. That's safest."

"All right," the master mind said briefly; and for the fifth time in as many seconds he tapped the little, old-fashioned call-bell that had been left beside his plate.

It echoed musically, a clear, penetrating little note. It died away and the overwhelming stillness was on the room again.

"Funny we don't hear 'em walking around any more," the Spanish Brute muttered. "The whole bunch was doing a regular Marathon before."

"And it's funny that orchestra

stopped after Ferra and Perito went out, too," James Evans contributed. "That's a good half-hour back, and they haven't as much as tuned one string since."

For the last time the little bell rattled violently. The sole result was its own echo; and Mr. Pollard, with a snarl, gathered it in his hand and sent it clattering to the corner of the state dining-room.

"Well, there seems to be so many devilish funny things connected with this happy little evening that I think we'll make a sort of cyclonic personal investigation right now!" he stated fiercely. "I'd hate to start anything brutal around here; but I'll run that dinner off in good shape yet or know the reason why—and I'll have the cash back before we sit down to it, too!"

He gripped the knob and pulled. The door of the state dining-room remained quite fast. He gripped with both hands and pulled once more.

"We're—locked in!" he gasped.

"Are we? Well gimme a grip on that knob," grunted William Ryan. "There's no door lock in this country I can't smash!"

"Turn out the lights before you try it, Bill," Mr. Pollard said cautiously.

"Why?"

"Because there's something *all* crooked here, and there may be a mob waiting for us. If there is, we'll have to fight a way out, and—here, wait. There are carving-knives in that sideboard. See if you can find three, Jim."

A drawer squeaked. William Ryan turned off half the lights with a jab at the switch-button and the electrolier alone burned, high aloft.

"They're here and they're like razors," the Snake reported softly.

"All right. Give me one and be ready to hand Bill the other. Turn out those other lights and get busy, Bill!"

Blackness, utter and complete, fell upon the state dining-room. Through it Mr. Ryan's quick, heavy step approached the door; they could hear his low growl as his fingers wound about the knob, and they drew close, with hearts pounding and knives gripped tight.

And through the blackness came one single, ripping squeal of metal and splintering wood. The lighted corridor loomed suddenly before them, a whiff of cooler air brushed their fevered faces. Tigerlike, with wonderfully melodramatic effect, Mr. Pollard crouched very low and, with blade upraised for the first slash, stole to the doorway and ever so cautiously peered around the side for his first victim.

And, having done so much according to the best precedents of similar dangerous and thrilling situations, Mr. Pollard thrust his head quite into view and rose with a jerk, stepping boldly into the corridor and murmuring:

"Well, what the—"

Nor did he profane his lips by finishing, for sheer astonishment precluded further speech. There was no one in the corridor. There were no waiters; there were no handy little serving-tables, set all about for the convenience of Malbino's men, as there had been an hour ago. Neither was there any light from the open ballroom. At the upper end of the corridor the screen which had concealed the dinner orchestra was missing; so were the chairs behind it; so, in fact, was the orchestra itself.

The hollow silence of a great building, quite deserted, brooded over all.

CHAPTER XIV.

Whither?

IN the void, William Ryan's knife, all untarnished by human blood, clattered to the floor. The Spanish Brute, who had been holding his breath in anticipation of the first murderous dive, permitted the breath to escape as a thin sizzle; and he had gulped in the

next before the spell upon Mr. Pollard broke and their gifted leader moved. One hand passed over his eyes, and he looked about again.

"Well, what in the name of common sense does it mean?" he gasped.

"They're gone," the Spanish Brute said brightly.

"Yes, I—noticed that, Bill," his chief replied with some difficulty. "But—"

"Say, were we drugged in there? Have we been asleep, maybe for hours?" the Snake panted.

The eyes which Mr. Pollard turned upon him were all but scared.

"I— Heaven knows! I don't!" he cried. "What time is it?"

James Evans stared back at the old-time marble clock in the dining-room —glided to it and listened intently— and then, somewhat more calmly, glided back.

"Ten minutes past nine, and she's running all right," he announced.

"But — why, we were locked in there!" Mr. Pollard muttered. "Who did that? I didn't hear any key turn."

"And not only that, but — *where's the dinner?*" asked the Brute.

"Eh?" Robert Pollard faced him, and gathered his scattering senses to something like a coherent mass. "I don't know where it is, Bill, and I don't know where the guests are, and I don't know much of anything else just at the moment, but standing here and gaping won't tell us much. Maybe—"

He broke off and strode to the ball-room door, and with a frightened glance about they trotted after him.

"Well, the lights are all out, but the flowers seem to have stuck at least," he said grimly. "That's something to prove that we're not crazy and imagining it all. Where's the kitchen?"

"How should I know?" the Spanish Brute asked.

"Didn't you inspect the whole house this afternoon?"

"Not the kitchen," the Snake explained.

"We'll inspect it now, then," their leader snapped. "There must be a pantry somewhere near the dining-room — yes, over there. That's the door, because that's where they were all rushing in and out." He twisted the knob and threw it open, stepping back cautiously—and again his caution might have been spared.

It was the pantry, so far as that went. Aged shelves, thick with dust, testified to the fact, as did the brilliantly rusted sink in the corner. But the only detail of the pantry which hinted at human occupation in the last generation was the collection of perfectly fresh cigarette-ends all about.

Dishes there were none at all; of ice or napery, wine, cigars, or silver, there was almost less than none; and when he had fully assimilated all before him Mr. Pollard's complexion was a trifle paler.

"It's — all a little too queer for me," he said. "It's barely possible that they must have had everything prepared in the kitchen and — say, where the devil *is* that kitchen?"

A wild note crept into his voice. He dived at a door and threw it open, and at another and another; and as the light from the corridor shone in they viewed Pacato's empty bedroom and his private library and another bedroom. From them all mysterious, empty silence flowed forth.

Lightly as he had left them, the Snake flitted back from a trip half-way down the stairs.

"There isn't a soul in sight down there but one old man asleep beside the president's office," he reported swiftly.

"Who is he?"

"How on earth should I know?" James Evans grinned nervously. "He's all hunched up on a stool; he may be dead for all I know," the Snake concluded pleasantly.

Mr. Pollard turned to the stairs and raced lightly downward, and as lightly they came after him. An instant he paused to stare at the elderly citizen

in the faded uniform, who might have been sitting there since the laying of the corner-stone; and then rather charily he shook the thin shoulder—and the ancient person blinked up at him and demanded uncertainly:

"The—the *señor* desires—"

"Who are you?" the master mind demanded.

"I, *señor?*" The elderly gentleman wakened fully and drew himself up with some dignity. "I am the first official night-watchman of the palacio. And you?"

"I'm the new president of the republic," Mr. Pollard explained hastily. "Where's the kitchen?"

On the stool the old man's head reeled back, striking weakly against the wall. He stared at Robert Pollard uncomprehendingly, and blinked several times before cupping one hand about his ear and mumbling:

"I do not hear, I think."

"The kitchen! The kitchen! The kitchen!" each pair of words rising in degrees of crescendo.

"Here, *señor?*"

"Yes!"

"There is no kitchen, *señor,*" the old man said placidly. "In the west turret lies the tiny room where the servant of our most honored president prepares his breakfast and luncheon, and even his dinner, they say, when that is simple. But the kitchen, *señor*—*ay de mi!* that is but a memory. There has been no kitchen since they ceased to use the state dining-room in the year 1886."

"What?"

"And as to that there has been great controversy," the elderly one pursued, and favored Mr. Pollard with his bland smile. "You see, *señor,* it is desired that our president reside here in the palacio. So it was planned many, many years ago. Yet it is related that also years ago a certain Pendas, becoming president, desired to sell his wares to the country. He manufactured glass, *señor,* and he converted the kitchen into an aquarium which at the time was famed all over—"

"Wait!" said Mr. Pollard gently, and gripped the thin shoulders. "There is a big dinner to be served here tonight. Malbino, the caterer, is serving it. I supposed—Heaven knows what else any one could suppose!—that he was going to serve it from the kitchen. But somewhere around this place that dinner—"

"The dinner! Aye! The dinner indeed!" the watchman cackled with astonishing animation. "In a lifetime one sees many dinners—good dinners and bad ones, *señor.* But the dinner without food, that is new."

"Eh?"

"It is true," the watchman rambled on. "At five Malbino himself appeared, bringing many men and baskets and flowers. They worked—ah, how they worked up there! At seven, *señor,* feeling hunger, I sought Malbino, and he laughed at me and said there was no food—laughed as a madman, and would say no more. He spoke the truth, *señor,* for I searched most carefully. Silver—glass—flowers, yes. But no food."

"Go on."

"And yet the dinner is over now," the old man said, "for, wakening a little while ago, I saw Malbino's men hurrying forth on tiptoe with tables, saw his musicians going forth with their instruments—and they, too, laughed. This I saw, *señor,* as I came from a nap in the cabinet-room, for I am an old man and must sleep at times. One wonders at this."

"You bet one does!" said Robert Pollard.

A good half minute he considered the aged head. It was drooping again now, and the old gentleman, staring at the floor, was muttering incoherently. As a watchman he seemed to be living up to the best traditions, and as a source of information he appeared to have been exhausted. The master mind faced the balance of the trio, and asked:

"Either of you see a ray of light?"

"Not me," the Spanish Brute confessed.

"Is it somebody's crazy joke?" Mr. Evans inquired.

"Who'd be playing it?"

"Some of the five perhaps."

The guiding mind shook his head.

"There's nothing in that theory," he said quietly. "Whatever lies behind all this is a long way behind the five."

"And do you know what I've been thinking?" William Ryan put in cheerfully. "I've been thinking of Velvet this last two hours. I've been feeling him in the air, and—"

"Well, he isn't in the air; he's locked up hard and fast, and I've got one of those infernal keys in each shoe, and they're nearly killing me!" Mr. Pollard said rapidly. "He has nothing to do with this, and I'm pretty certain none of that confounded five are behind it, but—"

"But it was queer how they left that dining-room," suggested Mr. Ryan. "It doesn't seem as if any man could make a speech so bad that they were willing to spoil the whole evening to get out of it."

"No; and the more I think of that speech, the less connection I think it had with their going. I think Mendez took fright at something when he left the room and sent in for his friends, to get them out quietly — see? Perhaps they figured on Aripo and Dambo following, and perhaps they didn't; but what I want to know is: *what scared Mendez?*"

"I give it up," William Ryan muttered. "Where's Jimmy?"

The swift and silent Snake answered the question by appearing suddenly from the front end of the corridor. His hands were clenched, his lips were parted, and his eyes seemed very round. He whisked to Mr. Pollard's side and murmured:

"Come on! I've found something, anyway!"

"What?"

"The reception-room, Robby!" Mr. Evans said hoarsely. "You can look it over and give the answer, maybe. I can't."

For no plain reason, his cold hand maintained its grip on Robert Pollard's arms as all three stepped swiftly toward the entrance of the place. He halted, almost fearfully, and pointed into the small, lighted room at the left; and Mr. Pollard halted, and so did William Ryan, and side by side they looked into the reception-room and exclaimed aloud, each according to his degree of culture.

Nor was there any lack of details to prompt exclamations. Through the once trim reception-room a Kansas cyclone seemed to have wended its merry way.

The dark, beautifully polished table stood upside down in the near corner, and of its four legs two were altogether missing.

The light settee, too, seemed to have tried halting an express-train, and to have failed utterly; it was crushed squarely through the center, and the halves leaned disconsolately against each other.

Nearer at hand, one pretty little water-color telescoped another; a chair which had stood near the door was no more than a tangle of light rubbish; yet, of it all, the rug furnished the most spectacular touch, for, heavy though it was, it had been ripped from one end to the other, and by the window one-half was a mere frayed ball, a sad reminder of its former beauty.

"You don't see it all yet!" the Snake whispered. "Look!"

"What is that thing?" Mr. Pollard muttered.

"It's the funny red cigar Mendez was smoking; I noticed the band and the color. "It's all squashed to pulp now, but—that's it. Now over here!" He dragged at his chief and pointed behind the shattered settee. "I haven't touched a thing; *that's Perito's shirt-bosom!*"

"The tucks—" began Mr. Pollard.

"Yes, and *that* isn't all! Look at this!" commanded the Snake, and placed a finger on a ragged hole in the plastered wall. "Look away in there! Did you ever see that before?"

"Is that a smashed watch?"

"Yes, and it's Ferra's watch!" James Evans said earnestly. "I know, because I pinched it and looked it over careful, and it wasn't worth stealing. That's why I put it back. But it's his watch!"

Mr. Pollard nodded grimly.

"There's been a battle here. Why didn't we hear it?"

"Because that bunch of waiters kept tramping about and talking in the hall till after Damba started out," the Snake said keenly. "That's why. Whoever did it got 'em down here one by one and—killed 'em, from the looks of things. But—"

"All right!" the guiding mind interrupted with sudden decision, as he started for the door. "I've seen enough to be convinced, Jim. We won't spend any more time theorizing here."

"Eh?"

"Nix!" said their leader, from the corridor. "There are too many better spots in town to think it out. I'll admit frankly that this hellish palacio isn't as safe as it might be, whatever I may have deluded myself into thinking."

"But why—"

"I don't know why and I don't care a rap just at present!" Mr. Pollard stated, as he started up-stairs. "But if they've been decent enough to leave our hats and coats, we'll get out of this and try thinking it out!"

With fists clenched he entered the little cubbyhole that had swallowed their outer raiment and switched on the light. Some astonishment welled up in him at the sight of the three black garments and the three shining hats above; he grunted and snatched them down; and then so swiftly were Mr. Pollard's nerves beginning to strain under the events of the later evening that he raced down-stairs with his armload without risking one more look about.

"That little old hotel is plenty good enough for me," he said, "and I think we'll change our rooms, too, before we go to bed. It may be silly, but—*what's that?*"

"Some one coming in a car—coming in here, too!" the Snake murmured. "There's only one of them and—eh? Him, is it?"

"Bentino!" cried the master mind.

"I, *señor!*" the chief of secret police confessed. "*Señor,* my heart bleeds, but—in this accursed country there is no peace!"

"What?"

"It is the truth! Would that my tongue might shrivel, *señor,* but it is the truth. I, as investigator, have worked too well this night."

"Why?"

"Because I have learned that you—all three—are in danger, *señor.* Nay, I cannot tell you all, for I know next to nothing. But this is certain: it is planned to kill you and all connected with you. My men are working with the energy of demons to penetrate the depths of what as yet are but too reliable rumors; yet this much I myself have made certain: who is paying them I cannot say, but José Lasta and his band have been commissioned to kill you!"

"*Who?*"

"José Lasta, the bandit—him they call 'the devil's father,' *señor*—you do not know him; but, soaked in the blood of his poor, helpless victims, he has ravaged—"

Emotion choked him. Bentino wrung his hands. Over Mr. Pollard came a curious calm; he laid a hand on Bentino's shoulder.

"Well, don't get excited; we're still alive," he said quietly. "Where's the safe spot in town for us?"

"There is no safe place in Relampago, *señor.* Before midnight every street will be occupied by one or more of José's curs. It is for this I have

made all possible speed to you! Beyond the city there is the old house of my uncle, who—"

"Is it safe?"

"Yes, *señor.*"

"Can we get to it?"

"I have brought an automobile for that purpose, *señor,*" said Bentino, and mopped his brow.

Mr. Pollard inhaled deeply and glanced at his friends.

"Shall we go?"

"*Shall we go?*" the Spanish Brute echoed frantically. "D'ye think I'm going to stick around this town and let any bandits soak in my blood when —where's the car, Benny?"

"Just in the shadow of the building, without lights, *señor.* And if we are to go, we go quickly, for—"

"We'll go fast enough; don't worry about that!" the Snake chattered as he leaped into the night and down the steps, with William Ryan, gasping, at his very heels.

It is entirely possible that panic did not seize Robert Pollard; yet what his movements lacked in grace they surely made up in speed as he followed. He reached the black bulk of the machine just as William Ryan stumbled, panting, on the step; he hurled Mr. Ryan aside and writhed in, to trip over the scrambling form of James Evans and crash into the corner of the seat. And now the Brute was beside him, and Bentino had followed, slamming the door and crying softly:

"The curtain at your window, *señor*—pull it down, for we pass many lights!"

He set the example, and Mr. Pollard obeyed without question; and the machine, bounding forward, reeled violently into the broad avenue and gathered speed amazingly.

Mr. Pollard, sitting back silently, fought down the terrors that sought to rise within him. It was a battle that consumed no great amount of time, either, for abundant reason came to calm him after the first minute or so; his heart ceased trying to hammer a path through his side, and after three minutes he even smiled faintly.

Sifted clear of the hysteria which seemed a part of the native, this wild dash of Bentino's was, in all probability, a false alarm. Bentino, somewhere in his wanderings, had heard something or other; perhaps he had conferred with some of his force, and assimilated what their imaginations could add to his own. It was even thinkable, after five minutes, that no such sanguinary person as José Lasta, parent of Satan, even existed in the flesh.

Not that the master mind discounted the strange happenings in the palacio, by any manner of means! His ill-starred dinner had ended mysteriously and violently before its beginning — before its very existence, for that matter.

He had planned a state dinner, with much real food and enthusiastic guests; he had received the silver and glass shell of a dinner, from which the guests had been plucked unaccountably. *Why?* In the darkness of the rocking automobile, the guiding mind shook his head slightly; that was too much of a puzzle to be solved while racing through Relampago behind a driver who was either intoxicated or frightened out of his senses.

Later on that could be analyzed from end to end; just now it behooved him to dwell upon the present, and wonder what sort of house Bentino's uncle might own.

It was odd about that house. Now that Mr. Pollard came to look coldly at the proposition, it seemed very odd indeed—this thing of Bentino's rushing into the palacio, scaring them half to death, and then snatching them out before they had time to catch their breath!

Of course, the chance persisted that Bentino was perfectly honest and faithful, and that he was saving their lives at this very moment; but all the childlike faith in human nature had dribbled out of Mr. Pollard years ago.

He wished that he had taken Bentino into a secluded corner before starting and questioned him more thoroughly; and since he had not, he would look over the uncle's establishment rather carefully before entering. Yes, that racing out headlong, just because their nerves had become taut, was a blunder and—the car stopped with a jerk.

"Heaven is more kind than one can comprehend!" Bentino stated feelingly. "We are here safely!"

He opened the door and peered out, and terrific blackness seemed to flow into the machine as a viscous fluid.

"Where on earth are we?" Mr. Pollard asked.

"Far beyond the city, *señor,* and safe," the chief of police assured him. "All lights have been extinguished by my order, yet I can lead you. Come, *señor—*"

"Bentino, if this—" the master mind began—and ceased.

If he cherished suspicions that grew with each second, there was no need of airing them just yet. They were three against one, and Bentino's throat was peculiarly adapted to choking.

Mr. Pollard, having drawn his silent friends to him, stepped out cautiously and stood immobile until one of them was on either side. He looked about, and he might as well have been blind.

Far, far away, a single green light suggested a ship, but—

"And now, *señor,* swiftly!" Bentino breathed into Pollard's ear. "For with the demon Lasta, one cannot know. This way!"

He tugged at Robert Pollard's sleeve and the master mind followed reluctantly, eyes peering uselessly through the impenetrable gloom. His feet, after the first two or three steps, struck stone; and he paused and jerked back and sniffed the air. There was a familiar quality to that air which—

"If the *señor* will hasten?" Bentino implored. "I have risked much for this!"

He tugged once more, and Mr. Pollard conceded three farther steps and stopped again, with a friend pressed close at either side.

And then, all in a single second, it seemed to have happened.

Feet were scuffling about everywhere; twenty hands descended upon Mr. Pollard's form just as his ear caught the clang of a mighty iron gate.

A crazy chatter of local Spanish, rising instantaneously from a hundred throats, set his very brain to reeling again—yet through all the din Bentino's laugh rang sharpest and his high-pitched words the loudest.

One terrific wrench Robert Pollard gave at the hands, and subsided abruptly; with half the population, evidently, holding him, there was small wisdom in tearing his anatomy to shreds.

Physically, then, he turned limp; mentally he turned to a wild beast! A snarling shriek of fury left him—and that, too, died out before the sound that floated over the dwindling chorus of voices in the blackness. It was an altogether too familiar sea song of Captain Velvet's, rendered unquestionably by that gentleman himself.

And in the gloom a flickering square of doorway was picked by the light of a match; it settled to the steadier yellow glow of a hand lantern within five seconds.

The captain's song ceased; the captain himself appeared in a doorway that defined itself instantly as the main entrance of the Spanish prison. And he was wholly free from shackles and smiling contentedly as he approached the trio and looked them over carefully.

"That's them, Bentino," he said pleasantly, and patted the little brown man's shoulder. "That's certainly them! Take 'em right in!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the conclusion of this story without waiting a month.

It Can Be Done

by Andrew Soutar

THERE are some friendships which come very near to being religious; and generally they are among men. Women may love more deeply, more sincerely, than men; but love is very different from friendship.

The four men concerned in this story were bosom friends at college.

Always, they were together, and none had a difficulty that wasn't shared by the others, or a joy that wasn't equally distributed. There was a beauty in their friendship, even for others to see, for their stations in life were totally dissimilar one from the other.

George Washbourne, for instance, was the son of a fairly well-to-do coal merchant; Webley, otherwise "Tiger," lost his parents when he was a child, and was "subsidized" in his studies by an aunt; Michael Claridge's father was a barrister; and the fourth man, and the proudest, was Robert Gwinn.

It was understood, as far as these things can be understood, that when Gwinn's uncle died—and he was an old man in those college days — Gwinn would come into a baronetcy and an estate.

It is to pay a tribute to the fine qualities of the other three to say that they admired Gwinn for his very pride. In a sense, he developed a similar quality in them, though never a word of his was openly directed to that end.

In the wild, riotous days when they had money to burn, as Tiger put it, they burned it with that delightful indifference to the stores of to-morrow that even the naturally cautious are sometimes bound to admire.

But when it was all burned, they would rather thank God for small and cold mercies than plunge into a "jag" at some one else's expense. Their pride never allowed them to borrow.

They left Oxford together, these four, and voyaged on the same liner from Liverpool to New York. Midway across the Atlantic the liner ran into a bank of fog, and in that fog was a derelict.

At the moment of the collision the four friends were separated.

Gwinn was dawdling over dinner; the others were either in their cabins or scattered about the deck. Even then fate was reluctant to separate them. When Gwinn rose out of the icy water into which he had dived, he struck his head against an upturned boat.

Within two minutes of his climbing on the keel he was gripping the hand of Webley, and he hauled him out of the water. The two raised their voices, and at the end of an hour Claridge and Washbourne were hanging on.

They were picked up by a "tramp,"

and a fortnight later they sat down to dinner in a New York hotel. They didn't talk very much at that dinner. They were all deeply impressed by their miraculous deliverance from the sea. But just toward the end of the evening, Gwinn rose, and with a muttered apology for any sentiment that might creep into his utterances, he said:

"To-morrow, boys, we're spreading out in our several directions. We've often talked of what the future might hold for us; we've often wondered what would be the result of a test of our friendship. I'll make a suggestion: Suppose we agree to meet in London on this very night ten years hence."

They all rose and clasped hands. It was agreed.

"And we will meet in my house, wherever it may be," said Gwinn.

"In your house," they repeated.

It should be explained here that Washbourne was on his way to Australia by way of Canada; Claridge was going up to Toronto; Webley was taking over an appointment in the University of Valparaiso.

Gwinn's visit to New York was only in the light of a holiday trip. He intended to return at an early date to consult his uncle on the management of the estate.

Ten years is a long period, and a great many happenings may be expected in that time. For the moment, the circumstances in which Robert Gwinn found himself some weeks before the night on which he and his friends had arranged to meet deserve the greater attention and appreciation.

In those ten years he had heard but seldom from the others.

Claridge, in fact, had not written at all. Gwinn was now married, and he was in business. The old pride was still there—in fact, it was more pronounced. But he was in business—in a drapery business, for which he was totally unsuited.

The uncle was still alive—and dependent on the bounty of his nephew! He had gambled away the estate; he had crushed the hopes of the nephew. But Gwinn, being a proud man, had deemed it in keeping with his pride to take up the challenge flung down by an unkind fate, and show the world that whatever his origin, whatever the color of the blood in his veins, he was not afraid of hard work.

He had married a sweet-faced woman who admired him for his pride and courage, just as his old friends had done in the college days. She helped him in the business. It was her suggestion that he should go into it.

She had friends in a position to teach him some of the intricacies of a drapery concern. What he didn't learn for himself, he gave his manager credit for knowing.

But when the great night was approaching, Gwinn felt himself to be standing on the edge of a precipice. He talked it over with his wife the morning after he received letters from two of his old friends.

He said to her: "Marion, perhaps, being a woman, you won't thoroughly appreciate all that this arrangement between me and my old friends means. I know that it would be only womanlike for you to say it was just a sentimental compact between four young men; that it should be forgotten or overlooked. But you would be wrong in thinking like that. They are coming here, and I don't wish them to know how we are situated."

"My dear Robert," she replied. "I take as great a pride in this friendship as you do. Many a time, when you have talked about them, I've wished that I had been a man, so that I might have had a chance of forming a similar friendship. Women couldn't rise to it. No, they shall not be told, although I don't suppose one of them would mind in the least."

"I'm certain of it," he said.

"It will be putting their friendship to the test to invite them here."

"Their friendship needs no testing,

Marion," he said; "only, we have to remember this — Washbourne is reputed to have made a large fortune as a sheep-farmer in Australia. Webley — the tall, stately Webley — he came into a fortune that must have meant anything up to fifty thousand. I don't know anything about Claridge, but I'll wager that he's done well. Now, do you see my position?"

She waited for him to go on, and there were tears in her eyes. Gwinn had been making a splendid fight of it; his courage had been superb, and never before had she heard him complain of his ill fortune so strongly as now.

"I have kept many things back from you, Marion," he said, "because it isn't right of a man to expect his wife to share all his burdens. You've never shown by your manner that you are disappointed in me—"

"Robert dear," she whispered, on a note of reproach.

"You've never known the luxuries that you were entitled to expect when you married me. Indeed, you haven't had half as good a time with me as when you were under your father's roof; but always there have been smiles" — his voice was perilously near to breaking—"smiles and cheerful words," he went on after a little pause, "and although I've never said anything about it until now, it wasn't because I didn't appreciate it in you."

Marion enjoyed that moment, though the tears were flowing, now, without restraint. There is no praise so sweet to the soul of a woman as that from her husband, whatever the cynics may say to the contrary.

"You don't know how happy I've been," she whispered. "It's just—just grand, the fighting, I mean."

"The hardest battle is to come, sweetheart," he told her, "but it's encouraging to know that I have a valiant lieutenant. There's a bill of fifteen hundred to foot within two months. One of the travelers—a man in whom I placed the greatest of confidence—has let me in for it.

"I thought that I had put all pride behind me and picked up every wrinkle in the business; but he knew that I was green; he knew that I couldn't crush him because of his wife and children. I gave him a chance to clear out. I suppose I ought to have handed him over to the police."

"Fifteen hundred!" She was biting at her lip.

He couldn't trust himself to look into her face. The thumb of his left hand was running over the polished finger-nails.

"Unless a miracle happens, it means that we go down, assuming, of course, that we pay up. The traveler knew that, although I didn't tell him."

"You'd be too proud."

He shifted about on his heel.

"Not that exactly, Marion, but—but I wasn't cut out for this sort of thing— His wife came to see me"—he hesitated, as though he were half-ashamed of the flush on his cheek—"and she brought her two kiddies with her."

He broke off; then, "Bah! I'm a youngster, still, Marion. We can start again. Mitchell (how I trusted that man) won't see fifty again. If—if you'd seen the expression on that woman's face, Marion, when I said that I would stand the racket—"

She slipped her arms around his neck.

"I should have done what you did, my love," she said with a smile.

He brightened up and rubbed his hands.

"You're a real helpmeet, Marion. But not a word to the boys. It's bad enough that they should come back to find me in this game, but I think I can preach to them about the dignity of labor. So don't you worry your little head about my feelings."

The hour appointed was nine o'clock. At quarter to the hour a car drove up and the stately Webley made his appearance. Gwinn received him in the hall — Marion on the landing above was straining her ears to listen,

and a sigh of relief left her as she heard a ringing, manly voice:

"Gwinn, my dear old pal. Lord save us! You haven't altered a scrap. Have the other boys come?"

Then they came up the stairs, and Marion was introduced. Webley was a handsome fellow, with a clear, healthy eye, and the stamp of affluence all over him.

"I was in the south of France, yesterday morning. But if it had cost me a thousand to get here I should have paid it. My dear Robert, I've been carrying a note on the back of my repeater these last three years, with the date and the hour written in a firm hand. You were not going to cry me down."

"You're doing well, Webley?" Robert's voice was hearty.

"Better than I deserve, old fellow"—lowering his voice in self-reproach. "I came into a little heap by accident, and a lucky deal in cotton futures a year ago made it possible for me to write a six-figure check if it were necessary."

"Splendid!" said Robert, still grasping his friend's hand.

"And you, Gwinn? Out with it. How has fortune regarded you? I heard that Sir—"

"Hus-sh! My uncle's misfortune gave me the chance I longed for. Sometimes I wish that I had gone into engineering, but—"

"You've done well?"

"Amazingly well. And I like the work. Hang the money if we get enjoyment out of the work!"

"That's the way to talk, Gwinn. And yet I'm certain that if I had come back penniless it would have been to find the same old Robert—eh?"

"No sobs, no sobs!" said Robert jestingly. "There's the bell. Claridge for a thousand." And he raced down the stairs.

It was George Washbourne, big, fat, and prosperous-looking. Those three men stood in a ring, hands clasped, and behaved like schoolboys. Washbourne had come down from Norway; he was married to a Norwegian lady whom he met in Australia, and had crossed the world to buy a property so that he might settle down for good. George was full to the throat of good stories, especially after he learned of Webley's good fortune and of the splendid accomplishments of his old friend, Gwinn.

They waited till quarter past the hour; then Webley said: "Claridge has failed us."

"Mick was always a laggard," said Robert pleadingly.

But they commenced dinner. Webley and Washbourne talked of the thousands they had made, and of what they intended to do in the future. Robert kept his end up with admirable courage. In their eyes he was still the gentlemen of the quartet.

They were through the first course when a ring was heard. They all started to their feet.

"Mickey!" they cried in chorus.

A servant came to Robert's shoulder and whispered in his ear.

Robert's eyes opened wide; a shadow as of pain came over his face.

"Boys—" he began, and pushed back his chair.

But the door opened in that minute, and something resembling a groan escaped the men at the table.

Michael Claridge was a few minutes late, but he had kept his appointment, even in his *rags!*

His face was pale and thin; on his chin sprouted a fortnight's beard; his trousers were torn; he wore no collar; and his lips were tightly clenched as he stood there in the opening, contemplating his more fortunate friends.

"Boys—"

There was a heavy, throbbing silence.

"*Gentlemen,* I didn't forget the day or the hour."

He shambled forward, a pitiable picture of rags and misery. He looked from face to face, seeking sympathy, and bit at his finger-nails.

"So we were only fooling each other ten years ago," he said bitterly.

Webley and Washbourne looked down at the carpet. Robert Gwinn went forward to meet the tottering wreck.

"Mickey, old boy!" And he had grasped the dirty hand. "*I* wasn't fooling you. Sit down. There's your chair. We've been waiting for you. Have a drink."

He filled a glass and held it to the broken man.

"And get on with the grub, old fellow; you'll catch us up. And don't you speak about your troubles until you have had a good dinner."

He turned to his own plate after shooting a savage look of defiance at his friends on the other side of the table. They bowed their heads, and went on with their dinner.

Suddenly Claridge dropped his knife and fork.

"I struck a piece of bad luck in Toronto two years ago."

"Not another word," said Robert; "finish your dinner. Whatever your troubles, we'll find a way out before the evening's ended."

The coffee was only half finished. Webley pushed back his chair, and remembered an appointment. True, he shook hands with poor Claridge as if the poverty didn't matter, and as he was backing away from the table he touched Robert on the shoulder, whispering: "See me out—will you?"

Out on the landing Webley laid his hand on Robert's shoulder.

"Don't think me a snob, old fellow," he said with quickening breath. "I want to do something for Mickey, and I don't want him to know that I've done it. Give me a pen."

Robert led him to the study. Webley sat down and wrote out a check for five thousand.

"I can't tell you how much it has hurt me to see poor old Claridge in that state," he said. "You know how proud he used to be. To-morrow I'm leaving for Cairo; if you want to do me a kindness, Robert, give this to him, and say—say—"

The door had opened. Washbourne looked in. He placed his hand on Webley's shoulder.

"Lord! Webley," he said in a breath, "this has got me by the throat. I can't sit there and watch him in his rags. And the beggar is talking as though he had thousands. Proud as Lucifer! Gwinn, forgive me if I—I cut it." He saw the check in Gwinn's hand, and nodded approvingly. "It's our duty," he said, and sat down at the desk in turn.

Ten thousand pounds! Gwinn's eyes were filled. These two boys were splendid. But what could *he* give?

He let them out; they said that they would try to run round to see him again before they sailed; they begged him to crave pardon of Marion for their apparent rudeness. Big, soft schoolboys!

Robert returned to the dining-room. Strange visions were flitting before his eyes. Ten thousand pounds!

And fifteen hundred would save him and his beloved, uncomplaining wife from the disgrace of bankruptcy! He thrust the checks in his pocket and opened the door. Claridge was still seated at the table, his chin resting in his hands. Robert walked over to the fireplace and stood with his back to the tramp.

"They've gone—haven't they, Bob?"

"Yes, Mick."

A sound like a sob being forced back from the throat came from the table.

"I shouldn't have come, Bob. Perhaps I placed too much faith on human nature. Money does count, after all. Friendships are—are only to be bought."

"You're wrong, Mick. They're good boys."

"Good! If you'd seen Webley's face when—when— Do you mind if I help myself to another drink?"

Robert poured it out, and closed his eyes to hide from them the shaking hand that lifted the glass to the unshaven face.

"To friendship!" said Claridge bitterly as he tossed the stuff down his throat. "May you never know the meaning of poverty, Bob. It isn't the hunger that hurts; it's the loss of an old friend's smile."

Robert sat down at the table. His cheeks seemed thin and drawn in the shaded light.

"Mickey," he said, "you have no right to say one bitter word against the boys. They were too cut up by your appearance to say much. Look! They asked me to give you these two checks, each for five thousand. You've knocked the glass over."

Claridge had grasped the checks and was staring at them incredulously.

Robert said faintly: "I wish I could do as much for you, but I'm afraid that—that I can offer you only the sanctuary of my house until you have decided on the fresh start you mean to make."

A change came over the face of the derelict. He threw down the checks, rose, and ambled to the fireplace.

"They might as well have given me poison," he said ungratefully. "Ten thousand will send me to the grave as quickly as any poison ever discovered."

"Mickey! For God's sake, judge them rightly."

"Would you take it?"

"Why not?"

Claridge shook his head, the while his lips curled.

"Of course, you don't need it," he said; "so it's easy to preach."

Robert's head dropped slightly.

"No, I don't need it," he said, and there was blood on his nether lip.

Claridge watched him in silence for a minute.

"I should get rid of it in less than a week. I wish I had your head and—and your courage, Bob. Say! Give me a hundred, old fellow, to be going on with, and do me the turn of my life—invest the rest for me.

"Hang it! Make me a sleeping partner in your business. What's good enough for you's good enough for me.

"Give me a hundred and I'll spruce up and take a holiday. Then I'll come back and try— What's the matter?"

Robert was gasping for breath.

"It's all right," he stammered. "What were you saying? Invest it in my business? No, it can't be done, because the business is not— Never mind; I'll introduce you to my solicitors; they'll invest it for you in something good, something that will bring you in a decent income."

"Bob, you'll do nothing of the sort. I have no use for solicitors. My pater told me too much about them. Are you going to do me that good turn? Don't rattle on about the ups and downs of the drapery business. I'm willing to take risks, and with that hundred I'll do something that will astonish you and the boys. Here, get me a sheet of paper and a pen and I'll drop old Webby a line telling him what I intend to do with the money."

And all was fair and square and aboveboard. And Robert and Marion were saved, though not a word of their position was mentioned to Claridge. Robert knew that the investment was as safe as if it had been made in gilt-edged securities.

Claridge stayed the night; the next morning Robert turned out his wardrobe, and at midday Michael Claridge said "Good-by," with Robert's check for a hundred in his pocket.

He told Robert that he was going up north that night to see a relative, but he lied. At nine o'clock he left his room in the Hotel Marque, and his valet, gazing after him, decided that there was only one well-dressed man in London. In a private room Claridge met Webley and Washbourne by appointment. Webley said eagerly:

"Well, Mickey, how did the beggar take it? Lord! What an actor you would have made."

"How did he take it?" Claridge laughed softly. "I was afraid that he smelled a rat at first, but it worked. Washbourne, you're a genius; it was your idea."

"Let's have the yarn," Washbourne insisted.

"There's no yarn to tell. He was as proud as ever; didn't drop a word about the shakiness of the business. In fact, if I hadn't come across that rogue of a traveler, Mitchel, I should have felt that we were making fools of ourselves."

"Proud, was he?" Webley's eyes glistened. "Good old Bob," he murmured. "He wouldn't have taken a cent if we'd been square with him. But what about the future?"

"Never mind the future," said Claridge carelessly; "I'm off to Toronto to-morrow. I'll write him from there and spin a story about having found a rich aunt."

"We'll leave everything to you, Mickey," said Washbourne. "Anyway, the old boy is safe. Now, what about that estate you're buying in Edmonton, and—"

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THE PATHS

BY OLIN L. LYMAN

NOW clear as light, now faint, now lost in shadows,
They wind to what dim goals?
O'er hills, through vales, and by green, dreaming meadows,
These pathways of the souls.

At first a highway, broad and smooth for faring,
Thronged with an eager press;
With light and laughter, vigor and uncaring,
Youth with its joyfulness.

Shoulder to shoulder, marching in the morning
While golden sunlight streams,
They pass with eager feet, with dreams a borning,
On toward the goal of dreams.

But by and by the broad way ends, entwisted:
A shadow veils the sun:
In labyrinthine snarls, dim, vague, unlisted,
The paths wind one by one.

The souls that fared together, seeing only
The Grail of mind and heart,
Must choose the parting ways and follow lonely
A tortuous path apart.

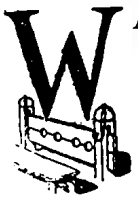
A while they tread in vivid light and kindly,
The path winds fair and free:
Again, lost in the maze, they wander blindly,
Who grope and cannot see.

And upward—look—o'er cold, bleak heights ascending,
Nearing the long-dreamed goal,
Spent with the toil, the pain, the dreaming blending,
Fares on a lonely soul.

Mournful it stands, while sunset redly glowing,
Heralds the dying day,
And sighs as sigh the winds of winter blowing,
For those that lost the way.

Heart to Heart Talks

By the Editor



WAS her death accidental? Was it natural? Or was it—murder? She was walking down-stairs at the time and no one was anywhere near her. At least, so the girl said. But then, the girl hated—

Here, let's get this thing straight. The story is

THE HOUSE OF THE PURPLE STAIRS

BY JEANNETTE I. HELM

When *Gordon* tried a short cut to the station in the dark in a perfectly strange country (it was not so very many miles from New York at that), he got himself into all sorts of difficulties.

It was not quite pitch dark, but the gibbous moon didn't help much. Besides it was fearfully hot—the heat of mid-August. Although the Hudson gleamed placid and silvery beside him; although the insects of the night and the smells of the undergrowths of ailantus and fern spelled a slumberous peace, *Gordon* was unaccountably nervous.

"I'll be seeing ghosts next," he thought, annoyed at the unwonted feeling of apprehension that was stealing over him. Yet try as he might he could not restrain a strange sinking of his spirits as he entered a grove of trees that faced him. With a sudden feeling of relief he caught sight of the bulk of a building ahead of him.

It was a strange house; the four heavy pillars of the front made it resemble the entrance to an Egyptian tomb. There was something forbidding about it, something sinister.

He struck a match and looked mechanically at his watch; it was five minutes after twelve. Suddenly, as he stood there hesitating, the murmuring sounds of the night were stilled by a wild shriek that died and rose again, to be cut off as abruptly as it came.

And next breath *Gordon* had plunged into the mystery.

* * *

Not a few stories have been written of the actions of the misfortunate convict after getting out of durance vile. But I venture to say that in

"DUCK TH' GLIM!"

BY J. EARL CLAUSON

a brand new and extremely convincing note has been struck.

When *Convict 341* was turned loose from the State penitentiary after ten years for burglary, he had with him a handkerchief, a clasp-knife, a few odds and ends, and the money he had earned during his incarceration—also a few words of wholesome advice from a warden.

But *341*, otherwise *Joseph Banta*, sniffed at both the money and advice. Had he not already, since lo, this long time, planned what he would do upon recovering his freedom? He had.

He proceeded to do it; and the things that happened go to make a distinctly interesting and vivid yarn which you will find complete in next week's issue of this magazine. J. Earl Clauson has written quite a number of long stories for this magazine, among them "The Trap" and "The Devil and Dr. Foster."

"JUSTICE—NO MORE, NO LESS," by Frank Condon, starts off with a young man asleep on a coil of rope on the docks of Hoboken, disheveled, and except for the munificent sum of nine cents, stone broke as well. In spite of his financial difficulties you will like young *Walter Davies Holbein* very much. He has a nature buoyant enough to float him in the middle of the Atlantic, and a sense of humor that you couldn't beat out of him with an ax.

In the morning of his lucky day you find *Walter* asleep, broke—and in Hoboken.

Before the dewy eve falls over New York he is comfortably seated in a large leather armchair in a millionaire's residence on Madison Avenue, chatting amiably with the owner, and smoking one of his dollar cheroots, with the prospect of a gorgeous dinner as soon as the fat butler can rustle it out of the hands of the chef. Incidentally he had acquired a vast sum of money in that short time, although I believe that there are some who consider one hundred thousand bucks a trifling pittance.

All that this mammoth pile of golden simoleons cost our hero was an investment of two copper cents which he loaned to a lady in the subway. Of course, *Walter* was cursed with luck. But how did he do it, you ask? I am afraid there's only one way to find out, and that is read the next week's number.

"THE GHOSTLY CROCODILE," by Elmer Brown Mason, is another story of *Van Dam*, the adventurous and daring collector of animals of the albino species. If you read "The White Gorilla," in the June 5, 1915, number, it will not be necessary to ask you to read this new story.

This time *Van Dam* gets on the trail of a white gavial, the great East Indian crocodile; it is a trail that leads him deep into the jungles of that land of mystery where, with the aid of a half-mad priest, he penetrates to the very heart of a Brahman temple, and the lair of the sacred white crocodile. Then, like many another adventurer in that strange country, he discovers that getting in is one thing and getting out quite another. It is to a weird and thrilling adventure that the trail of the albino crocodile leads, but it is one well worth following.

"TIME'S WHIRLIGIG," by William Holloway, is the story of a man who cast his bread upon waters to have it return to him fourfold. If you believe that it is possible to withdraw from life, to acquire no friends, make no enemies, and leave no impression whatsoever upon the world about you, then you had better read this story.

The moral of it is that our slightest action, our most thoughtless word, influences somebody for good or for evil. It is one of those stories about which it is impossible to say anything beforehand without spoiling the pleasure you will get out of perusing it. Because it is written around a great theme, and is a very human, entertaining story as well, I invite you to read "TIME'S WHIRLIGIG."

TO ERR IS HUMAN

As showing the great interest aroused by that fascinating narrative, "The Fatal Gift," transcribed by George Allan England, the following letters were received within a few days of the appearance of the first instalment on the news-stands:

To the Editor:

Have just finished George Allan England's first part of "The Fatal Gift." I have always liked similar stories to his style, particularly because they are purely fiction. I usually get enough of stern reality in the daily grind, so it is a mental vacation to read what I know is imagining.

Is the author, and are you sincere in your prefatory note and prologue? If so, please explain how *Dr. Bloss* could have died in 1897; could have been called into the Alexandra case in 1892, and could have read the 1899 edition of Gordonski's "Surgery of the Eye."

P. S. Durgin.

P. S.—Somebody is always taking the joy out of life, aren't they?

186 Winthrop Street,
Winthrop, Massachusetts.

To the Editor:

Just finished reading the first instalment of "The Fatal Gift." You have originated a very interesting plan to make fiction appear real, by the editorial introduction and the foot-notes by the author. But why, oh, why, do you give the snap away in the very first part of the story? The doctor's diary states very plainly that she took the case

in March, 1892. Yet we find her perusing a volume "edition of 1899." Oh, shush!

R. T. GANETT.

57 Princeton Street,
Bridgeport, Connecticut.

In reply to the criticism of Mr. Durgin and Mr. Ganett that *Dr. Bloss* could not possibly have "picked up . . . Gordonski's 'Surgery of the Eye' in the 1899 edition" in 1892, the obvious explanation is that the date given was a misprint for 1889. This was easily verified.

However, to make assurance doubly sure, we wrote Mr. England about it with the result that a far graver error was disclosed. Mr. England's letter concerning it is in part as follows:

In going over the portion of the *Bloss* diary in which the doctor referred to the morphin-stained treatise she picked up, I found that I had mistranscribed the name of the book in question. The diary was in very bad shape when I got possession of it, and some portions are practically illegible. It was found in an attic of the Perham homestead, Howard's Valley, Connecticut. Rain had leaked on it, and in certain places had reduced the writing to a deplorable condition, and in addition, from its appearance, rats or mice had been at many of the opening pages.

I was, of course, obliged to make the best of the situation, and where I could not definitely read, used my best judgment in supplying lacunæ. After puzzling for some time, and referring to a medical library of the period, I found that the book in question was an 1889 London edition of a work of Dr. Xavier Galezowski, M.D., whose text-books on ophthalmology first appeared in Paris about 1875.

I can plead nothing further save the exigencies of the situation. Let the blame be laid on the New England climate and its genus *mus*, not on my defenseless head.

G. A. E.

WHAT WE ARE MAKING PEOPLE DO

TO THE EDITOR:

The reason you hear from me now is that I have a kick coming. The very idea of publishing a story like "Barney Custer, of Beatrice" as a serial! It should have appeared as a complete novel.

I know what you are after! You are simply compelling people to beg, borrow, steal, or failing all this, to buy the March, 1914, numbers of the magazine, for who can read one instalment of "Barney Custer, of Beatrice" without wanting to read the others? I am enclosing thirty cents in stamps. Send me at once those copies of March 7, 14, and 21, 1914.

As to your stories, I like almost all of them.

I used to be very fond of Fred Jackson, but lately his stories are getting flat. I think he needs a tonic. "Pellucidar" was very good, but all nonsense; also "The Empire in the Air." Give us stories like "The Curious Quest of Mr. Ernest Bliss," "The Man-Eater," "Blackmailed," *et cetera*.

Here's to the editor of the ALL-STORY, wishing him and his staff success, and trusting to get the books soon,

G. M. KINAL.

Muskegon, Michigan.

THREE CHEERS FOR "BARNEY CUSTER"

TO THE EDITOR:

I have been reading the ALL-STORY for three years and find it the best yet. Fred Jackson's stories are the best, but all the others are good.

I have just finished "Barney Custer, of Beatrice," and I don't think I ever read a better. Give us another like it soon.

Wishing you the best of success, I am,

Yours very truly,

HARVEY R. KYLE.

211 North Twenty-Eighth Street,
Birmingham, Alabama.

FROM ACROSS THE SEA

TO THE EDITOR:

I have been going to write you for a long while, but have only now had the opportunity. I used to be a great reader of the *All-Story*, which I preferred to our own magazines here on account of its stories and general get-up, and indeed possess a number of volumes of them. Now, just a year or a little longer ago you changed the policy of the monthly issue to a weekly one, which lasted only a short while, over here at any rate.

This caused me great disappointment, as the stories and serials were good just then, and it was a great wrench not being able to get hold of it.

I could get no information on this side as to whether it was still in existence or wiped out altogether. What I want to know is whether it is still running in the States, and what would be the cost of having all the back numbers sent me, commencing from the week following the date of the last issue over this side. I think the date of the last issue here was somewhere about the first week in April, last year—April 4 or 7, I forget which at the moment.

Also what is the cost of a yearly subscription to the magazine, and would you be willing to send them over each month,

the four parts; or if monthly only, then only the one issue monthly? I want to get them right up to date, if possible; that is, all the back numbers right up to date, and then start with the following numbers either in weekly or monthly editions each month.

I am afraid I have put it in a rather roundabout manner, but I expect you will be wise to what I mean. I was particularly disappointed in the fact that the new serial of Edgar Rice Burroughs, "At the Earth's Core," had just commenced, and also a good, sound yarn, "The Gates of the West," I think was the title, by a new author in that magazine. So please put me out of my misery as soon as you can by letting me have the information asked for and I shall be eternally grateful to you. P. N. WOODALL.

29 Esmond Road,
Bedford Park, London, West, England.

SO MUCH FOR SO LITTLE

TO THE EDITOR:

I have read the ALL-STORY WEEKLY for one year and I must say it is simply great. How do you give us so much for so little—ten cents? Why, I have paid fifteen cents for other magazines that could not hold a candle to this one.

I liked "House of the Hawk," "The Promise," "Mr. North of Nowhere," "Barney Custer, of Beatrice," and "The Riddle of the Night." "The Executioner" was great. Also "Ebb-Tide," "Andrew Garvald, Tidewater Trader," and "Blue Sky" are excellent.

Positively the funniest story I ever read in my life was "Diada, Daughter of Discord," and I think the author, E. K. Means, is wonderful. He uses the funniest expressions and descriptions of any author I have read. Request him to work overtime and give us another story like this one.

Wishing this magazine good luck,
MRS. D. A. BREED.

61 South Street,
Lynn, Massachusetts.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

TO THE EDITOR:

Enclosed please find four dollars for the continuation of my subscription to the ALL-STORY for one year, beginning with the September 18 issue. Kindly acknowledge receipt of same at your earliest convenience.

At first I did not favor the change of name, but seeing that this did not affect the stories in any way I did not mind the change. I am not a critic or anything else in this line, but I know a good story when I read one.

Let me say that I consider "Ebb-Tide," by J. U. Giesy, a very good story. In fact, all that you print are first-class ones, and I like them all; some better than others, but on the whole they are excellent.

CHARLES D. VOSSLER.

108 East 112th Street,
New York City.

DISLIKES FAR-FETCHED TALES

TO THE EDITOR:

I wrote you once before telling you how well I like your magazine, but I really had to write again to tell you what I thought of one story in this week's magazine. It is very seldom I laugh aloud over a story, but when I read "Diada, Daughter of Discord," by E. K. Means, I simply could not help it, I just laughed aloud from the start to finish. The little pathetic touch at the ending was fine. Altogether, it is one of the bulliest stories I have ever read. I wish Mr. Means would give us one like it every week.

I think your stories are getting better every week. "Ebb-Tide" and "Blue Sky" are both fine.

I do not care for such stories as "Judith of Babylon," "The Empire in the Air," "At the Earth's Core," and such far-fetched imaginative tales. After reading one of those I have kinks in my brain trying to imagine those things that happen. I like best the tales that one can follow and know that they can really happen.

Don't think I want to be a knocker, because I don't. I really think your magazine is the best yet. What some don't like, others do, so let's all get together and say "Hooray! Long live the good old ALL-STORY WEEKLY and its editor!"

GRACE RYLAND.

Trenton, New Jersey.

P. S.—Please don't think about cutting out the Heart to Heart Talks. All we ALL-STORY fans enjoy them so much.

THE CREAM OF THEM ALL

TO THE EDITOR:

Enclosed find one dollar for which please send me your ALL-STORY WEEKLY for three months, beginning with the issue of September 11, as my subscription expires September 4.

My brothers and I think your magazine the cream of them all, and we possess educated tastes in fiction, acquired through years of experience.

CATHERINE DAVIS.

R. No. 1, Cogar, Oklahoma.

Quest of the Ju-Ju

by Captain A. E. Dingle

Author of "Made at Sea," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A Lesson in Sportsmanship.

WHEN Captain Red Saunders blew in with his schooner from Mombas, and declared to the custom-house a freight of copra, nutmegs, and mustard, the Eurasian clerk grinned openly. The customs official, more accustomed to shocks, merely pursed up his mouth and squinted at the big skipper through narrowed lids.

Saunders and his beautiful schooner, the Black Pearl, had a reputation that had seeped into every nook and corner of the Indian Ocean; his visits to Zanzibar, infrequent though they were, invariably resulted in a period of wakefulness for the authorities.

That nothing was held against him was attributable to his uncanny cunning rather than to any lack of vigilance on their part.

Since his first appearance, two years before, when his departure had been followed by the discovery that he had left behind him a year's supply of hashish and opium, none of which had paid tribute, his vessel always received more than her legitimate share of attention.

It made no difference, apparently. Nothing had ever been found to incriminate him. He had entered at times with clean-swept holds; his clearing out always heralded a vast increase in trade in the less bulky articles of contraband commerce.

This trip, with his cargo of copra and spices, the customs people were ready for him; the schooner would not get her clearance papers until every nutmeg, every grain of mustard, and every shred of copra had been overhauled.

Thus, while the skipper strode briskly out of the custom-house to arrange for discharging his schooner, the officials got feverishly busy and detailed a crew of "rummagers" to probe every hole and seam, every furled sail of the Black Pearl, and told off two men for duty in every lighter that on any pretense moored alongside.

All this had a humorous aspect for Saunders, and he swung along his way with shoulders back and head well up, a grin of quiet mirth making sunlight on his tanned, frank face. And the joke lay in the fact that his cargo consisted of precisely what he had declared; just that, and no more.

Bigger game brought him to port this time—legitimate game that promised large returns, and the business of

engaging lighters was hurried through as of secondary importance. The residence of an official high in the confidence of the dissolute Sultan was the prime object of his visit.

Leaving the lighterage office, he kept to the water-front to postpone as long as possible the ordeal of sourer odors that awaited him in the back sections of the town.

Stretching along to his seaward hand, the wide expanse of the roadstead shimmered electric blue under a rising heat haze; a medley of craft—rakish dhows, coastwise schooners, pudgy, grubby little steamers, and a single mail-boat lording it over all—thronged the anchorage, each set plumb down in its own reflection like a model on a sheet of glass.

A smudge of sooty smoke to northward marked the departure of a cruiser, the last war-ship the port would see for a week or two. And, like a vast bell covering the whole, as though to protect it from dust, the brassy dome of cloudless sky spanned from zenith to horizon, seemingly suspended from the blinding disk of the sun, blazing with intolerable heat.

The big, white-clad skipper of the Black Pearl held on his way with a sublime indifference to physical discomfort that spoke eloquently of a clean body, a cool brain, and a level pulse.

Two hundred and fifty pounds of healthy sailor; every inch of his seventy-four of height quietly but insistently proclaiming virility and strength; crinkly, tight red curls peeping from under the sweat-band of his pith *topi;* Red Saunders presented a figure that compelled attention.

The blue of the ocean deeps shone and twinkled in his eyes; sunlight of the tropics played in his brown face; a stranger's first impression of him might be that he was a big, easy-going, good-humored "mark."

A second look inevitably corrected that first impression. That lean, granitelike jaw warned caution. Men who once fell into the error never repeated it.

Striking up from the front through the palm-shaded avenue leading to the villas of the semiofficial and official residents of the town, some of the glow died out of the skipper's face. The big, clean, fair-fighting sea was his domain; an excursion into the stuffiness of stucco and thatch ever soured his temper.

It may have been the natural result of this, or perhaps the quality in the man that would not permit even a yellow dog to be maltreated, figured in it; whatever the cause, a sudden turn through the narrow gateway of the house he was bound for brought a change in the skipper like a thundercloud over a summer sea.

Under a clump of mangoes stood a white man with rage-distorted face. White helmet, duck suit, white buckskin shoes—he was immaculate save for one shoe. That shoe was planted on the neck of a whimpering, squirming Swahili boy, and was flecked with blood.

The black man's back and loins and face were seared and streaked with livid wales and raw gashes, and a rhinoceros whip in the white man's hand licked devilishly at the bleeding flesh until the moaning wretch collapsed utterly, subsiding in a quivering heap on the hot sand. And, timed by vicious curses, the whip still rose and fell.

Had the victim chanced to be a cur dog the skipper would have acted exactly as he did now. He knew that black fellows, just the same as whites, at times needed correction, and the reason for the castigation was no concern of his.

But enough was enough, and flaying a man alive was never a favorite sport of Saunders. He stepped from the path and laid a hand on the white man's sleeve.

"Time, old chap!" he remonstrated with a smile that reached as far as his eyes which carried a warning. "Count of ten, y' know—he's out."

The man shot a look at the interrupter of his sport, saw the smile, and missed the warning.

"Mind your own affairs!" he snarled, and the whipping went on.

The warning in the skipper's eyes spread to his jaw; his grasp tightened on the fellow's sleeve, and, as if handling a child, swung him around clear of the Swahili.

"He's licked, old sport, now stop," admonished Saunders, reaching for the upraised whip.

"Blast your impudence!" swore the man, and the whip fell with a wicked swish across the skipper's face.

Then things happened. Saunders swiftly appraised his man, and promptly decided on his punishment. One muscular brown hand gripped the white drill collar, the other closed over the whip hand, crushing the bones together until the whip was released.

Then, heedless of the fervid oaths that volleyed from his victim, the big skipper applied the lash in dominie fashion to the place provided by nature for spanking.

"There, Willy-boy," concluded the skipper, hauling his man to his feet and returning the whip. "A couple of stitches in the seat of your troutrous will put you right. But never slam a man after the referee's counted ten. It 'll get you disqualified."

Five minutes later Saunders was closeted with Divant, the Lord High Something-or-other of Crown Lands, and the incident of the whip had passed from his mind.

"The territory you ask a concession to trade in is impossible at present, captain," said Divant in response to Saunders's statement of his errand.

"I'm offering cash, Mr. Divant," pressed the skipper, refusing to feel overawed by the august presence. "The district's in your jurisdiction, I believe."

"Yes. Zanzibar includes a strip of coast land ten miles wide, extending from Cape Delgado to the Tana River. Any other tract except the Sabaki River Valley I may be able to let you have, at a price."

"There's no other district worth a gamble," replied Saunders, curtly. "What's the objection?"

The official's gaze hardened at the skipper's emphatic demand. Into Saunders's eyes crept the glint that dwelt there when he wanted a thing badly and meant to get it.

"What's the objection, Mr. Divant? My record?"

"Er — no, captain. You're too smart to show a bad record. We've got nothing against you, though you have the customs people badly rattled. Fact is, we're having a lot of trouble around the Sabaki. There's a deal of Ju-Ju, and stuff like that, you know, up there. It's unsafe for trade just at present."

"Unsafe for trade!" snorted the skipper. "Was Africa ever safe for trade? I'm offering you your price for a concession, sir; *not* begging for protection. I want that district. What's the price?"

"There's no price, Saunders, and you can't have that district. Sorry. I can assure you, though, you ought to be thankful that you can't get it. It would take you ten years to get the price back in trade."

Divant rose in intimation that the interview was closed. Saunders sat tight, some of the sunniness clouded out of his face, the hardness of his eyes reflected in the granite set of his jaw.

A moment the official stood, waiting for his visitor to accept his dismissal; then an uneasy look crept into his eyes. He had heard a lot about Red Saunders.

"You've got other reasons than insecurity," challenged the skipper from his chair.

"You must have prospects other than trade," countered Divant, and the two men regarded each other warily.

"Look here, Mr. Divant," announced the skipper emphatically; "if

I buy a concession, what in Tophet does it matter to you what I do with it if I keep inside your rules and regulations? I'm not a shopkeeper; and I never heard of a fortune being made out of brass wire and colored beads in East Africa since Brummagem Burke's time. A trade concession covers what I'm prepared to gamble for—ivory, dust, pelts—"

"And possibly an idol or two," coolly interjected Divant.

"And possibly an idol or two," assented Saunders with a click of his powerful teeth. "What of it?"

"Just this"—Divant laughed, but a note of apprehension ran through the laugh—"idols and religion are rights of the natives that we try to avoid trespassing upon. As you know, tales are plentiful along the coast of gaudy images up-country worth thousands. Generally they are worth about a dollar to a curiosity-shop keeper. All the same, let a white man take one, and it costs lives to quiet the fuss they raise over it."

"It costs no lives unless the man who gets one of them runs whining to you, sir. If I go after a thing, I either get it or lose it on my own hand. You'll get no complaint, officially," insisted the skipper.

"Sorry, captain—" Divant paused as a black attendant entered and gave him a message.

"Excuse me a moment," he added, and followed the boy from the room. He was absent ten minutes. When he returned he scrutinized his visitor with fresh interest. During the interview, though refusing the skipper's application, his attitude had been one of open friendliness. Now his expression was enigmatical.

"Sorry about the concession, captain," he said with an air of dismissing that subject finally. "But I think my secretary, Mr. Todd, wants to see you about a charter which may pay you almost as well.

"Just wait a moment; I'll send him in. I'll wish you good day, Saunders; some other time I may be able better to serve you."

The skipper sat staring out of the veranda windows, showing no outward sign to indicate the seething condition of his temper. A step sounded in the room behind him, but he did not turn. He was in no mood to make advances.

"Morning, Captain Saunders," greeted a voice, and something in the tone brought the skipper around with a jerk.

Mr. Todd, the official aid to Divant and the man to whom the skipper had given a badly needed lesson in good sportsmanship, were one and the same.

CHAPTER II.

The Idol of Saakuru.

AN ominous quiet filled the room while ten might be counted. Saunders gathered his feet under him, his hands gripped the chair-arms tensely, his face was non-committal.

"My name's Todd," imparted the newcomer, extending a hand. "Forget our earlier meeting. I've—er—had those stitches put in."

A wrinkling of features, obviously meant for a smile, accompanied the words. The skipper, soundly versed in the lore of mankind, took Todd's affability at its precise value.

"Glad you found a seamstress, Mr. Todd," he nodded, taking the proferred hand without warmth. "Mr. Divant spoke of some business you wanted done."

"Yes, captain; I understand he had to refuse you a concession, so perhaps you're at liberty to take up a charter."

"For you?"

"Well—er—not exactly, skipper. It's really for Divant, in his unofficial capacity, y' know, and—"

"Why couldn't he tell me himself, then? Why the go-between?" The query went with a snort of impatience.

Todd stood with his back to the long window, facing Saunders with the air of a man less sure of his ground than he might be. The secretary was built along the lines of a fox—lean, soft-footed, sharp of feature—and some of the fox's slyness lurked about his thin mouth.

Affability was costing him an effort that did not escape the skipper, who was not to be fooled into the belief that the application of the rhino whip had been forgotten. Besides, the big, red-headed sailor chafed under his recent failure; his observation was sharpened.

"Mr. Divant's name must be kept out of this business, captain," replied Todd at length. "Orders and payment will come through me. The payment is good, but under the peculiar circumstances, you understand, it's imperative that we're satisfied of the reliability of the man we engage to carry the job through."

"Then good day, sir." Saunders got up deliberately, shook himself like a huge mastiff, and picked up his *topi*. "Plenty of men along the front—old Ali's rum joint is full of 'em. I don't pack a sheaf of testimonials around with me. Good day."

Alarm chased surprise across Todd's face as Saunders reached the door. Then deep cunning scintillated in his eyes for a second, giving way to a deprecating smile that closely imitated sincerity.

"I apologize, captain; don't go, please," he purred, laying a hand on Saunders's sleeve. "Of course we're satisfied of your reliability or the thing would never have been broached to you. When you've heard more you'll doubtless appreciate the necessity of precaution."

"Talk turkey then," Saunders enjoined sharply. "My time's limited, and the air is cleaner outside."

Todd produced his cigar-case and proferred it. When two cheroots glowed in perfect combustion, and Saunders's expression softened somewhat from the mask of cold hostility he had assumed, Todd threw a leg across the table-corner and proceeded.

"What we want done, you've done many times before," he began. "Difference is that playing on your own hand you were always liable to capture and imprisonment. Now, for the same work you will receive as good payment, perhaps better, with no risk whatever. You'll be under official protection, so to speak, though that, of course, is *sub rosa*."

"Get to the point," growled the skipper, not too well pleased at receiving a reminder of his little peccadillos from such a source. "What d'you want done?"

"Just a minute, captain—I'm coming to it; but you must know the situation clearly. You've heard tales about idols, and native gewgaws smothered with gold plates and gems? And no doubt you've heard the tale of the big idol they call the 'Idol of Saakuru?'"

"Heard of it, yes," admitted Saunders, his attitude revealing nothing of the intense interest that actually consumed him at this mention of the very thing he was bent upon securing for himself.

"Well"—Todd picked up some papers, under cover of which he watched the skipper keenly—"you realize that these yarns are horribly exaggerated; that an idol, or a gaudy footstool, or royal pillow, in most cases turns out pure Brummagem."

"Some of them, yes."

"All of them, more or less, my dear fellow." Saunders squirmed at the term. "I can assure you that the most amazing bauble of them all is not worth a white man's while searching for.

"But I'm coming to my point. Though these things are myths, there's a constant stream of crazy treasure-seekers dribbling into the country. The traders, and freelances like yourself, don't give us any trouble; they take care of themselves, and if they get into a scrape they don't squeal. But green-

horns, rich young yachtsmen, ancient professors, and, yes, in some cases very earnest young ladies, keep us on the jump to pull them out of bad holes.

"And it's this Idol of Saakuru that's causing us most worry. Perhaps you don't know"—here again Todd's eyes keenly explored Saunders—"but it's supposed to be hidden somewhere along the Sabaki River. And, frankly, that's the reason you failed to get your concession—yet."

If Todd expected to force what was in the skipper's mind by his cunning announcement, he was foiled.

"Go on," prompted Saunders briefly.

"Well, old chap, you know that territory is administered here in the port, and old Said Khaled, our respected and very foxy Sultan, gives us all the trouble we can handle without equiping a regular force to safeguard the lives and interests and chimerical schemes of a lot of pot-hunters in the back lands.

"But we're compelled to look after 'em somehow, you know, or we'd get a hornet's nest of apoplectic consuls about our ears. So, in a way, we've engaged Tomba, a Bantu chief, to act as a sort of patrol up there. It keeps him out of worse mischief, and gradually he's cleaning up the more troublesome of the villages along the river.

"Can't be acknowledged officially, of course; but it's the best way devised yet to avoid complications. The thing came to a head a week or so since, when Tomba lost nearly all of a big war party in rescuing a blue-spectacled, goat-whiskered professor from some Ju-ju priests whom he was trying to rob of some paltry feather fetishes."

"Very interesting, Mr. Todd," put in the skipper impatiently. "But how in thunder does this all concern me?"

"Just coming to it, skipper. Tomba needs weapons—rifles—and as we can't let him have 'em openly, er—"

"You want me to run 'em to him, eh?"

"Precisely."

"Put your proposition in writing, on official paper, with Divant's signature, pay in advance, and I'll take you up," announced Saunders, blowing a long spiral of smoke straight before him and regarding Todd through the wreaths. Todd laughed uneasily.

"Pay in advance is all right, captain. But I'm afraid the other part is impossible. You must admit that, under the circumstances. But it'll be O. K. You run no risk. Even if you ran foul of a gunboat, and were taken, you would be brought here for trial. We'd look after you, y'know."

Saunders fully appreciated the extent of that "looking after." But he simply asked:

"Well, what's the figure?"

"Within reason, skipper—your own. What d'you think?"

"I'll do it at my own risk for that concession, signed and delivered now. No less."

"Make a cash price, captain."

"No. I came to get trading rights in the Sabaki Valley, and it's that or no charter."

For thirty seconds the official turned his back on the skipper, gazing through the window at an odorous clump of Cape jasmine, through which seeped the hum and fret of the baking street.

"You're pretty hard, skipper," he protested at length. "But we want this job done—would prefer a man of your caliber to do it—and perhaps I can arrange it. Tomba will give you a receipt for the guns; then, when you bring it back, I think you can have the concession."

"Right now, before a rifle goes into my hold, sir!" Saunders rose with his final remark and again picked up his *topi*.

Todd's acid features puckered in chagrin, and his eyes burned with malice; he shot a look of vicious intent at the skipper, opening his lips to volley forth a hot retort. Under Saunders's level gaze the ferocity softened, a diplomatic smile spread over his face, and he extended his hand.

"You win, captain," he conceded. "But I can't give you an agreement at this minute. Mr. Divant is at the palace. Come up as soon as your vessel is discharged, and I'll give you your orders and the papers at the same time. Will that do?"

"Better than that, Mr. Todd," returned Saunders inflexibly. "My freight will be out by dark; I've nothing in the world to bring me ashore again. You can arrange with the customs for my clearance. Send the papers to the schooner, and let the rifles come at the same time. As soon as I see the agreement is O. K., I'll ship the guns. Then I'll be sure there'll be no funny business before I pull out."

"Oh, very well. You hold all the cards, Saunders. I'll say this, though: you're a pretty stiff highbinder. The rifles are aboard a dhow now; she'll be worked down close to you after dark and her anchor let go. Her crew will clear out as soon as she's moored, and you'll get the guns out of her yourself. I'll bring the concession aboard in person, and—taking a leaf out of your own book, skipper—I can assure myself that you don't pull out without the arms."

Saunders picked his way out through shady groves of age-old mangoes and emerged into the narrow, noisy, blinding white streets, with their violently hued bazaar awnings and veranda frames, and teeming, white-robed, gaudy-shawled natives, who appeared from and vanished into dark, twisting apertures in dazzling white walls that apparently existed for no other purpose.

But the big skipper's mind was working hard upon a problem; he had no eye nor ear for the sights and sounds that enveloped him; his nose, alone of his senses, urged him to make the best of his way back to the clean air of the harbor.

And the problem that exercised his mentality to full capacity was the reason lying behind the charter he had accepted. He was not unsophisticated; he knew full well that a man of Todd's type would not be likely to reward a thrashing by putting a good thing in the way of the man who had administered it. And he had very definite ideas about Divant's connection with this gun-running business. Why had he not broached the matter himself?

Saunders smiled cryptically as his suspicions evolved a vision of himself attempting to make use of his concession — after he had landed the rifles. He saw through Todd's plan very clearly, and it frightened him not a bit. He was bent upon searching the Sabaki River—to its source, if necessary—and trade was not the attraction.

All the talk of Todd to the contrary, he knew that the Idol of Saakuru was no myth. And he knew that, of all the tribes of eastern equatorial Africa, that of Tomba was one of the most explosive. For a government official to give them arms and ammunition was equivalent to giving a child a box of matches to play with in a powder magazine.

He needed that idol. Rumor placed its value at a hundred thousand dollars intrinsically; as a curio it would doubtless command a higher price than that; but the cash value was the attraction for the burly skipper, and, concession or no concession, he was bound to have it. Yet the concession was desirable, in as much as it would legitimately cover the operations of seeking the image.

Saunders swung past the last line of sun-baked wall and emerged upon the sizzling sea-front, filling his lungs with clean sea air and resting his eyes with a long look at his trim little schooner.

Two lighters had just pulled away from her black sides; another, half laden, was being shifted farther forward under the swinging gaff, and the skipper knew, from the amount of his small cargo, that her holds were all but empty.

He stepped down to the shore, past rows and piles of canvas-wrapped

ivory and oozy bags of beeswax, and sent a blast of his whistle hurtling across the shimmering bay.

Then he stepped back into the shade of the sheds to await the boat, and felt a timorous tug at his sleeve. He turned swiftly and found, crouching behind a heap of hides, the Swahili boy whom he had snatched from under Todd's merciless whip.

"Hello, son!" ejaculated the skipper, noting with a shudder the raw wounds that scored the fellow's flesh from waist up, buzzing with blood-frantic insects. "No can find doctor? You'll go rotten before night if you don't get those cuts plastered up!"

"Me 'fraid, sar," whispered the boy, cowering. "Massa Todd ketch me—s'pose go for Dr. Sahib. I go for your boy, in ship, sar?"

"I don't want a boy. Here"—Saunders produced a coin and proffered it to the suffering wretch—"go get yourself fixed up. The dogs will take you for raw meat if you don't watch out. Skin out now!"

The Black Pearl's boat was threading her way inshore, and the skipper started to meet her. Again that gentle pull at his coat.

"I good boy, sar. I spik good Englis'. I sabbee Massa Todd bery long time. I sabbee 'bout Tomba, 'bout guns—everyt'ing, sar. I beg you no leabe me, sar."

Saunders hesitated a moment. Then he turned abruptly, flung off his coat and covered the boy's ghastly body with it, and decided gruffly:

"Guess I do want a boy, anyway. Into the boat with you!"

CHAPTER III.

Contraband.

AN hour after nightfall Saunders stood on his little quarter-deck with his mate, Tom Carter, watching the clumsy maneuvers of a dhow that suddenly loomed out of the dusk ahead.

A light breeze had followed the going down of the sun, and now the air was sickly sweet with perfume of jasmine and bougainvillea and cinnamon, which modified and rendered bearable the more pungent odors of packed warehouses, steaming after the day's grilling.

"What d'ye imagine the game is, skipper?" asked Carter, keeping an eye on the dhow with a good seaman's anxiety for his own vessel's safety. The skipper had told him the result of his interview with Divant, and now they awaited the arrival of the rifles.

"Can't say yet—at least not all of it," replied Saunders after a thoughtful pause. "Divant absolutely refused me the concession; then Todd said it could be had after these guns are landed; and he spoke so feelingly about the Saakuru image being the worthless cause of all his troubles that I decided he had an aching tooth for that idol himself.

"But the rifles have me stuck. Todd lied, of course, and maybe the Swahili boy can put us wise when he feels less terrified. But whatever the great game is, we'll find it out while we're on the spot; we may have luck and stumble on that image before we come back; in that event he can paper his official cocked hat with the concession."

"Then what do we want with this job at all?" demanded the mate impatiently. "Can't we slide up to Melindi and snoop around the river without kotowing to these official blighters?"

"Not now, Carter. Divant's got a hunch that I'm after that big fetish. They'd send a gunboat after us one time, and have us held up on some trumped-up smuggling charge or something. No; I'm certain they're after that Saakuru thing. Divant wants it for his collection, and he knows that if I get that concession I'll beat him to it.

"That's why Todd tried to hold it out until this job's done. He thought

I'd have to come back here, and his party would have time to do all they want. I'll bet a hundred right now that when Todd brings the paper aboard you'll find it's postdated far enough ahead to stop me butting in on them."

Further discussion was cut short by a heavy splash out in the night, and the dark bulk of the drifting dhow brought up on her anchor abeam of the schooner, and so close that the lapping of wavelets along her rough planking could be heard.

The chirp of tackles and the hollow squelch of a boat dropping into the water followed immediately, and the squeak of oars as the crew pulled shoreward was succeeded by the stillness of desertion.

"Get a couple of lines across to her while we're waiting for Todd," ordered the skipper, and went below to dress his Swahili boy's hurts again and to hide him from his late master.

When he first brought the native aboard and washed and bandaged his wounds Saunders had questioned him regarding Todd and his plans. The black fellow—Karkri he called himself—in agony and abject terror, was in no condition to give a coherent story. Now the skipper tried again.

Karkri controlled his chattering teeth sufficiently to tell that he was a "freedman"; that he desired nothing more than to be allowed to return to his own people, but that Todd had forced him into his service. An attempt to escape had been punished in the manner which the skipper had seen.

"I tell you plenty, sar, when we leabe dis place," concluded the boy, writhing anew at the recollection of his whipping as the skipper soothed the sore spots with ointment. "I beg you no let Massar Todd ketch me, sar!"

"Don't worry, son; Todd won't see you till you say so."

Stowing the boy in a snug corner of the lazaretto, the skipper rejoined Carter and found the dhow moored, bow and stern, to the schooner with twice the schooner's beam between. A pull on the lines would bring the craft alongside when Todd arrived.

The droning hum of the night-clad town filled the air; except in the southern anchorage, where a tramp steamer's clattering winches hove in a few belated bales of freight, the roadstead lay still and dark. Saunders and his mate peered through the velvety blackness shoreward for the expected boat. They were impatient to lift their anchor.

"Here he comes, skipper," announced the mate. A small boat with but two oars crawled slowly into the faint circle of light cast by the gangway lantern.

"Right! Get all hands; take a pull on the lines, and stand by to put half a dozen men aboard the dhow." Saunders turned to greet Todd at the gangway.

"This way, Mr. Todd," he requested, leading the way to the cabin. "I'll take a peep at that concession; then we'll strike out the arms and stow 'em below."

"It's quite in order, captain," Todd assured him with a laugh that was meant, but failed, to be pleasant.

"I prefer to satisfy myself," replied Saunders abruptly.

The papers were opened on the cabin-table, and the skipper perused them with impassive face, Todd regarding him curiously the while.

"All right?" queried the secretary.

"Suppose so. Wish I knew Divant's signature, though."

"I thought you'd be suspicious of that," smirked Todd. "Here—this check ought to satisfy you," producing a draft made payable to himself.

"Seems O. K.," decided the skipper, glancing at the signature and comparing it with that on the concession. He folded the paper and locked it away in his strong box. "Now your orders.

"Just a minute, though," he added, stepping to the companionway; "may

as well start getting the stuff aboard. You can give your instructions while you tally in the cases."

The gloomy old Arab dhow, with the memories and smells of twenty years of slaving hovering about her creaking fabric, towered high above the schooner at the stern. Amidships and forward her low bulwarks snuggled under the Black Pearl's black side, forming a convenient step for the passing up of her freight easily by hand.

Silently Carter's men — all brawny brown islanders who had sailed with Saunders for years—broke out the cases from the dhow's dark hold; silently the rifles were handed up and passed over the schooner's rail, and as silently they disappeared and were stowed.

A complaisant moon loitered on the other side of the world; the star-dusted skies revealed nothing to sleepy watchers ashore.

"Now skipper," charged Todd as the last case came aboard, "you'll keep offshore till you reach three and a half degrees south latitude. Then edge in and coast north. Keep close in by day, and lie to at night until three canoes put off to you. You'll know them, because they'll start simultaneously from three different points. Don't show yourself off the Sabaki River. As soon as you've handed over the guns you'd better haul off to sea and make yourself scarce for a while; it might be awkward if a war-ship spotted you."

"I can take care of myself, Mr. Todd," retorted Saunders, shrugging. "I can't afford to wait for payment for any job I undertake. I have business in that district myself, and a permit now to conduct it."

"Well, say a month from now, captain. Shouldn't advise you to try to take up that concession earlier. The naval people are rather keen on this station, you know."

Mr. Todd climbed down into his little boat and was pulled back to town, the friendly gloom of night cloaking the grin of triumph with which he urged his boatmen shoreward.

As for the big skipper, he, too, was satisfied. He chuckled hugely and hurried forward the work of getting under way, casting off the stops of the big mains'l with his own hands.

The last wedge was driven into the hatch cleats, and the fore and main sails jumped aloft while the slack-chain clattered in through the hawse-pipe.

Awaiting the mate's hail of "Anchor's apeak!" the skipper fell to scanning the old dhow as the schooner crept ahead of her to the pull of her shortening cable. Something unusual about the ancient ark riveted his attention, and he strolled forward to the windlass.

"Carter, that old lavender-box has a figurehead. Ever see one on a dhow?" he remarked to the mate as he reached that nonchalant officer's side.

"Not that I remember, skipper. I s'pose she's got a right to ship one, though, if she can find one ugly enough to fit her."

"Surely! But that one's just been shipped, judging from the look of the stemhead, and it don't fit her. That's why I noticed it."

"Huh!" grunted the incurious mate, applying himself to the cable. "Chain's up and down. Shall I break her out?"

"All right! Run up the jib, haul the sheet to port, and get the hook aboard lively."

Saunders took the wheel himself, and, with the soft breeze thrusting insistently at the backed headsail, the schooner spun sweetly on her heel and swam silently away from her creaking consort.

The twinkling lights of the town faded astern and the pitchy loom of the land spread into an indistinct blur against the black heavens before the anchor was stowed and the last ghostly cloth of sail was sheeted home. Then Saunders called a hand to the

wheel and took a turn along the deck with Carter before going below to his bunk.

"Get the concession all straight?" inquired the mate.

"Straight! It's so beautifully straight that I'm certain it's crooked!" replied the skipper in a vehement whisper.

"Huh — riddles. What's the answer, skipper?"

"I'm not absolutely sure yet. But I tell you that paper is O. K., dated this day—signed by Divant—all shipshape and Bristol fashion. And Todd warned me to haul off and keep clear of the coast for a month before taking it up."

"Don't see anything phoney in that," grumbled Carter. "Seems like a good tip to me." The mate saw nothing in it beyond a masterly stroke of business for the schooner. But then he was not addicted to worrying over trifles. In common with every man in the crew, he had absolute faith in the skipper; was content to wait until an obstacle arose—the bigger the better—then wade in with no fear of the outcome and run the roller over the difficulty.

"Good tip, eh?" breathed the skipper with quiet sarcasm. "Did Todd strike you as a man who would take a licking like what I gave him and repay it with a good tip? No, sir. He advised me to clear out, knowing full well that I surely would not. He's got something big on up that river, and he's decided I'm to be the goat."

"Of course he's got something big on—that Saakuru thing. You've tumbled to that already. Can't blame him for wanting you out of the way, if Divant guessed you're after it, too. All we've got to do is to put those guns on the beach and go after our own game."

"We'll snaffle our game all right," laughed Saunders, stepping into the companionway. "Always do, don't we? All the same, you'll find these rifles playing a star part in a bigger play than you imagine before we show our stern to this coast."

CHAPTER IV.

Saunders Gives a Tip.

SUNUP revealed the Indian Ocean a sparkling azure jewel, whipped into white foam-flecks by a crooning breeze that made tinkling music at the schooner's sharp cutwater.

A smoky haze on the horizon vanished before the sun's advance until the sea-line showed clear and glittering, save where Pemba Island loomed a rallying point for the dispersing mist-wraiths.

Saunders stood in the main rigging, an arm crooked around a shroud, his glasses focused upon the rapidly clearing north end of Pemba. The brisk swish of water and whiz of brooms on the main-deck mingled harmoniously with the cheerful rattle of pots in the tiny galley, and pungent wood smoke lent powerful aid to the aroma of brewing coffee.

Karkri, spick and span in a new white jacket, waited with a mug of the fresh brew at the foot of the rigging. Snapping his glasses shut, Saunders dropped to the deck, took the mug from Karkri, and sent him to call the mate in haste. The mate appeared, rubbing his eyes.

"What's up, skipper?" grumbled Carter, robbed of two hours' rest and yet sleepy. "Trouble?"

"Maybe yes. See what you make of that speck crawling out from under the land—just off the north end."

Carter took the glasses, mounted on the rail, and looked. He grunted, rubbed his eyes vigorously, mounted higher, and looked again. Then he grabbed a backstay and slid to the deck with an oath.

"Looks like a bloomin' navy pulling cutter under sail," he growled. "Did you make it out?"

"I figured her to be that. Standing

this way, too. That's not down in the program unless I've got the dope all wrong."

"Think Todd's put one over on us?" demanded Carter, peering at the distant speck.

"Not like that, mate. Not with his guns aboard of us. This is one trifle he overlooked, I suppose. No doubt, he's arranged to have me well looked after, but not until his own stuff's safe on the beach. That's one of the gunboat's boat cruisers that's been delayed in rejoining her ship, I guess."

"Well, what'll you do—run?"

"Yes—guns!" snapped Saunders, his jaw set hard, his eyes glinting. "If we ran offshore we'd outsail that boat three miles to one. But in a month's time when we came back she'd still be waiting for us.

"I can use those fellows with luck. Anyway, we'll make a stab at it."

"You don't mean to let 'em board us!" snorted the mate incredulously.

"Why not?" grinned Saunders. "Listen, son—"

The skipper rapidly outlined his plan, and Carter's glum visage expanded in an appreciative grin. This was not the first time the Black Pearl had dabbled in guns. Saunders took the wheel himself, and with every available man except Karkri the mate lifted the main-hatch and disappeared into the hold.

Holding his course, the skipper found that the distant cutter would be hard pressed to intercept him. She pounded into a hard sea against a stiff, muzzling breeze for a small boat, but nevertheless stuck to her task in a way that proved her to be undoubtedly in chase of the schooner.

She was yet six miles to leeward and losing ground, which was not at all what the skipper desired. He left the wheel and freed his sheets, spilling his wind and deadening the schooner's speed. Then, satisfied that the cutter held her own, he called the Swahili to his side and made a further attempt to coax a coherent story out of him.

Under decent treatment, beyond the fear of the whip, Karkri had during the night regained some of his nerve; he already looked up to the big skipper with something akin to adoration in his doglike eyes.

Sounds of industry floated up from the hold—pounding of hammers, ripping of axes, screech of drawing nails—and Saunders's bronzed face relaxed. Softened eyes, parted lips, all bespoke a mind entirely at ease.

"See there, boy," began the skipper, pointing to the man-of-war's boat; "bimeby come alongside, that boat. Maybe make plenty bobbery for me. S'pose you speak plenty quick about Todd *sahib,* can fool 'em. What's he want these guns for?"

"Las' night you spik 'bout Saakuru fetish, sar," said Karkri. "I frighten' then; no could tell. I sabbe him, plenty, sar. I know where he lib. Massar Divant an' Massar Todd sabbe him, too—they sabbe him plenty too much. Massar Todd beat me one—two—three time, for I no tell um how to fin' big god.

"Dey gwine git him dis time, ho, yis. Tomba say s'pose dey gib him plenty gun, he ketch fetish an' gib him for pay."

Karkri paused, shuddering, then added: "I t'ink Massar Todd bery mad for you whip um, sar. I go back to house after he beating me. I hear um say to Massar Divan' he fix you plenty fine, ho, yis. He say he'll tell black fella up ribber you take away de god. Den, bimeby, s'pose you go to Whindiwezi for trade, dey kill you. So I run away an' fin' you, sar."

"H-m," muttered Saunders reflectively. "D' you know just where this big fetish is?"

"Yassuh. He lib in my village up de ribber now. My people steal um las' year from de Bantu an' dey steal um 'fore dat from Masai."

"That's how it is, eh? Then your people don't think he's their own god?"

"No sar," grinned Karkri. "Ol'

witch doctor spit in um face to show my people he no good. But plenty white man come after dat fetish, an' my people t'ink he wort' plenty rifle an' gin. Dey no let him go, sar. But I git him for you, cap'n. Ho, yis. You good fella to Karkri."

"We'll see, sonny," laughed the skipper, glancing at the cutter, now within two miles of the schooner.

He whipped a turn of rope around the wheel and stepped to the hatch.

"Hurry, Carter," he urged. "They'll hail us in a few minutes."

"In five minutes they can board if they like, skipper," sang out the mate, raising a sweating face in the square of the hatch.

Saunders resumed the wheel, sent Karkri below to set breakfast, and fell to reviewing the situation. In spite of the Swahili's tale, which he saw no reason to doubt, the idea instanly rapped at his brain that the Saakuru image was of secondary importance in Todd's game.

And he couldn't believe that the whole thing had been cooked up since he had licked Todd for his own special benefit and Todd's revenge. What seemed certain was that this big thing, whatever it was, had been carefully planned, and he had only been called in to play a part after Todd had cause to seek means of reprisal on him.

He had no doubt that Divant's attitude at first was the one prearranged —under no circumstances was any one to be permitted to trade in the Sabaki Valley until their own scheme had fructified. He recalled that Divant had left him to speak to Todd not fifteen minutes after Todd's chastisement, and that it had been made possible to give him the concession he sought—after a show of hesitation, truly, but nevertheless he had got it.

He was abruptly shaken out of his reflections by the faint pop of a gun, and he looked over the side to see a ball of smoke blowing away astern of the cutter. He looked a trifle anxiously toward the main-hatch as he eased the helm down and brought the schooner to the wind. As the Black Pearl, relieved of the wind pressure, came up to an even keel, the mate's flushed face appeared above the hatch-coaming, alight with a wide grin.

"Let 'em come, skipper," he hailed, cheerily. "We're clean."

"Come, flatten in your sheets, then," ordered Saunders briskly. "Then get below and wash up; the men can go to breakfast."

The schooner lay hove-to, with head-sheets a-weather, swaying and dipping with a rythmic sweep of spars to the subtle swell rolling up the wind.

The cutter, carrying a small swivel gun up in the bows, and filled with blue-jackets, went about abreast of the Black Pearl, and dashed under her stern with a surge of bow wave and smash of lee sea that proved her previous lack of speed to be more apparent by contrast with the schooner than real.

A youthful midshipman handled the cutter in masterly style, bringing her alongside with a regular regatta sweep, and as she shot into the wind he hailed the schooner.

"Shove a ladder over, skipper. I'm going to board you."

"Come right aboard, sir. Glad to see you," answered Saunders, with his own hands slinging over the boarding ladder.

The middy clambered up like a monkey, followed by half a dozen sun-baked but capable-looking seamen, armed with rifle and cutlas. Four men remained in the cutter.

"Slave cruising, sir?" inquired Saunders pleasantly, saluting the youth. He was an ex-navy man himself; but that's a different yarn.

"Slaves — and guns, captain," replied the middy briefly, surveying the trim schoner with an appreciative eye. "Where are you bound; and what's your cargo?" he asked.

"I'm in ballast, sir, barring a few bundles of knocked-down trade boxes. Going to trade up the Sabaki. Just got a concession from Mr. Divant."

"Just left Zanzibar?"

"Last night. Anything I can do for you?"

"Well, skipper, I'm supposed to join my ship to-morrow off Melindi. She's ordered up to Kiunga to look after a big slave job. But I've information regarding a dhow that loaded rifles in Zanzibar, and I'm looking out for her on my way up. Seen anything of her?"

"There was a dhow there, certainly. And boats alongside of her after dark," replied the skipper. "So far as I know, she's there yet."

"All right — thanks." The middy stepped to the open hatchway and peered into the hold. "I'll take a look at your papers, and a squint into the hold while I'm here. Orders, you know."

"Surely, sir," assented Saunders heartily. "Want to put a party into the hold? You can see my floors from here."

"I'll take a look myself first, cap'n. Hold looks empty from the deck."

The young officer dropped below, stood in the square of the hatch and peered around. The floor of the hold was spread with a single tier of bundles of wood, some long, some short, all tied with a cross-lashing of coarse jute trade-twine, and stowed edge upward. He cut a lashing.

"Right-o," he pronounced, climbing back on deck. "Papers?"

Saunders led the way to the cabin, where breakfast was spread. The middy gratefully accepted an invitation to eat a decent meal, after six weeks of small boat work and very concentrated diet, and perused the schooner's papers while he ate. The concession was the last document he scanned.

"Don't know much about that kind of paper," he admitted, returning the concession. "But I've no doubt it's all serene. Sorry to have bothered you, skipper; I'll wish you a good trip now—and thanks for a ripping breakfast," he added, rising to go on deck.

Saunders had received a flash of inspiration while talking to this boy officer. A light broke upon him that meant much, accustomed as he was to the keenest reading of signs. He halted the middy at the foot of the companion ladder.

"One minute, sir," he requested. "D' you mind telling me who ordered your ship up coast?"

"Orders came through Divant, of course. Why?"

"Pardon my seeming nosey, but did you get the information about the rifles from the same source?"

"No; got that from a native on the coast. But how does this interest you, cap'n?" The boy bridled under the skipper's questioning.

"Thanks for the information," said the skipper, a glint hardening his eyes. "If you don't mind taking a tip from a trading coaster, I think I can give you one that 'll do you a bit of good."

"Awfully good of you, cap'n," smiled the middy; "but I'll have to join my ship right away, you know. No time for private ventures."

"This is no private venture, sir. You'll have to join your ship to make use of it, anyway. Better have it, anyhow. You can suit yourself.

"It's this: You pull out for the gunboat as fast as oars and wind'll drive you. Don't ask me how I know—you can be sure that I *do* know. Your skipper 'll find no slaves anywhere near Kiunga; but if you can persuade him to steam down to ten miles south of the Sabaki, in about three days from now I'll bet a high hat he'll make the biggest haul of slavers ever engineered on this coast."

The middy looked his astonishment. A slow smile of incredulity stole over his face; a boyish superiority, tinged with a little pity, sat on every line of his grinning features.

"Oh, come now," he protested. "Aren't you laying it on a bit too thick?"

"Try it," returned Saunders abruptly. "I can give you no proof of what

I say. But if you tell your skipper you got the tip from Kenneth Saunders of the Black Pearl, he'll take it up like a shot. If there's nothing in it I shall be on the spot when he comes, and I'll let you arrest me and collar my ship for—well, gun-running, say."

The officer looked sharply at Saunders, and he saw a man far different from the common run of coast skippers. Something solid about the man appealed to him. He stuck out a brown hand and exclaimed:

"By gum! I'll take you up, skipper. A scoop like that would make me. I'll take a chance. Call away my crew, will you, please?"

CHAPTER V.

Saunders's Schemes.

THE cutter, heading north with eased sheets, soon dwindled with distance to a fairy toy of pearl and ivory. When she could no longer be seen from the schooner's deck, Saunders took the glasses and mounted to the main-crosstrees, whence he commanded an expanse of ocean of twelve miles' radius with all that therein floated.

Fifteen minutes he remained aloft, fixing his attention on the horizon and slowly sweeping the entire arc of the sea-line. His gaze rested for five full minutes in the eastern quarter.

"Thirty of 'em" he muttered, snapping the glasses shut and starting to descend. "Only twenty when I first spotted 'em. I'm dead right, I'll bet my head."

Carter and the crew awaited orders with ill-concealed impatience. A terse command changed the schooner's course four points to the westward, and the mate was called aside.

"Going to repack the guns, skipper?" he inquired. He was bursting with curiosity, yet knew his skipper too well to ask for aught but orders.

"Not necessary, Carter," returned Saunders. "Just leave 'em where they are until the canoes show up. Better get our own shooting-tools overhauled right away, and see the bomb-gun's in working shape. Stow arms and ammunition, and grub and water for ten men in the whale-boat. Then tell off eight men to stand by to go in her."

"When's the fun due, skipper?" asked Carter eagerly.

"If I haven't made the biggest flivver of my life, mate, we'll be in on the sweetest little picnic you ever saw within twenty-four hours. We're part of the picnic. But as I read the cards, we're only supposed to tote the baskets; the high moguls are sitting in on the big feed alone. But we'll join 'em in time to collar a wish-bone or two, with decent breaks."

"Only going to need one boat, skipper?" plaintively asked the mate.

He wasn't clear as to the nature of the promised picnic, but long experience had taught him that it was emphatically something to get in on when Saunders foretold excitement.

"One boat, Carter. But the fun will be right here aboard the schooner, unless I'm hopelessly wrong. Don't weep, mate; you'll get your share of the fireworks, too."

The mate opened up the ship's arms chest, and until noon the decks were animated with little knots of quiet, earnest Gilbert Islanders, putting a workmanlike polish on Snider rifles.

The buzzing breeze of early morning had dropped toward midday, and now the schooner swam forward in fitful spurts, creeping fathom by fathom on her course to the erratic impulse of thunderously volleying canvas.

But the pace suited her errand. Dim, blue, hazy, the low-lying sandy shore made a splash of green-fringed yellow at the edge of the hot circle of sea in which she rolled.

The sea stretched away to the eastern horizon in long, lazy swells of molten glass, leaving the schooner's glossy black sides in oily, unbroken undulations. But a seaman's eye could

pick out the line of tiny bubbles and clinging sea-froth that ran along her length and swirled past her rudder. It needed no bluster of wind to put motion in the Black Pearl's nimble heels.

"Could do with a trifle more, though," grumbled Saunders when, near the end of the afternoon watch, the breeze lost even the power to flap his sails. Far out to sea his glasses revealed a long line of specks, where other craft, hull down, had lost the breeze even earlier than the schooner.

The decks were cleaned up, the whale-boat was ready for instant use, and the crew in the hold were busily engaged taking down the rifles from their cunningly hidden racks in the dummy deck-head beams.

Carter and the skipper stood at the rail near the wheel, content so long as their ship made bubbles, but beginning to fume now that the bubbles had ceased.

And the motion, too, of the becalmed vessel was not calculated to sweeten the temper. With a blistering sun overhead, the little schooner during the day had absorbed a furnacelike heat that simmered up from the open hatchway now and hung about the decks in sizzling waves.

Every few moments, up from the blue-black depths underlying the steely glitter of the sea surface, a flight of silver spears flashed into the sunlight; and into the maze of ripples following the backfall of the flashing spears sneaked long, sepia-colored, snaky forms with terrible teeth and the speed of light.

"Gars and dogfish—flying fish and dolphins—slaves and slavers—all alike, Carter. Not a bit o' difference." Saunders spat savagely at a wicked-eyed dogfish that darted out from the very shadow of the schooner's stern.

"Can't say I'm very clear about your idea, skipper," grunted the grilling mate. "Why the philosophy, now?"

"Philosophy nothing; it's a fact, Carter. We've run guns and smuggled poppy and poached pearls, and done pretty much everything else that officialdom was created to prevent; but have you ever known me to touch human flesh as trade goods? No, sir! Recruiting or slaving—there's no difference, and, to my mind, murder's more Christian!"

"My opinion, too," Carter agreed, though without enthusiasm. "But we can't buck the slave trade, y'know. It gives the navy a handful. What's put this into your head? Heat?"

Saunders ignored this last remark. He went on:

"Can't buck the slave trade — no, Carter. But we can buck this part of it, son. We're going to buck the biggest steal ever pulled off, and we'll beat it, too."

"Well," sighed the mate hopelessly, "I'm with you till gun-fire; but, all the same, I'd feel more enthusiastic about it if you opened up a bit more. I'm as much in the dark now as when we pulled out of Zanzi."

"Wait, old fellow." Saunders's eyes roved around the horizon, which showed as bare as a salt desert, save for the distant line of shivering heat-lines where lay the land. "This whole thing is coming to me in scraps. I'm only sure in my own mind that I'm right—I can show you nothing yet in proof. But if to-morrow morning you find a fleet of dhows edging in and anchoring somewhere near where we land these guns, you'll see I'm right. I can show you the whole works then in five minutes."

With sundown, a blue line of wind whistled down from seaward, and the Black Pearl shook herself with a frisky throw-off of bow-wave, leaning over a creaming lee sea until sparkling jets shot through the scuppers and halfway across the deck.

By midnight Saunders judged he was far enough north, and headed still more westward until an hour before dawn. Then a distant rumble of breaking surf warned him to heave-to.

And in the paling starlight preceding

dawn, converging upon him like a advancing armada, in a crescent from northeast to southeast stretched the expected dhows. They swept past the schooner, riding with her headsails aweather, like squat gray ghosts, silent and swift; the faint screech of working frames and the whisper of coir rigging alone proving them real.

Suddenly, as the schooner was apparently sighted from their decks for the first time, the fleet tacked and stood off into the darkness again.

"Now d'ye get the idea?" asked Saunders, as Carter stared open-mouthed at the weird fleet.

"Looks like slavers!" stammered the mate. "But sink me if I see yet how it touches our business."

"The rifles, those dhows, gunboat ordered up coast, Todd's cock-and-bull yarn about helping Tomba clean up troublesome tribes—"

"Blazes!" gasped Carter as he saw light. "You don't mean to tell me that Todd and Div—"

"No names, son," warned the skipper softly. "I know, anyway, that I'm slated for the goat here. As it happens, it's likely that our falling in with that cutter saves our bacon. I'm not clear myself just how our official friend means to pay me for that licking; but I know that I'm going to pay him for trying it on. There'll be at least fifteen hundred slaves if they fill those dhows—fifty to a dhow—and when our young middy brings back his war-ship we ought to stand ace-high with the powers that be for a while."

"Give me the dope, if you're so sure, skipper."

"First, send a sharp-eyed lookout into each masthead to look for the canoes. Then have the rifles laid on deck, ready to sling to the niggers.

"As soon as we've earned our pay, Carter, we're going up river to collect it. You'll keep four hands, and hold the schooner off and on just out of sight of the town — off the southern entrance to the river.

"I'm going in the whale-boat with Karkri, and if my dope's right I'll get up to Whindiwezi, where I believe the raid's to be, before the raiders can make it overland. From what the boy says, his village contains both the slaves to be and that gaudy old Saakuru image we want."

"Huh! You're skipper!" grunted Carter, as hazy as ever regarding the skipper's plan. "Why can't we all go straight to the village in the boat and get old Saakuru without bothering our heads about these slavers? What d'ye want to butt in on that business for?"

"Because, apart from the fact that I've no use for slavers, that image has got to be bought or stolen. Karkri tells me how his people value it. Before I could collect enough trade stuff to buy it, Mr. Blooming Todd would have stolen it. I've got to steal it or earn it, son.

"That kind of stealing's out of our line just now. We're honest traders. But I can earn it, with Todd's kind assistance. Tomba is to turn over the idol in exchange for these rifles. I guess they'll cut fifty-fifty on the slaves. So you see it's up to me to enlist in the cause of humanity, queer this slave business, and accept the idol myself as a reward.

"Unless the raid comes off, nobody will get anything at all out of the mess, and it'll cost money and time to get what we want. Once the slaves are brought down for shipment, what happens? Why, our little midshipman gets slated for promotion, God bless him! His skipper, an old acquaintance of mine, pulls down a hunk of prize money—bless him, too! Karkri's people return to their happy homes none the worse, and forever after I shall be big medicine with them if I want to trade.

"They'll have lost their old image, anyhow; but they don't worship it—just value it—and they'll be too tickled at getting home to fret over its loss.

"Tomba will have his rifles, so he'll be nothing out—until he's pinched and they're taken from him: and I shall

take the idol from him as Todd's agent. It's all clear: We get what we came for, everybody else gets something, and Todd will get a wholesome lesson that he'll be glad to thank me for—maybe."

"Maybe is right," grinned Carter as he grasped the full import of the scheme.

At ten o'clock in the forenoon watch the schooner jogged easily along close inshore. On the port bow a tiny promontory reached out from a steaming jungle, forming a snug little creek hidden from everything to seaward unless the observer sailed almost up to the beach.

And out from the point a canoe shot swiftly; a second emerged from the creek; a third put out from a clump of mangroves, and all three paddled at top speed toward the schooner.

"Stand by with the guns!" called Saunders as the canoes came up. "Jerusalem! What a villainous old devil it is in command!"

Tomba, who had come in person for his rifles, was in truth just that. But he was in no degree more villainous than every one of his men, unless indeed being a bigger man added to his complement of villainy.

The arrangements had been made by a master mind. Without a hitch the rifles were transshipped and a receipt handed over, and the schooner filled away and bore up for the river, ten miles north. And as she left the canoes far astern, up over the horizon to the southeastward popped the brown sails of the dhow fleet, hurrying to the spot the Black Pearl had just left.

CHAPTER VI.

Todd Shows His Hand.

THE whale-boat started off from the schooner at dusk under eight oars and two lugsails.

Instead of the common white canvas in general use, Saunders had long since equipped all his boats with sails of tanned duck; the reason was apparent when, slipping in past the town in the deepening gloom of a moonless night, oars were laid in, and the blue-painted whale-boat became a noiseless, swift, invisible fantom.

The village of Whindiwezi lay in a northerly bend of the river, nearly sixty miles westward from the sea. In the darkness it was out of the question to judge progress by landmarks; even the night-trained eyes of the islanders could do no more than keep the boat clear of the banks.

It remained for Karkri to guide them; and by virtue of a keen sense of smell, detecting the baked-rock odor of the precipitous hill spurs of the Coast Range, and again the rank, earthy reek of steaming mangrove swamp when the hills were pased, the Swahili brought them half-way on their journey by daylight, ten hours after the start.

Now they emerged into open country; the north bank of the river lay flat and bare as far as the eye could see; farther along a dark rise hinted at more hills to pass, but just now with the coming of the sun a fresh breeze whistled across the plain and sent the boat buzzing along under her big sails at a gait that rendered oars futile.

In five hours more Karkri pointed out two huge boulders spiking up from the yellow stream, forming a natural dock under the north bank, and chattered with subdued excitement.

"My village he five mile more for boat, sar; but he only one mile for walk. Leabe boat here. Come; I show you."

Laying the whale-boat alongside a boulder, out of sight from the river, the skipper followed Karkri, and together they set off toward a blue-green belt of jungle that formed a cincture around the bald dome of a small mountain.

For half an hour they trudged over a road composed mainly of granite blocks, which radiated heat as fierce as

a steel hot-plate. The skipper paused to mop his streaming face, and suddenly his eyes lighted keenly, his body stiffened with caution. At the same moment the Swahili's smile faded, and his mouth opened in fear.

"I t'ink bobbery start, sar!" he grunted, leaning forward and listening intently.

They had paused on the edge of a thick belt of bush, grateful for its shade in spite of the myriad insects and stagnation of air that was the price of it. And above the cheeping of heavy foliage, the harsh screech of startled birds, and the buzz of carrion flies a far-carrying, sonorous boom came to their ears.

"Tom-toms!" cried Saunders with an oath.

"War drum, sar!" chattered Karkri, turning a look of inquiry on the skipper. "What shall do?"

"You scared?" demanded Saunders, searching the boy's face.

"Me no scare, sar. I 'fraid we too much late, sar, that's all."

"Then hustle along and make see," ordered the skipper. "I'll lie here. Come right back and tell me what's up. Looks as if we are late."

The Swahili disappeared, snaking through the bush noiselessly as a cat, and the skipper cast about for a nook in which to lie hidden until he returned.

A handy cottonwood offered a vantage-point from which he could scan the surrounding country, and up this the active sailor shinned, ensconcing himself snugly in a forked limb.

For some minutes he caught fleeting glimpses of Karkri; then the tangle of undergrowth swallowed him up. But the booming note of the tom-toms rolled out its insistent summons, and a distant crashing of bush indicated men running in answer.

Checking his impatience, Saunders ascended higher into his tree, scanning the waving tree-tops for signs of a break which might reveal the position of the village.

He drew in his head with a snort of surprise, made a careful note of direction, and remained quiet, albeit his impatience had grown now to an almost unbearable degree.

For that last glimpse had shown him much. A party of twoscore rifle-armed blacks wound around a spur at the farther river edge of the jungle, and a white man led them.

Too distant to discern the white man's face, the actions of the party plainly revealed their mission as one of hostility. And what seemed more to the point, from Saunders's view, they approached the village from the opposite direction to that in which the alarm was being sounded.

Karkri's return saved the skipper's nerves, and the boy's eyes blazed with excitement.

"Big war-party comin' on udder side de ribber, sar!" he gasped, breathless with haste. "All people who no can fight go far away. Bimeby come big fight, I t'ink."

"Never mind that. What's over there?" demanded the skipper, indicating the direction where lay the other white man's party.

"Fetish-house, sar," stammered Karkri. "Big Saakuru fetish he lib ober dere."

"Then listen!" Saunders's face lighted with joyful anticipation. "Hustle to the boat. Bring up all hands but two. Savvy? Bring 'em right up to the Ju-ju-house. I'll be there. Git now!"

The Swahili took a pull at his loincloth, he had discarded his semicivilized jacket and trousers, and fled back over the rocky path like a chamois, while Saunders, carefully emptying and reloading his rifle, stealthily crept through the sweltering bush, using all the bushcraft he had learned from years of association with his islanders.

Maybe four hundred yards had been covered, each yard seeming to his strained nerves a mile long, when a low hum of voices near by warned

him to halt. Noiselessly parting a bamboo thicket, in itself no easy task, the skipper peered through at a little drama being enacted right under his nose.

An almost imperceptible path led past his covert, and on either side of it crouched the party he was shadowing. Half a dozen natives, hurrying to the call of the war drums, entered the path as he watched, and silently, swift as death, they were pounced upon from behind.

For an instant the skipper's trigger finger itched. Then he drew back and waited, for no sudden death was dealt out; the villagers were seized, their arms were bound with the dexterity of long practise, and, each with a rifle pressed to his spine, they joined the march of their captors, too utterly frightened to sound an alarm.

Saunders followed cautiously, and presently the party emerged beyond the fringe of jungle and commenced the ascent of a gentle slope thinly dotted with tussocks of coarse grass and thickly scattered with irregularly shaped blocks of age-corroded stone.

The skipper halted, for the moment irresolute. He had no intention of breaking all his eggs in a spectacular moving-picture attack single-handed upon a party of whose identity he was scarcely sure.

While yet undecided, the blacks with their captives reached the top of the rise, and in an instant, like a puff of smoke, the whole party vanished, leaving the skipper rubbing his eyes in bewilderment.

Sending a sharp glance around the open space against possible surprise, Saunders stole swiftly to the spot where his quarry had last been seen, and revelation came to him.

He peered over the edge of a cup-shaped elevation and almost fell in among the white fellow's party. Lying sheltered in a grassy glen surrounded by precipitous rocky walls a score of huts clustered about a big, octagonal, stone building, in and out of which a swarm of white-robed figures passed and repassed in feverish agitation.

But that which sent a thrill through the skipper, though he had not been altogether unprepared for it, was the close proximity of the white leader of the strange party of blacks.

A wide, white pith helmet sat like a huge toadstool immediately beneath Saunders's nose; a voice from under it muttered commands in Batu, and with a gesture of irritability the man swept off his helmet to wipe his face.

"Todd!" gasped Saunders, drawing back hastily.

A hurried scrutiny of the jungle-fringe revealed no sign of Karkri and the whale-boat crew, and the skipper crawled back to the ridge, determined now he had found Todd to keep touch with him.

Apparently Todd was in no hurry. He and his men were effectually concealed from the huts behind a pile of rock and, like Saunders, appeared deeply interested in the actions of the white-robed figures below.

A seemingly endless procession of women and half-grown children filed into the hollow by a narrow cleft in the rock wall on the farther side; and as they came they were hurriedly herded inside the big stone house.

Already twice as many had entered as the house seemed capable of containing, and a wrinkle of puzzlement creased the skipper's face.

"Now, what?" he wondered blankly. "Looks as if Mr. Todd is playing a deep little game of his own. Can't see where Tomba gets his slaves out of this."

A low, thrilling whistle shrilled from the bush behind him, and Saunders turned to see his crew, at Karkri's heels, steal out of the thicket and look stealthily around.

He waved a hand, they saw him, and silently crept up alongside. Diminishing as with increasing distance the tom-toms sounded fainter, but a different rhythm could be detected in their notes.

"Hey, Karkri," whispered the skipper as the Swahili joined him; "you savvee tom-tom talk. What talk they making?"

"War party go odder side de ribber, sar. Big fight, I t'ink, ober dere."

"Then what's this?" and he hauled Karkri up to peer over the lip.

The Swahili's eyes popped with fright when he recognized Todd, who at that moment was marshalling his men for the descent into the hollow. His captives lay bound among the rocks below the ridge.

"Oh golly, sar!" blurted Karkri. "Big fetish he lib in dat place. We find um quick now, sar."

A sharp command snapped from Todd as they watched, and like one report a withering discharge belched from two score rifles, mowing down a flock of unarmed priests and magic doctors in the door of the big hut. And with a demonical howl, Todd's men charged down upon the bewildered mob, firing as they ran.

As long as a white-clad figure showed the rifles barked, and before Saunders grasped the horrible truth nothing living moved about the stone house.

"Come, bullies! We'll talk to Mr. Todd!" gritted Saunders, leading the way down the slope with great leaps.

Todd heard him coming. He turned shortly and stood in the path revolver in hand. His face was full of evil blood; his gun-hand quivered with hardly suppressed rage. Then in an instant the pistol dropped to his side, a sickly grin overspread his face, and he advanced in greeting.

"So you didn't take my tip, Saunders," he said, his features working fearfully. "I'm sorry. It's not healthy here just now."

"I'm on business, Mr. Todd," retorted the skipper gruffly. "And I didn't take your tip because I heard of a raid going on up here. I don't propose to allow that sort of thing in my trading district."

"Excellent principles, Saunders," purred Todd, his thin lips drawn back revealing tightly clenched teeth. "You'll be a valuable acquisition to the community of peace-loving traders —when you take up your concession.

"At present I don't think Mr. Divant would uphold you. And further, I'd remind you that I'm in authority here, and if you don't clear out I'll be compelled to—well, you know, I saw you land those guns!"

CHAPTER VII.

On the River.

FOR a brace of long breaths Todd flirted with sudden extinction. His threat, accompanied as it was by a sneer of triumph, flashed red spots before the skipper's eyes.

In spite of his long experience on the border-lines of civilization and savagery, which had taught him the infinite value of discretion at such times as these, Saunders was hard put to it to keep his itching hands off the rascally official.

He realized that the odds were all in Todd's favor. In numbers, in knowledge of the ground, in everything that might decide a contest, perhaps, the whale-boat's crew were overweighted. And in addition, a remark that Todd let drop revived an old suspicion in the skipper's mind — the suspicion that, after all, his precious concession contained a cleverly concealed joker.

In the few minutes they had been talking Saunders's eyes had been busy. Todd's blacks had disappeared inside the big hut; evidently well posted, they did not need to wait for their leader's presence to carry out their orders.

Karkri also had vanished; and with him had gone the half dozen captives from behind the rocks, liberated by the Swahili's swift, silent knife. Discretion and discomfort at his too great distance from his native element, the sea, decided him, and Saunders played to delay Todd a little longer until

things developed in the Ju-Ju house below.

"Well, Mr. Todd," he conceded, forcing a sunny smile, "you're in command. But that gun gag won't help you. I expected you'd deny any official knowledge of that deal; so I took the precaution of getting my ship searched before the guns were landed.

"Now, if any question arises I have as witness that my schooner carried nothing contraband an officer of his Britannic majesty's navy. So, with your permission, I'll go about my business. I'll take a chance on the unhealthiness."

Considering that Todd's carefully planned weapons of reprisal on the skipper had been, first, the fear of arrest for gun-running, and second, the simmering fury of the natives after this raid, which he intended should be diverted to the skipper, Saunders's calm announcement was well calculated to touch him on the raw.

"See here, Saunders," he exploded, "you're answerable to me in this district—not I to you. If you come a step farther into this village before I say so I'll sick my boys on to you and drive you and your half-baked niggers into the river. You can't fool me with your lies about wanting to trade. You're after the big fetish here, and I'm on hand to protect the natives from robbers like you!"

"Oh, I thought that fetish was a myth," drawled Saunders.

"So it is—to you!" snarled Todd.

The skipper had himself well under control now; his keen eye had spotted Karkri behind a distant boulder making frantic signals to him; the quiet of the catacombs had fallen over the big fetish house. Putting together the signs, he came to a decision that took the wind out of Todd's sails.

"All right sir, I bow," he said with mock reverence, sweeping off his *topi* in salute. "Come, boys," to his men, "we'll let Mr. Todd clean out the warehouse before we start in to trade.

"I understand your position, Mr. Todd," he added as he turned away. "I'll help you all I can. If I see anybody pulling a raw steal on these poor natives you can depend upon me to stop them. So-long!"

Saunders led his crew back up the slope, and Todd hurried down into the hollow and entered the hut. Arrived at the pile of boulders, behind which Karkri lay hid, the Swahili boy joined them and gave the skipper a few facts that rendered his course as clear as a buoyed channel in daylight.

"Massar Todd he got steamboat ober dere," pointing to the invisible village. "He catch de big fetish, an' s'pose you hurry, maybe you stop um, sar."

"Got it? Jerusalem!" snapped the skipper, not at all clear as to how. "Nobody's come out of that hut while we've been here. And where are all the people we saw going in?"

"Massar Todd's black fellas dribe 'em t'rough de caves to de ribber," stated Karkri, his teeth bared in a savage snarl. "Dey all go 'cross de ribber now, and big party dribe 'em plenty quick to de coast. Massar Todd take de fetish alonga him in de steamboat."

"But the war drums? There's been no fight."

"Todd's odder party beat de drums, sar. De men go de wrong way, an' he ketch um in lilly bits. Now dey go for coast too. Ho, yis! Massar Todd he bery clebber fella, sar!"

"Wait!"

The skipper bounded down the slope and rushed into the hut. In five minutes he reappeared, and his face was grimly set when he rejoined his party. Karkri's tale was too true.

In the big hut he had found an empty pedestal, whereon had stood Saakuru's image; three or four score aged women, and a mob of frightened babies were the sole tenants of the place, and a great dark opening in the ground through which blew the damp air from the river clinched the matter.

"Come, boys," he rapped, and led the way toward the boat.

The sun was vertically overhead, and the little cove where lay the boat threw off the heat of an oven. The wood of thwarts and gunwale blistered and seared the skin at the touch; the slowly flowing stream shone like yellow oil, a shimmering heat haze rose from its surface, and an overpowering stench of rotting vegetation hung oppressive in a stagnant calm.

The two men left in charge sprang to bow and stern lines as if there existed no such thing as unbearable heat. Their brown skins glowed like burnished copper. Saunders alone felt uncomfortable, and he was too full of business to allow himself to show it.

"See a launch pass, Billy?" he asked as the crew piled aboard.

"No, cap'n, no boat. But plenty people walk along far side of river—young womans—childrens—men wit' chains round dere necks — hoondred, t'ousan', I t'ink."

For ten seconds the skipper raked over the layout in his mind, then:

"All right, boys. Shove off. And whistle for a wind, if you can chirrup in this oven. Give way!"

Karkri's knowledge of the river was more than useful in the absence of wind. Hugging the near or northern shore, the whale-boat received the assistance of a deep-bodied current that, with eight oars working like a machine, caused the banks to slip past with welcome rapidity.

At the end of two hours twelve miles had been covered, and the boat entered a stretch of river where for several miles the banks were overhung with impenetrable jungle. Thick, gnarled, moss-covered mangroves thrust their slimy roots far out into the mud of the river-bed; from either shore a shallow of greasy ooze thickened the yellow water, leaving but a narrow channel between.

Here, at Karkri's earnest entreaty, Saunders steered his boat in shore, pushing inside the screen of lush vegetation for shade and a bite of food. Then, taking a couple of hardtack in his hand for his own lunch, the Swahili slipped ashore and vanished into the dense undergrowth, ignoring the skipper's hail to stay him.

The minutes slipped by, the boat's crew made short work of their rations, and Saunders began to cast impatient glances in the direction where the Swahili had disappeared.

Through the screen of leaves a view could be had of the part of the river they had just traversed, and as yet there was no sign of the launch. But a sibilant rustling among the foliage overhead from time to time gave promise of a breeze, and fugitive cats-paws out in the river made the skipper fume with irritation.

At intervals, too, a dull, swishing splash sounded along the unseen river-bank ahead, and the combination of suspense and impatience all but ruined the skipper's temper. He could stand it no longer.

"Shove off!" he growled, unfastening the painter from a root. "We can't let that launch pass. Karkri 'll have to swim."

The branches were thrust aside and the boat pushed out into the stream. The oars took one solid bite on the water, then a heavier splash just beyond the mangrove screen was followed by a gurgling shout, and Karkri's grinning face rose from the water and headed for the boat.

"Look, see, sar; I fix de steamboat proper!" he blurted, blowing a shower of muddy water from his mouth as he was hauled aboard.

He pointed shoreward, and following his hand Saunders saw the reason for the swishing splashes they had heard. A huge mass of thatch-grass and swamp-weed floated under the bank like a pile of hay, and six perspiring blacks hurled greater masses upon it. As it bobbed in the stream, pieces drifted apart from the mass and floated sluggishly off.

"By Jenkins! you're a jewel, Karkri," whooped Saunders, grasping at once the boy's idea. "Where d'ye get the help?"

"Dey Massar Todd's pris'ners, sar. I let um free," replied Karkri simply.

"Spread it, bullies, spread it," chuckled Saunders, shipping the long steering sweep. "And by the Gods! Here's the breeze!"

Like water-spaniels the islanders leaped overboard, and while the skipper sculled the boat clear with the steering oar, pushed and tugged at the floating mass until they had it lengthened out in a thick, ropelike streamer that reached across the river from shoal to shoal.

The skipper was not idle meanwhile, and when the boys clambered back into the boat, grinning broadly as they too caught the idea, he had the masts stepped and the sails half-way hoisted.

In five minutes more the boat was buzzing down stream under the pull of her canvas, throwing off a bow wave like a harbor tug, and steered to take full advantage of wind and current until the narrows were passed.

At the end of the straight reach the river opened out into wide, flat country, at the entrance to which a huge hummock of slidden land stuck out into the river, forming a deepwater lee where the boat could lie with sails set if necessary.

But half a mile before the hummock was reached, Karkri, watching astern, threw up his arm with a howl.

"Steamboat he comin', sar!" he shouted, and simultaneously with the shout a scattering volley of musketry crashed out from the further bank.

"Now hell's a popping!" grunted the skipper, swiftly taking in all the visible points of the situation. "Thought that little rat wouldn't let us get far ahead of him. Empty your guns at anything you see moving over there!" he snapped, pointing shoreward. "Then load up with dum-dums and lie low."

The gas-pipe trade guns on the bank made poor practise at a hundred yards, and the slugs and nails they threw spread over the water like ragged hail fifty yards short of the boat. The islanders' Sniders were different weapons, and the boys handled them like veterans; before the barrels were warm the reports from the bank were hushed.

But in the launch, now in plain sight a mile astern, rifles as good as their own got busy. The range was too great for accurate shooting; nevertheless, a nickeled inch of lead *zipped* through the mains'l, and another sank with a solid plunk into the boat's stern before the skipper swept her round and shot behind the hummock of land.

Climbing to the top of the projection, Saunders watched the oncoming launch through the trees. Karkri's scheme worked even as he watched; he saw the launch slow down, back, start ahead again, then stop and swing across the stream as she plowed into the floating weed and grass, fouling her propeller and choking her boiler feed-pipe.

The skipper's plans had been made, as he thought, finally. Now he saw cause for a slight alteration.

"Away we go, bullies!" he shouted, springing aboard again. "The tea-kettle's busy for a while."

Down-stream the whale-boat swept, now unmolested from the shore. As soon as she left the shelter of the hummock the reason for her immunity became apparent. A swarm of black figures leaped along the shore toward the launch and, abreast of her, splashed into the river to her assistance.

It had been Saunders's intention to stop the launch at the hummock and relieve Todd of his plunder, since might was obviously right here. But the revelation of the extent of the official's influence by the well-intentioned attack from the bank showed him the futility of doing anything like that so far from the coast.

He decided now to wait, and beat Mr. Todd at his own game by tackling him right on the fringe of his settlement, knowing well that he dared not permit himself to be recognized in the town, in view of his errand.

With this new object in view, he kept the boat at full bore on her course, sailing on after the sun sank into the yellow waters astern and until the higher land of the hills shut off the breeze.

Then oars were manned, in shifts of four each, with Karkri conning the course ahead and the oarsmen keeping their sharp eyes wide open over the stern for the launch.

Through the night they spelled, and when the black sky ahead became gray with dawn the skipper gave up the tiller and let his head fall on his shoulder in a cat-nap. But with the coming of daylight his snooze was shattered; a yell pealed out from the south bank, and trade guns spat lead in streaks now from an effective range, and splinters flew from the boatsides and oars with a spiteful whiz.

"Holy sailor!" gasped Saunders, picking up his rifle and steering by pressure of his ribs against the tiller. "Todd's surely got his army clear down to the sea! In oars! Up sail! And, by thunder, here comes the launch!"

CHAPTER VIII.

The Fate of the Black Pearl.

IF Todd, in the launch, had been in telegraphic communication with his black hirelings through the night, he couldn't have sprung his trap with nicer accuracy.

Half a mile ahead of the whale-boat a mud-flat reached out from the northern bank, throwing the channel well over to the other side. Right opposite to the tongue of the shoal, a flat-topped rock jutted into the stream about three feet out of the water.

And as the party abreast fired their morning salvo from the bank and the launch hove in sight astern, piling the water up to her stemhead and blackening the sky with her smoke, out of the flat rock ahead marched a score of rifles, while a swarm of men plunged into the river to intercept the boat.

Through the early hours before dawn the awesome jungle noises had muffled the sound of the launch's approach. She was within a mile when first sighted, and traveling two miles to the whale-boat's one. It meant quick action if Saunders's little crew were ever to smell the sweet scent of old ocean again, and the big skipper was the capable commander.

A veritable rope of fire streaked from the launch's bows as she came in range, an earnest of Todd's intentions; and with the lobe bitten from an ear and two men badly creased, the skipper accepted battle.

Throwing his boat into the wind, he laid her head fair at the south bank and showed his broadside to the swimming blacks. Then, with the flapping sails balking the aim of the party ashore, and all hands on the port side raising the starboard gunwale high enough to spoil the shooting from the launch, every rifle in the boat picked off the swimmers one by one, until the survivors ducked in panic and broke for shore.

But now the stream had carried the boat down until she showed all her men perilously close to the party on the rock, and when they opened fire it was all too obvious that real marksmen stood there.

Real marksmen, with far different weapons to those on the bank. Saunders peered over the gunwale when he noticed the businesslike sting of the bullets that were flying.

"That's Tomba, or I'm a Turk!" he swore fervidly. "What a joke! Getting potted with the guns we ran to 'em!"

The boat was hulled in a dozen places and leaking badly; every man in her had been hit; the skipper himself dripped blood from both sleeves. And the launch snorted nearer.

Snapping short, decisive orders, Saunders slid slowly to his knees, and his crew, one by one, sagged into the bottom of the boat. But the skipper kept a turn round his wrist with the

main-sheet, his knee caught a pressure grip on the tiller, and every hand in the boat slipped shells into empty rifles. The big bomb-gun was charged and laid close to the skipper's hand.

This was the place where Saunders meant to tackle the launch; but he had not counted on fighting an army ashore so far from the village. Now it would call for all his resourcefulness to pull his men out of the mess without bothering about Todd. From appearance, Todd might take a hand himself; the launch headed bows on for the whale-boat now.

Drifting aimlessly with the current, the whale-boat edged nearer the rock, and the skipper momentarily expected to receive a hot volley from Todd. But suddenly the launch shifted her helm, dashed on, and plowed through the mud-flats and down river. As she passed Todd sent a mocking laugh at the whale-boat, and shouted a string of orders in Bantu to his allies ashore.

"What's he say, Karkri?" whispered Saunders sharply.

"Him say, sar, for Tomba to make proper good job of you."

"Kind of him," growled the skipper with grim humor. "This is where he gets fooled, though."

A yell burst from the shore party in answer to Todd's hail. They scampered out to join their fellows on the rock, howling like a pack of hyenas fighting over a fat cadaver. And nearer drifted the boat. The yelling blacks gathered on the extreme point, every dusky demon bursting with anxiety to get his hands on the gunwale as she swept within reach.

Now she was within twenty yards, guns were dropped, a chain of hands reached out for the prize, when Saunders considered they'd had fun enough.

Springing to his feet, he grabbed the tiller and trimmed his sheet, sheering off the point and missing by a hair the hands outstretched for him. And from eight rifles in the boat belched a withering blast of good, expanding lead into the thick of the mob now bunched in hopeless confusion on the rock. And in the thickest of the confusion the roar of the bomb-gun drowned all other sound, and where the mob had stood remnants now strewed the rock.

There was no need for a second blast of that murderous weapon, and Saunders laid it aside with a grim smile. The launch had disappeared round a bend, and the whale-boat was put at her best speed in the same direction. Past that last mud-flat the river opened into familiar country, and the sea-tide made itself felt more with every mile covered.

With the close prospect of the ocean, and their own tight little ship, the islanders made the best of their mishaps and went to work bandaging each other's hurts with strips of duck and sopped hardtack.

Only the skipper looked glum. The volatile spirits of the crew never permitted them to lose their sunny grins for more than a few breaths at one time. They were as keen as a Donnybrook faction for a scrap, and enjoyed such a one as they had just come out of for the tussle itself, never worrying about the cause or the outcome.

But, much as he relished a battle of brawn or wits himself, Saunders was hard-headed enough to prefer a fight for profit to one for glory, and he saw little profit in his trip now. With the escape of Todd went his hopes of laying hands on Saakuru's image, which was, after all, the sole reason for his venture. And he was sore.

The boat leaked more with every mile covered, and disgustedly he ran her ashore on a bank of red clay to patch up the holes. The delay irked him the more as an ominous haze low down over the river estuary presaged storm, and his boat was in no condition to battle with a breeze while waiting for the schooner to pick her up.

So when on shoving off again one of his boys reported Karkri missing he settled himself in the stern-sheets with a shrug, and simply growled:

"The Duppee fly away with Karkri! May as well lose him, too; we can do without ballast!"

It was dusk when the town came in sight, and a black cloud hung low in the east now, rumbling with thunder and spilling the first drops of a torrential rain.

Out beyond the estuary, where yellow and blue water merged, tumbling white-caps raced ahead of the coming breeze that struck down with a screech as the boat hugged the southern shore.

To seaward a few laboring dhows scurried in for shelter, but the sight that chased the gloom from Saunders's frowning visage was his own little ship standing in to meet him.

Leaning to the rising blasts under four whole lower sails, she raced through the short seas with a creaming bow-wave that hissed and leaped to her lee-cathead, standing inshore with a daring that brought a snap of pride to the skipper's tired eyes.

The boat was half full of water from rain and imperfectly calked leaks when the Black Pearl swept around into the wind and gave her a lee; it was a drenched, stiff, and sore crew that scrambled over the schooner's rail and received the volley of queries fired at them by the shipkeepers.

"Lost out, didn't you, skipper?" was Carter's soothing inquiry.

"Oh, shut up!" growled Saunders, glancing up at the weather and again at the too near lee shore.

"That's why I didn't reef," went on the mate, ignoring the skipper's ill humor, with which he was entirely in sympathy. "See that dhow?" pointing to seaward, where a flying speck blinked white against the black of the lowering clouds.

"To Hades with the dhow!" gritted the skipper, and rapped out an order that brought the schooner close-hauled on a course to clear the land.

"Sure!" pursued the mate, unruffled. "But if we can get to her maybe we haven't lost out at that."

"Give it up, Carter. Why in perdition can't you peel off what's on your mind?"

A shrieking gust made the schooner's rigging twang again; she lay down until a lump of water lolloped over the lee-rail, and the mate sensed what was in the skipper's mind.

"Don't reef, skipper! Keep her to it. I'll tell you. A big launch came pelting out of the river a couple of hours before you showed up. She ran alongside that dhow—"

"See who was in her?" interrupted Saunders, showing interest at last.

"Sure! It was Todd. And unless I'm bat blind, Saakuru's blooming image is aboard of her right now. She's the same dhow we took the guns out of — the one with the figurehead, though they've taken it off her again.

"The launch hustled on down the coast, and she followed. Then the breeze freshened; she snugged down, but I guess she's light—she was going to loo'ard like a dump-scow when she had to haul offshore and make a long board. One long tack out and she'll about make the point where we landed the guns when she tacks again."

"Like fun she will!" grinned Saunders, his old smile coming back with the new prospect. "Loose tops'ls. The Pearl can show paces to any coir-stitched slaver that ever sailed! Bless your old eyes, mate!"

The distant dhow vanished behind a blinding rain screen as they watched, and when she reappeared, and he had rubbed his eyes and looked again to be sure of what he saw, Saunders sang out cheerfully:

"Hold on the foretops'l! Ready about! Hard a lee there! She's tacked, Carter. We'll get her now!"

A rumble of thunder culminated in a terrific crash, and with it the squall shrieked with redoubled force. The schooner staggered under her press of canvas; the loosened tops'ls ripped like paper and blew away to leeward in ragged fragments. The slender main-topmast buckled like a whip; a backstay parted at the collar, and the spar

snapped like a stick of macaroni. And as she plunged her sharp stem into the side of a mountainous sea tons of gray water thundered aboard, smashing the whale-boat into staves; the starboard boat shot away over the side on an avalanche of swirling sea.

Still she held on, though again the dhow was hidden by the low-flying cloud-wrack.

Straining their eyes in the deepening murk of falling night, Saunders and his mate strove to keep the dhow in view. Two men in the bows kept ears and eyes open, too, and when darkness finally blotted out the chase her position was such that they couldn't well lose her if they held their own course.

They were on an unfamiliar coast, and the schooner should have been hauled offshore ten miles; but as long as that dhow stood in toward the land, the skipper would follow her, though he suspected she drew but half his water.

Reward and penalty for his hardihood came fast. A hail from forward sent a thrill through the little ship.

"That dhow he on port bow, sar!"

And in the next breath came the shudder.

"Surf close to loo-ard, sar!" In the same instant a shock racked the schooner to her sternpost. Another rending crash deep down amidships followed; she halted, staggered, then heeled to her tremendous sail-pressure and shot forward again, while from her forecastle sprang men who shouted:

"She's fillin' wid water, sar!"

Saunders jumped to the hatch with a lantern. The light was wholly unnecessary. A rush of air whipped the hatchcover from his hands, the holds roared with rushing water, and he sprang aft to the wheel with a fervid curse.

"Stand by to board!" he yelled. "You've got to take that dhow, boys, or drown!"

The creaking of the dhow's fabric could be heard a point or two to windward as the schooner tore over the reef. She showed up, a black blotch ahead and close aboard when the skipper gave his schooner a full sweep off the wind and put the utmost momentum into the rapidly foundering hull.

Fair at the black blur the Black Pearl surged, heavy and loggy. Her way deadening with every forward plunge, the master hand at the helm shot her jibboom like a javelin across the dhow's low stern; the vessels came together with a grinding crash, and above the babel of tongues that cursed him Saunders's voice carried clear:

"Now bullies; no shooting. But get aboard or sink!"

With the order the skipper sprang into the dhow's rigging. Carter followed hard after, and with him twelve husky islanders, with death astern to impel them on.

Taking his fists to the helmsman of the dhow, Saunders rendered him harmless with a swift jolt to the point. Then he took charge and strove to back the vessel clear of the sinking schooner.

Sounds of strife on the dark decks were brief. In five minutes the slam of a hatch was heard, and Carter's hoarse bellow announced:

"Rats are trapped, skipper. Now what?"

Saunders was silent. Somewhere out in the night a tumbling swirl of waters closed over his Black Pearl and, to the seaman who had lost her, her going sounded like a sob.

CHAPTER IX.

The Fight on the Dhow.

WITH a fleeting but eloquent glance at the black waters beneath which lay his well-beloved little ship, the skipper made a rapid calculation of the position, and stored the figures away in his memory. Then he applied himself to the business in hand.

"Take a look and see if this old lavender-box'll float," he directed. "We hit her a nasty smash as we ran aboard."

"What'll we do with the rats below, skipper?" asked Carter, as a medley of howls filled the dark bowels of the old dhow. "Sounds as if they're badly rattled about something."

"Take a couple of hands and stop their noise. Tie 'em up if necessary. But first put a hand in the chains and get a sounding. Don't want to lose this one, too."

As if in acknowledgement that it had done its worst the squall moderated almost immediately after the schooner's disappearance. And with the lulling of the wind the sea rose in lumpy confusion, in the midst of which the ancient slaver wallowed with weird creakings and groanings.

And above all the hubbub of squealing frames and slamming of great lateen yards, sounded the frantic hammering of fists upon the under side of the hatches and plaintive appeals against fate.

"Hurry below, Carter," roared the skipper, fearing the facts. "I believe she's sinking, too!"

The mate lifted a hatch-cover, and was all but overpowered by the panic-stricken rush of the crew from the hold. A babel of Arbi and Swahili buzzed around his ears out of which he learned the truth.

"Watch these swine!" he yelled to his men. Then to the skipper awaiting his report: "She's half full, skipper. She's wide open somewhere."

And from the leadsman in the fore-rigging came the hail:

"No bottom!"

Calling a hand to the tiller, Saunders swiftly made a round of the dhow, noting her peculiarities of rig and gaging her peculiarities.

"Shake out all reefs!" rang out the order. "And, Carter, make those Arabs rig their old pump. Put a couple of boys to watch 'em; lash 'em to the pump-brakes if they kick. They've got to pump or perish. And, for the love of Pete, keep the old barge agoing!"

Then Saunders hurried forward and dropped through the tiny hatch into the dark, evilly smelling forecastle, landing in three feet of water that swashed and tumbled from side to side with the dhow's dizzy lurches.

By sound rather than sight he sensed the spot where the water came in and groped toward it. Knowing well the model of his own lost ship, he felt certain that the mischief could not be far below the water-line. He verified this by reaching down under water on the starboard side near the bows. His wrist was near broken by the inrushing torrent.

"And a half—nine!" boomed the leadsman's voice through the hatchway.

That was rapid shoaling with a vengeance. The skipper sprang on deck in alarm. The wind had died down to a fresh air that had chopped around to the south'ard; the lowering cloud-bank hung black in the western sky; overhead the heavens were starless—opaque—as black as velvet. In spite of the rapid shoaling, however, no sound of surf could be heard; nothing beyond the rush and sweep of big seas driving landward.

"Deep—eight!" came the warning from the chains, and the cry was an imperative call for action.

"Haul the wind abeam to starboard," ordered the skipper; then he shouted to Carter to get a weighted tarpaulin over the bows to try if possible to stay the inrush of water.

The port list of the dhow now brought the wound in her starboard side near the surface, and heeling and staggering crazily she lunged forward, while a score of eyes peered anxiously through the murk ahead.

"By the mark—seven!"

"Get the anchor clear for letting go," roared Saunders, resuming the

tiller himself and bending all his energies to pinching the last fathom of speed out of his clumsy ark.

Five minutes passed — five minutes of feverish searching and rummaging in the dark, chaotic mess of the littered fore-deck—then the mate's hail rang out:

"All clear for'ard—and there's a light dead ahead, skipper, coming this way."

"Quarter less — six!" chanted the leadsman, and gathered his line into fakes for another cast.

Seaman's instinct told the skipper, as well as clear sight, that the tarpaulin was enabling the dhow to hold her own. The vessel's logginess was not increasing; her weather freeboard became no less.

He peered ahead for the reported light. He saw three—red, green, and white — low down, rising and falling with a dazzling swoop that marked the vessel carrying them a small one.

"And a half—three!"

The lights swung nearer. An excited chattering broke out among the dhow's crew, sweating at the pumps. A faint hail carried down from the approaching craft, and the skipper snatched yet another searching look over the side at his freeboard, then threw a turn of rope over the tiller and ran to the hatchway, listening intently. Reassured, he ran aft and swept the dhow up into the wind.

"Keep fast everything for'ard!" he bawled; then called Carter.

"Get all our boys up here," he directed. "Stand by these rats until we see what that boat is. We don't want rescuing yet; we're making no water to worry about, and that Saakuru thing's aboard here somewhere, son."

Another hail came from the approaching boat, close-to now, and half visible in the darkness. She was a large steam launch, and something in the tone of the voice hailing caused Saunders and the mate to start.

"That's Todd's voice, or I'm a ghost!" swore the mate.

Saunders sprang to the pump, grabbed an Arab by the arm and hissed in his ear:

"What's he say?"

"He say heave-to and he board us," growled the Arab surlily. "He come to meet us here."

"Tell him we're not his dhow!" prompted the skipper fiercely.

The Arab bawled something in reply to the launch's peremptory third hail. Neither the skipper nor Carter understood much Arbi, but there was that in the man's voice that aroused suspicion as to his good faith.

The suspicion was verified when a round oath in unmistakable English, and in Todd's rageful voice, was followed sharply by the flash and crack of a rifle, and a slug zipped into the rail at the skipper's hand.

"Come, bullies!" gritted Saunders savagely. "Toss those rats into the hold. Shove hatches over them, and stand by for boarders."

The big launch shot alongside and backed up. But before one of her crew laid a hand on the dhow's rail the islanders had seized the dhow's people, now fighting furiously, and hove them bodily below. Now they ranged along the low bulwarks with eager rifles pointing squarely down at the steamboat.

No further word came from Todd. One vicious volley spat lead at the dhow, then swarming like giant apes the launch's men piled on to the rail, every man gripping in his teeth a wicked billhook.

The dhow lay head to wind, and the two vessels ground and hammered at each other with the powerful heave of the running swell. And in a darkness that could be felt, the grinning islanders cheerfully clubbed their rifles and danced from end to end of the rail, hitting at every head that showed from overside.

Whispering to the mate to cut adrift the launch's bow grappling iron, Saunders sprang to the tiller, slashed through the stern-fast, and sheered his

craft off, leaving the launch several feet away in the first lurch, and carrying half a dozen of her crew hanging desperately to the dhow's gunwale.

Seizing his own gun, the skipper left the tiller and played a tattoo with his rifle butt on the brown hands gripping the rail. One by one the hands let go; one by one, with curses hot and earnest, the brown assailants dropped off and splashed frantically toward the launch.

"Take a couple of hands with you, Carter," ordered Saunders in the breathing space, "and rip up every part of this old box that's likely to hold that fetish. It's here, somewhere. Fish it out, and next time Todd ranges alongside we'll leave the dhow to him and beat it in his launch."

The mate obeyed with a confident grin, and Saunders warily jockeyed the dhow into position to play tag for a while with Todd. The launch steamed up again as the dhow luffed, and a score of fresh hands stood ready to spring. Then with a shrewd touch the skipper sheered off again, just a few feet, and the launch was forced to start up her engines once more.

Ten minutes Saunders played with the launch, and a guffaw of delight pealed from his islanders every time he dodged. The big skipper was revolving things in his mind as he nursed his ship, and he was more certain than ever that the dhow held the great fetish, when time after time the launch charged down, backed, and was left astern, when with ridiculous ease she could have rammed and sunk the dhow.

The skies were clearing rapidly, and the stars winked with increasing brilliance; every moment a wider horizon was visible from the deck, and Todd wearied of his futile chase. His angry voice was heard giving sharp orders, and rifles began to spit venemously again as the skipper and his crew stood out more clearly against the loom of the dhow's sails. Carter came up from below, empty-handed, crestfallen.

"Nothing there, skipper. Better run for it while we float," he grumbled, dodging hurriedly as a nickeled bullet zipped through his hat.

"Here, take her," snapped Saunders, relinquishing the tiller. "I'll take a look. It's here, I'll bet my hope o' glory!"

The launch snorted up again as he spoke, this time steered fair at the dhow's head, and the islanders gathered with clubbed guns on the foredeck.

In the same instant a shaft of vivid light shot athwart the sea from seaward, swept a wide arc of the horizon, and trembled past the dhow, hesitated, returned, and lighted up both vessels with a blaze of brilliance.

"Oh, corks!" cried the skipper. His face lighted in a rare grin, and his visit below was postponed. "Here's the gunboat! Now things 'll whiz!"

They did. Todd saw the significance of that light. He screamed commands; the launch drove ahead and hooked into the big anchor hanging over the dhow's side, and a living wave of blacks swarmed aboard and hurled themselves at Saunders and his men.

In the brief instant that the searchlight had swept the sea-line, keen eyes on the dhow had noted many things. Among others that dead ahead, inshore, lay a fleet of other dhows, and the sharpest eyes saw that most of them were hurriedly making sail. The rest had already got under way.

But more urgent matters were on hand, and Carter led half his men in a furious onslaught forward, leaving Saunders to defend the waist. And every man at Todd's heels pressed toward the bow.

Saunders speedily sensed that the object of their attack was something apart from the capture of the dhow itself. He rallied his half of the crew, and with a whirlwind rush broke through and joined Carter, who fought like a trapped tiger at the heel of the big foreyard.

Clubbed guns and knives pounded and slashed to the accompaniment of

thuds and gasping curses. The swift pinnace that shot alongside from the war-ship was unnoticed until her men poured onto the dhow's deck with a cheer.

Todd saw them first, and with a scream of fury he fired full into Saunders's face, then threw himself back to the rail and howled to his blacks to finish the job. Saunders staggered, half blinded by the flash, but unhurt, and gathered himself in a knot of tensed muscle as an avalanche of brown and black assailants fell upon him.

The man-o'-war's men charged into the mêlée with fixed bayonets, and foremost of them charged the young midshipman who had boarded the Black Pearl. Behind him, unarmed, charged Karkri, his dusky face set upon Todd, aglow with hate.

Saunders struggled fiercely under a heap of writhing, stabbing foes, while Todd watched like a wolf from the shelter of the foreyard, ready to commit himself to the hazard of the sea if he could see Saunders murdered.

For an instant the skipper's set face showed above the press, and a streak of flame spat from Todd's revolver.

A red smear ran across Saunders's eyes; blood streamed into them and blinded him. Todd threw a leg over the rail, ready to spring overboard, and his pistol covered the skipper again.

Before the shot could leave the barrel, a black form launched itself across the deck with the snarl of a wild beast, and Karkri fastened his teeth solidly into Todd's throat.

Once fast, the Swahili exacted full payment for the weals that yet seared his body. Todd's eyes glared horribly; his mouth opened voicelessly and stayed open, gasping his life away, while the writhing combatants near by paused in fascination.

In a few short minutes Todd subsided, limp and lifeless, in Karkri's hands as the last of his men disappeared overboard in panic or threw down their arms and howled lustily for quarter.

Saunders hoisted himself painfully out of the heap of bodies that had overwhelmed him and greeted the middy.

"Lucky for me you took that tip," he remarked with a wry grin.

"Yes, skipper, and I'm glad I did, for my own sake," replied the youngster heartily. "My ship's scooping in those dhows now. I should have been with her, only your boy here"—pointing to Karkri—"swam out to us as we were heaving up anchor off Melindi and told us about Todd. We'd seen him take his launch alongside this dhow. So the skipper told me to come in the pinnace and see what was up. Hurt badly?"

"No—only at losing my schooner," growled Saunders. Then he hailed the mate. "Better anchor, Carter, until we clean up the mess."

Carter went into the bows and looked over. The launch lay where she had been driven, plumb under the anchor. Calling a couple of men to help, he sprang into her to shove her clear, and as he jumped two heavy splashes under the stem called his attention to the dhow. At first he saw nothing; then his eyes opened wide. He climbed aboard hastily, ran to the skipper, and whispered hoarsely:

"This blooming dhow's hocused! She's got that figure-head shipped again! I scared off two niggers who were unshipping it."

For a moment the skipper frowned perplexedly. Then light broke upon him.

"By Jupiter! Is that the answer? Let's see," he muttered, running to the stem and peering over. Then a whoop went up that startled every man who heard it.

"Get it aboard, Carter! It's the Idol of Saakuru! Todd wasn't such a fool, after all! No wonder we couldn't find it when we looked!"

Getting the figure-head inboard was not a hard job. It had been lashed to the stemhead, and the lashings were all but cut through.

Saunders grabbed it in his arms,

finding it a full load even for his powerful muscles, and walked along to the waist, where hung lighted lanterns.

The man-o'-war's men stood about the gangway awaiting orders, and their officer, knowing and caring nothing about the Saakuru idol, was impatient to rejoin his ship and share in the slave capture. The dhow's anchor plunged down with a mighty splash, and he approached Saunders.

"Since you've anchored, cap'n, I'll get back to the ship," he said. "You'll lie here until daylight. Then my skipper will board you and take Todd's body off your hands. We'll take your prisoners now, if you like."

"All right," grunted Saunders, intent upon an examination of his own capture. "I'll be here — if we don't sink. Thanks for your help."

The pinnace rushed away, and the skipper and Karkri bent over the idol, setting a ring of lanterns about them on deck. A guttural exclamation from the Swahili was echoed by a furious curse from the skipper, and Saunders rose to his feet.

With a mighty heave he swung the figure-head to his shoulder, and the mate, attracted by the fervid language of his chief, stood amazed to see the light flash on the gold plates and glinting jewels of the idol as it whizzed over the rail and fell with a tremendous crash into the sea. The water closed over it, and it was gone.

"Lord! You ain't been hit in the head, have you, skipper?" he gasped.

"Hit! Halifax!" swore Saunders in deepest disgust. "That blasted idol is Brummagem! Brass and glass! And I lost the schooner to get it!"

CHAPTER X.

Not So Brummagem!

TWO days later Saunders and the captain of the gun-boat sat in Divant's office in Zanzibar. The big skipper's smile seemed to have permanently fled from his frank countenance. He presented a marked contrast to the naval commander, whose whole attitude breathed the keenest satisfaction.

"I hardly understand you, Captain Saunders," Divant was saying. "If you remember, I distinctly told you I couldn't let you have that concession."

"I got it all the same," snapped Saunders angrily. "Todd gave it to me, signed by you, and dated the same day."

"Signed by me!" The official's surprise was genuine. "I can assure you, sir, that I signed no concession for you!"

"But you did!" retorted the skipper heatedly. "Todd showed me a check you'd drawn in his favor, and the signature was the same!"

"Oh!" Divant's eyes opened in a wide stare. He took his check-book from his desk and ran through the blank checks. Gradually understanding crept into his eyes.

"There is a check missing from the end of the book, Saunders."

A pained expression crossed his face, and he said slowly:

"That signature was a forgery. Tell me something, please. Todd asked leave to go after you when you left here. He said he suspected you were taking rifles up the coast—"

"Certainly I did!" exploded the skipper. "That's what he said you were giving me the concession for. You were sending the rifles to Tomba to help him clean up some trouble that had arisen over the Saakuru idol!"

"There was some trouble, certainly," admitted Divant. "And I wanted it stopped. But we have legitimate methods of handling that kind of trouble. That idol is, as I told you before, captain, pure rubbish. But curio hunters won't believe it. I'm going up there myself as soon as I can get away, to take the thing and put a stop to this foolishness once for all."

"Don't bother," growled the skipper. "It's in three fathoms of water off the coast."

"Then it was rubbish?" smiled Divant. "How did you find out?"

Saunders briefly told him, and added:

"If you want it for a curio it's lying right under Todd's dhow. Carter and my crew are holding her there until I get back. She's all the ship I've got now."

"Oh, that's all right," put in the gunboat skipper heartily. "I owe you something for the tip you gave that youngster. You must allow me to replace your schooner out of the prize money. But"—and a deeply humorous smile wreathed the officer's face—"I'll give that cub a wigging for letting you get away with those guns, right under his nose, too!"

Still the gloom would not depart from Saunders. At the moment he felt mad enough at the result of his venture to turn skipper of a tramp freighter. Divant saw and sympathized with his ill humor.

"I think, now the cause of all the trouble is gone, skipper, you can have that trading permit," he said. "You've earned it. But what had Todd against you that he should bring you into such a mess?"

"I suppose it was to pay me for a licking I gave him for half murdering a Swahili boy out on your grass," and for the first time the skipper's visage glowed with amusement at the memory.

"But," he added, "I think I'll take that concession now, sir. And I'd be glad if you'd loan me that dhow until I get to work and try to raise my schooner."

"Oh, you must let me do something, Saunders," put in the naval officer eagerly. "Really, you must!"

"Well, sir," and Saunders rose to leave, "if you can let me have a crew of divers I think I can use them on the schooner. And I'd be glad, too, of docking facilities when I get her up. That'll be all I need."

"And come in this evening to dinner, both of you," invited Divant. "I'll have a bona fide document ready for you this time, Saunders.

"My word! But it's really as well for Todd that he was killed. Did you say he was killed by the Swahili who was the cause of your licking him, skipper?"

"Yes; Karkri. He's waiting outside for me now. I can't seem to get rid of him."

"Well, Todd cleared up a lot of nasty mess by dying, anyway."

"Yes, and for a relic of Brummagem Burke—a glass and brass imitation of a gold and opal god," returned Saunders grimly. "But that fetish will kill no more curio-hunters, I think. I'll accept your invitation to dinner, sir. Expect me at six-thirty."

Saunders then left his companion and bent his steps toward the waterfront.

At the house gate Karkri glided like a black shadow to his side, and looked up at him with glistening eyes.

"You ketch trade for Sabaki Ribber, sar?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, Karkri," smiled the skipper, wondering what he could do to get rid of this overgrateful servant. He felt he had no use for a body attendant in his present state of prosperity.

"But I've got to get my ship first. You'd better hire out to Mr. Divant, son, or hike back to your own village. I don't want a boy now."

Karkri's ebony visage shone with pleasure. His big eyes sparkled with pride in his own wisdom. He had solved the problem.

"All right, massar," he declared joyously; "I go back to my village. I tell um 'bout you when dey git back from coast. Den, when dey no frighten no more, sar, I make ebery-t'ing ready for when you come tradin' sar. Yassuh!"

And Saunders walked on down to the front, and muttered:

"That blamed old fetish wasn't so Brummagem after all!"

(The end.)

A HOUSEKEEPER'S TRAGEDY

BY JULIA TOBOLA

ONE day, as I wandered, I heard a complaining,
And saw a poor woman, the picture of gloom;
She glared at the mud on her door-steps ('twas raining),
And this was her wail as she wielded the broom:

"Oh! life is a toil and love is a trouble
And beauty will fade and riches will flee;
And pleasures they dwindle and prices they double
And nothing is what I could wish it to be.

"There's too much of worriment goes to a bonnet;
There's too much of ironing goes to a shirt;
There's nothing that pays for the time you waste on it;
There's nothing that lasts but trouble and dirt.

"In March it is mud; it's slush in December;
The midsummer breezes are loaded with dust;
In fall the leaves litter; in muggy September
The wall-paper rots, and the candlesticks rust.

"There are worms in the cherries and slugs in the roses
And ants in the sugar and mice in the pies;
The rubbish of spiders no mortal supposes,
And ravaging roaches and damaging flies.

"It's sweeping at six and dusting at seven;
It's victuals at eight and dishes at nine;
It's potting and panning from ten to eleven;
We scarce break our fast ere we plan how to dine.

"With grease and with grime, from corner to center,
Forever at war and forever alert,
No rest for a day, lest the enemy enter—
I spend my whole life in a struggle with dirt.

"Last night, in my dreams, I was stationed forever,
On a bare little isle in the midst of the sea;
My one chance of life was a ceaseless endeavor
To sweep off the waves ere they swept over me.

"Alas, 'twas no dream! Again I behold it!
I yield: I am helpless my fate to avert!"
She rolled down her sleeves, her apron she folded,
Then lay down and died, and was buried in dirt!

"Whoso Diggeth A Pit—"

by Herbert Flowerdew

"DO you think," said Reggie Dunbar, breaking a three-hours' silence, "that the boat will get swamped and go down when we are dead, or will it go on drifting around until some day it is sighted and they try to identify our skeletons from the buttons on our clothes?"

Neither of his companions answered. He had not expected an answer.

Five days earlier, when they found themselves the only occupants of the last boat to leave the sinking Hesperides, they had consulted together as men of a single mind. In the face of their common danger the distinctions of nationality, class, and even color, were forgotten, and the full-blooded negro who had been cook of the Hesperides took an equal voice in their discussions.

It was no more than his right, considering that he was the only one of the three who had brought any provisions into the boat. He had nearly been left behind while he was securing a tin of ship biscuits, and he had had no time to get water.

It was agreed at the inquiry held later that less than five minutes elapsed after the Hesperides struck the reef before she sank. All that the cook could secure in the way of drinkables was a pint bottle of dinner ale, which he had found in the deck-house as he passed and slipped into his pocket.

The ale, shared out as far as possible—when they had to drink from the bottle — with meticulous fairness, lasted them a day.

There were a hundred biscuits in the tin, and they calculated that one a day per man would be sufficient to sustain life, which would give them thirty-three days before starvation faced them. In thirty-three days they must surely, if they kept on rowing, come to some island or be sighted by a ship. They agreed to keep on rowing continuously in spells; they had only one pair of oars.

This unanimity and hopefulness lasted until the demon of thirst descended upon them.

It was four days now since a drop of liquid had passed their parched lips, and for five they had been in the little open boat under a pitiless sun in the mid-Pacific, rowing aimlessly across a waste of waters that stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction like molten glass.

They could see nothing of the other boats that had left the Hesperides. At the first sunrise they had found themselves absolutely alone on an empty sea, and the five days' rowing left them encircled still by the same unbroken, unchanging horizon.

Even Pettifer, who at the outset

had talked authoritatively about the different steamer routes across the Pacific and the certainty that they must sooner or later strike one, admitted now that they were as likely as not to be leaving the track of the steamers.

They rowed intermittently as they pleased.

The agreement and unanimity with which they had started was at an end. If one of them wanted to eat, he took a biscuit without any thought of their former calculation. They all knew that they would be dead for want of water before the tin was empty, and for twelve hours none of them had cared to eat.

They could think of nothing but the torture of their thirst.

The negro, who had been first to give up regular work at the oars, lay at the bottom of the boat with his great tongue lolling out. He had kept up a monotonous wail of "Water! For God's sake, a drop of water!" until it got on the other men's nerves, and Pettifer stopped him with a kick.

Even Pettifer and Reggie Dunbar had practically ceased to speak to each other. A common hope draws men together, and gives them something to discuss. Despair isolates them.

The two men, although they were of about the same age—Reggie Dunbar passed his twenty-seventh birthday on the boat without mentioning the fact—and, although each was a pretty fine specimen of his class, had little in common.

Pettifer, the Englishman, had been a junior officer on board the Hesperides, a man of routine, who made a fetish of discipline and a religion of duty. He had stayed for the last boat because those had been his orders, and he would have gone down with his captain and his ship if the former had given the command.

What Reggie Dunbar disliked about him was that he seemed to have no sense of humor.

Pettifer, for his part, looked upon the young American millionaire as a man without principle, an idle and worthless person, who owned no master but his whim, and thought his money entitled him to act as he pleased—which was probably true, although Reggie's whims were never unkind ones, and it never pleased him to do anything wholly selfish.

He had jeopardized his own chance of escaping from the doomed vessel by arguing with the captain on the bridge and trying to persuade him that it was foolish to sacrifice his life to a convention that could do nobody any real good.

In the face of death, and exposed to the ordeal of torture by thirst, he made a better show than the man of duty. Pettifer had become irritable and morose. Reggie Dunbar still spoke, when he spoke at all, with the same easy, indolent drawl which had irritated the young Englishman on board the Hesperides, and with the same touch of humor that had endeared him to all its passengers.

"I'd really like an expert opinion how long an old tub like this is likely to stay above water when it has nobody on board—alive—to manage it. Say, Pettifer, is the sea here always like glass, or do they have seasons and storms?"

Pettifer continued to pull mechanically at the oars in morose silence. He had been recalling all the stories he had heard of shipwrecked mariners who quenched their thirst with the blood of a companion. There had been a case in the courts when the survivors were tried for murder, and he believed that they had been exonerated—that the killing of one to save the others was held to be justifiable.

He could not remember clearly, and would have liked to discuss the question with Dunbar, if the negro cook had not been there to listen.

He was irritated with the American for not originating the discussion. He was the man to do so when he recognized no law except that of his own

will, when he had been trained to look upon negroes as mere animals who existed for the service of the whites.

Pettifer's own thoughts on the subject were quite tentative and theoretical; but the idea had become less nauseating, and the theory absorbed him. He could not turn his thoughts from it to talk piffle about what would happen after they were dead. He did not want to die, and hated Dunbar for the apparent complacency with which he spoke of it.

For the last hour or more Dunbar had been engaged on a new occupation. He had been writing with a stump of pencil in his pocketbook, but Pettifer felt no curiosity.

He did not speak until an action of the American's stirred him to sudden nervous irritation. Dunbar had been groping at the bottom of the boat, and from beneath a pile of cordage brought out the empty beer-bottle.

"Oh, throw that cursed thing away," said Pettifer, "or we shall all start licking it again for the last drop! It was bone dry days ago."

He lay down his oar, and put out a hand to snatch it as he spoke; but Reggie held it tight, and for a moment it seemed as if the rough nerves of the two would find relief in a ridiculous struggle.

The negro caused a diversion.

"Water! For God's sake a drop of water!" he wailed.

And Pettifer released his hold of the bottle to strike the prone figure with his oar.

"This bottle," said Dunbar, his voice pacific, "is just what I was talking about. If this old tub is likely to go on floating indefinitely, I've no need for it. I can leave what I have written in my pocketbook for them to find when they find our corpses.

"But if there is a chance of the boat being swamped—well, in any case it will make the document safer to put it in the bottle. I'll ask you fellows to witness my signature first, though. It will set free a man who has been sentenced to imprisonment for life, and I don't want there to be any hitch after I am dead. You remember the Melville case?"

Pettifer nodded. There moved in his sick mind, if not a sudden interest in what his companion was saying, a realization that it would have excited him if they had not been dying of thirst together in the middle of the Pacific.

Less than a year ago the Melville case had excited the interest of two hemispheres.

Harry Lincoln, one of the gilded youth of New York, had been convicted on circumstantial evidence of shooting dead in cold blood Oscar Hammersley Melville, the well-known actor, and had escaped the electric chair only through the wealth and influence of his family.

"Well, I killed Melville," said Dunbar in his nonchalant tone. "Oh, I am not ashamed of it! He injured my sister. Practically he killed her, and the law could not touch him, so I had to take the execution into my own hands. I was sorry for young Lincoln, but it was his own lookout. He ought to have been able to clear himself without any help from me. I could not give myself away just for his bungling. Still, if I've got to die, I might just as well leave matters cleared up."

Pettifer was quite interested now.

A new thought had come to him. If one of the three had to sacrifice his life for the others— It had not seemed quite fair to decide on the cook just because he was black. But the execution of a murderer! It was a duty demanded from every civilized society, however small; to see that life should pay for life.

There was a new, strange, appraising gleam in his eyes as he stared at the young millionaire.

"You mean to say that you are a murderer?" he asked slowly and deliberately.

Dunbar laughed with cracked lips,

"You never know till you've heard the lawyers. We'll leave them to give it a name, if ever they get my statement. Wake up, Sambo! I want you to sign your name. We'll make the statement as legal as possible."

"What are you going to do?" asked Pettifer. "Put the paper in the bottle and throw it into the sea?"

He was thinking that he would like to retain the evidence for his justification—if the execution took place, and was relieved when Dunbar shook his head.

"Scarcely. I don't part with this while I am alive. I am only putting it in the bottle to give it another chance if the boat goes down after we are dead. If we are picked up—well, that is another story."

His eyes met the Englishman's, and read a threat there.

"It would only be your word against mine," he said. "Our black friend has not taken in a word."

As a matter of fact, the negro could not be roused sufficiently to sign his name, and there was only one witness when Reggie Dunbar signed his confession.

II.

REGGIE DUNBAR woke to consciousness to find himself lying on a comfortable berth in a state cabin of the American liner Golden Queen, traveling from Auckland to San Francisco.

At that time he felt very little curiosity as to his whereabouts. The comfort of his berth satisfied him, and only one question seemed to him important enough to demand the effort of speech.

"Anything to drink?" he asked laconically of the angel bending over him, and when the refreshing cup held to his lips proved conclusively that he was not the victim of a mirage he drew a deep sigh of relief and went to sleep again.

It was after a twelve hours' refreshing slumber, from which he woke with quite a healthy interest in his surroundings, that he heard what had happened.

The Golden Queen had sighted the boat about two hundred miles south of Honolulu, but had succeeded in rescuing only two of its occupants. In the excitement of seeing help arrive the negro had gone raving mad, and jumped overboard.

Reggie himself had made an effort to prevent him, but had been knocked senseless by the maniac with a blow from a bottle which he had seized as a weapon against his would-be preserver. The Golden Queen's boat had been near enough to see the struggle, but not to prevent it or to rescue the maniac when he jumped overboard.

Dunbar was suffering from a moderately serious concussion more than from the effects of his exposure in the boat. Pettifer was already about again.

Vague, disjointed memories came back to the young American's mind as the ship's doctor recounted these facts—Pettifer's hoarse cry of hope when he caught sight of the liner on the horizon, the frenzy with which they had torn off their coats to wave them as signals, and then the sight of the negro's distorted face and the sudden realization that he was climbing insanely over the side of the boat.

It was all disjointed in his mind like bits of a dream. But the mention of the bottle brought back other clearer memories.

His eyes grew anxious, and White, the doctor, wondered whether he was a little delirious still. He wanted to know what had become of the bottle with which the negro had attacked him, and would not be satisfied until the doctor went to make a searching investigation.

He did not return himself with the result. In his place a sweet-faced woman, who looked to Reggie like a girl of twenty, although she was actually twenty-six, entered the cabin, smiling to find him awake and conscious.

Dunbar's blue eyes answered her smile.

"I thought I had dreamed you," he said. "I am so glad you are real. You gave me a drink of nectar, didn't you?"

"Nectar composed chiefly of barley-water," she smiled; "and you were good enough to go to sleep after it. The doctor has sent me to tell you to go to sleep again."

"That was foolish of him," said the patient in his slow drawl. "I don't commit that mistake twice. I want to know who you are?"

"I am a fully certified nurse, among other things," she said, "and was feeling the want of occupation until you and Mr. Pettifer came into my care. I have staked my professional reputation on your being absolutely well when we reach Frisco."

"You are nursing Pettifer, too?" he said jealously. She had the softest and sweetest laugh in the world.

"Of course," she said cheerfully. "But he is almost out of my hands now. He did not try to prevent the poor delirious negro from jumping out of the boat, so he did not get a broken head. The strange thing is that we are quite old friends. I crossed in the Hesperides when he made his first voyage in her."

"That's interesting," he said lugubriously. "Do you know, I don't like Pettifer. I suppose I ought to. He is really a fine fellow—a hero in his way. But I don't remember ever being shipwrecked with a man I liked less."

"I expect you are prejudiced by his want of humor," she said, and Reggie stared at her wonderingly.

It seemed to him that her judgment was as marvelous as her laugh, and his instinctive jealousy left him.

A woman may possibly realize that a man has no sense of humor and still feel a sentimental interest in him; but if she feels the slightest sentimental regard for him she would die sooner than admit his failing to another soul.

"The doctor told me that I might answer three questions, and no more," she went on, trying to make her pretty voice authoritative. "I believe I have answered three already, but I will give you one more. The bottle you were speaking about to Dr. White, by the way, was not in the boat when they brought it in, and nobody seems to have seen anything of it. The probability is that the poor man who struck you jumped overboard with the bottle in his hand. One more question, and then you must go to sleep."

"But I have a hundred to ask," he said plaintively; "and ninety-nine are about you. I don't even know your name."

"That and the ninety-nine can wait till you are better," she said with pretty authority. "What is the hundredth?"

"Only this," he said in his deliberate drawl; "I do not suppose you will be able to answer it, but I should be awfully glad if you could find out. The poor nigger broke my head with a bottle. I *should* like to know whether it broke the bottle."

She laughed delightfully and spontaneously. The story of Dunbar's question, as she recounted it on deck, with the prettiest imitation of his languid drawl, earned him the reputation of a humorist before he appeared there.

He had been, of course, quite serious. Accepting it as a fact that the bottle had fallen into the sea, the question whether it was broken or intact was an important one for him.

For if it was broken, or even seriously cracked, it would sink, and the document it contained was safely disposed of now at the bottom of the sea. If it was intact it was floating about somewhere on the surface of the water.

It might float there indefinitely; years might pass, and he would still never feel quite sure that the thing was not still drifting about the Pacific, waiting to give up its message to any curious stranger in whose way the

chances of tide and ocean travel carried it.

And the confession could benefit nobody now.

In the first newspaper the invalid was allowed to read—a San Francisco paper taken aboard at Honolulu — he found a page devoted to an account of Harry Lincoln's death. The young man who had been convicted by the New York courts of having murdered Oscar Hammersley Melville had died heroically, defending a warder from a murderous and unjustifiable attack on the part of his fellow convicts.

The paper spoke glowingly and sympathetically of the dead man, and Reggie Dunbar had tears in his eyes as he read. He had been fond of Harry Lincoln.

Then his thoughts went back to the bottle, which was probably floating somewhere "about two hundred miles south of Honolulu."

But he was a young man who did not worry.

"As soon as I get back to Frisco I'll charter a yacht and have a look for it," he said to himself; and dismissed the subject from his mind, not without a smile at his own project.

Nobody could have accused him of a lack of the sense of humor, and the idea of searching the Pacific for a pint bottle was amusing in its way.

He was recovering from the concussion with a rapidity that satisfied even his nurse, and he had already induced her to answer the ninety-nine questions about herself—and more.

Her name was Grace Eldon, and she was English by birth, although she had spent most of her life in California. She was an orphan, like him, and her own mistress. She had taken up nursing as a hobby, dissatisfied with the idle life of mere amusement which her friends expected her to lead; but she had gone through it thoroughly, and was returning to the land she loved after a three-years' course in a London hospital.

Everything that she told him about herself seemed to him delightful, but he told himself that it did not affect his opinion of her.

His opinion had been fully formed in the moment when he woke from his delirium and found her bending over him; and she would have been just the same woman in his eyes if her name had been an ugly one, and if she had preferred England to California or been obliged to work for her living.

It was very curious.

He was twenty-seven years old. He had met hundreds of charming women and had never imagined himself in love with them. He had looked upon himself as a confirmed bachelor, not because he disliked women — they all found him charming—but because he liked them all so equally.

And abruptly he discovered that life had been an empty and profitless thing until he met Grace Eldon, and would continue to be empty unless she shared it.

"I feel rather as though I was newly born," he said to her. "You see, I finished up one life—not much of one, but it might have been worse—when I was in the boat. I was quite certain that I was done for. I have never been willing to plank so much on a wrong guess before, and I had reviewed the story and wound it up. Now I am starting on 'life No. 2.'"

"I hope it will be even better than the first," she said, and Reggie nodded.

"It will be a hundred items better if it goes on as it has begun."

She looked at him questioningly.

"Well, it began with you," he said. "You were the first thing in it when I opened my eyes, and I reckon I know what Adam felt like when he woke up and found Eve just made."

He had reached this point before Dr. White gave him permission to go on deck, where he found himself quite a popular idol. Pettifer had been interesting as a waif picked up from the sea, but Pettifer's reign had ended with Reggie's appearance.

For the Englishman had not risked

his life to try and save a demented negro's. Pettifer had spent much time explaining his inaction. From his position in the boat it was impossible for him to join in without risk of hampering Dunbar.

But the fact remained that Dunbar, and not he, had done the brave and proper thing, and the story of the struggle had been embellished by those who saw it until it made the young American quite a hero of romance. The way in which the women flocked round his chair and petted him surprised him all the more because his actual identity, he found, was not known.

Pettifer, for some reason of his own, had described him only as "Mr. Dunbar," without the "Reggie," which distinguished him for all America as the fortunate inheritor of the Dunbar Silver Mines. Even to his nurse Reggie himself had not volunteered the information—he never did.

Pettifer, who was quite himself again, gave him the curtest of greetings, and Reggie felt no very eager desire for his company. He felt that he had had enough of it to last his lifetime.

The two survivors of the Hesperides did not exchange words again for three days, and in the three days Reggie's romance had proceeded with even more rapidity than characterizes these affairs on an ocean liner.

He had informed Miss Eldon quite early with his usual directness that he was going to win her heart if it took him fifty years to do it. He had discovered beyond doubt that it would not take him nearly so long, when Pettifer interrupted them in a tête-à-tête and begged Miss Eldon to give him a few moments alone with Mr. Dunbar, as he had a matter of considerable importance to discuss with him.

"Rather bad taste to interrupt a conversation, isn't it," Reggie drawled when the two men were left alone together, "when you have got the whole voyage to talk?"

"It is generally in bad taste to do one's duty," said Pettifer stiffly, and Reggie laughed.

"Well, what is your duty impelling you to say now?"

Pettifer drew a meditative puff at his cigar. After pondering over his duty for some days he had, after all, acted impulsively at the end under the goad of the obvious love-making that was being carried on before his jealous eyes. He had not prepared his words.

"Only that you seem to have forgotten the confession you made when you thought it was all up with us," he said.

Reggie smiled indulgently.

"My dear fellow, we were both a little delirious when we last conversed at any length together. You need not attach any importance to anything I may have said in my delirium, and I am sure nobody will attach the slightest importance to anything that you in your delirium thought I said."

Pettifer answered very deliberately.

"The full and detailed account of how you planned and carried out the 'execution,' as you called it, of Oscar Melville, which you signed and I witnessed, bears no trace of having been written in delirium. It is a very straightforward and lucid statement which would strike anybody, I think, as having been written by a man in full possession of his faculties. That is how it struck me when I read it through again this morning."

He was very conscious of saying something dramatic; but, if Reggie was startled by it, only his complete immobility for a second gave evidence of the fact.

"So you have kept the statement," he said, his voice quite even; and, although it expressed no emotion, Pettifer reddened.

"Sambo dropped the bottle in the boat, after he had struck you," he said, his tone defensive. "I did not think you would like it to fall into the hands of strangers, so I took care of it."

"Thanks," said Dunbar, and held out his hand.

The Englishman ignored its suggestion.

"I feel, of course, that my possession of your statement imposes a considerable amount of responsibility on me," he said. "If Mr. Harry Lincoln was still in prison suffering for your crime, there would have been only one course open to me. You have heard of his death, I suppose? But I am in doubt whether I ought to let his memory remain under the stigma of a crime he did not commit."

"Oh, Harry Lincoln's memory is all right," drawled Reggie. "I would not bother about it if I were you. His death has made him a public hero, and after all it was not your affair. I did not even give you permission to read that statement."

Again Pettifer reddened.

"I read it because it affects other people besides you," he said. "I read it, I may say, before I heard of Harry Lincoln's death."

"I suppose that is some sort of justification," said Reggie deliberately. "And now that you have heard of poor Harry's death, I'll be glad if you would hand me back my private property."

Pettifer laughed sharply.

"Unfortunately, I have a responsibility toward others."

"For instance?" asked Reggie, and guessed what was coming.

Pettifer's face turned from red to white.

"Miss Eldon," he said, his voice tense. "You have been paying her great attention. Perhaps you are hoping to marry her?"

Reggie nodded.

"I am."

"Well, you can't!" snapped Pettifer. "You don't think I could stand by and allow a lady I respect to unconsciously ally herself with a murderer? Look here, Dunbar, I don't want to be hard on you. I am willing to believe, after reading your confession, that to a certain extent you really thought yourself justified in taking Melville's life, and, now that Mr. Lincoln is dead, I don't think it would be wrong of me to shield you from the worst consequences of what you have done. If you will undertake to cease your attentions to Miss Eldon, I will promise to hold my hand."

"And if I refuse?" asked Dunbar, in his dry, nonchalant drawl.

"You will compel me to show Miss Eldon your confession."

For a moment or two Reggie Dunbar seemed to be deliberating. Then, without a word, he rose languidly from his chair and strolled across the deck to resume his interrupted conversation with Grace Eldon.

At dinner that evening Miss Eldon's place was empty, and Pettifer's hard, clear-cut face wore the grim, satisfied expression of a man who had sacrificed his own feelings to perform a painful duty. Reggie Dunbar looked merely bored, although his mind was really very active.

No meal had ever seemed to him so long and depressing.

When he had finished his coffee, he strolled aimlessly about the ship until he reached Grace's cabin, and stood at the closed door for a moment. But he turned away without knocking. He remembered that she was his nurse, as well as something more, and he was still supposed to be an invalid. An hour after dinner it was part of her routine to bring him his last dose of tonic for the day, and he did not think that she would forget it.

He returned to the sheltered nook on deck which she had selected for him, where she was accustomed to find him with a chair at his side for her.

Exactly on the stroke of the hour she joined him there with the medicine glass in her hand, and even in the moonlight he realized that her face was graver and paler than usual.

"It seems years since I saw you," he said, as he gulped off the dose. "Why were you not at dinner?"

"Mr. Pettifer has told me something that took my appetite away. I wanted to think it over before I met you again," she said evenly.

"And now you have thought it over?" he asked.

"I do not believe it!" she said resolutely.

Reggie threw out his hands in an expressive gesture.

"But, my dear girl, nothing could be more credible. I loved my sister better than anybody else in the world. She was perfectly innocent and wholly romantic, and that hound Melville played upon her romance. When practically every man she met wanted to marry her for her fortune, she could not imagine the possibility of a hitch. Of course, Melville would have been glad to marry her, but he had a wife behind the scenes, and the shame of it killed her. Wouldn't you have killed him if you had been in my place?"

"I think I might," she said simply. "And if you shot Melville, I should not think any the less highly of you for *that*. But to let another man suffer! I don't believe you could do that, and, frankly, I don't believe you did."

Reggie smiled dryly.

"That, of course, was the weak point of my story. I saw it all along; but Pettifer swallowed it whole, and I hoped the others would."

"You mean that none of the story you wrote was true?" she asked quickly; and Reggie nodded.

"Not actually. But it might have been. I should have shot Melville if I had thought that the best way to deal with him. I wanted a better revenge than that. I wanted to see him beggared and starving, and I would have done it if poor Harry Lincoln had not been so hot-headed.

"You see, he was in love with my sister. I did the best I could for him at his trial; but the alibi I tried to prove for him had a hitch in it, and I don't know why they did not send me to prison with him for perjury. I expected it.

"Of course, when I thought I was booked for the 'Far Country,' it occurred to me that it would be a good opportunity of giving him another chance of getting out. I did not know then that he was dead. You see, he had never admitted that he shot Melville, except to me.

"He was determined not to tell the whole story, for the sake of my sister's memory, so he refused to admit any of it. I hoped that if he knew I was dead he would let me take the blame, and I tried to make my 'confession' very circumstantial and convincing. I had five nice long days with nothing particular to do but think it out, you know, before I began to write.

"I am wondering now whether I made it too convincing.

"The fact that *you* don't believe it gives no evidence as to its plausibility, because you are prejudiced, and the fact that Harry Lincoln is dead makes the matter a little more serious. If he were alive he would say very quickly that it was really he, and not I, who shot Melville. But now he is dead I expect poor Pettifer will be able to give me a great deal of trouble."

"But surely nobody would take that man's word against yours?" she said, in a tone that it might have done Pettifer good to hear; and Reggie smiled.

"No, his word would go for nothing; but unfortunately, they have got my own, signed by myself and witnessed by him. That is what I should like to get hold of."

Grace laughed happily.

"I am afraid that is impossible, because it is in very little pieces scattered over the sea. I took the liberty of tearing it up as soon as I knew what it was."

Reggie rose from his chair with glowing eyes.

"You did that for me, before I had denied a word of it?" he said. "Then you can't pretend any longer that it is not all settled between us."

And he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Julie's Romance

by Josephine Underwood Munford

"I LOVED the good Monsieur Benoît very devotedly, *monsieur*. He was not my—what you call?—first love, it is true. But, *hélas*, my salary was most small then. So I could not afford Henri." Julie Lajeune proclaimed all this without the slightest flicker of self-consciousness. We had met as usual on the train between Montreal and New York, that being her territory for laces and fine underwear, as it was mine for guns and ammunition. It was the first time I had seen her since the death of her husband, M. Benoît, so I had offered the usual commonplaces.

"He was a good man," I mused. "His loss is most unfortunate."

"Yes, he *was* a good man, *monsieur*," agreed Julie eagerly. "Though many people could not see it. He was so—so irresponsible, so gay, so brilliant, so like a dragon-fly for flitting!"

Now Benoît, according to all accounts, had been about as thrillingly speedy as a turtle, so I perceived at once that her mind was still running upon the loss of Henri.

"What has become of him?" I asked.

"He has gone to heaven, without doubt," she replied, the least touch of asperity in her sweet voice.

Plainly, she had switched back to Benoît.

I was all balled up.

"I mean Henri," I explained meekly.

"Oh—Henri!" Julie jumped as if her mind had been a thousand miles from that subject. But her slanting eyes were filled with a vivid light; her lips, as scarlet as wild strawberries in the spring, kept fluttering up at the corners in little reasonless smiles; and her whole personality—used as I was to its French-Canadian incandescence—seemed glowing with some wholly new inner fire, which, somehow, I attributed to Henri Rousseau.

"You ask me where is Henri, *monsieur?*" She shrugged her shoulders expressively. "How shall I know? He went away, poor fellow, when I married M. Benoît—that was four years ago. I did my best to make him be sensible; but no, he would never see me again! And now"—the light vanished from her face with the suddenness of a tropical sunset, and shadows crept around her eyes—"I do not know where he is."

So all the tender glow and thrill of Julie had been only for a memory!

I have lived too long in this world to be surprised by anything. That she had been a good wife to Benoît I will swear. More, that she loved him, I can prove—she had risked her life unhesitatingly to nurse him, for he had a deadly disease.

The best I can do to work it out is that she loved him with the dutiful, home-making side of her, while Henri had captured her imagination and the romantic reaches of her soul. And now that Benoît was dead she, with that curious mixture of impulsiveness

and practicality which characterizes the French blood, closed reverently that page of her life whereon his name was inscribed, and let the new freedom in her soul leap with anticipatory joy for the living Henri.

But—where was he?

"Julie," I said with sudden daring, "if you could find Henri, you could afford him now."

She shook her head while a droll expression crinkled her mouth into an impish grin.

"No, I could not. You make the mistake. True, I have three times the salary of four years ago. But my income and outgo grow always with an equal quickness. Though I do my most to make my income big, my outgo is always as much too much as before! Life is like that, *monsieur*. Always you seek a dollar's worth for a dime! And if you have the dollar, *hélas*, it becomes but a dime of a different size. And you must scramble for your dollar's worth as before!"

A blue-eyed baby, with a round face and butter-scotch hair, came toddling down the aisle. He interrupted our meditations with a bold onslaught upon Julie's affections.

"Nice yady!" His face blossomed into a sticky smile.

He was a bland young person; discriminating; appreciative. His white dress had the withered look of butter-paper wrapped around a candy; altogether, he seemed an oversticky bonbon escaped from its normal environment.

To Julie, however, he spelled but one thing — B-a-b-y. I've never seen a woman like her in all my life for children. She was always borrowing them. Once when she was on the road and had none too much money to live on herself, she actually adopted one; but she gave it away afterward to some one who could make a better home for it. Funny she never had any —but I suppose fate knows her job!

"I yant to sit on your yap," announced Butter-scotch.

Up he came, stickiness and all, right upon Julie's immaculate frock — a black tailored suit of unspeakably smart lines which, with a coquettish little toque and the violets at her breast gave her the allure of a Parisian fashion-plate.

We conversed with him about "choo-choo cars," "ticktocks," and "too-too horns," while an ancient ebony porter with an ivory smile made down the berths by a series of incredible gymnastics. Finally we were recalled to the exigencies of the situation by his inquiring of me solicitously:

"Is de young gemman gwine to sleep wid his daddy or his mammy, sah?"

Thereupon Julie in dismay began to look about for a possible owner.

At the far end of the car we discovered a tired bit of wistful womanhood asleep on her seat, a dismal hat straining down from her nodding head in a disconsolate droop, a baby of a few months asleep on her lap and only restrained by some miracle from falling off. She wakened at our approach and lifted to us a face of faded prettiness.

Julie entered into conversation at once. I passed on into the smoker, leaving her busily at work helping the young mother to put Butter-scotch to bed.

When I came back the whole sleeping-car loomed a blank mystery of green curtains, a mystery that baffled while it stirred within you a burning itch of curiosity as to the souls snoring out their destiny behind that impenetrable green.

Somehow, though I am a seasoned traveler, I could not get to sleep. I lay in my berth staring wakefully out into the night—or trying to. For a heavy fog was rolling along outside the glass, its wraithlike folds muffling the noise of the train like fleecy cotton-wool.

Never have I seen such a fog on this side of the Atlantic. Surely, I thought, it was meant for London, and got lost on the way. It gave me a curiously

detached feeling—like a soul, freed from its body and floating aimlessly in a swathing mist.

Weirdly interesting it was, yet dangerous. From time to time we glided past warning signal-lights which showed but dim orange glimmers in a hazy yellow-brown gloom.

Just after midnight we stopped at a small station while a group of fantastic ghosts bundled hurriedly aboard. So weird were their outlines, as seen dimly through the fog, that I judged them to be some theatrical troupe, too hurried or too tired to change their costumes before catching the midnight train. As we pulled on again, the Pullman was invaded with feminine giggles, grunts of masculine laughter, threaded by a soft "tra-la-la" in a pure tenor — until some worthy magnate stopped snoring long enough to thrust an irate head from behind his curtains and shout, "Shut up!"

We had barely worked up speed again, and the gigglers had not had time to get to bed, when the train stopped short. I sat up abruptly.

Before I had time to wonder what was the matter, there came a sickening crash, and I was thrown violently forward.

Splintering glass fell about my ears; blood trickled down my face; the murky fog rolled in, covering me like a shroud. Instantly the night was pierced with screams.

"Julie!" I shouted above the din. "Julie Lajeune!" And again: "Julie Lajeune!"

A voice came almost at my elbow, but its owner was cut off from me by a fallen partition.

"Here I am! But, *mon Dieu,* I am smothered between two feather beds. I think I have swallowed a pillow!"

Evidently she was not hurt, and I drew a breath of relief. I tried to push aside the wooden partition, but it was jammed; through a crack I could dimly discern a pile of bedding, and the tousled head and piquant face of the little Frenchwoman.

"Do not stop for me!" she cried. "There are others worse off! Go quickly! Help the little mother with the sticky baby!"

For the first time, I am ashamed to confess, I thought of Butter-scotch. Groans and cries came from all sides. I wiped the blood from my forehead—the wounds were only skin-deep—and moved forward as best I could in the wreckage and darkness.

I had worked my way about the length of the coach, having remembered that the berth of the tired little woman and her children was at the end next to the smoking-car, when the meaning suddenly dawned on my benumbed senses of the glare of which I had been conscious for some time.

The train was on fire!

I turned at once to go back and help Julie, but the cry of a child stopped me short.

"Muvver! Talk to me! You won't talk to me!"

Poor little Butter-scotch was clutching the skirt of a still form which, together with the baby in its arms, had slipped, painlessly perhaps — for the tired face wore a smile—from the earthly sleep into the last, long sleep whose awakening, it may be, is heaven.

I picked him up in my arms, still sobbing bitterly, and struggled back down the slanting, cluttered aisle toward the death-trap which held Julie Lajeune.

The fire was flaring closer and closer down the long line of cars. In its wavering light, grotesquely through the smoke and fog, I caught sight of a fantastic figure bobbing about, its arms and legs incased in flapping pillow-cases, its head chalky-white and completely bald!

The ghostliness of the vision made me doubt my senses. But as the light grew brighter, I saw that it was one of the laughers, one of the little theatrical troupe; and the make-up lost its grotesqueness as I recognized the ruffled collar; big, black pompons, and pointed slippers, which always ex-

press the pathetic wistful dearness of Pierrot.

He was working frantically at some jammed woodwork. In the effort his white-skinned peruke fell off, exposing a mass of rich, waving, dark hair.

As I reached him he succeeded in tearing away the partition. It fell away, and there in a muddle of mattresses and pillows lay Julie Lajeune, a picturesque lavender-silk negligee fluffed coquettishly about her, her dark hair tousled in a cloud above her perkily pretty face.

She tried to rise, but fell back, white to the lips. The Pierrot, with a quick intake of breath between his teeth, caught her unconscious form up in his arms. For all his slender delicacy he had a fine, fiery strength, born, perhaps, of excitement.

Refusing my offer of help, he carried her like a child to the slanting, mashed-in doorway, her head against his breast, her bare, white feet falling limply and exposing an ankle swollen and blue. I followed in his wake with the still crying Butter-scotch. Together the four of us made our escape to a patch of bushes by the roadside.

Pierrot laid Julie down tenderly upon the soft grass on her traveling-coat which I had rescued from the wreck, and we looked anxiously about for help. News of the disaster had evidently reached the town, for already dark forms hurried in and out among the burning ruins on their work of rescue.

A man passed us with a bucket of water. I filled my pocket drinking-cup and started to fling its contents into Julie's face; but the Pierrot snatched it from me and, tenderly as a woman, bathed her brow and lips.

With a long, shuddering sigh she opened her eyes.

"Weren't you killed?" she demanded, staring at me doubtfully. Then her eyes fell upon Pierrot.

I thought she was going to faint again, but she held to consciousness by sheer will-power.

"*Dieu du ciel!*" she cried. "Where did *you* come from?"

The glare of the burning train penetrated even the thick fog. I looked hard at Pierrot, and beneath his motley make-up my eye discovered the truth.

It was Henri!

He was staring down at Julie as if ready to eat her, but when she spoke he stiffened into stony aloofness.

"Are you better, Mme. Benoit?" he inquired in French in a voice of congealed politeness.

Julie, who was far too game to be seriously incommoded by a mere strained ankle, raised herself up on one elbow and laughed wickedly at his tone.

"You, I perceive, are not," she replied, and laid her hand on his arm.

He withdrew from her touch with much dignity and extreme haste.

As for what followed, I might as well have been a roadside bush for all the attention they paid me; and Butter-scotch having cried himself to sleep in my arms, was also negligible.

Henri eyed the hand that had touched him as if it were some dangerous explosive whose fuse had been extinguished only in the nick of time.

"*That* you did—four years ago," he said bitterly. "It means as much now as then, Mme. Benoit."

"Henri, I do my most to make you be sensible," murmured Julie sweetly. "But you are still too fly-from-the-spark! I was sincere with you then, *mon ami,* as I am now. If I lay the hand on your sleeve it is—it is because I like you, Henri." This last so low that it might easily have been mistaken for the murmuring of the night-wind in the bushes.

"Julie," said Henry brokenly, his voice, in spite of his fantastic make-up, holding a genuine pain which took all humor from the situation, "You know I love you. Don't make it more hard!"

I am afraid Julie was playing with him a little. But if she were enjoying

it wickedly on one side of her teasing soul, there was a glad note in her own voice which told of the deeps that stirred down below her laughter.

"Henri," she said again very softly indeed, "there was a question you asked me four years ago. If—if you care to ask it again, the answer shall be different."

"But—but—" stammered Henri. "Benoît?"

Julie's answer came so reverently that I could have kicked myself for wanting to laugh.

"God rest his soul!" she said solemnly.

Henri caught her in his arms without more ado, and kissed her.

It was a queer situation for a love scene, especially for a scene of such undramatic proportions as that of my two quaint friends. A queer setting, indeed, that clump of stodgy bushes by the roadside, the glare of the burning train, the hurrying, dark figures passing in the distance bearing their tragic burdens.

In the midst of her happiness Julie could not forget it.

"You must go help!" she cried, pushing Henri gently from her. "It is of wickedness to stay here when there is so much pain. Go both of you; find first the tired little mother and her baby!" She held out her arms to relieve me of Butter-scotch.

"Julie, I found them," I said slowly. "They will never, either of them, be tired any more."

"You mean—dead?"

I nodded, and she burst into tears above the orphaned baby in her arms, who woke up and began sobbing heartbreakingly.

"Hush, *mon petit!* My poor, poor little one! You shall have a mother," vowed Julie. "I am going to adopt you—if I can!"

"You are going to marry me," said Henri, as one who courteously but resolutely shoves into notice a matter which is being neglected temporarily.

A motor-car was collecting the injured from the wreck to carry them to the village. I took the child from Julie's arms, leaving to Henri the honor of carrying Julie herself to the car.

As he stooped to lift her, he declared again doggedly:

"You will marry me, first of all, *ma petite!*"

Some imp made me blurt out teasingly and with shocking bad taste:

"But you can't afford him, Julie!"

"But yes," she protested as she held out her arms like a child for him to lift her. "I have arranged all. I see it most clear. Some one will be needed to make the home for my child (if its relatives permit) when I am on the road—and why not Henri? He will be a most excellent father. What think you, Henri—no?"

A droll expression of surprise, even dismay, yet none the less of worship, twisted Henri's face into an adoring smile that somehow suddenly became masterful.

His answer wasn't in words. But I guess Julie understood all right.

U U U U

INSIDE

BY MARY CAROLYN DAVIES

A LITTLE boy 'way deep inside
Peers sometimes through your eyes
With childish eyes of wonder wide
Though you're a grown-up wise.

The little boy I could not see
With my dull adult eyes,
But—I have deep inside of me,
A girl who's just his size!