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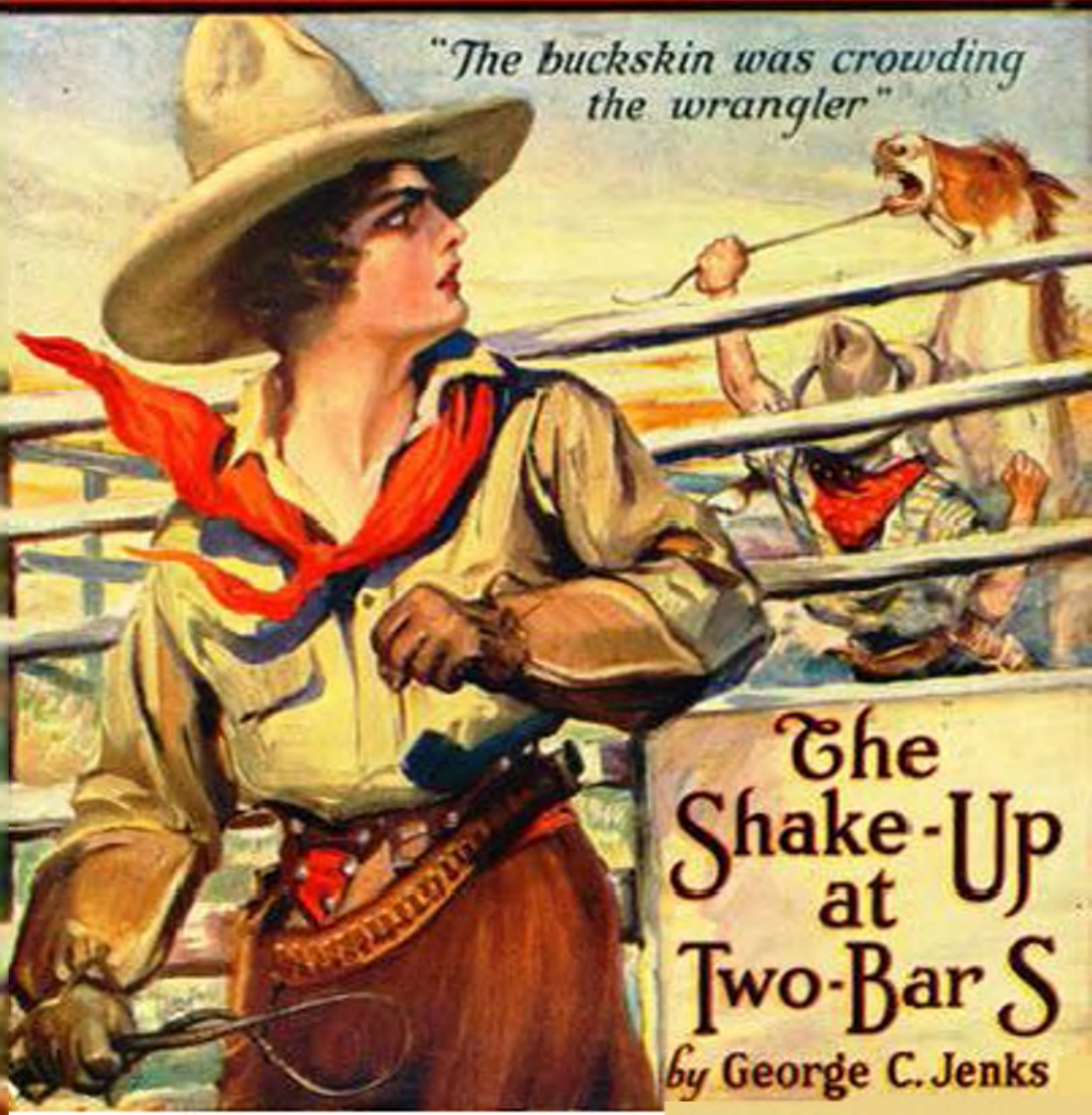

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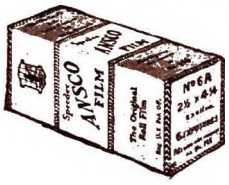

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VOL. CLXXVIII — CONTENTS FOR JULY 10, 1926 — NUMBER 6

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POETRY

THE ENDLESS CHAIN

By WILLIAM SLAVENS McNUTT

AN EPIC OF THE STRENUOUS AMERICANS OF TO-DAY

It begins next week

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXVIII SATURDAY, JULY 10, 1926 NUMBER 6

The Shake Up at Two Bar S

By GEORGE C. JENKS

Author of "A Jewel from the Gods," etc.

HOW THIS AUTHOR BECAME ONE

THERE are two questions asked oftener than any other of persons who write stories for a living. One is " How do you *think* of all you write? Does it just come to you, or do you only describe things that you have seen or heard, or—or—*how* do you do it?" The second question, almost as frequent as the first, is " How did you come to be a story writer anyhow? How did you begin? How do you learn to write novels and short stories and serials, and how long do you generally have to study before you can turn out fiction that will sell?"

Well, here is my experience in brief. The first stories I remembered producing were told by word of mouth to a dozen or so of my schoolmates in the dormitory of an English boarding school, after we had been sent to bed, about eight o'clock. Of course,

no healthy lad in his early teens could be expected to go to sleep so early, so for an hour or so, as we lay there in the dark, each boy in turn was called on to contribute a narrative in hushed tones to the general entertainment. In all modesty, I may say now that I did my full share. I rehashed all the fiction I had read, beginning with "Robinson Crusoe," and when my memory tottered I fell back upon a rather riotous imagination. My version of works by Fenimore Cooper, Captain Marryat, Captain Mayne Reid, Harrison Ainsworth, Bulwer Lytton, and others of my favorite authors would have astonished them, I am afraid. Even Dickens did not escape, for I had recently read "Oliver Twist" and "Nicholas Nickleby," and I served them up hot and enthusiastically with the others.

It was at that same school that I made my début as an actor, playing a long-winded comedy part in an amateur production of a melodrama called "The Mutiny at the Nore," based on one of Marryat's sea novels. I remember how I hated being kept in to study my lines and attend rehearsals when I wanted to be out on the cricket ground. It is a saying among actors that when once you have rubbed against the "tormentors," you never get over it. Perhaps that boyhood play-acting of mine is responsible for the fact that my life's activities have been about evenly divided between theatricals and writing. Had it been otherwise, I might never have written "The Shake-Up at the Two Bar S." Let me remark that I have known personally several *Velma Arsdales,* and that long periods of traveling with "road" shows in former days brought me into contact with cowboys and other picturesque Westerners such as I have introduced in the story.

I doubt if there is a better way to become a writer of fiction than to serve an apprenticeship as a newspaper man. Many a well known and successful author has come into his own as a story teller by way of the newspaper "city room." For myself, I believe I have done everything possible on a newspaper, from setting type—by hand, at case—to writing editorials.

Incidentally, many of my experiences as a New York reporter have proved useful in furnishing dramatic material for fiction stories in the ARGOSY and other magazines. I have worked on sensational bandit, murder and suicide cases, and have interviewed "Buffalo Bill"—Colonel Cody—"Wild Bill" Hickok, and "Bob" Ford, who killed Jesse James. I have reported prize fights in the days when such contests were illegal, were conducted early in the morning on some lonely field, with everybody around the ring keeping a sharp eye out for officers of the law who might break in at any moment, and when the men, fighting with their bare knuckles, cut each other's faces to ribbons at every blow, and I once saw John L. Sullivan, with gloves, knock out in a very few rounds one of his many opponents.

For two years I was dramatic editor of the New York *Commercial Advertiser,* which afterward became the *Globe,* and was purchased by Mr. Frank A. Munsey. Only two of the critics I used to see at first nights then are still reviewing plays—Alan Dale and J. Ranken Towse.

Among several plays I have written and had produced was one called "The U. S. Mail." My partner in that enterprise was a newspaper man who not long ago represented the United States as ambassador to one of the large European countries which still maintains a royal court. He may have had more real fun in that exalted post than I have enjoyed in writing for the ARGOSY for nearly twenty years, but you never can tell.

GEORGE C. JENKS.

CHAPTER I.

THE OWNER ARRIVES.

ONE of a dozen cowboys drowsing in the afternoon sunshine on a bench against the rough shed of a small cattle-shipping station on the U. P. came to life suddenly to express emphatic disgust over something that had occupied his mind as he smoked. He was Tim Ripley, a top hand with the Two Bar S.

"It won't do, an' that's whatever!" he blurted out, hurling his cigarette end with a vicious snap over to the railroad track. "I tell you, Len, a young woman who belongs in a Eastern city, and is purty, an' a star singer in grand opery, an' who is used to scented baths an' limousines an' sech,

ain't got no use on no rightly-organized cow ranch in Wyomin' or anywhar else."

Leonard Hays, foreman of the Two Bar S, to whom this had been violently addressed, puffed at his cigarette in silence, as his gaze swept up the line of rails stretching away over the level plain until they were swallowed up in the distance. Then, satisfied that the train from the East was not yet in sight, he turned his eyes coolly upon the grumbler and replied in a gentle drawl:

"There'll have to be room for Miss Velma Arsdale, I reckon. She has owned the Two Bar S ever since her agents bid it in by auction two years ago, when old Colonel Watkins died and his heirs decided to turn the whole outfit—land, water rights, ranch house, outbuildings, corrals, and all the cattle carrying the Two Bar S brand at the time—into spot cash. Now she wants to see it, and she is going to manage it in her own way, she says."

"Jumpin' cats!" exploded Tim. "How's she goin' to do that? What does *she* know about runnin' a cattle ranch? Why, she's a opery singer. That's what you told the boys a week ago when you said she was comin'. Why don't she jest keep on singin', an' let you continue to manage the Two Bar S the way you been doin'. Why, you was Colonel Watkins's foreman for more than a year afore he died, an' thar ain't no one knows the ranch an' all about it the way you do."

"I shall still be foreman," remarked Hays, as he got up to look again along the railroad for some sign that the train was approaching. "Miss Arsdale is going to manage the ranch this season she says. She has certain ideas she wants to carry out, and all her men have to do is to obey orders. It is what I shall do, as her foreman, and I expect everybody else to do the same."

"That's what is puttin' the iron into the boys," said Tim. "When you gi' it out a week ago that Miss Arsdale—who we knowed already owned the ranch—was one o' these hyar prima donnas, an' that she was goin' to take a year's lay-off from the stage to rest her voice, no one cared a cuss what she done. It wasn't until you allowed she was comin' to show them buckaroos on the Two Bar S how to punch cows, an' that she was goin' to be the one an' only boss, that we got it plumb in the eye."

"I am glad you got it somehow," rejoined Leonard Hays. "Because that is the way it is going to be."

"Well, the boys don't like it one little bit! You kin take that from me an' bank on it. For that matter, I'm plumb annoyed myself, an' I ain't pertendin' nothin' else." Tim's tone rose in his indignant protest. "Why, blame my cats! I've heerd—an' I reckon it's the cold fact—these hyar big singers in opery draws down more *dinero* for singin' one night than you or me kin make in a whole season o' hard ridin'. What is she givin' up all that for? Locoed?"

"I guess you don't know that singing in grand opera is mighty hard work," returned Len. "Some of you hombres think there is nothing tires a person out except herding cattle. Miss Arsdale has been ordered by her doctors, voice specialists, not to sing for at least a year."

"You mean on the stage?"

"She is not to sing in a theater, at home, or anywhere else," answered Len Hays, gravely. "This has been the most successful season she ever had, according to the papers. But she has sung more often than in any other year, and, from what she said in her letter to me, telling me she was coming to the ranch, she might lose her voice altogether if she didn't save it now."

Tim Ripley smoked in silence for a few moments. Then, with an incredulous grin: "If she isn't goin' to sing while she is takin' this hyar rest, as she calls it, why for did she have that piano sent out to the ranch house? It weighs nigh as much as all them trunks of hern what come with it?"

"A person can play the piano without using her voice, can't she?" was Len's curt rejoinder. Then, after another look along the railroad into the dim perspective, he called out, in a different tone, full of businesslike energy: "Here she comes! Get busy, Tim!"

"The train?"

"That's what I said. She'll be here in ten minutes. Better hold the horses as she comes in. Then be ready to do whatever Miss Arsdale may tell you, and look after

what small baggage she will bring with her. The train won't stop more than a minute. It's a through express, a flyer."

"This hyar Velma Arsdale must have a heap o' influence to make a through train stop at a dog-hole station like this," observed Tim.

"She has, of course," assented Len. "But even *she* will have to hurry."

"Ever hear her sing, Len?" asked Tim, as the huge bulk of the locomotive, coming nearer out of the haze, loomed larger and more distinct.

"No," replied Len shortly.

"Never seen her either?"

"Yes. She spent some time on the ranch three summers ago, the guest of Colonel and Mrs. Watkins. That was before you came to the Two Bar S."

"I see," nodded Tim. "That's why she bought it. Maybe took a likin' to the place. I reckon you got to know her purty well that summer?"

There was no answer, but Tim believed Len's face flushed suddenly. He couldn't be sure, however, for the foreman had turned his back; and when Tim came to think it over, he reached the conclusion that just a wave of heat had put a deeper red momentarily into Len Hays's sunburned visage.

With a clang, a roar, and a bewildering hissing of air-brakes, the great express train slowed down and came to a slithering halt along the station platform.

Before it had quite stopped, a white-jacketed porter, who had opened the vestibuled doors of a Pullman and been riding on the steps with a carpet-covered stool in one hand and a leg swinging in space, leaped down, planted his stool, and practically all in the same movement, half lifted from the steps a flurried young woman with a round hat box about the size of a cheese in her arms. On the box, in gilt letters, was the name, "Velma Arsdale."

"You are with Miss Arsdale?" said Len, taking the hat box.

"Her maid," answered the girl, looking timidly up at this tall young man, who seemed so strong and capable in his gray flannel shirt, pinched-in, high-crowned hat, and boots with jingling spurs. "Miss Arsdale is in her private room, taking a nap. The door is locked. I called her, but—"

Into the picture burst the conductor of the train, an irascible, big man, gorgeous in his blue and gold uniform, and full of violent language.

"Here! What's this? Get your passenger off! What are you waiting for?"

As he flung this at the distressed porter, he looked ahead to the engineer leaning out of his cab window, and prepared to wave his autocratic hand in "All aboard!" He was mad already at having to stop at this "tank" even for a few seconds. A through Overland! Such a thing had never been heard of on the U. P. before in his time. Not that he didn't understand how it had come about. Velma Arsdale, the American prima donna, that every one had been talking about for two seasons, had a name big enough to accomplish anything. But, even so—

"Where *is* Miss Arsdale?" he demanded, sternly of the maid. "Is she off the train?"

"No, she's in her drawing room—er—er—asleep!"

"*Asleep!*" shouted the conductor. "Didn't she *know* she got off here? And where's all her hand baggage?"

"It's in the drawing room with her. I was trying to wake her up by knocking on the door, when the porter dragged me away and made me get off."

In desperation, the girl pushed past conductor and porter, and disappeared into the car.

"Go after her and get the baggage!" ordered the conductor, turning on the porter. "Bust open the door, and throw the things out of the window if you can't do it any other way! The lady, too, by jings! Holy pelican! We've been here two minutes already!"

The conductor stamped up and down, while the ring of cowboys that had gathered offered various facetious suggestions which prevented his temperature going down:

"Rope her through the window!" "Sing to her, old man!" "Why don't you cut this hyar car out an' pick her up goin' back?" "What's time to you? Wyoming is full of it! Take all you want!" "How many prima donnas have you got on board,

anyhow?" "Wire the president of the road that your train's stuck! Maybe he'll tell you what to do." "She hates to leave *you*. That's what's the matter."

The wrathful conductor swung around on his tormentors, but before he could voice an effective "comeback," a gasp of admiration from the whole group of young men in unison, made him turn his eyes upon the vestibule of the Pullman.

At the top of the steps was as dainty a feminine figure as ever that conductor had beheld in all his hard-boiled career, a young woman, in her early twenties, in picturesque Western riding costume, which somehow suggested the stage rather than rugged trails over mountains and through sage and chaparral.

The short skirts, tan leggings, high-heeled boots with silver spurs, the gold-embroidered khaki shirt, set off by a loosely-knotted crimson silk handkerchief, and the gray Stetson rakishly tilted back from the piquant face, all were of more costly material and more ornamental than the watchful cowboys were accustomed to see on the range or about the cattle towns of the uplands.

The wearer of all this finery seemed quite satisfied with herself, however. Letting her glance sweep rather haughtily over the assemblage of cowboys as if she were looking for some one who ought to have been waiting, she began to descend the steps, when Len Hays shouldered his way through the crowd and raised his soft hat.

"Miss Arsdale!" he said, evenly. "I am Hays, foreman of the Two Bar S."

He offered his hand to help her down, but she ignored it. Walking through the lane that the cowboys, with instinctive courtesy, made for her, she spoke over her shoulder, without looking back, as if she took it for granted Len was there, to take her orders:

"Where are the horses, Mr. Hays? Did I not make it clear in my written instructions that I intended to ride to the ranch on horseback, instead of taking the stage part way?"

"It will be a long ride," he ventured. "I have a buck wagon, as well as saddle horses. Perhaps you're tired after so many hours on the railroad. If you rode in the wagon for a spell—"

"All right, Miss Arsdale!" broke in the conductor. "Here's your maid! Put those bags on the platform, porter! B-o-o-ard!"

The big train moved on and Tim Ripley, with the maid's help, stowed the bags and other personal property of the prima donna in the buck wagon.

"Are those two saddle horses ours?"

It was Velma Arsdale speaking, as she moved over to the back of the buck wagon to look closely at two sinewy horses, carrying heavy range saddles, and all the equipment of cattle mounts.

"Yes, ma'am!" replied Len, stressing the "ma'am" slightly, as if to show her he thoroughly understood their relative positions were those of employer and hired man. "I have your saddle on the bay mare."

"How did you know I'd want that one?" she asked quickly, her lips tightening.

"She's a very easy-gaited creature," was his answer, as he led the bay forward for her inspection. "I gentled her myself."

She gave the mare a cursory glance.

"I like the looks of that roan. He appears to be stronger. I lived on a ranch in my teens, you know, and I always liked a horse I had to *hold*."

"The bay has plenty of spirit," observed Len. "Still—"

He brought the big roan gelding from behind the wagon and loosened the cinches.

"What are you doing?" she asked imperiously. "Isn't that horse all right?"

"Quite, ma'am, except that the saddle might not be comfortable for you. That's *your* saddle on the bay. I'll have 'em changed in a jiffy."

"No, don't do that," she ordered. "I'll ride the bay."

She gave the foreman a sharp look under her sweeping lashes. She had not ruffled him.

"Yes, ma'am," he responded evenly, and cinched up the roan's saddle with two vigorous pulls. Then he called out to Tim Ripley, who, with Velma's maid, was already in the buck wagon: "Drive on, Tim! Straight out over that road from the cattle pens. Then along the upper trail over the hills."

"All right!" came Tim's cheery reply.

He cast an appreciative glance upon the girl at his side, Velma's maid, and clucked to his dependable calico team. In a few minutes they had gone up the road, rounded a lofty butte, and were out of sight.

About that time, Len Hays walked around Velma Arsdale and her mare, to satisfy himself that everything was all right, while the lady in the saddle affected to be supremely unconscious of his presence.

But when they had ridden out of sight of the station, leaving cattle pens and loitering cowboys behind, and were passing a fringe of cottonwoods whose flickering shadows softened the afternoon sunshine, Velma Arsdale pulled up her mare, and as Len Hays involuntarily checked his own horse, the big roan, she leaned over in her saddle toward him and placed her soft, ungloved hand in a warm clasp on his brown wrist.

CHAPTER II.

COMING TO GRIPS.

A WEEK had passed since Velma Arsdale had arrived at the Two Bar S. That she intended to manage things in her own way, regardless of cowboy tradition or the opinions of anybody else, was apparent from the first. As a queen of opera, petted both before and behind the footlights all the more because she was a native American girl who could hold her own with any of her rivals from overseas, she was accustomed to a deference that was often servile. It never had occurred to her that her will would be questioned by any one on her own ranch.

Nevertheless, as she wallked up and down the big living room of the ranch house, waiting for her foreman to come in obedience to her summons, her lips tightened and a troubled frown wrinkled her white forehead.

There was a knock at the door. She sat down behind the big table, and composed her features before she called: "Come in!"

Len Hays strode in from the veranda, removing his high-crowned soft hat as he entered.

The fact that fresh streaks of dust mingled with perspiration on his sun-browned face, that his well-worn chaps gave forth strongly the odor of warm leather, and that he smelled generally of horse, indicated that he had just come in from the range and had been riding hard.

"Well, Len," said the owner of the Two-Bar S abruptly. "Anything new?"

"A bunch of twenty cows and ten calves run off from the grass meadow along Bubbling Creek," was the sententious answer.

"Gone through Timberwolf Pass, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Who was riding there?"

"Tim Ripley."

"Why didn't he stop them?"

"Two of Tucson King's men had him covered."

"Sure they were Tucson King's men?"

"Pretty sure," replied Len. "When they went through Timberwolf, Tim knew they were headed for the Hole-in-the-Wall, and it's somewhere in that district, among the hills, that Tucson is hiding out."

"What does this Tucson King look like?" she demanded.

"No one in this part of the country has ever got a look at him. He was first heard of around here five weeks ago, when two hundred of the Lazy L herd were run off one night, and one of the riders of the outfit was killed. Three strangers rounded up the cattle, and one plugged poor Tom Meade, of the Lazy L, plumb through the chest."

"Deliberate murder!" exclaimed Velma Arsdale, with a little catch in her breath. "Horrible! I didn't think even outlaws in the West would kill a man except in fair fight."

"Well, in a way, that was what this was," said Len. "It was Tom Meade or the other man, and the rustler was a little quicker. Even at that, when we catch that hombre, it's a safe bet he'll stretch hemp. One of the Lazy L boys who was hurrying to help Tom heard him call the man 'Tucson King.' It seems Tom Meade had known Tucson in Arizona as a rustler and killer, but he never would say much about him; and none of the other men on the ranch knew what kind of looking man he was."

"So you think Tucson King killed this man Tom Meade so that there would be no one about here who would recognize him?"

Len Hays smiled a little. Velma Arsdale's quickness of deduction awoke his admiration.

"That's about it, ma'am," he assented in the drawl that occasionally marked his speech, and which was a heritage from Southern forbears. "All any one along Powder River can say of Tucson King is that he's at the head of a gang of murdering thieves, and has a bad record. But what he looks like no one knows. Whether he's tall or short, or light or dark, or about how old he is—well, one guess is as good as another."

Velma did not make any comment. With a shrug of annoyance, she walked over to the nearest window and looked out, while Len stood patiently waiting.

It was the most peaceful time on a ranch in the whole twenty-four hours—just after sundown. Several of the cowhands, who had been in the saddle all day, had finished supper and were lolling outside the bunk house, while others idly watched the horse wrangler busy with his milling charges in the big corral. Nearly every man had a cigarette in a corner of his mouth.

Two night line riders had just left the home ranch for their long vigil among the scrambling hills, buttes, and mesas that, in those days, as now, made the Powder River country the wildest, as well as the most picturesque, in Wyoming.

Velma turned from the window as the horsemen, loping across the plain, faded from her sight in the evening mists; and Len saw in her face that she had come to a sudden decision of some kind.

Since Velma Arsdale, in a sudden friendly urge, had placed her hand upon Len's wrist as they rode away from the railroad station—and quickly withdrawn it—there had not been again the slightest suggestion of familiarity in her manner. Len had not expected there would be. Simple ranchman as he was, he knew something about the romantic impulses of a girl of Velma's type.

Also, his mind wandering backward, he remembered a warm moonlight evening nearly three years before, when he had accompanied her on a ride over the hills strictly in the character of a hired protector, and how, suddenly carried away by the intoxicating beauty of the scene as they emerged from a coulee into the full white glow of a seemingly endless rolling plateau, she had leaned over from her saddle and, to call his attention to its loveliness, lightly touched his hand.

Then he recalled how, in a crazy moment, he had ventured to place his other hand on hers, and how, shriveling him with a blazing look of indignation at his presumption, she had, without speaking, drawn her hand away and ridden a little ahead of him all the way back to the ranch.

Yes, Len Hays's memory was good, and he knew that all she had expected of him was that he should act as guide and general manager in their long trip through the hills to the Two-Bar S, and keep in his place.

So he had kept his place throughout the long journey, which included a night camp with a tent for Velma and her maid, Evelyn, and hot coffee and fried bacon for supper—and he was doing it now as he waited for her to speak.

"Have you been used to losing twenty cows and a lot of calves by theft on this ranch?" she asked coldly. "Just allowed them to be run off?"

"We have had cattle stolen from time to time, ma'am," he returned quietly, although a little flush on his brown cheek told that the imputation of carelessness had hurt. "The Two-Bar S has not suffered more in that way than other outfits of its size. Most ranches lose a bunch of range stock now and then."

"By professional cattle thieves—rustlers?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Have you ever sincerely tried to catch them?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Without success, I suppose?"

"Well, ma'am"—the drawl was very pronounced—"we have sometimes found our cattle before they could be driven too far away, but we have never caught the thieves, so far."

"You tried?"

"Yes—we tried," replied Len Hays unemotionally.

"Well, we are going to try again, and I intend to be there when you do it," she announced. "I shall want three good men—two besides yourself."

"When were you thinking of using these men, ma'am? Not to-night?"

"Yes, to-night," she returned crisply. "Bring the two best you have into this room, and I'll tell them what they are to do."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. Then, stopping on his way to the door, "There was something I wanted to say to you this evening," he said slowly, but with no hesitation in his tone. "Reckon I'd better get it out of my system now, before I go for those two men."

"Is it very important?" she demanded. "Because, if not, I like my orders obeyed promptly. That is something that does not apply so much to you, Len," she added in a half apologetic tone. "I did not mean to speak just that way. But I see a disposition to mutiny among the riders and others in my employ, and I am not pleased with it."

"I was only going to say," answered Len, "that two of our best men have quit, and I'm afraid more will follow. They don't like the way the Two-Bar S is run; so they say they'll go somewhere else to work."

"You mean they don't like the way I 'run' it, as you call it? They are dissatisfied with my management of my own property?"

There was defiance in her voice—a voice that had been many times described by musical critics as "golden," "silken," and in other terms expressive of superlative beauty and sweetness. The *beauty* was there now.

"You need not answer," she went on. "I can see that these cow-punchers of mine, who have been doing things one certain way for many years, think there cannot possibly be other and better methods. You can tell them from me that the Two-Bar S will continue to be managed in my way, if every man on the ranch leaves me. There are other cowmen to be got, I dare say. Let me see those two men you mentioned, if you please."

Without a word, Len Hays went out. When he returned, ten minutes later, the owner of the Two-Bar S was seated at the piano which stood at the other end of the spacious room, rendering, to her own accompaniment, a world-famous operatic aria of great range and crackling with trills, turns, and chromatics, which is known to operagoers as one of the most colorful and difficult soprano numbers in the whole scope of the lyric drama.

Every note was correctly and effectively brought out.

But not by her voice. With intently serious face and beautiful red lips properly puckered, Velma Arsdale was *whistling*. She stopped as she saw Len in the room, with two cowboys behind him. Like himself, they wore chaps and were otherwise fully equipped for the saddle. One was Tim Ripley, whom she recognized immediately.

The other she recalled as a man she had seen about the ranch, but never had spoken to. He might have been fifty years old, and if he had been in rags and patches, instead of the regalia of a cow-puncher, could have been taken for an old-time mountain prospector or "desert rat." His rugged face was of the hue of old mahogany, its color seeming all the deeper in contrast to the long gray mustache that drooped on either side of his mouth; but the keen blue eyes were still young.

"We can depend on these men, Len?" asked Velma without moving from the piano bench. "We don't want any other sort with us to-night."

"If you be aimin' that at me, ma'am," broke in the old man, "I'm Sam Bland, mos' gen'ally knowed as Silver Sam; an' I kin lick any man who says I ain't plumb straight an' up an' down, an' that's whatever. I kin ride anything that wears hoofs, an' I shoots true from heel, hip, or shoulder.

"In concloosion, ma'am, I've heerd a lot o' wild talk about the lady as has come to manage the Two-Bar S. As for me, seein' as this lady is the owner tharof, I'm fur *her*. A lady is the finest thing the Lord

ever made, and any man as wouldn't stand by her till the last toot of the round-up is guilty of treachery."

Silver Sam finished off his oration by sweeping his greasy old slouch-hat across his breast in a bow which Velma Arsdale felt instinctively was sincere. She arose from the bench and bowed in return.

"Thank you, Silver," she said. "I know I can trust *you*."

Silver Sam was too much overcome by the graciousness of his fair employer to reply. All he could do as he stepped back was to mumble behind his heavy mustache: "Say—ain't she a queen? *Ain't* she a queen? S-a-a-y!"

"Are your horses ready?" asked Len, turning to Ripley and Silver Sam together. "Miss Arsdale is going to ride, and she wants us to go with her. That's all there is to it."

"Of co'se they're ready, Len," answered Tim in a slightly injured tone. "So's Miss Arsdale's. I knowed she was goin out afore you said anything about it. I saddled up her fav'rite bay mare, Cherry, as soon as you came indoors the fust time."

Tim Ripley did not think it necessary to tell Len that he had managed to have a few words with Evelyn, Velma's maid, at the kitchen door, and that before Miss Arsdale had received the foreman's report she had told her maid she intended to take a ride over the range that night, which information had been promptly passed on to Tim. It was nobody's business, Tim considered, if he and Evelyn had already got to be very good friends.

When, a quarter of an hour later, all four rode away, some of the idlers about the bunk house and corral would have liked very much to know what this unusual expedition meant. But none had the boldness to ask Velma Arsdale, who was the only person that knew.

The owner of the Two-Bar S, riding silently by the side of Len Hays, with the other two behind, kept her own counsel until they were far out on the range and nearing the jumble of rocky crags in the mountain foothills.

Then, as at her command they all reined up, she called Tim Ripley to her, and told him to show her exactly where he had been riding when Tucson King's band of robbers descended upon the herd and stole the twenty cows and ten calves.

CHAPTER III.

VELMA SWINGS HER ROPE.

THERE was a bright moon, and she had no difficulty in following Tim's explanations as he pointed out just where he had been riding on the mesa to the left when the three rustlers, having without noise rounded up the bunch of cattle they were after far on the right, turned them through the mountain gorge known as Timberwolf Pass, which gave upon a vast expanse of broken country where it was easy to lose them.

"Fact is," went on Tim, "by the time I savvied what was goin' on, an' c'd ride over, it was too late. Two o' them tarrapins ambushed me, an' it would ha' been plain sooicide for me to have reached for my gun with two six-shooters p'inted at me. Jest as the last o' the cattle went out o' sight in the mountain the two Tucson King gents slipped behind rocks right after them, callin' out to me to stay back."

Velma Arsdale listened attentively, saying at last:

"I suppose you could not have done anything under the circumstances. But we're going through Timberwolf Pass. I'll go first. It isn't likely they would shoot at me if they are still there."

"Don't seem to me as you kin do much thataway, ma'am," put in Silver Sam. "I know these hills as well as any one. I've been through 'em agin an' agin, lookin' for pay ore, an' I'm tellin' you they's still a puzzle to me."

"You mean I'd get lost?" said Velma incredulously. "I lived on a ranch when I was a child, remember. Roaming the hills is not entirely new to me."

"'Tain't on'y that," returned Silver. "Thar's trails as you might foller which would bring you out agin, an' mebbe if you was to stay long enough you might git a sight o' one or two critters as have been stole. But don't fool yourself that these

hyar Tucson King gents wouldn't shoot a woman. They's been knowed to do that very thing. That's what I meant when I said them hills was a puzzle to me—they's one big ornery ambush, an' no one, man or woman, is allowed to go more than half a mile from the other end of Timberwolf."

"A murderers' stronghold, eh?" was Velma Arsdale's scornful exclamation. "I should think—"

She was interrupted by a sudden commotion among the cattle herd behind them, which had wandered down from the mesa and taken the place of the stolen cows and calves driven off by the thieves. Velma and the three men involuntarily turned in their saddles.

Something had startled the animals as, after satisfying their thirst in Bubbling Creek, they were contentedly cropping the bunch grass along its shore, and immediately there was a stampede.

The cause of the panic was insignificant enough—it generally is—but the effect was to send half a hundred maddened steers and cows charging toward the long slope of the mesa, with a red-eyed, snorting Texas bull for a leader.

"Tim!" said Len quietly.

"Shore!" was Tim Ripley's instant response, as he turned his horse.

"Me too!" came huskily from Silver Sam.

Len Hays had already begun to move when he spoke to Tim, and both the men with him knew that the task was to head off the crazy cattle and turn them before they reached the plateau at the top of the mountain, with its sheer drop of more than a hundred feet at the other side. Otherwise there was a strong chance of some of the runaways keeping right on till they leaped over the precipice.

Len pulled up as Silver Sam laconically declared himself in.

"You stay with Miss Arsdale, Silver," he ordered briefly. "Tim and I will attend to this."

Len and Tim galloped away before Silver Sam could reply, and as they used quirt and spur to put their horses to the highest speed they had, they were soon too busy to give heed to anything but the work in hand.

Thundering along in a great billowing mass, frantic with a fear of they knew not what, the herd were nearly halfway up the long slope before Len and Tim reached them. Then as the two experienced range riders pushed their cayuses against the side of the crowding racers, trying to turn them, there was a break, and the cattle ran in several directions at once.

"Now, Tim, turn them to the right!" shouted Len. "Keep 'em from going on to the bluff. Get in front, and shove them back. Quick, now! Get a move on! I'll round up the strays!"

Leaving Tim Ripley to attend to the main body, which, now that they were spreading apart, was not so difficult, Len gave his attention to four or five cows who were following the bull diagonally across the slope, to bring them back.

He knew the cows would keep behind the bull as long as they could, instinctively looking to him for protection, and there was always the likelihood that he would swing around and go straight up the slope toward the bluff.

A bull hasn't any more sense than a cow or steer when he is angry or in terror, and there was a strong possibility of this bull leading his trusting followers to a tragic death with himself. The chances were a hundred to one that if he suddenly found himself on the brink of the precipice he would not think of turning to find some way of escape, but would leap blindly into space.

"Look at that thar crazy bull, Len!" shouted Tim, as he galloped hard toward the great creature, now bellowing in wrath. "I can't git thar in time! Rope him, Len! If you don't he'll go over, an' all the cows with him! Hurry, Len!"

But Tim Ripley knew, even while he shouted, that Len Hayes was too far away to intercept the bull, notwithstanding that his powerful roan gelding was straining every nerve to bring his rider near enough to drop a loop over the animal's great neck, or to draw it around two of his feet and throw him.

It looked to Tim Ripley as if nothing could be done, and that they would have to trust to the bull turning of his own ac-

cord, when out of the hurly burly of flying cattle now spread all over the mesa came a swift-moving bay mare, whose rider, standing in the stirrups, was whirling a wide-looped lariat ready for a cast.

Velma Arsdale, her dainty, lithe figure in its showy riding costume, with hair streaming from beneath the wide-brimmed Stetson, looking, as Len unconsciously told himself, ravishing in the moonlight, had broken away from Silver Sam, and was bearing down directly on the bull.

She was much nearer to the raging creature than either Len Hays or Tim, and it was evident that, regardless of the danger, she meant to do her best to stop him.

"Come 'way, Miss Arsdale!" shouted Len at the top of his voice. "Let him go! He'll kill you! Come away, I tell you!"

Perhaps the rumble of pounding hoofs, as the cattle ran this way and that, together with the snorting and bellowing of the bull and the steers, mingled with the mournful bawling of the cows, drowned Len Hays's voice.

At all events, if Velma heard him she took no heed. Accustomed to have her own way, she paid no more attention to the shouts of her foreman than she would have given to an assistant stage manager who wanted her to do something on the stage that didn't suit her. She did not vouchsafe either Len or Tim, or the excited Silver Sam —who was swearing horribly in his deadly fear for her—one look. Instead, she rode as hard as the bay mare would take her straight toward the bull.

Even at that critical moment, when Silver Sam was calling himself all the hard names—mostly profane—that he could think of for letting her get away from him, the old man, who was credited with being able to do anything with a lariat possible to man, felt a thrill of admiration at the graceful and dexterous manner in which she whirled the wide loop over her head and let it go.

But good as the cast was—and Silver Sam declared afterward with a few of his choicest oaths, that it had been perfect—the bull was too quick for her.

She had aimed to drop the loop over his head, and at the same time to catch one of his forelegs. Whether the old-timer, taught by experience, anticipated her purpose, or whether it was sheer luck plus his fierce determination not to be captured that aided him, he dodged at the very instant that the rope would have settled around his neck, and with a bellow of defiance galloped away, tearing up the earth at every bound.

But this was not all. Velma had been riding headlong, intent only on roping the bull and keeping him from going over the bluff. She had not observed how near she herself was to the edge of the chasm, and hardly had she realized that she had failed in her cast when her mare, governed by unerring instinct, stopped short not more than two feet from the brink of the precipice, throwing himself back on his haunches.

Velma Arsdale was a good rider. She had taken her first lessons on her father's ranch when a very young girl, and having learned most of the tricks of Western horses had completed her equestrian education in one of the famous riding academies of the East.

But all her skill failed to avail her now. Absorbed in her effort to rope the bull, and taken entirely by surprise by the shock when the mare threw herself back, she shot out of the saddle, over her horse's head, and the next moment, with the horrified shouts of the three men ringing in her ears, and the rope still in her hand, dived into the abyss beyond!

CHAPTER IV.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

THERE always is a moment or two, when some shocking calamity has suddenly overtaken a human being, during which the senses are deadened to every sensation of pain, and the mind refuses to grasp the horror of the catastrophe. The greater the disaster, the more surely is the victim, for a few ticks of the clock, beyond the reach of suffering—mental or physical.

This paralysis of the nerve centers lasted with Velma Arsdale only for an infinitesimal period. Then she came to herself—to find that she was hanging, with a rope around

her body, over a void of unknown depth, her arms tightly bound to her sides.

The moonlight, which had been strong enough on the mesa to make all fairly large objects visible in detail, failed to penetrate the cañon as far as this place where the girl hung, utterly helpless. She was twenty or twenty-five feet below the surface.

Her hat had fallen off, and she was able to look to the top of the bluff with unobscured vision.

As she saw that the rope holding her was drawn tightly over the edge of the precipice, she knew it was her own lariat, which doubtless was still fastened to the saddle-horn, with the sinewy, well-trained mare, Cherry, braced back to keep it taut. It was the sort of thing Cherry had had to do on the range many a time, usually with a raging steer at the other end of the rope.

Her horse sense would hardly go so far as to tell the mare that there was no steer this time. All that she would know was that something was tugging at the rope, and that it was her duty to hold on till ordered to let go.

Velma tried to make out how much space there was below, but could see nothing but shadow. She managed to call feebly, "Len! Len! Where are you?"

Then the voice of Len Hays came down to her, shaken by anxiety,

"Miss Arsdale—Velma! Are you on this rope?"

"Yes. It is pulled right around my arms. I can't move," she replied. "Can't you pull me up?"

Petted prima donna though she was, accustomed to having life in the city made smooth and safe for her by a small army of attendants, as well as by the whole staff of the theater, from the impresario down, Velma Arsdale was in the beginning a ranch-bred girl. While she had never been exactly in her present predicament before, she had had her share of perilous adventure, and the nerve inherited from her fearless, steely-sinewed ranchman father, had somehow always brought her through.

That she would be rescued now she had no doubt, for the muttered "Thank God!" which had escaped Len as she called to him, and which had come distinctly to her ears, also conveyed a confidence that he would know how to proceed.

The lariat was cutting into her arms, and she braced herself to bear excruciating pain when she would be drawn up with her whole weight sustained by this half-inch rope. But she said nothing of this to the three men who were peering over the edge, preparatory to pulling her up by main strength.

"Couldn't you lead the mare away with the rope tied to her, and let her draw me up?" she asked.

"The rope has caught somewhere," replied Len hurriedly. "We've loosened it from the horse already. I'm coming down to you."

Velma did not ask how he was coming. She only wondered in a vague way whether the lariat would not be cut through by the jagged edges of the split rock that had caught it, and whether it would hold till help came.

Of course, though she maintained a certain amount of coolness in voice and demeanor, it is not to say Velma Arsdale was not frightened. She was only twenty-five, and at that age the near possibility of a frightful death is not to be faced without a tremor. Besides, the rope was giving her almost unbearable agony. She hoped Len would hurry.

"Do you think this rope will bear you, as well as me?" she called up to him in a voice that was not so strong as it had been at first. "If it is only held by the rocks somewhere might it not give way?"

It was Silver Sam who answered.

"That's what it would be plumb likely to do," he said. "But don't worry, ma'am," he said reassuringly. "He's using another rope."

Even as Silver spoke she saw Len Hays come over the edge and work his way down the rough face of the cliff, while his two companions tugged hard at a rope that was secured about his chest just under the arms.

Would he be able to climb down all the way till he reached her? Well, it was none of her business. She was gradually losing consciousness, and the horror of it all had resolved itself into a patient weariness and a disposition to leave it all in the hands of

some one else—lazily she saw that another loose rope fastened above was hanging over Len's arm as he began his downward journey.

Then, just as it seemed that she was about to fall asleep, she came to herself with a jerk as she heard Len say, very close, that he could not find her. Somehow, this struck her as funny.

In the curious mental condition into which she had fallen, she laughed aloud. It was merely hysterical, but it startled Len so that his feet slipped from the narrow ledge by which he had been supporting himself, and he swung away, with nothing but the rope to sustain his weight. Moreover, the exact position of the girl in the black darkness was quite beyond him now.

"Got those two ropes I have good and firm?" he called up.

"Shore!" replied Tim Ripley's voice. "They are fast to a tree. Besides, me an' Silver is holdin' 'em."

"That's whatever," added the voice of Silver Sam. "Don't you fret yourself none about the ropes, Hays! One of 'em is mine, an' I kin sw'ar it'll never give way, no matter how much weight you puts on it. I tests it the other day ag'in' two tons o' live beef, an' it didn't even quiver. In course, I don't know 'bout Tim's—"

"Shet up!" interrupted Tim Ripley indignantly. "I use my rope to pull big trees up by the roots, an' I stopped a elephant in a circus with it once."

As this double-barreled lie made honors even between the two, they stopped talking to each other and gave all their attention to the foreman invisible in the blackness below.

"Keep up your nerve, Miss Arsdale," cried Len. "I'm close by. Wait till I get a light. Then we'll be out of this inside of three minutes."

"I'm all right, Len!" came almost inaudibly from the nearly exhausted Velma.

As she answered him, there was a flash as he lighted a match and held it out in front of her.

"Good!" he breathed, as, holding the burning match in one hand, he tried to throw the loop of the loose rope he held over her head and shoulders.

It was not so easy to do in the dark, with one hand, while he swayed to and fro on a thin line that cut into his flesh through his clothing. The match burned out, and he lighted another. The glimpse he had of Velma's closed eyes and deathly white face sent a thrill of discouragement through him. Then, as he glanced upward at the rope holding her, this discouragement deepened into terror.

"Merciful heaven! It's grinding on the edge of that shelf of rock just above!" he muttered. "If it should—"

He did not complete the sentence. He would not confess the possibility even to himself. Instead, he lighted a third match and struggled desperately to get his loop over the slim form that hung so helplessly a few feet away.

"Good Lord!" he burst out in agony. "If she could only help. But she is too far gone! And that rope is surely—"

There was a slight snap overhead, and as he let forth an involuntary sob of horror, the girl dropped out of sight! A frayed end of rope above, of which he caught one glimpse before the match went out and dropped from his fingers, told the story.

The half-inch lariat had been rubbing along the sharp edge of an outcropping slab of rock until it had cut nearly through. The weight of the girl had done the rest.

He heard a muffled thump below, telling him that she had struck heavily he could not tell how far down; and then silence.

If only he could have heard her cry out!

"How could she?" he moaned. "Why, it's nearly a hundred feet from the top down to the cañon bed!"

Then, as the paralysis which had seized him in a cold grip at the suddenness and awfulness of it all gave way to a rush of blood boiling through him from head to foot, he shouted up to his men:

"Say, Tim! Let out this rope of mine as far as it will go! Quick!"

Their response was so prompt that he had gone down what seemed like many feet and stopped with a jerk, before he could give any further directions.

He believed he could hear the voice of Velma still faintly calling "Len!" and it spurred him to further action.

Accustomed to the mountains as he was, he knew that he was not at the bottom of the cañon; but he believed he could clamber down the rough face of the cliff if once he obtained a good hold.

Feeling about with his feet in the blackness, he obtained a foothold on a narrow ledge, and then, as his groping hands found protruding rocks by which he could keep himself from falling, he lifted the rope from his waist and let it hang.

"Miss Arsdale!" he called, as he began his perilous descent.

"Don't worry!" came a man's voice from below. "The lady ain't hurt. I'll take care of her till you git down."

"Where are you?" asked Len.

Before an answer could come, Len found out for himself. He chanced to rest his weight on a ledge of rock that gave way under him.

"Whee-ee!" exploded the same voice he had heard before, close to his ear.

Len had fallen on a great sloping heap—a small mountain, indeed—of broken rock and rubbish that had been recently loosened from the cañon wall and piled up some fifty feet from the bottom.

A faint exclamation of relief: "Oh, Len!" told him Velma was by his side on this great heap of shattered rock as well as the mysterious man who had so coolly taken charge of her when she fell.

CHAPTER V.

A "DRIFTER" FROM ARIZONA.

"IT was jest thisaway," explained the voice of the man quite invisible in the darkness in a calm, conversational tone. "I'm a cowhand. I'd camped fer the night down in this hyar cañon, when I was woke up by a lot o' racket above. Sounded like a stampede. Then I seen some one in the moonlight fall over an' git snatched up by a rope an' hang thar. It was this hyar lady."

"And he caught me, Len," put in Velma, "or I might have rolled all the way down and been killed."

"None whatever," said the man. "But you might ha' been bumped an' bruised some. I'm shore glad I ran up this hyar slope in time to save you from fallin' over the edge. I'm tellin' yer, lil gal, it ain't no cinch fallin' down anywhar in a gorge like this hyar."

"I'm sure of that," she answered feebly. "But now Mr. Hays is here, he will help me down."

"In co'se! But mind you don't slip, sister!"

"I shan't slip," she returned somewhat haughtily.

Who was this strange cowboy who presumed to address *her*—Velma Arsdale, the reigning favorite in grand opera in America for the past two seasons—as "little girl" and "sister"? Such insolence! She was thankful Len was there. Somehow, she always felt safe by the side of Len.

"That rope must have cut into you," said Len, ignoring the strange cowboy. "Better rub the place with your fingers to take out the stiffness before we climb down."

"Thank you," she answered. Len always knew what to do, she reflected.

Her arms were sore and numb, and she found relief in rubbing and stretching them. When she moved to get up to her feet it was Len's hand that found hers and helped her up. She knew that because the voice of the stranger was several feet away from her by this time.

"Over hyar is the best place to go down," he announced.

"Very well," responded Len. "But wait a moment." He could see the heads of his two men over the precipice outlined against the moonlighted sky, and he called up to them: "Bring the horses down to the cañon. You know how to get here?"

"Shore we do," replied Silver Sam. "It ain't fur. But how about you an' Miss Arsdale?"

"She is not hurt," replied Len. "Don't ask any more questions, but get horses down to the cañon. You don't need to ride in from the open. We'll meet you outside. Remember, Miss Arsdale is in a hurry for her horse."

The coolness with which Len Hays spoke, together with his assurance that Velma was not hurt, satisfied Silver Sam and Tim Rip-

ley, and they busied themselves about the horses, having drawn up the two ropes that Len had used in his descent and looped them to their respective saddles.

"Say!" observed Silver Sam. "Ain't she a queen? After tumblin' down into that thar dark hole, whar she might ha' been smashed plumb into eternity, all she says is that she wants her hoss, an' she won't admit she's hurt a bit. Don't let some one tell me a real lady ain't got nerve. Why, thar ain't no man c'd ha' held up better'n she has. I wonder if all opery singers is like that."

While the two men on the mesa mounted their own horses, leading Len's big roan and Velma Arsdale's mare, Cherry, and came hurrying down from the mesa, Len took Velma's hand and led her to the place from which came the voice of the cowboy.

"You'll have to come down one at a time," said the stranger. "It's a narrer trail an' some steep. If you'll take my hand, ma'am, I kin help you."

"Thanks!" she returned briefly. "I can find my way."

She let go of Len's fingers, and immediately her feet slipped from beneath her and she found herself sliding helplessly down the slope in a mass of shifting rubble in which she could gain no foothold.

"Better let me help you," advised the strange cowboy in a cool voice that irritated her. "I climbed up this hyar deadfall, an' I knows the easiest way down."

She would have to let him help her, it seemed. Len was above and she could not reach his hand. Besides, it was only the man below who could do anything for her. She held out her hand, and his fingers, groping in the darkness, found it.

After all, if his manner was somewhat familiar, he was respectful. His grasp on her hand was only as tight as circumstances required, and twice she would have fallen but for his aid.

Once he was obliged to throw his arms quickly around her waist and lift her across an awkward break. He released her the instant she was again firmly on her feet, and she took his liberty in embracing her as something that could not have been avoided.

He did not offer to touch her again until they were at the foot of the immense mound, and Len asked her if she felt better, and able to go on.

"That speck of light you see yonder is where the cañon opens out to the range," he said. "Your horse ought to be there in a few minutes."

"I can walk that little distance," she answered, with a little laugh.

"It is farther than it looks," put in the stranger. "But I reckon it won't trouble you to make it. You shorely have pluck, ma'am."

"Are you going the same way?" asked Len, desiring to change the subject. "If not, I'll thank you here for taking such care of Miss Arsdale. She is the owner of the Two-Bar S ranch."

"Did you say 'Miss Arsdale?'" asked the stranger, sudden interest in his tone. "It can't be Miss Velma Arsdale, the big opera singer. I knowed she owned a cattle ranch somewhar in Wyomin', but I didn't s'pose she ever lived on it."

"I am here for a few months," she answered for herself. "I *do* sing in opera; but I have never sung in the West. Perhaps you have heard me in some Eastern city?"

"No, ma'am," was the even reply. "I don't often go to big cities either West or East. But I reckon thar's hardly a man on a ranch from hyar to the Rio Grande what ain't heard of Velma Arsdale. She's an American girl, I've heard, an' folks say all these hyar foreign singers has to step around to keep anywhar nigh her. I'd gi' three months' pay to hear her in one of her big parts—or to hear her sing at all for that matter."

They walked the remainder of the distance along the cañon in silence. In places, where the gorge twisted, a stray beam of moonlight came down to them. But it was not until they were outside and in the full glare of the moon on the open range, that Velma was able to see what this strange cowboy, who was so easy and matter-of-fact in speech and manner, looked like.

What she saw was a rather sparely built man, of middle height, in the flannel shirt, bandanna, wide-brimmed soft hat, and

high-heeled boots of the ordinary cowboy. He seemed to be about thirty. There was a good-humored half smile at the corners of his mouth.

"I'm Miss Arsdale's foreman," offered Len. "I want to thank you for giving her all the help you did. If you're riding near the Two-Bar S any time, you might 'light an' meet the boys."

"Thanks!" replied the stranger carelessly. "I'll mebbe drop in on yer afore long."

"You belong to a cattle ranch in this part of the country, I suppose?" asked Velma, casually.

"No, ma'am. I'm from Arizona. Rickard is my name—Clay Rickard. I'm lookin' for work."

"Couldn't you find any between Arizona and Wyoming?" asked Len, with the sudden suspicion of a business man.

"Not none that suited me," was his offhand answer. "It don't happen, do it, that you have room for another hand in the Two-Bar S outfit, ma'am?" He had turned to Velma, instinctively recognizing that she intended him to understand that she was manager, as well as owner, of the Two-Bar S. "I kinder like the country hyarabouts. Besides, I've never worked on a ranch run by a lady, an' I've allers wanted it."

"Why?" she asked.

His smile stretched a little wider. "I've allers believed a lady would be either a very good boss or a very bad one. Either way, it'd be bound to be plumb interestin'."

Velma Arsdale regarded him thoughtfully as he walked over to where a reliable-looking cayuse, dark brown, with a blazed face, was comfortably cropping the short grass, the lines trailing and hobbles on two of his feet, and patted him with an air of ownership. She remembered that wandering cowboys occasionally had ridden up to her father's ranch when she was a child. Her father had called them "drifters."

It was her recollection that these roving cowboys had always been good-natured men, and were declared by her father to be good workers. The worst of it was that they seldom stayed long. They had the same careless manner as this stranger who called himself Clay Rickard, and they came and went whenever a capricious spirit moved them. But they were good while they lasted.

She watched his supple movements as he walked around his horse, and put on the leather chaps that had been hung to the saddle horn.

Then something seemed to occur to him, for he walked over to a big bowlder some little distance away and climbed to the top to look around. He kept his gaze on the foot of the slope from the mesa for a few moments. Then he called to her:

"Your men will soon be hyar. I reckon I'll be ridin' along."

Without looking toward her or Len again, he mounted his blazed-face cayuse, and sat motionless, gazing about him, uncertain.

"Come here, please!" cried Velma, her clear voice carrying well in the still air.

"Shorely, ma'am!"

He walked his horse over to her, slipped from the saddle, and, with the reins over his arm, stood waiting for her to speak.

"You said you were looking for work, and that you'd like to be on my ranch," she told him. "This is my foreman, Mr. Leonard Hays. You will take your orders from him."

"Then I'm hired as a rider on the Two-Bar S ranch?" he asked.

"That's what Miss Arsdale has just told you," put in Len impatiently. "You can ride with us. Is your horse all right? Looks well for a cayuse that's been traveling a long way."

"I allers takes care of my hoss," was the reply. "Ev'ry man does."

The thudding of horses' feet proclaimed the coming of Silver Sam and Tim Ripley. When the party, including the new hand, started for the Two-Bar S, the stranger rode by himself some fifty feet to one side of the others. He was smiling contentedly.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHINAMAN'S CHANCE.

ALTHOUGH Velma insisted that she had suffered no bodily hurt from being pitched by her mare into the cañon and narrowly escaping death by almost miraculously being caught in the loop

of her own lariat, and afterward falling to the mountain of broken rock below, she tacitly admitted, the next day, by remaining in her room till noon, that her adventures of the night before had taken their toll.

It was the clang of the cook house dinner bell, calling to the midday meal such of the Two-Bar S men as were working around the home ranch, that woke her from a sound sleep.

From her curtained window, she could see the Chinese cook, Lin Fum, standing at the cook house door and ringing the big bell with a vigor that suggested a healthy enjoyment of the noise, as well as the exercise.

Hastily throwing on a silk kimono—part of the costly wardrobe she had brought with her—Velma stepped outside her room, and called to the middle-aged housekeeper in the kitchen.

Amanda Preston was her name, but for years she had been simply "ma" to the men of the Two-Bar S; and it was "ma" that Velma called her now.

"Yes, Miss Velma!" responded Amanda, her face red from superintending the cooking and her temper at a fine edge. "Dinner will be ready in ten minutes."

"Never mind about dinner," was the rejoinder. "Tell Evelyn to go out and stop that bell."

"Very well, Miss Velma!" responded Evelyn for herself, brushing past ma to look up the staircase. "I'll tell Lin Fum right away."

The annoyed Velma went back to her room, and peeped through the window while Evelyn, her maid—who was glad of any sort of excitement, for she found it rather dull when Tim Ripley was away on the range—went to Lin Fum and commanded him to stop ringing the bell.

The Chinaman, an excellent plain cook, but with the usual single-track Oriental mind, could not hear her through the crashing of the bell, and went on ringing.

"Stop!" she shouted at the top of her voice.

Lin Fum, who secretly admired Evelyn, didn't know what she meant; but he gave her an amiable grin.

Evelyn had something of her employer's asperity when crossed, and she didn't like Lin Fum's admiring smirk.

"You plagued heathen!" she cried, angrily. "Give me that bell!"

Evelyn was a well-built, muscular young woman; but the Chinaman, small and wiry, was much stronger than he looked, and the girl couldn't get the bell away from him.

The two were in the throes of a desperate struggle, with the Chinaman holding on desperately to the bell and the girl using all her strength to get it away, when six or eight cowboys and horse wranglers, on their way to dinner, stopped in astonishment.

"What's the trouble, lady?" asked one. "The Chink been doin' anything to yer? Ef he has, it won't take more'n a minute to skin him alive, an'—"

"No, no!" interrupted Lin Fum in an agonized squeal. "Me lingee bell fo' dlinner, an' lil missee allee same stop me!"

"Stop yer? What for?" demanded the cowboy, while the others listened interestedly for the reply.

"It is Miss Arsdale's orders," explained Evelyn, condescendingly, giving up the bell to the Chinaman. "She doesn't like the noise."

"Don't like the noise?" put in another man, big Ben Simmons, the horse wrangler. "Reckon she'll have to l'arn to like it a whole lot. How are we goin' to know when grub's ready if thar ain't no bell? You go an' tell Miss Arsdale it can't be helped, wi' the compliments o' the whole Two-Bar S outfit." He turned to the cook: "Gi' that bell another whirl, Lin Fum. Thar's two or three o' the boys in the creek meadow as didn't hear it, an' I reckon they wants their grub same as us."

As the men already there filed into the cook house, Lin Fum swung his bell harder than ever. He kept up his deafening din for two minutes. Then, as the men from the creek meadow came, followed by Len Hays, who had been out on the range and had just ridden in, he went inside, bell and all, with a wider grin than ever. Lin Fum did not often get the better of a dispute. When he did, it was something to grin over.

When Evelyn went up to Velma's room and made her report that some of the men

had insisted that the bell should be sounded in defiance of orders, the owner of the Two-Bar S said nothing.

But, an hour later, when the foreman was called into the large living room where Velma sat at her piano softly whistling the music of one of her favorite rôles, he smelled trouble as soon as he was inside.

"That bell, Len," she said, in a tone of finality, without getting up, "it must not be used hereafter. Please tell that Chinese cook. He seemed not to understand when I sent my maid to him. Then I am told some of the men interfered. Is that true?"

"Yes, that is true," replied Len. "That bell has been used for calling the hands to meals for years. I'm afraid we shall have difficulty in changing the custom."

"There should not be any difficulty," she rejoined. "I have been accustomed to having my wishes respected. It is my order, as owner of the Two-Bar S, that the bell shall not be rung. Some quieter way of calling the hands must be used. And please tell those men who encouraged the cook to defy my express order that they must obey the rules of the Two-Bar S or get their time."

"You mean that you want them to quit?" asked Len Hays, incredulously. "Why, we are short-handed now."

"I don't expect those men to quit," was her calm response. "They will obey orders and stay. But you tell them what I say. Where is the new man I engaged last night? Clay Rickard, I think his name is."

"He's line riding around Timberwolf Pass. He seems to know his business, rides well, has had plenty of experience, as I soon found out when I tried him out this morning; and he didn't hang back when I told him Tucson King's rustlers might give him trouble at any moment."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing much. But he showed me that he is a two-gun man, and he proved, right out there on the range, that he can shoot straight with either hand. He has plenty of cartridges in his belt, and he is the kind who doesn't know what fear is. You know, ma'am," went on Len, in a lower and more impressive tone, at the same time that his attitude was more than ever merely that of the foreman, "one man can always see that in another man—when it is there."

"You like this Rickard?" asked Velma, with a smile.

"No, ma'am!" replied Len, with unexpected energy. "I *don't* like him. But I've got to give him credit as a fine top hand, and pretty near a wizard with a six-gun."

"That will do, Len," she said, coolly turning her eyes to the opera score before her on the piano without asking why he didn't like Rickard. "I will be out there later. If we are short-handed, you'd better look up some other men."

"I'm afraid they'll be hard to find," he returned. Then, after a moment of hesitation, he continued: "The fact is that the Two-Bar S hasn't a very good name among the cow-punchers of this part of Wyoming."

"Why is that?" Her tone was perfectly even.

"There is an impression that the present management of this ranch doesn't suit the men we have, and that any riders we engage will have to lose many of the privileges they've always had, beside being hampered with rules that, as some of the hands in other outfits say, couldn't be obeyed for long by any real he-man."

"I believe that is what I have heard called 'bunk house talk,' Len," she answered. "At all events, as I have said before, the Two-Bar S will be managed by me in my own way, regardless of the opinions of cowboys either on my place or any other. Report to me later in the day."

Recognizing this as a dismissal, Len turned away and opened the door to the veranda.

As he did so, a tall, well-built man of middle age, who, with his trim gray mustache and goatee, prided himself on the fact that people said he looked like Buffalo Bill, stepped inside, and gave Len Hays a resounding slap on the shoulder.

"Hello, Len, old-timer, how goes it? Not very well, I hear. That pesky Tucson King an' his gang been ropin' Two-Bar S cattle! Well, we'll—"

He broke off short as, for the first time, he saw that Velma Arsdale was sitting be-

hind the piano at the other end of the room. Off came his Stetson.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, for makin' so much racket. If I'd knowed you was thar—"

"I am glad to see you," said Velma, rising and smilingly holding out her hand. "This is Sheriff Terry, I am sure."

He gingerly took the tips of her fingers, and immediately released them. "That's right, ma'am—Miss Arsdale. I'm Captain Bill Terry, sheriff of this hyar county, an' I rode over hyar as soon as I could after gittin' your message that you wished to see me."

He turned to the door as Len Hays went out. Then, in obedience to a wave of Velma's hand, took the chair she indicated, near the piano. She reseated herself on the bench.

Sheriff Bill Terry wore high boots, with spurs, a flannel shirt, and a waistcoat on which was pinned the silver emblem of his office. Sometimes he wore a coat, but generally, it was rolled up at the back of his saddle, as was the case now.

"I have been here a little more than a week, and already some thirty head of my cattle, including some calves, have been stolen and driven into what seems to be an unknown region beyond Timberwolf Pass," she said, plunging at once into the business for which she had summoned the sheriff. "My men are inclined to think, apparently, that there is little hope of getting the cattle back. I do not agree with the men. Tell me, what do you think of it, sheriff?"

For a moment or two, Sheriff Bill Terry, who was of a deliberate habit of mind, gazed at the decidedly handsome young woman behind the piano, in a dainty afternoon gown that had been designed in Paris. Bill didn't know where the garment came from, but to himself he pronounced it a lallapalooza of a frock, with a mighty fine girl inside it. Then he pulled himself together, and replied to the young lady's question, slowly, but clearly.

"Accordin' to my idees, Miss Arsdale," he began, "thar ain't no cattle rustlers as kin git away wi' the game allers an' forever when the right men is on thar trail—per-tickler when thar's been killin's," he added, gravely.

"That's what I believe," she coincided, warmly.

"Shore! That's whatever!" responded the sheriff. "Tharfore, I holds that while we can't bring Tom Meade to life again, this hyar cattle o' your'n ought to be back in this ranch as soon as we gits right down to huntin' for it systematic.

"Mind, I ain't sayin' that it will still carry the Two-Bar S iron. The fust thing these hyar pizen thieves does allers is to blot the brands. But I know Len Hays—have knowed him since he fust come to this hyar section—an' Hays, he knows cattle. He don't depend on brands or earmarks either, allers purvidin' he's ever seen the said critters before, long enough to give 'em the long gaze."

"I see," murmured Velma Arsdale, although, to say truth, she found it rather difficult to follow Bill Terry all the way. "I quite agree with you about my foreman. I'll call him in again, and he can perhaps map out a plan of campaign."

"Hold on!" interposed the sheriff, hastily. "I ain't through yet. What I was goin' to say was that I won't be able to take up this case for mebbe a week. I've got another one on hand—folks as spoke to me afore you did—an' I must cl'ar up that fust. Then I'll come to you."

"But I want you to attend to my affair first, without delay," returned Velma. "Can't the other people wait?"

Bill Terry looked at her in astonishment. It was beyond his understanding that one person would try, arbitrarily, to push another aside, and use his official services out of turn. The unwritten code had seldom been violated under his observation. When such a breach of etiquette had been attempted, it had generally resulted in a dispute that sometimes had ended in gunpowder smoke. But then, in the very few cases he had known, the parties thereto always had been men. Still and all, even a woman—

"Couldn't be done, ma'am!" he blurted out. "'Twouldn't be squar'. Ef I was ever to begin doin' business that way, I would have less'n a Chinaman's chance to

live to my next birthday. An' I'd desarve jest what I'd git. I'll be goin' now, ma'am," he added, rising and moving toward the door. "As soon as I kin git back, I'll shore be proud to look into these hyar sassy raids on your range stock. Good afternoon, ma'am!"

CHAPTER VII.

HER POINT OF VIEW.

WITH a thoughtful frown, Velma Arsdale rose from the piano as soon as the door had closed on the sheriff, and went to her room to exchange her house gown for a riding costume.

She had felt from the first that she had a fight on her hands to conduct the affairs of the ranch in accordance with her own ideas, but she never had for a moment thought of yielding. For one thing, a prima donna is not made of yielding material, and for another, she was a ranchman's daughter and had vague childhood memories of her father as a masterful, efficient man sitting straight in the saddle, who had always insisted on his own way, right or wrong.

"He wouldn't have let his men rule him if they all had left him," she told herself, as she came out to the veranda half an hour later. "If they think they can make me give in because I'm a woman, they have another think coming," she added, dropping into slang as the most forcible way of expressing herself.

With her silver-mounted quirt hanging to her gauntleted wrist, silver spurs jingling, and hair streaming loosely under her wide hat brim, she sauntered down the veranda steps, and over to the horse corral. Her manner was that of an operatic queen making her entrance down stage center.

At the corral gate, she spoke through the bars to Ben Simmons, who had roped a fractious buckskin cayuse, so that he could examine a lame foot, with the animal plunging and kicking frantically in the endeavor to beat out the wrangler's brains.

"My horse, please?" she called out.

"Huh!" growled Simmons. "Wait a minute till I git this hyar yaller devil whar I want him, will yer?"

Simmons was hot, angry, and preoccupied. He knew it was the owner of the ranch giving an order, but when a man's cheek has just been grazed by a hoof, and he is doubtful whether he will be able to miss the other three, he is not in the humor to choose his words.

"Never mind now," she said. "I didn't see. I'll wait for my horse."

Big Ben Simmons, who had backed the fighting buckskin into a corner, and was taking imminent chances of a violent death by lifting the sore front foot to examine it, took no notice of her.

"I'll bring out your horse, Miss Arsdale," broke in Len Hays's voice. "You'll ride the bay mare, I suppose?" he added.

"Don't you think she's too tired, after being out so long last night?" she asked. "There is that seal-brown mare. She's almost as good as Cherry."

She had turned away momentarily from the corral. Now, as she looked again, and saw that the buckskin was crowding the wrangler against the fence and trying at the same time to sink his long yellow teeth in the man's shoulder, she uttered a cry of horror.

"Len! He'll be killed!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

ALL MY LIFE IS THERE

I'VE wandered from the valley,
I've climbed the distant hill,
I've found cool, quiet canons,
Where placid pools are still.
I've ridden grassy ranges,
Where mountain parks are green;
There's not a spot of woodland
I haven't crossed or seen.

And yet I miss the valley,
For all my life is there—
I see the sun-seared desert,
Still gold and green and fair.
Our ranch was in the open,
Where there was room to lope;
And there my father taught me
To coil and throw a rope.

There's loneliness in mountains,
In somber aisles of pine,
I'm tired of pale wild flowers,
Of sickly columbine;
I want to see the cactus
Abloom in gold and red,
And palo verde blossoms,
And poppies bright, instead.

I long for far-flung sunsets,
For giant moons of brass;
A land where changing colors
Aren't ever green like grass.
This fall I'll leave the outfit,
And hit the trail alone;
I'll throw my bed on Long Ears,
My saddle on my roan.

My home is in the valley,
Where brilliant sunlight gleams,
Where warm nights, softly wanton,
Are made for endless dreams.
For there my love awaits me,
Beside some cottage door
Where rambler roses beckon,
And moist blue eyes implore.

H. A. Woodbury, Jr.

A Rodeo Romeo

By WALTER A. SINCLAIR

Author of "O. K. for Oklahoma," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

"RAY BENTON on Bear Down," bellowed the megaphone announcer, Siren Jaxon by name. "Coming out of the chute."

They came out—Ray Benton and Bear Down—all in one piece, despite the broncho's brilliant efforts to sever partnership. A big, vicious sorrel was Bear Down—heavy, but all muscle, with supple hindquarters made sinewy by years of furious bucking and kicking. Beautiful yet terrible in his agile rage, the outlaw horse sprang into the rodeo arena, head down, back arched, flanks twitching, and hoofs flailing murderously.

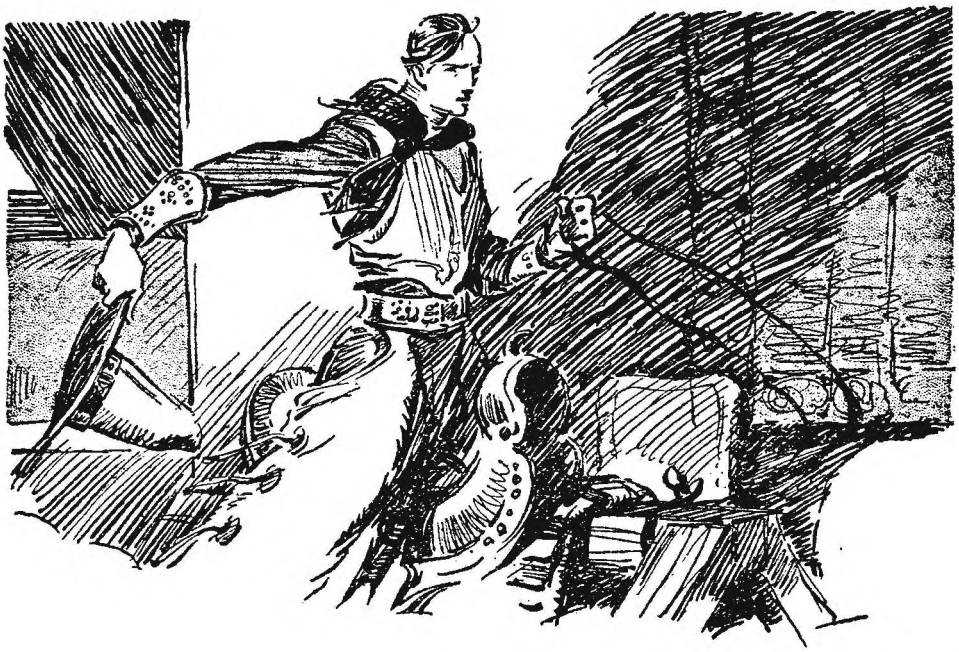
Ace of outlaws was Bear Down, with a buck-off to his credit for every time out during the past two weeks of his metropolitan engagement. He had dented the old Garden's tanbark with plenty buckaroos.

"Ride him, cowboy!" encouraged the Manhattan crowd, which had acquired the phrase during the past fortnight of rodeo.

"Th'ow him, hoss!" urged the rival buck riders whose markings were imperiled by the outcome.

Ray Benton was riding him. Centaur-like, he weathered that horse typhoon raging in the arena, moving easily and gracefully as if part of the equine fury beneath his committee saddle. His left hand, poised rigidly, steadily held the hackamore taut—a single-rein rope halter to anchor a runaway battle cruiser!

His right hand, held high above his head, weaved gracefully back and forth, fanning with his big white two-gallon Stetson. His long, supple, well shaped legs set out in tight-fitting gray trousers tucked into fancy tooled boots—for he was riding slick, without chaps—pendulumed rhythmically from Bear Down's withers to haunches.



And at every scratch the taped spurs tickled the bronc into fresh frenzies which carried his rider nearer the purse. Here was a man dancing with a horse for partner, outsmarting the animal all the way, synchronizing his stirrup leaps so that the movements of the pair seemed perfectly rehearsed. As if any man could rehearse an outlaw bucker!

Ray sat his saddle as firmly and easily as though it was a rocking chair, with no light showing beneath him.

With one mad effort Bear Down rallied for his final frenzy. He sunfished. In a tremendous surge he threw his body up sidewise, with flanks quivering in the tight cinch until it seemed as though the saddle must turn. For a flashing instant the overhead electric light illuminated his upturning belly, just as the sun shines on the lower side of a fish when it turns over.

Down upon stiffened legs crashed the outlaw, just as the judges' whistle announced the ride was made. Leisurely the rider dropped gripping hands to the mane of the jolting bucker, which continued its antics, unmindful of man-measured time and rules.

The mounted pick-up man raced alongside, pressing his well trained cow pony close to the broncho and snatching up the outlaw's head while Ray Benton swung over behind him.

Thunderous applause swept the sophisticated city crowd as the bronc rider slid off on the protected side and walked toward the chutes, waving his hat in response to the cheers. With pantherlike grace he strode, his long legs straight in contrast to the bandy underpinning of most of the buckaroos. His head and body went well with those legs.

Possibly he was an inch under six feet, his body as straight and supple as a buggy whip. Wide shoulders, tapering waist, sheer flanks, here was a body all flexible sinew, steel wire muscles without any bulges. And with it a natural grace unusual in a cowboy set down on his own feet.

Upon those broad shoulders was set a neck supporting a head such as the ancient Greek masters sculptured upon the enduring marble figures of their athletes. A strong neck and a well shaped head, neither small nor large.

Thick chestnut hair crowned the head above a brow that was wide and set off with straight dark eyebrows. Below these were steady gray eyes, edged by humorous puckers. A short, straight nose, firm, friendly

mouth, and square chin completed the face which an artist would fancy. One did.

"Hey, fellow!" came a hail from the arena rail directly behind Benton, who had stopped near the chutes to watch the next rider.

Ray didn't turn his head until an arena hand called his attention to the hailer. Waving commandingly at the buck-rider was a man of about his own height, though possibly ten pounds heavier. A red-faced man of thirty-five, with sleek black hair and a carefully pointed black mustache. He was in a Tuxedo suit with a black soft hat jammed rakishly on his head. A big diamond ring flashed on the white but muscular hand he waved.

"Come here," he ordered impatiently.

"Speaking to me?" drawled Ray evenly, as he made no move to obey this imperious summons.

High color mounted in the other man's cheeks, and his black eyes suddenly snapped hostility, meeting Benton's equally challenging glance halfway.

"Oh, don't try to high-hat me," snapped the city man. "*I* don't want to speak to you, but a young woman does. I'm acting as her messenger-boy to ask you to step up to her box."

"A lady wants to see me?" exclaimed Ray, coming nearer.

"Yes. I thought that would bring you," commented the other man, scarcely disguising a sneer. "It always does."

"I reckon it doesn't this time," contradicted Ray with cool politeness as he kept one eye on Chick Naylor grabbing leather on Tail Light. "I don't know any city lady."

"This is a granddaughter of Bonanza John Oakman, which ought to be good enough for you," sharply announced the stranger. "And she told me to ask you to please come to her box."

That was different. Ray Benton was not accustomed to refusing when a woman asked him to "please" call. And although John Oakman had not taken his bonanza out of Benton's native New Mexico, his name and fame were familiar throughout the West he had quitted decades ago.

"Lead on," Ray ordered brusquely, restraining an impulse to add "hombre," to offset the city man's "fellow."

Out in the arena the rodeo judges were totaling their markings on the saddle bronc riding. Unless his calculations were very wrong, Ray had won the main purse of one thousand dollars and the title which had drawn him from the Southwest to New York.

However, one moment after he had followed his guide into an arena box Benton had forgotten such trifles.

II.

THE young woman seated alone in the box had swept him with a quick, comprehending, and admiring glance which set Benton to tingling as though he had been plunged suddenly into an electric bath. The crowd, the trick riders in the arena, all else faded away, leaving him standing with her. Such was the effect.

Curls of India ink blackness crowned her small head, and from beneath slender arches of ebon sparkled midnight eyes brimming with interest. She lifted an alert, eager face, with its patrician nose, sweetly curving red lips, and piquant chin. A black evening gown and a sable coat thrown carelessly back over the wooden chair set off her exquisitely molded white shoulders and arms.

"Mr. Benton, your riding was a poem in action," she greeted, heading off the other man's leisurely introduction. "I am Zelda Oakman."

Ray bowed gallantly—and silently.

"It was so nice of you to come when I sent Mr. Carstairs," she rushed on enthusiastically, and then added: "I suppose he introduced himself."

"Hardly necessary," yawned Carstairs.

"Yes, we spoke, sort of," admitted Ray, matching the other man's supercilious glance with a cool one of his own.

"Well, anyway, this *is* Mr. Carstairs, if he has been modest about himself," Zelda Oakman smiled, intuitively sensing the strained relations between the two men and promptly seeking to ease the tension. "He is quite a rider among us. Steeplechase, hunting, and hurdles, you know—quite

keen in his line of horsemanship, although not in yours."

"Oh, I say, Zelda!" protested Carstairs. "That's unnecessary."

"I reckon he's a top hand down here, if you say so, ma'am," comprehended Ray, dropping into the chair beside her which she indicated.

Carstairs sulkily took another seat—evidently they had the box to themselves—and stared at the riders circling the arena.

"Naturally I didn't invite you here to tell you this, or even to compliment you on your fine bronc riding," continued Zelda. "I don't know exactly what you will think about what I'm going to say, but our family's chief characteristic is straightforwardness; so here goes.

"I have been watching you here frequently—almost daily since the rodeo began in New York. You're absolutely the ideal figure of the American cowboy. I want you to pose for me. Please?"

"Pose?" echoed the scandalized Ray. Visions of—er—"classical figures," as he had heard them modestly termed, filled his mind. Pose like that, without any—Well, hardly!

"As a bronc riding cowboy," the young woman enlightened. "You see, I am a sculptor—at least, I have been recognized as one."

"Why, I understood that yore grandpa was Bon—er—John Oakman," floundered Benton.

"Yes—Bonanza John. But we're considering me, and not my ancestors," she corrected a bit impatiently. "I suppose it is natural for every one to think that a girl born an heiress—yes, a bonanza heiress I've been called—has to fold her hands and be a useless society butterfly. Not I. Maybe I inherited some of my grandfather's energy. He swung a hammer on rock, battering out name and fortune for himself, while I hammer marble and have made some small reputation at sculping."

"That's fine," approved Ray, a new light of admiration kindling in his eyes. "But—me?"

"Then you agree?" she exclaimed, brushing ruthlessly over his preparations to hedge. "I'm doing a series of 'Real Americans' in marble, and the bronc rider comes next. Frederic Remington and others have done it, I know, but why shouldn't I, too? You'll help me?"

Quite impersonally she laid a cool hand on his wrist to prompt an acceptance. It was an unfair advantage; Benton was stricken helpless.

"Why me?" he managed to stall.

"You're the perfect embodiment of the type," she explained, turning her gaze up to his trustfully. The result was dazzling. "And—well, I suppose I oughtn't tell you, but you're just too awfully good-looking to let you slip."

"Reckon the joke's on me," grinned Ray, attempting to rise, while she detained him with an easy pressure. "You had me guessing. I'll go."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," she contradicted firmly, and sent up just the faintest flash of a smile which petrified him. "I meant every word of it, though I hate to feed any man's vanity. Talk about women being vain! I know men love it. But how else could I convey my meaning? It was purely impersonal—an artist's verdict. Please stay."

"Why?" asked Carstairs impatiently, with undisguised jealousy.

That settled Ray. He sat down. Carstairs glowered.

The girl—she was not more than twenty-five—rapid-fired questions about the cowboy contests. Why wasn't Ray wearing "chaps"?

"That was my final ride, and I had to ride slick," he explained.

"Then you have qualified to the end?" she cried. "You may have won the main purse."

"Reckon I have, ma'am," admitted Benton, calmly.

Zelda Oakman became so enthusiastic in her admiration that Ray was relieved almost when Carstairs interrupted:

"Zel, you're just romancing about this. It's all trick stuff. Those broncs are trained buckers. You see the same weary old nags at all big rodeos. These cowboys cinch them up so that they want to wriggle loose of their cinches, and in addition they spur until the broncs kick. It's all tricked up

for the Eastern trade. Any good rider could stay on."

"You, for instance?" inquired Zelda gently, speaking the line which Ray politely had refrained from uttering.

"Certainly," snapped Carstairs.

"There's an event for amateurs due in fifteen minutes," stated Ray. "Open to anybody. You could prove it and win fifty dollars."

"Small change doesn't tempt me," sneered Carstairs.

"I'll bet you a thousand to five hundred you cain't ride one," announced Benton, mildly. He caught himself and cast an apologetic look at Zelda Oakman.

"Words," commented Carstairs scornfully—and then he stopped.

From a buttoned pocket Ray exhumed a wad of big bills, and counted off one thousand dollars. This took most of his roll, but he coolly laid the money in Zelda Oakman's lap, requesting:

"Please hold the stakes, ma'am. Now, Mr. Carstairs, cover that."

III.

ZELDA OAKMAN gazed with new respect at this Westerner who had backed his assertion with "one grand," while Carstairs plainly was taken aback. He began to hedge.

"Absurd! You can see I'm not dressed for riding," he stormed.

"We can fix you up thataway in five minutes, and never rumple your dinner clothes," Ray assured him placidly.

Zelda was creasing the bills and casting an oblique glance at Carstairs which burned under his skin. He made a last effort.

"Naturally I didn't come here prepared to bet on anything," he evaded. "I don't ordinarily carry that much."

"You can write your I. O. U. on that program," suggested Benton, fishing a pencil stub from his shirt pocket. "It's good enough for me—if Miss Oakman says so."

There was a little barb concealed in that last, and Carstairs winced. Zelda hesitated the tiniest fraction of a second, her eyes downcast in thought. Then she nodded slightly. Carstairs seemed relieved.

"All right, if you'll take my chit, then it's a bet," he agreed. Writing "I. O. U. $500. Vivian Carstairs," on one of his cards, and dropping it on Ray's money, he added defiantly: "You'll never collect on it."

"Reckon I will, if Miss Oakman says it's O. K," drawled Benton, purposely misinterpreting Carstairs's boast. "Come on, and I'll fix you up with the riding clothes and put in your entry."

"Don't let him get hurt," smiled Zelda.

"I can take care of myself," said Carstairs haughtily, as he strode down into the aisle.

Zelda Oakman caught Ray's sleeve as he was starting to follow. Leaning close she whispered:

"I'm sorry, but you've angered him. Look out!"

Benton nodded understandingly, and led the other man to the contestants' dressing rooms. It thrilled him queerly to consider that he had come between this man and that fascinating girl to the extent of rousing Carstairs's jealousy. And Zelda had favored him with her warning!

Gruffly refusing Ray's offers of assistance Carstairs changed into the riding shirt, trousers and boots provided by his rival. Whatever else about him Ray did not like, he had to admit that the man was a fast worker in making the shift of personal scenery. Evidently he had had plenty of experience in effecting quick changes of clothes.

He was dressed for saddle in time to see the rest of the bronc riding by amateurs. What he saw made Carstairs thoughtful.

In addition to himself there were two National Guard troopers entered in the amateur event. These young chaps went into it more for a lark, on a dare, rather than with any expectation of winning.

The second guardsman was being bucked to the tanbark by an experienced old bronc used in the cowgirls' bronc riding event when Carstairs reached the arena. He stared contemplatively at this débacle. Of course, the troopers hadn't tried very hard. They merely wanted to be able to boast that they had been bucked off by bronchos.

Because he sensed Carstairs's dislike Ray

did not attempt to give him any advice, but sent Slim Stanton to coach the city man. Inasmuch as Slim was a bulldogger and not a bronc rider, no suspicion could be harbored that the buckaroos were taking an unfair advantage to protect their craft. Slim would have been a great comfort to the late Job.

"When he th'ows yo', let go and th'ow yorese'f 'way out an th'ow yore ahms around yore haid," counseled Slim, reassuringly. "Then the bronc caint stomp on yore haid. No foolin'. Them outlaws air man-haters, mister, and I don't mean maybe."

After which stimulating overture, delivered with a serious face, Slim gave his most conscientious efforts to coaching Carstairs and helping him make the ride. Gently easing the saddle onto old Sawbuck, he held himself ready to cinch, and instructed Carstairs how to drop lightly from the chute bars to his seat.

"Next amachoor, Mr. Vivian Carstairs," bawled Siren Jaxon, standing out on top of the chutes. A reporter in the press row behind him called out some information to him, and Jax added: "Of the Babbling Brook Hunt Club. Coming out on Sawbuck. Let 'im out!"

Experienced hurdler that he was, Carstairs coolly let go of the gate as it swung open, and jerked the hackamore. Sawbuck turned sharply to the right and headed into the arena.

One rising jump the old scoundrel took to enter the lists. He landed, all fours stiff-legged, shaking every bone in the hunt clubman's body, and sending a dreadful nausea through him. Instantly Sawbuck went up again, shimmying as he rose. Carstairs described a short arc, landing in a limp heap, while Sawbuck pranced on, kicking the atmosphere viciously.

Ray and Slim raced to the dazed clubman and carried him from the arena. Carstairs's forehead had been cut slightly.

Before they reached the boothlike cubby back of the chutes, which served as a first aid station, the amateur buckaroo rounded up his scattered senses. Savagely he tore away from Benton, snarling:

"Take your hands off me. You framed this up on me to make a fool of me before —you know whom. I'll make you sorry for this."

"Slim," suggested Ray, patiently, "you help him to the doc."

"You, too, let go of me," raged Carstairs, turning on Slim. "You were in on it. You probably put a tack under that saddle."

"Brotheh, I mought do that ef it war only yo'," stated Slim, steadily, "but a cowboy don't treat any hoss thataway."

The surgeon who had been patching up rodeo victims took Carstairs in hand at this strained point. Slim hurried out front for the bulldogging, but Benton remained near the first-aid coop.

That girl had asked him not to let Carstairs get hurt, and he hadn't been able to keep his promise. Well, that was "jest too bad," as the boys say in Texas.

When Carstairs, with a patch on his face, went to change back into his own clothes, Ray hovered solicitously around until the clubman snarlingly asked him to get out. Benton went out through the horse gate into the arena and started for one of the side gates leading to the boxes. Mort Franklin, assistant arena director, intercepted him and whispered:

"Be ready on a hoss as soon as the bulldogging is over."

That meant just one thing: Ray had won one of the main purses. After the bulldogging the judges would summon the winners of the various classes to receive the trophies and purses. This would precede the wild horse race, the blow-off which would hold the crowd until the riotous finish. That wasn't a title event.

He had won. Two wins in one night, Ray meditated as he walked toward Zelda Oakman's box, to collect Carstairs's I. O. U., as well as his own perfectly good "one grand."

That extra money would be mighty handy, just so much velvet for lengthening his stay in New York, he ruminated pleasantly. And that girl! This sure was his lucky night.

He hummed a little circle-riding tune. Then suddenly the tune died in his throat. His eyes widened unbelievingly as he stared in dismay.

The box in which he had left the girl introduced by Carstairs as "Zelda Oakman" was vacant.

The girl was gone.

Likewise Ray's one thousand dollars.

IV.

"EASY come, easy go," whimsically muttered Benton the next morning as he left the inner office of the rodeo.

He had just received the main purse in the broncho riding class, one thousand dollars, exactly equaling the amount of his money which had vanished the night before. He mingled with the others assembled in the contestants' room for the pay-off.

"Old Barnum used to show right here, I reckon, and that ought to have been plenty warning," he grumbled to himself. "Except that Barnum underestimated the birth rate."

"Now, see here, don't go thinking any slurs on that little gal," he told himself sharply a moment later.

"Well, where is she?" demanded the imp within. "And your jack?"

That was a puzzler. Ray had found no one who had seen Miss Oakman go. The usher on that section, hired by the night, had taken himself off before the bulldogging. No near-by spectators could give any information.

Spectators were leaving all over the Garden at that hour, and the departure of one young woman failed to register in any one's memory.

Benton had not seen Carstairs again, either. The man was gone when Ray went back of the chutes. Then Ray had had to prepare for the title and purse announcements in the arena, so he could not search around any longer for the missing lady who had walked off with his money.

The crowd was piling out, and the rodeo was ended. In that moving throng he failed to see the girl he sought. No word had been left for him. He didn't know her address.

Among the Oakmans in the telephone directory was no Zelda Oakman. If he tried calling up the various ones in the book, asking for her, he would get himself into plenty trouble, Ray knew.

"How do you know she's Zelda Oakman?" demanded the imp inside him. "Carstairs introduced you."

"She said so herself," Benton reminded himself. "That's plenty."

When, on that morning, he rose gloomily and received no word to dispel his wonder, he realized that the girl did not know where *he* was stopping. Of course! How could she call him up, then?

Without delay he went to the Garden office and remained expectantly until called in to receive his bronc riding purse. After stowing this away, he waited in the contestants' room, hardly hearing what was being said to him, although his spirits were rising.

Slim Stanton entered from the street door, holding himself erect with exaggerated stiffness, his nose and chin pointed haughtily upward, his arms held flatly against his sides. Staring with wooden face straight ahead, he posed beside Ray and announced in his own idea of a British butler:

"Muh lawd, the keerage waits."

"What?" exclaimed Ray.

"A lady is without," intoned Slim.

"Without?" echoed Ray, dazed. "Without what?"

"Without outside," quoted Slim, concluding the venerable nifty by changing his voice and answering: "Tell the lady with removed exterior to come in. Howeveh, she asks me very nice to ask Mistuh Ray Benton to join her in the cah. And, boy howdy—that's some bus! Only limooseen they eveh sent around afteh me heah had the wuhds 'Noo Yawk Poleece Depahtment' onto it."

Ray did not tarry for Slim's comments. He hastened "without outside," skipping gayly, but no more gayly than his heart. He was powerful happy. Not about the money primarily. In his career he had known nights when he had had chips to that amount before him, and then had seen them melt.

No, Ray Benton was happy because he had graded that girl correctly. She was all right.

Zelda was smiling at him from a big limousine, one of the makes the very name of which connotes expensiveness. A fur-trimmed chauffeur held open a door monogrammed "J. L." while Ray climbed in beside the sculptress and took her warmly clasping hand.

A group of cowboys peered interestedly from the office door.

"Drive to the Subtreasury, James," murmured Slim Stanton, but only loud enough for his cronies to hear. "In soft. Who? Ray!"

"I had to leave unexpectedly last night," began Zelda, opening an expensive, jeweled hand bag and producing Ray's money and Carstairs's I. O. U., which she handed him. "I hope you weren't worried."

"Why, sho', ma'am, of course not," protested Benton.

"It never occurred to me until this morning that possibly you might wonder if your money was gone permanently," she laughed. Ray waved away the very idea. "It might have looked like an easy way to rob a trustful stranger in our city. You didn't know us. You only had Carstairs's word that I was I, and he had baited you into a wager."

"But I had your word, ma'am," Ray reminded her gently.

The girl inhaled a quick breath and expelled it.

"No wonder you Westerners are heroes to so many girls," she commented, eying him seriously. "I never had a nicer tribute."

They fell silent, staring ahead. The car had swung through Madison Square and down Fifth Avenue. Ahead loomed Washington Arch. Reaching the Square, the car slid into a clean alley flanked by old-fashioned carriage houses, two-storied brick relics of past grandeur.

Trimly painted and remodeled with glass skylights, they constituted that studio row, Village Mews, the ateliers of the wealthy artists. Before a stable they stopped. Unlocking the studio's single outer door, Zelda invited:

"'Will you walk into my parlor?' said the spider to the fly."

They entered the remodeled stable. Its second floor had been removed so as to have a single big room, two stories high and glassed over with northern exposure skylight.

This interior was severely but soundly finished as a sculptor's workroom. The only concessions to comfort were a few large, handsome rugs on walls and hardwood floor and, in one corner, two chairs and a table with a samovar. Some beams which once supported a second floor had been left.

The principal space under the skylight was given to the model's stand and the sculptor's workbench with its unhewed marble and tools.

While Ray admired the stark practicality of the atelier, the sculptress doffed hat and coat and donned a blue smock. After consulting some sketches she had made at the rodeo, she asked him to assume a correct buck-riding pose.

For his mount she had secured a proper stock saddle which she perched on a plasterer's high wooden "horse." Ray felt sort of foolish as he bestrode this imaginary bronc, but he was game, "scratching and fanning proper."

"I must confess I find it rather a delicate matter to discuss compensating you," she admitted frankly. "Naturally I thought I could hire you just as I would a model. Then you flashed that roll, won your wager and the bronc riding purse besides, so I realize you're hardly one to pay in the ordinary manner."

"Oh, I'm doing this as a pleasure, ma'am," volunteered Ray. "I've got a litty-bitty ranch, and this roll—well, I had some of it, then I won me some day money and had some luck at—other games, and finally won the purse. It's a pleasure to be here with you, ma'am, just—just to look at you. Why, I cain't think of anything I'd rather do than be with you."

Benton stopped in dismay. What was he saying? Zelda Oakman's cheeks were crimson, her lips were parted, her eyes shining, then veiled. Ray was dumb; but his eyes cried: "I love you!"

For a space of several clock ticks a breathless silence was maintained. The young woman's clear, direct gaze betrayed

that she had read his message, yet nothing in her expression rebuked him.

Benton controlled himself with an effort. This was madness—a rodeo top hand letting himself fall in love with a bonanza king's granddaughter.

Between them yawned an unbridgable social cañon. Their ways and worlds were different, and she had invited him to her studio merely as she would hire a professional model. He was the right type. And yet—he knew he had met the woman he loved.

"I think we had better get to work," smiled Zelda Oakman.

"Ma'am—miss—" floundered Ray.

"Call me Zelda. All of my friends do," she suggested, adding with a smile: "You are going to be one of my good friends."

"Reckon I want to be, Zelda," replied Ray frankly. "It's an honor to be one of your good friends. I've been all over the West, and I never met a girl like you before. I'd admire to have you be my best friend."

"Now, Ray, be careful," she warned smilingly, quite calmly. "Words like that lead men into making love."

"Reckon if I dared—if I was anything but a cowboy, a litty-bitty rancher," announced Ray, swinging from the saddle and stepping toward her, "no man on earth could keep me from making love to you."

"A very pretty little scene," sarcastically commented a new voice from the doorway.

Turning, Ray saw Vivian Carstairs standing there, a sneering smile twisting his lips while his eyes flamed with jealousy.

V.

"Oh, hello, V. C.," hailed Zelda calmly, apparently quite unabashed by the clubman's unexpected appearance. Carstairs had opened the door quietly, without knocking.

"I got your note asking me to come here," announced Carstairs, forcing a more agreeable smile to his face. He advanced gallantly, in spite of the patch on his face, the memento of his bronc riding, and tossed a casual nod toward Benton.

"We call him 'V. C.,' though he hardly looks like a British decoration," laughed the girl, turning to include Ray in the conversation.

"More like a wound stripe," commented Benton easily.

"My respect for bronchos has gone to par," confessed Carstairs, surprising Ray by joining in the laugh. It was a forced laugh, but the clubman seemed to have dropped his hostile attitude.

"I want that prop broncho you told me about last night," requested Zelda, addressing Carstairs. "Can you deliver it this afternoon?"

Carstairs nodded. Turning to Benton, the girl explained:

"V. C. is what they once called a man about town. He has influential friends among all sorts of people, especially theatrical folks. He has promised to get for me a prop horse, a dummy that was used in a scene of a musical show. It's life size and perfect, and its neck and legs can be adjusted in any position. You can place it in correct bucking pose, and saddle it, then you can mount it, and I'll work up your figure from that. With the aid of the effigy and sketches I've made, I can finish my statue of the horse in action."

"I'll have it here by two o'clock," promised Carstairs. "And now, can I see you alone a few minutes?"

Zelda cast a speculative glance at Ray, who promptly prepared to leave if she gave any sign.

"We could work much better with the dummy bronc," she decided. "Suppose we postpone the pose until two o'clock? You may have had things you wanted to attend to and lunch to get. Also, I want you with chaps and spurs—yes, and a holster belt with a six gun, Ray."

"I can bring everything but the gun, Zelda," replied Benton.

"A cowboy without a gun!" exclaimed the girl. "As well have 'Hamlet' without the Dane. I thought all cowboys wore guns."

"Not in the city," corrected Ray. "Mine's at my ranch."

"We'll have to get one, then," she decided. "Two o'clock?"

Benton seized his Stetson and hurried

out as quickly as he could go, not wishing to appear to intrude. He had gone a block before the cold, penetrating November wind reminded him that he had left without his light overcoat. Moreover, his money was in one pocket of that garment. When Zelda had put the bills into his hand he had been in such an exalted mood that he had shoved the money carelessly into an overcoat pocket. Also, the sheltered limousine had made him oblivious of the sharp wind. Of course, his money was safe unless some intruder broke into the studio while Zelda was at lunch.

Hesitating for a moment or two, he reluctantly turned back. As he softly approached the studio door it opened an inch. There it stopped as if whoever was starting out had paused or had been detained. Carstairs's voice came to his ears:

"Zelda, you *must* listen to me. Don't go yet until you hear me through. You know I am mad about you."

"And you know that you mustn't say such things as that, V. C., reminded the girl quietly, but firmly.

"Why mustn't I?" demanded Carstairs. "Why do you repulse me?"

"You know very well why," she stated. "It isn't right."

"You talk of right!" jeered Carstairs. "Ten minutes after I surprise you leading on this roughneck cow hand to make love!"

"He doesn't know," she reminded. "And he was stating his feelings regarding me very respectfully. Nothing more."

"'Very respectfully,'" mimicked Carstairs. "If I hadn't come in when I did—I won't stand it, d'you hear? It maddens me to see you listening to this fellow. Don't romance about a cowboy."

"He took your I. O. U.," she recalled to him. "You didn't mention it to-day."

"What's more, I won't," blustered the clubman. "He had a fixed game. If he tries to dun me, I'll remind him that this little scene I witnessed would sound very interesting if whispered to—"

"You wouldn't!" challenged Zelda indignantly. "Very well. I vouched for you, and I will see that your paper is made good. Now let us go."

"Not until you tell me you are doing this for my sake," objected Carstairs. "Gad! When you have that look you're irresistible."

"Let me go!" came the subdued voice of the girl. The man's laugh answered her. "We can't afford a cheap, vulgar scene here."

"You can hardly afford to make a row," exulted Carstairs.

"Let me be," panted Zelda, speaking low.

"Not until—" began Carstairs.

The door swung open. Benton stood calmly on the threshold.

Carstairs's arm had dropped at the first warning. Ray veiled the anger in his eyes, for Zelda appeared quite calm, making no appeal to him. He did not want to admit eavesdropping, even though unintentional.

"I came back for my overcoat," he explained evenly, ignoring Carstairs's resentful scowl. Ray crossed the room and donned his coat.

"V. C. is going after that horse," the young woman announced. "I was wondering if you were lunching alone."

"I'd admire powerful to have you lunch with me," suggested Benton.

The girl hesitated a moment. The silence was broken by Carstairs.

"And in the meantime, as the movie titles say, Jason pursues the Golden Fleece," he commented cynically.

"Am I presuming, Miss Oakman?" asked Ray.

"I'll be glad to go with you," accepted Zelda.

"'Miss Oakman'!" echoed Carstairs. "A rolling Lucy Stone gathers no mossbacks."

As they went out of the studio together Benton was pondering the other man's cryptic paraphrase. What did it mean?

VI.

"DON'T pay any attention to what V. C. says," counseled the young woman as she led the rancher to a sedate old hotel near Washington Square. "He poses as a satirist, so it's best to take his remarks as attempted wit."

Ray reflected that the man's words sounded poisonous. However, the pair were soon laughing over luncheon. The girl started him to telling her humorous stories of his West. That hour fled. After the meal was concluded she sent him for his trappings and then taxied away.

When Ray returned to the studio, Zelda had just arrived. She was directing four truckmen to carry in the prop horse which was waiting on a motor truck.

It was quite a realistic dummy, molded to the life in some fabricated substance and finished up with glass eyes and roan horsehair. When the workmen had set this up on the model stand, Ray discovered attached to the mane a tag on which was printed:

"His name is Trojan."

"Quite appropriate for a horse," commented Zelda.

"Yes, a good hoss name," agreed Benton, trying to remember where he had heard it before.

"Set it up right as a bucking horse," she requested.

Investigation showed that the various leg joints were swiveled on thumbscrews permitting the crooking of the limbs in any natural posture. The neck, too, could be twisted. A base with thin steel rods spraddled like a music stand had been sent with the horse. This rack could be adjusted so as to hold the dummy bronc in any position desired.

Benton fixed the prop horse in a rearing attitude, saddled it and twisted a hackamore on its head. After looping his lariat on the saddle-horn and donning chaps and spurs, Ray prepared to mount the buckless bucker.

The sculptress went to the door and released an inside catch which controlled the spring lock. As the bolt snapped noisily into its socket, she explained:

"I can't endure interruptions when I am working."

Benton realized that she had in mind the sneaking entry of Carstairs that forenoon. Now the door was locked. No intruder could come in without warning—or without a key.

Ray swung into the saddle while the sculptress went to work on her stand. His was a difficult pose to hold, yet he held his seat as surely as he would ride a bad broncho.

Zelda was a rapid, sure artist. To take his mind off his strained pose, she drew him out to talk of his Western country, picking up where they had left off at luncheon.

"You ought to come out there to see broncs and cowboys in action on the range, if you want good models," he asserted, earnestly.

"Go West, young woman," she paraphrased, laughingly. "Why?"

He told her, picturing with vivid native eloquence the vast canvas of the mesa-flanked range country from which he came. She gazed in frank admiration, the light of interest growing in her eyes as he continued. When, after an hour's work a rest period was called, she bade him talk on.

"Remember, you are talking to a descendant of one of the men who made the West glamorous," she reminded him. "As you tell it, I seem to see it vividly, although I'm ashamed to admit I've never been there."

"Come out to my little Bar-6-Bar ranch and let me show you the most beautiful country in the world," urged Benton, impulsively approaching her. "I'd be the happiest man in the world to have you out there at sunset on the mesa. Just you and I riding together—"

A startled look in her eyes stopped him. Ray tried to remember what it had been she told Carstairs: "He doesn't know." Know what?

"I just remember," Zelda exclaimed, changing the subject abruptly. She took up her handbag and from it she produced a neat packet of big bills fresh from a bank. These she proffered, saying: "Here is the money V. C. was to have given you to-day for his I. O. U. The other matters drove this out of his mind."

"Zelda, look me in the eyes and tell me if he gave you that money for me," ordered Benton, sternly.

"Why—you don't suppose any one else would—" she evaded, trying to meet his gaze, and failing.

A pang smote Ray's heart. Did this girl care so much for a welsher that she would

pay his losses in order to shield his welshing?

No! He remembered now: she had vouched for the man and now was making good her guarantee.

"He never gave it to you," charged Benton, reproachfully. "Why, Zelda! What kind of a man do you think I am? I cain't take your money. I won't take your money. Cain't you see that I—"

He stopped short and turned his head, his eyes following the gaze which the girl directed toward the door. It was open. Standing on the threshold, drawing a key from the lock, stood a strange man.

A dapper, rather small man of possibly forty, Manhattanese from his properly set derby to his small, well-shod, spatted feet. Shrewd, rather good-looking if worldly of face, perfectly attired in expensive clothes, and complete master of the situation, this man stared coldly.

"This really is too much," he pronounced, with deadly calm. "Giving money to a lover."

"Jason!" cried Zelda in sharp reprimand. Her face was pale.

At the tone, Ray acted automatically. Stepping between the young woman and this man, he faced the latter and demanded:

"What's it to you what Miss Oakman does?"

"Get out of here," ordered the newcomer, coldly.

"I'll get out only for Miss Oakman," raged Benton. "Who are you to tell me?"

"Nobody," snapped the man, his restraint breaking. "Nothing but her husband."

VII.

"JASON, stop or you will say something you'll regret," commanded the young woman. "Don't go, Mr. Benton; this is my studio. I am not going to permit any foolish misunderstanding to put any of us in a wrong light. Ray, this is my husband, Jason Larimer."

"Larimer?" repeated Ray, puzzled. "Why, I understood you to say you were Zelda Oakman, granddaughter of Bonanza John Oakman."

"She probably did," rasped Larimer. "She follows the style of a club of married women who insist on being known by their maiden names. You may have heard of the Lucy Stone League."

"Oh—" began Ray, choking an impulse to blurt out: "So that was what Carstairs was hinting at when he said: 'A rolling Lucy Stone'."

"I don't belong to it, but I believe in the idea," declared Mrs. Larimer, warmly. "They have all made names for themselves in some professional line, and to each, her name represents a business asset."

"You have such claim?" intimated her husband, coolly.

"Mine is a famous name, at least," retorted Zelda with hauteur.

"Well, it led one cowboy astray," commented Jason Larimer. "I'm willing to believe he didn't know you were married. However, that doesn't excuse your handing him a wad of big denomination orangebacks."

"If your spying began soon enough, you saw that he did not take them," reminded Zelda, controlling her anger. "I am not accustomed to discussing affairs relating to my professional work. Mr. Benton is just the cowboy type I must have for my 'Real Americans' group."

"I'll go," announced Ray, who had been unsaddling the dummy bronc from force of habit. "I don't aim to mix in domestic affairs."

"Please don't go away," requested Mrs. Larimer. "There is something I must tell my husband privately and then I am sure he will welcome you back. If you will wait outside ten minutes, Mr. Larimer and I can straighten this entire misunderstanding. Promise me you will come back."

Benton nodded. He would return if only to maintain his self-respect. Waiting at the alley entrance was a closed car, Larimer's, doubtless. Rather than loiter there, Ray walked to the Square and waited.

"Your spying and accusations, innuendoes, were inexcusable, Jason," stated his wife the moment they were alone. "Our agreement was that I could pursue my art activities unmolested. Until now you have kept your agreement and have not intruded here while I was working."

"Judging by the scene I surprised, it is high time I intruded," commented Larimer, dryly. "That certainly wasn't any professional pose. You don't pay a model in hundred-dollar bills."

"That doesn't sound a bit like you," asserted his wife, calmly. "Which leads me to suspect that you did not pop in here by chance, but that you were put up to it by some one. Am I right?"

"Suppose I admit that?" parried Larimer. "What then?"

"I will tell you the whole matter if you are equally frank," offered Zelda. "Who was it?"

"I don't know positively," confessed her husband. "A phone tip—a man's voice warned me that if I hurried here I might catch you with a rodeo Romeo. That tip apparently was correct. The voice was a familiar one."

"Vivian Carstairs?" hazarded Zelda. Jason shrugged his uncertainty. "At the rodeo, just before you dragged me out last night, V. C. baited this cowboy into wagering a thousand cash against Carstairs's I. O. U., and lost his bet that he could ride a broncho. I was stake-holder. To-day V. C. admitted to me that he was not going to pay his I. O. U. Inasmuch as I had vouched for him, I drew the money after lunch and tried to give it to Benton, telling him that Carstairs sent it by me. I think you arrived in time to see Ray refuse it. In some manner, he had learned the truth. That ought to show you what a high type of man he is. And you believed Carstairs!"

"Why did you vouch for Carstairs?" raged Larimer. "That man is notorious as a welsher. I blackballed him when he tried to get into the Patroons last month, and here you go paying his gambling debts! That looks suspicious. What is your interest in Carstairs?"

"None. I despise him now, if you can believe me," replied his wife. "But he has been in our set ever since we were boy and girl. He's always accommodating to fetch and carry, so I couldn't snub him. As for my reason for proffering that money to Benton, I told you I had vouched for Carstairs, supposing he was honorable. I had to uphold my own word, no matter what the cost in money. And I must remind you that it was my own money."

"You needn't fling Bonanza John's bequest in my face," protested Larimer, angrily. "I can't say positively that it was Carstairs's voice on the phone, but look out! He's a rotter without any known business. I've heard he gets a secret income from selling society scandal. Watch your step."

"Then you don't believe in me?" accused Zelda. "Last night you pounced on me at the rodeo and made me leave to avoid a scene. To-day—this!"

"I'm afraid I am jealous," confessed Larimer. "Put on your things now and come along home for the afternoon. My car is here."

"But I must work," protested Zelda. "Benton is returning."

"Oh, he's the reason," exclaimed her husband, meaningly. "Now I am beginning to think there is something to this. Carstairs lost out, eh?"

"I will come," decided Zelda, simply. On the door she tacked a note asking Ray to return the next day. Then she drove off with her husband.

After waiting fifteen minutes, Ray started back to the studio when he saw Larimer's car departing. Upon finding the note he walked back to the mouth of the Mews and waited for a bus. As he boarded one, he chanced to look back toward the studio. Cautiousy sneaking out was Carstairs.

VIII.

BEFORE dinner time Mrs. Larimer telephoned to Ray at his hotel, and assured him that all was well. Larimer had been satisfied and was sorry for his suspicions. She requested Benton to overlook the incident so that she could continue her work. Ray agreed.

His acquiescence was not entirely unwilling. Despite the fact that he realized now that he must put away any romantic thoughts of Zelda, he longed to be in her company. There was about that association, a pleasurable sense of companionship he had never before known. A feeling of ease and understanding existed between him and this talented, attractive young

woman. Ray was avid to see her again. He went.

Work progressed rapidly and uninterruptedly the next morning. On the following day, Zelda surprised Ray by presenting him with a silver-mounted .44 revolver with a holster and cartridge belt. This she offered as a token of her appreciation for his unpaid model service. Moreover, she wanted him to wear the gun as part of the pose. Ray accepted it, but kept the gun unloaded, leaving the cartridges in the belt.

When Carstairs and a mutual woman friend of his and Zelda's invaded the studio that afternoon, the clubman jested broadly that Ray was arming for an indignant husband. Carstairs tried to induce Benton to display his marksmanship in the studio, but the cowboy flatly refused.

V. C. maintained an assumption of gayety, although Ray detected a strange look in his eyes. Finally, Zelda drove away the unwelcome visitors, saying that she must get along with her work as Benton could not stay on indefinitely.

On the fourth day when she and Ray returned from luncheon together, Zelda paused as she entered, and picked up from the studio floor a cigarette that had been half smoked and then stepped on. For a moment she examined it closely, and then, with a sigh, tossed it into an ash tray.

"What is it?" asked Ray, noticing her troubled expression.

"One of my husband's private brand," she explained. "That means just one thing: he was here while we were at luncheon. I wonder what brought him here. I'm afraid his baseless jealousy."

"Jealousy, Zelda?" echoed Ray. "Not of me!"

"I'm afraid so," she sighed, staring thoughtfully around the big, bare room. The rugs hung high against the walls were flat, with no suspicious-looking bulges. There were no chests or closets in the remodeled stable, merely four high walls supporting a skylight.

"Then I'm going to go," declared Benton, decisively.

"Going away?" she exclaimed. "You promised to help me."

"Not when it sets husband against wife," said Ray. "I know we haven't done anything to deserve suspicion, and I know that I am nothing more to you than this old hoss Trojan—a model. But if Mr. Larimer doesn't know that, then I'm taking the only way to rest his mind."

"I'm rather fond of old Trojan," smiled Zelda.

"But a nice woman like you doesn't think of any man but her husband," persisted Benton, loyally.

"Whatever I may be, I'll have to live up to your chivalrous estimate, Ray," she replied. "You don't mention your own thoughts."

"A man cain't be near a woman like you without thinking mighty fine of her," answered Benton. "But I don't covet my neighbor's wife. It isn't fit or proper."

"We can always remain good friends, even if far apart," she decided after a pause. "I'm sorry Jason developed this jealousy. He followed me to the rodeo and insisted that I leave with him at once that night that I disappeared with your money. I was too mortified to tell you then. I'm sure some one is poisoning his mind against me. That person, I'm certain, is V. C. He is mad to punish me because I repulsed his unwelcome love-making. I suspect you overheard him that day when you returned for your overcoat."

"Yes, I did," admitted Ray. "I didn't mean to snoop. I'd have broken him in two then only you didn't let on anything was wrong, and I didn't want to let on I overheard and make you feel more uncomfortable."

He prepared to leave after hanging the gun belt on a nail.

"Your next model will need this," he suggested, writing on a slip of paper. "If you want to send it to me after you finish the figure, here is my address."

"Until I come out West, then," she said, shaking hands in farewell. Her face was serious as she watched him go. Serious and a little bitter.

Two hours later, with his grip packed, Ray sat in his hotel room preparatory to starting for the railroad station. A bellboy brought up a note which had been delivered at the desk by messenger.

Tossing aside the envelope, Benton stared at the note. It was in Zelda's handwriting, undated and with no salutation, and read as follows:

> Please come to my studio as soon as you can. There is something I want done quickly which only you can do. ZELDA OAKMAN.

Without a moment's hesitation Ray went, boarding a bus that passed opportunely. When he reached the studio, he found the door unlocked, and pushed inside. There he paused in horror.

Lying beside the prop horse was Jason Larimer, dead. A bullet hole pierced his brow. Beside his body lay Zelda's gift revolver.

IX.

"MURDERED!" muttered Benton, stepping to the side of the still form and staring down at it.

Larimer had been shot at close range, tiny powder burns on his face indicated. Lying under his right hand was Zelda's sculpturing hammer. Had Larimer seized it to defend himself or to use as a weapon? Or had he wrested it from— No, never that!

Abstractedly, his mind in a whirl, Ray picked up his presentation revolver and examined it. The gun was cold. The shot must have been fired some considerable time earlier. All the chambers had been filled from the cartridge belt and only one shot had been fired.

Benton's keen eyes detected tiny specks of red spattering one side of the prop horse. A rubbed blur farther up the back showed that a cloth had been mopped across the dummy steed. On the hearth lay a wadded-up rag originally used to keep clay wet.

Still holding the revolver, Benton stooped over the body and with his free hand felt for any heartbeat. In that instant, while he leaned over the murdered man, a whole troop of turbulent thoughts passed through his mind.

Who had done this? Why had Zelda sent for him in such importunate haste at this time? Had she discovered the body and, fearing that suspicion might rest on her, had she sent for Ray to help her carry it from the studio?

He was sure Zelda had not killed Jason Larimer, but undoubtedly, she was panic-stricken as a result of the circumstantial appearances. She had been left alone in the studio. Maybe she had wanted Ray's help or advice when she sent for him. Or —what did she want?

Horrified gasps from behind him caused Ray to spring up in alarm. Staring at him from the doorway were Carstairs and the Larimer chauffeur.

"My God! This is terrible, Benton," ejaculated Carstairs, his face the picture of horror. "Why did you do it?"

"I didn't do it," stated Ray, turning toward them, his gun still clutched in his hand, making him a sinister figure.

"Don't shoot!" cried Carstairs, while the chauffeur, with a squawk of terror, dodged out of the doorway.

"I'm not doing any shooting here, I tell you," snapped Benton, tossing down the weapon where he had found it.

"You must have been goaded into it," suggested Carstairs. "He was jealous and attacked you first, probably?"

"Don't keep insisting that I did it," remonstrated Benton. "I just arrived here a minute or so ago and found Larimer dead. I left here two hours ago for good, and he wasn't here then. I only came back because—"

Abruptly, he ceased speaking as he realized how the truth could be distorted, misinterpreted. If he said that Zelda had sent for him to do something that only he could do!

"Yes? Go on," prompted Carstairs, noting the hesitation.

"Nothing," concluded Ray, lamely. "I returned for something of mine that I had left behind."

"Your gun?" suggested Carstairs, helpfully.

Then, with unsuspected swiftness, he slammed shut the door and twisted into place an old hasp which had been folded back in disuse since the spring lock had been put on the studio. Through the staple he thrust his penknife, securing the hasp.

"Run for a policeman, Eustis," he shouted to the chauffeur.

"Now, Benton, I've got you safe," Car-

stairs exulted, calling through the door. He took care to keep the brick wall of the stable as a shield between his body and a possible chance bullet.

"You needn't have done that. I'm not going to run away," declared Ray, resentfully. "I'm innocent, and here I stay."

"Circumstantial evidence is all against you, Benton," insisted Carstairs. "If you didn't do it, who did? Got any idea?"

"Maybe you did," retorted Ray.

"Fortunately for me, I came here with the chauffeur at Larimer's request," responded Carstairs. "Larimer asked me to bring the chauffeur here to meet him at this hour. I inferred he wanted us as witnesses of something."

He paused to let the significance sink in.

"Larimer's friends all know that he was insanely jealous of you," pursued the clubman. "Now, if you didn't do it, suspicion is going to fall on some one of whom you probably think very well. If you have anything, any letters or tokens connecting you with this person, you had better destroy them."

Instinctively Ray scratched a match and touched its flame to the note from Zelda. In a moment it was a blackened mass, crumbled on an ash tray.

"See here, Benton; you don't like me and I don't love you, but we both want to shield a certain person," insinuated Carstairs. "Suppose you got away and went out West. They'd never find you. Your act would draw all suspicion from this certain person, for whom you may care a lot. It would be the big thing. I'll do my share. I'll open this door and say later that you tricked me into doing it, and then stuck me up or stunned me. You won't have to go out through the Mews and risk meeting a cop. I'll boost you over the wall adjoining this studio, and you can run through the yard out into the next street. The front gate latches on the inside, and the house is vacant. What do you say to that? Be quick."

Silence greeted his proposal.

"Benton, decide now," urged the clubman after a minute's wait, puzzled by the cowboy's failure to reply. "You can't waste a second. A cop will be here—"

He bit off his words. Into the Mews loped a policeman, accompanied by the panting chauffeur. The officer held his service pistol ready.

"Is he in here yet?" puffed the patrolman.

"Yes," snapped Carstairs, veiling his disappointment.

Holding his gun ready, the policeman unhooked the door and thrust it cautiously open. Not a sound greeted them. Calling for surrender in the name of the law, the officer plunged into the studio.

It was empty of any other living soul. Above the officer's head gaped a skylight section, which had been pushed open. Around one beam was noosed Benton's lariat, its other end dropped into the adjoining yard after he had climbed to the skylight. The bird had flown.

X.

MORNING light of March in the Southwest set all the surrounding peaks aflame. Gorgeous in their vivid coloring, majestic in their looming height, they towered a hundred miles distant as sentinels around Lariata Mesa. Here the land shouldered up abruptly for a distance of five hundred feet, to a great table of land upholstered with range grass, upon which a thousand head of cattle could graze comfortably.

Shouts proclaimed that already the men of the B-Circle-J outfit were in the saddle. Out from their wagon camp they were riding, breakfast over, ready for a strenuous day's work. Cook was packing up his wagon, and the wrangler was herding the spirited remuda after the vanguard of range riders. An exacting job awaited the cowboys.

They were rounding up wild horses. The outfit had obtained an extension of its range, together with permission to graze a portion of a national forest topping the mesa. In return for this privilege, the rancher had agreed to clean out a bunch of wild horses—broomtails—which were doing damage to the young trees and to other tender growths in the forest reserve.

These broomtails were pests. Most of them were too undersized for any practical

use. The largest of them might be rounded up for rodeo purposes or wild horse races, while the remainder would have to be driven off or disposed of otherwise. All of the cowboys rode equipped for this job, with ropes, six-guns strapped to their thighs, and rifles in scabbards swung beside their saddles. Vigorously they went to the task.

In mid morning a horseman riding light and coming from farther down overtook the chuck wagon. He was a tall, darkly tanned fellow with a long, square jaw and a wide, humorous mouth.

"Hello, Chuck. Whar's John Dogan?" he inquired.

"Hello, yo' ownse'f, Slim," replied Chuck Condon, the cook. Pointing on a line with a distant peak, he added: "John Dogan is working along the aidge of the forest reserve abote oveh thar. Leastwise, he's done gone thataway, John Doe—uh—Dogan has."

"Wal, see thet yo' keep yore comedy fo' me exclusive," warned Slim with a frown. "And I don't mean maybe. Savvy?"

"See hyar, Slim Stanton," expostulated Chuck, "yo' don't hafta be a-telling me. That boy hain't got a bettah friend than me."

"Then, Lawd deliver us f'um our friends!" quoted Slim, changing to a fresh horse.

Despite the long ride he had just completed, Stanton mounted and rode off in the direction indicated by the cook. An hour later, guided by the shouts of a cowboy who was working the broomtails out of that strip of forest, he came upon the man known there as John Dogan.

At Slim's hail he turned, revealing Ray Benton.

"Hello, Slim. What news of my Bar-6-Bar?" Ray inquired, riding out to meet his friend.

"Same as last time I went thar fo' yo'," reported the Texan. "Them boys aire tending to it as well as could be expected without'n yo' to watch 'em. Whitey seems right reliable fo' a fo'man. I paid 'em and tole 'em yo'd done had to stay down in Mexico a little longer on yore secret prospecting trip. That seemed to satisfy 'em—them boys seemed powerful un-curious. Wonder what they'd say if they knowed yo' wasn't a hundred miles away from the Bar-6-Bar. Howsoever, Whitey took me aside and whispered in my shell-like ear that a stranger had been projecting around thar last month asking abote whar yo' was at."

"A stranger?" echoed Ray.

"Yep. A feller that knows this country—could pass fo' a cowman and mebbe is one," answered Slim. "Again, mebbe not. Claimed to be looking fo' a job punching fo' yo', and that yo' done know him. Claimed his name was Cale Remus."

"Never heard of him before," commented Benton, thoughtfully. "I reckon he's a detective or some kind of officer looking for me. My address was easy to get, from the rodeo records."

"Whitey assures me he told this *hombre* jest nothing," continued Slim. "Except that yo' was away and wasn't expected back soon."

"Are you sure he didn't trail you here, Slim?" asked Ray.

"Far's I can state, he didn't," replied Slim. "'Course, I cain't swear positive shore. My comings and goings thar since yo' been missing mebbe have been noticed. A good trailer could mebbe foller me."

"Then I'll have to drift," decided Ray. "It's only a matter of days before he'll land here. I don't want to involve you boys in it."

"Nobody but me and Chuck knows," Slim assured him. "Yo' kin trust us. It's four months now since yo' stampeded outer New Yawk."

"I was stampeded, all right," conceded Benton. "I ought to have faced the music, I see now. So I've made up my mind to go back and do it. First I want to get my affairs in shape, sell off my stuff, and get a good roll for the fight."

That was all he volunteered. Never a word concerning his real reason for wanting to go back—no matter what the cost—to see Zelda and assure her that he was guiltless of the Larimer murder.

Many times he had considered writing to her since he had fled from New York. Before the alarm was raised that day he had changed his high hat and boots for a cap

and shoes. Thus disguised he had slipped on board a cattle boat, the captain of which was his friend, and eventually had landed in Galveston. From there he had hastened across Texas to the mesa country, where he had been on the dodge ever since. As a result of this intense living, Benton had had no time to analyze the Larimer murder.

And now the pursuit was closing in on him.

XI.

"We'll talk it over after supper," announced Ray, ending the conference.

He had work to do and so had Slim. The B-Circle-J had received him without troublesome questions when he needed refuge, hence he was not going to desert that outfit without finishing his job.

Slim rode off in search of Gates, the foreman, to ask for a lay-off for the rest of the day. Slim belonged with that outfit, and to him Ray had come in his wandering after Stanton returned from the rodeo. Gates, a hard-driving range boss, received Slim's request with stinging satire and put the weary cow-puncher to work.

When, with a tired yawn, Slim slid out of his saddle at the wagon camp late that afternoon, he found Chuck alone.

" They was a *hombre* hyar to-day asking fo' a waddie what he done described," announced Chuck, casually. " He done described John Dogan."

" What'd yo' tellum?" asked Slim.

" Told him John done left hyar yestidday fo' Arizony," replied the cook, thoughtfully. " He reckoned that was jest too bad because John was a friend of his he wanted to meet up with powerful bad, only he didn't name him thataway. Howsoever, he insinuates that he'd see Gates abote staying hyar all night 'cause he didn't want to ride back in the dark."

" Reckon I'd better go meet John and tellum his dear friend is hyar," yawned Slim, drearily. " First, I gotter catchum some Java and beans."

Having taken these measures to fortify himself, the weary waddie saddled a fresh mount and took a lead horse on which he packed some provisions. Without pausing for any rest, he galloped away toward the edge of the mesa where he had left Benton earlier that day.

As he neared that section, he met Ray's mount drifting empty-saddled toward the camp.

Alarmed by this sight, Slim turned back the horse and followed. The well trained animal led the way to a clump of sagebrush. There, beside a dead broomtail, was stretched the motionless body of Ray Benton.

Slim was out of the saddle and investigating in a moment. Ray was alive, but unconscious, evidently stunned by a terrific kick. An ugly wound on the side of his head told that much, and a rigid, outstretched hind leg of the dead broomtail supplied the rest of the story.

Stanton's deductions were correct.

Late that day, Benton had come upon a wounded wild horse, dying alone in the brush where it had hidden. Dismounting, he approached with revolver in hand, mercifully intending to end the broomtail's sufferings.

As Ray neared it, the wild horse lay so still that the cowboy thought it was dead. He was leaning over to make sure, when the broomtail lashed out with one final convulsive kick which landed crushingly on Benton's head. The cowboy was knocked insensible.

" Fracture, mebbe," muttered Slim, as his fingers touched the injured head. " Got to get Ray some place pronto. Cain't go back, either."

From his canteen he poured water on a handkerchief and bathed the injured spot, after which he wrapped the wet cloth around as a bandage. He forced water between the unconscious man's lips. After transferring the saddle and bridle from Ray's mount to the fresh lead horse, he headed the former toward camp and sent it along with a vigorous slap.

Then he gently lifted Benton to the saddle and swung aboard his own mount. Riding close alongside, he supported the insensible cowboy and guided the two horses to the far side of the mesa, away from the direction whence Slim had come earlier that day, away from the camp, away from

that inquisitive stranger. Riding thus, the pair lurched on into the night, across the mesa.

Dangerous riding it was, over that rough country, lighted only by the stars. Progress was necessarily slow because Slim had to support Ray in his saddle and he did not dare ride hard for fear of aggravating the unconscious cowboy's injury. So they pushed on through the night, stopping only occasionally to rest men and horses. Going down the far slope of the mesa offered many difficulties with much uncertain footing, but the ponies felt their way along diligently.

Morning had advanced when Slim reached a distant ranch where there was a flivver. This carried the two waddies twenty miles to the railroad point. Twenty-four hours after he had found Ray unconscious, Slim left his injured friend, alive but delirious, in a city hospital, while he himself staggered away to find a place where he could get "seventeen dollars' wuth of sleep." It was noon of the next day when he returned.

"He'll pull through, thanks to you," promised a friendly nurse who had responded favorably to Slim's pleasantries. "A doctor wouldn't tell you that much, but you deserve something for bringing him here. He's resting all right now, but he was delirious after you left him."

"Yeh?" fished Slim, sensing a meaning tone in her voice. "Say some queer things mebbe?"

"Kept talking about New York," she added, eying him keenly.

"Sho', it's been his life-long ambition to go thar some day," explained Slim. "Reckon this 'll de-tain him some. Anything else?"

"Yes. I thought he must have been in New York," the nurse stated. "He kept repeating 'Zelda, I didn't kill Larimer' and 'I'm coming back to New York.' The reason I mentioned it to you is that there was a deputy sheriff in here last night to take a last statement of a dying man who'd been shot. This officer couldn't help overhearing your friend raving away, so he stopped to listen. I noticed he jotted down some notes. I thought you would be interested, because it looked as though he might be going to write or wire to New York."

XII.

LYING on his white hospital bed, Ray Benton thought it all out. He had time now. Staring at the blank ceiling, he went over every point of the Larimer case.

Shut in from that activity which had filled his life, he was able to give all his thought to the matter. Little hints came creeping out of the past, out of the things he had learned in school or had read somewhere. He believed he had a solution.

"Slim, when do they say I can get out of here?" he demanded on the sixth day when his faithful friend made his daily call.

"In another week," answered Slim, uneasily.

"I cain't stay here that long," protested Ray. "Why, Slim! It's nearly time for the Fort Worth rodeo. Reckon that's why you've been looking so worried. We're going there, old-timer, and if they won't let me go, then you run along by yourself, anyway."

"You aiming to enter thar?" demanded Slim.

"Shore am. I'm going to win that bronc riding just as shore as you're going to win the bulldogging," prophesied Benton. "They cain't keep a cowman down. I just got to go there."

"How come, got to?" asked Slim.

"I told you back on the mesa that I was going back to New York and that I had to have plenty of money," reminded Ray. Slim nodded. "Well, that's why. I'll win the bronc riding and then go East fixed proper. Did I still have my money when I landed here in bed?"

"I took it off yo'," explained Slim. "These hospitals have a way of taking a feller's money and pants on arrival and keeping 'em so he cain't run out on 'em. So I took yore jack befo' I turned yo' in. It's ready fo' yo' any time yo' want it. Still figger on going to Fo't Wo'th?"

"Shore do," promised Ray. "That's next week. Let's tell 'em."

"Keep powerful quiet if yo' aims to go," cautioned Slim. At the other's startled

glance, he asked: "Feel strong enough to hear news?"

"Shoot," nodded Benton. In a whisper, Slim confided the story of the officer who had shown such interest in Benton's ravings.

"That settles it," declared Ray. "No more running away. I'm going to win that rodeo purse and then go back East to prove some ideas that popped into my head while I was flattened here. If they are coming here for me, they'll get me in time. I must get out of here and to Forth Worth, and that ends my dodging. I'm going to fight for my good name."

"They'll grab yo' thar, shore," predicted Slim.

"They won't be looking for me where it's natural for me to be—at a rodeo," argued Ray. "There'll be so many cowboys there that the officers won't see me. 'They can't see the woods because of the trees,' as it were. Probably they'll look for me back on the mesa."

"If they send anybody out f'um the East after yo', he oughter get hyar abote to-morrow," pondered Slim. "I reckon we'd better fix us up a little get-away for said day."

They plotted in whispers, perfecting the details. As Slim was leaving, Ray asked:

"Slim, what do you know about Troy?"

"That's whar the collars and weights come f'um," grinned Slim. "Or mebbe so yo' means that place whar a ruckus was started by a feller stealing another man's wife when she invented the line 'So this is Paris!' Not that I'm insinuating any odorous comparisons."

"Go to the head of the class," chuckled Ray. "You've got the right place. That story is coming back to me now."

Without receiving any further explanation, Slim departed. When he returned to call on the following day, he wore a long, light overcoat which he did not remove when he entered the accident ward.

Their friendly nurse glided to Ray's bedside and inserted a thermometer in the patient's mouth. Without looking up from her watch and scarcely moving her lips, she informed him:

"Those men pretending to be visiting a man at the other end of the ward are the deputy sheriff and a man he brought here to-day."

She studied the thermometer with professional interest and hurried on. Slim took his time about looking around. The two men indicated, seemed indifferent to Ray's presence.

"Nurse, kin I put this pore wreck in this wheel chair?" called Slim, presently. "He's getting powerful tired of lying hyar and he ain't spry enough to stand on his two laigs."

The nurse nodded consent, for Slim had not waited permission, but was tenderly lifting Ray into the chair and wrapping a blanket around him. Ray appeared to be too weak to raise his head.

"Cheer up, pard. Yo'll be up in a week or two," promised Slim in loud, encouraging tones. "Shore, I'll roll yo' up and down the hall."

Turning his back on the watching men, he propelled the chair down the corridor leading to the door and then returned. The second time he rolled Ray toward the door, he stopped in a patch of sunshine and talked with the patient, keeping between him and the officers.

Ray was doing something beneath the blanket. Suddenly he threw it aside, revealing boots on his pyjamaed legs. Slim whipped off his overcoat and Ray slid into it as he made for the door, pulling a cap from one pocket.

The pair ran out and jumped into a car which had been waiting with its engine running. When they reached the railroad station, Ray was dressed in clothes Slim had provided. They had just time to get aboard a train which was preparing to pull out.

"Fort Worth next," whispered Benton. "And then—"

"Troy, huh?" chuckled Slim.

XIII.

FORT WORTH was alive with cowboys. The rodeo season was beginning. Off the ranges of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona, the top hands had swarmed to ride the broncs and the Brahmas, to wrestle the long-horns and to cast fancy loops.

The Southwestern cattle raisers were holding their annual stock show with the rodeo as the big thrill attraction. Tourists escaping the March cold of the Northeast were numerous in the fair grounds throng.

From beneath a two-gallon hat, Ray Benton viewed his world happily. It was good to step out into the open again, to cease being on the dodge, no matter what the consequences.

He had not taken the trouble to try riding under an assumed name here. That would have been useless in the heart of rodeoland where the tops were as well-known as the big stars of baseball or boxing are known elsewhere.

Down East all cowboys look alike, and any name would have done. But in Texas it would have been as impossible for Ray Benton to ride under a sobriquet as it would for Babe Ruth to try batting in New York as " John Smith."

On the opening day, Siren Jaxon had announced Ray Benton riding, and the cowboy had squared his shoulders proudly. Although the average man might have lingered in a hospital bed after that stunning kick, a rodeo contestant has to ignore such trifles.

Despite his injury, Ray weathered the rides he drew and qualified for the finals against impressive competition. Jeff Washburn of Wyoming and Harvey Coleman of Oklahoma were his most dangerous rivals, both first class top hands, while Polk Baird, former saddle bronc champion, was not to be underestimated.

Before his final ride, Ray went around to the corral to study the outlaw he had drawn. This was a new horse making its rodeo début, a wicked-looking sorrel that had demonstrated high tension man-hating which qualified him for use at championship cowboy contests.

As yet he was recorded simply by a number, 21, for drawing purposes. When a big hat containing paper slips had been passed around among the bronc riders qualifying for the finals, Ray had drawn 21. Later, a name would be assigned to this broncho by popular acclaim, when his peculiarities had inspired some happy title.

The big, heavy sorrel drew back his ears wickedly and showed his teeth when Benton looked him over, as all good buckaroos do before riding a horse.

" Look out fo' him," warned a chute handler. " He sent one of us boys away in a ambulance yestidday with a murdering kick."

" Then he'll give me a winning ride," asserted Ray with enthusiasm. For bronc riding contests are not won by merely staying on a bucker safely, but by staying on dangerously, qualifying throughout the most whirlwind, breath-taking ride.

" Got a name fo' that snail, Ray?" rumbled Siren Jaxon that afternoon as he stood on his platform above the chutes and pointed his megaphone at Benton. The latter stood with legs spraddled out just above the sorrel in the chute, his boot toes resting on the opposite bars of the narrow stall.

" Yes. Call him Trojan," suggested Benton, gently raising a stirrup and inserting a foot into it. The name had flashed out of the past. He would name a real bucker for that dummy horse.

" Ray Benton on—Trojan," boomed Jax. " Watch the chutes."

Benton dropped lightly into his saddle and, as the sorrel reared back to smash him against the bars, the gate swung open. With a powerful pull on the hackamore, Ray turned the animal's head toward the arena. The bronc went leaping out on its hind legs, twisting its neck and trying to bite its rider's legs.

Benton's heels shot forward to the withers and swung back, " scratching proper." Instantly, the tensed muscles of the animal's hind quarters hurled Trojan forward as from a released catapult. Bent like a horseshoe, the bronc landed so violently on its front hoofs with its hind heels lashing the air, that it nearly turned a somersault.

Jolted by that terrific landing, his injured head aching, Ray needed all his skill to maintain a firm seat.

Instantly came the murderous back throw. As the bronc heaved rearward, Ray thwarted him by pulling down his head. Baffled at this, the raging outlaw tried to fall sideways. Again a touch of the spurs and a pull on the hackamore prevented it.

Throughout it all, the bronc kept churning its body right and left with the powerful persistency of a concrete mixer. And through all, Benton demonstrated how man can rule the wildest horse with a rope halter, and skill and daring.

Packed with action and thrills, the minute ended finally with Ray still riding high, wide and handsome, while his hat waved triumphantly. When the judges' signal sounded, the sorrel had whirled and was racing at top speed blindly toward the front boxes.

A thunder of applause was cut short instantly by hushed expectancy as the powerful beast drove straight at the protective barrier of wood and meshed wire.

Dragging on the hackamore, Ray swerved the bronc from the head-on crash and at the same time leaped free, his hands grasping at the fence. Smashing half turned against the latter, the horse knocked itself down. Although it scrambled up instantly, the pick-up riders loop tightened around its neck and dragged it, kicking, away.

Clinging to the fence, Ray turned to the box. Into it a girl had run from another box. Now she stood within a foot of him, gazing directly into his face. Oblivious of everything else, they posed, Ray Benton staring spellbound down into the blanched face of Zelda Larimer.

XIV.

"RAY, are you hurt?" asked Zelda, finally breaking the silence.

She now appeared conscious that her impulsive act might have attracted the attention of thousands, yet her only spoken emotion was anxiety for the rider. Her rush from another section to the box where Benton landed had been witnessed by the big throng, and for a moment the two were the cynosure of all eyes. Then the wild riding on Brahma steers began and interest switched to the arena.

"I'm O. K.," answered Ray, dropping from his perch. "Can I see you privately for a few minutes?"

She nodded, and he hurried down to the gate where he entered the spectators' section. She joined him there and together they sought a secluded spot back of the chutes.

"I was coming back to you as soon as I won this contest," he announced. "I was coming back to tell you I didn't kill Mr. Larimer."

"I know you didn't," Zelda answered simply, her eyes glowing, never leaving his face. "I have found you, at last!"

"Were you looking for me?" asked Ray. "How did you find me?"

"Yes. I knew the rodeo season would begin here," she replied. "I inquired and when I learned that there was a rodeo here, I came to Fort Worth at once. But I was late in starting. My information was not exact, and I didn't arrive until to-day. You made a wonderful ride, Ray. And under your real name, too."

"Why not?" demanded Benton. "I am not guilty of any crime."

"That is what doubly convinced me, if I needed anything to make me sure," Zelda told him. "Your flight after the murder tended to draw suspicion to you, yet I believed all along that you did it to save me from being accused. Isn't that true?"

"Yes," he muttered, unable to evade the searching glance of her frank, inquiring eyes. "I knew you didn't—couldn't do such a thing; but the way it was represented to me, you might be put under suspicion. I knew you could clear yourself, but I didn't want you even to be suspected for a moment, because such suspicions stick in the minds of some people long after the law has been satisfied of your innocence."

"And yet you deliberately took that stigma on yourself!" she exclaimed, her gaze tender. "Why did you?"

"Because I'm just a roaming rodeo cowboy, while you're a fine girl, Zelda," he explained. "Also I'd caused unpleasantness between you and your husband, so it was up to me to make up for that."

"But you hadn't, really," she protested. "That was just an excuse, a pretext Jason found convenient. Although I was faithful to him, our marriage had been only a polite convention for two or three years. I was a young, inexperienced girl, and he was a clever, rather fascinating man fifteen years

my senior when we were married. All of our incompatabilities became apparent in the first year. Still we tried to make the best of it, and neither did anything to warrant divorce.

"That is why I plunged into my art, seeking solace in work. And Jason seemed quite agreeable to that arrangement until toward the last, when he developed an unaccountable jealous, suspicious streak. I was grieved by his murder, as I would be by the killing of any friend, but—nothing more."

"You convinced him that day I left you and Mr. Larimer alone in the studio?" asked Ray.

"Why, yes." She hesitated. "At least, he said he would be satisfied if I would go home with him that day. I wanted to wait and continue our work, but he was so insistent of a husband's right to demand that I leave at once that I locked up the place and went."

"Then there wasn't anybody else there with you?" demanded Benton eagerly. She shook her head. "And you didn't leave any one there when you locked up and went out? No? Then who, besides you and Larimer, had a key to that studio?"

"No one," Zelda replied. "I was very particular not to let any one but my husband have a key. Whenever I wanted the place put in order I sent one of the servants with my key. Why do you ask?"

"Because I returned to the studio in time to see your car drive off," said Benton. "Within a minute or two after you left. After reading the note on the door, I went out of the Mews, and, as I looked back, I saw Carstairs sneak out of your studio."

"V. C.? Why, he couldn't have been in there!" she exclaimed incredulously. "There was no place where he could have hidden."

"Then I've got it!" ejaculated Ray excitedly. Leaning so close that her curls brushed his lips, he whispered in her ear.

"I believe you are on the right track," she breathed. To mask her enthusiasm she powdered her nose and began arranging her hair by the aid of a vanity-case mirror.

"Then I'm going to New York openly to investigate and have this out," declared Benton aggressively.

"No, not yet," pleaded Zelda, laying one hand on his arm. "Not until you have shown me the sunset on the mesa and the peaks."

"Cain't that wait?" he inquired, surprised by her tone. "Why are you so anxious to go to the mesa country now?"

"Suppose I told you that it is because I want you to hide me there?" she asked, gazing keenly at him. "Suppose I tell you that, in spite of your sacrifice, suspicion has fallen on me, and that now *I* am being hunted for the murder of Jason Larimer?"

XV.

"THEN I'll give myself up at once," announced Benton, after a breathless pause. "All the more reason for my doing so. You must not suffer for this. I won't allow you."

"But, first—before you do anything else—you will take me into the mesa where you have hidden?" she insisted.

Reluctantly he nodded. Nothing would suit him more than to guide her through those wonderful table-lands fringed by the colorful peaks, but he felt that the mere appearance of flight would draw suspicion to her.

"You are so unquestioning!" she marveled. "You trust me without qualification. Is there anything I can tell you to help clear up this mystery? If so, ask me."

"I believe in you—that's enough," he replied simply. "You said you believed in me. Have I been indicted or accused of murder?"

"Not openly at least," Zelda answered. "Possibly secretly. All I know is that in the police investigation V. C. and our chauffeur swore they found you standing over Jason's body with your revolver in hand. Were you there?"

"Yes," admitted Ray. "I'd just arrived, found the door unlocked, walked in, and there was the body. I examined the gun—it wasn't warm. I'd been gone about two hours."

"Then why did you go back to the studio?" she asked gently, her eyes downcast. She expected an answer which would be an avowal—that he had returned seeking her.

"Why, you sent for me!" exclaimed Benton.

Seeing the astounded look in her eyes, he qualified: "At least, I received a note in your handwriting asking me to come at once."

A gasp of surprise escaped her.

"I never sent you a note!" she cried. "What did it say?"

That message was burned into his memory, and he recited:

"'Please come to my studio as soon as you can. There is something I want done quickly which only you can do. Zelda Oakman.'"

Brows puckered, Mrs. Larimer concentrated for a minute, her mind turned inward searching her memory. Then her face brightened.

"I remember!" she exclaimed. "That was what I wrote to Carstairs when I wanted him to get that dummy horse. The envelope wasn't addressed to you in the same handwriting?"

"I dropped it in the wastebasket at the hotel without noticing," admitted Ray. "I was so keen to go, I didn't compare. And your note just started off without addressing any one by name."

"That note might help to clear you and to link up V. C. as the one who lured you to the studio," pondered Zelda. "Did you keep it?"

"I burned it there," explained Benton. "No wonder Carstairs suggested my destroying any letters, knowing I had that!"

"You mean he suggested that you burn it?" she inquired.

"Yes. He said I ought to destroy anything—any letter—that might connect the murder with any one I cared for—" Benton suddenly came to an abrupt stop.

"One you cared for? Me?" cried Zelda softly. "Oh, Ray, you destroyed evidence that would have cleared you, to save me!"

"Who wouldn't?" muttered Benton, suddenly self-conscious.

"Ray Benton, aren't you going to come out flatfooted and say you care for me?" she demanded, and suddenly her cheeks colored. "Oh, why did you make me say it? I do believe I'm blushing."

Again she hastily consulted her vanity-case mirror.

"Very well, Mr. Benton, if you swear you know nothing of the murder, are you willing to testify?" she burst forth suddenly, in a swift change to a hard, cold voice. Ray stared, amazed. A look in her eyes checked the exclamation surging to his lips. "If so, give me your address."

So saying, she whipped a gold-bound little memorandum book from her vanity case and poised its pencil over a blank page. On this she wrote so that he alone could read:

> Don't betray that you know: V. C. has just sneaked up behind the chute back of us. He must have followed me here. Speak out and tell me where to meet you.

"That's my own ranch address, ma'am, but I'm riding for the B-Circle-J right now," said Ray, speaking clearly for Carstairs's benefit. "If you want to talk it over there, I'll meet you there two days from now. You go by railroad to the nearest town, and I'll come the back way across the mesa to pick up the horses we left at a ranch. Then I'll come down to the station for you. I'll write the directions."

Taking her pencil and book, he wrote. As he handed back the book, her hand gave his a quick, reassuring pressure.

"I've got to go now, Mrs. Larimer, and see about my prize money," Benton announced stiffly.

Never looking back, he walked briskly toward the gate from the stand into the arena.

His mind was alive with a plan which had flowered since Zelda warned him that Carstairs had followed her to Texas and was spying on them, trying to overhear. Nevertheless, Ray was not too engrossed to notice a husky man in Eastern clothes who stepped out from behind a grandstand pillar to intercept him at the gate. This was one of the two men who had looked him over at the hospital—the detective from New York.

His presence complicated matters. Quickly jumping to the gate, Benton

hurdled it. Instantly the officer followed into the arena.

Intent on shadowing his man, the detective had not noticed, as the cowboy had, that three vicious Brahmas, which had objected to being driven out of the arena, were running toward them.

At sight of Benton crossing the arena, the three Brahmas lowered their horns and charged. Ray ran straight across their path, while the Easterner hastily turned back.

As the foremost steer was almost upon him, Benton threw himself flat, and the animal passed over him, inflicting no injury but a glancing kick. Ray bounded up like a jack-in-the-box and escaped through the contestants' entrance on the far side of the chutes, while the detective was scrambling over the rail to safety. When the officer turned, his quarry was gone.

XVI.

EARLY the second day Benton reached the New Mexican ranch on the south side of the mesa, where Slim had left their horses *en route* to the hospital. Traveling a circuitous route, by train, horse, and automobile, Ray made his way there unmolested by officers.

He hated to run away after having determined to stand up and fight to prove his innocence, but he had promised to meet Zelda on the other side of the mesa. There was no way of changing this plan without publicly sending word to her, and that would link her name with his. He couldn't do that.

Even if he had wanted to send word to her by Slim, he did not know where she was staying. By that time she might have gone far on her way. Benton's last sight of her, as he turned back at the contestants' exit, showed Zelda climbing toward the rear aisle of the stand, while, at a discreet distance, Carstairs shadowed her.

The intervention of that New York officer had been bothersome. Yet Ray might have expected the detective to seek him at the rodeo, the most likely place to find him. Benton's margin of escape had been only a few yards. That man tracker would double back after him, he was sure.

Upon reaching the ranch, where the horses had been abandoned in favor of a car, Ray was greeted by the friendly ranchers.

"Shore didn't expect to see you back so soon, if at all," commented the ranchman over a meal to which he sat Benton down. "You looked powerful like a goner that morning."

Despite all urgings to linger, Ray saddled his mount and led Slim's horse. Buckling on his gun, he swung into the saddle and started up the trail to the top of the mesa.

After riding many miles he turned at a point far up and looked back toward the ranch. His keen eyes saw two men riding furiously toward it. One of those riders was not a Westerner, Ray could tell from the way he rode. That New York man tracker!

Undoubtedly the detective had searched Fort Worth and then had hurried by train to the place where Benton had been in the hospital. From there he had worked back along the railroad to the station where Ray and Slim boarded a train from a flivver. Probably he had enlisted that deputy who had sent the tip East, and now the two were not more than an hour behind—maybe less.

What if they overtook him before he reached Zelda?

They must not do that, Ray decided. Climbing the slope to the mesa, he had eased his horses along. Now, coming out on the high table-land, he pushed them forward at their best speed.

Riding by day, he covered this route much faster than Slim had been able to do in the darkness while supporting the injured cowboy. Hours later he came upon the vanguard of the B-Circle-J herd, being moved up on the new grazing lands.

Cowboys waved detainingly or galloped up to greet "John Dogan" with questions about where he and Slim had been. Benton asked where Gates, the foreman, was, and, learning he was at the ranch house, hurried on without explaining.

Late afternoon found Benton riding up to the ranch house. He had unsaddled his weary cayuses before turning them into the horse corral, when Gates strode up.

"Whar you been?" he demanded. "Whar's Slim Stanton?"

"Slim took me to a hospital," explained Ray, naming the city. "A broomtail kicked me insensible. Nigh fractured my skull. Slim carried me down to the railroad on the other side of the mesa and took me where I could be fixed up."

Nettled by Gates's tone and attitude, he made his explanation curtly and stared at the foreman, wondering what was behind it all.

"Whar's Slim, then?" persisted Gates.

"I don't know," replied Benton. "I left him at Fort Worth."

"I thought you said he took you to—" began the foreman.

"He did. He went on to the rodeo from there," explained Ray.

"Why didn't he bring you here when you were hurt?" demanded Gates in a suspicious voice. "Mighty strange he'd ride off without saying anything or without bringing you this way."

"I was unconscious, and he wanted to get me to a hospital as pronto as possible," retorted Benton. "He'll tell you."

"If he ever comes back," commented Gates. Unexpectedly he popped the question: "Is your real name John Dogan?"

"No," snapped Benton. "What of it?"

"Thought not," remarked the foreman. "Know a man by the name of Cale Remus? Hah! That hit the bull's-eye, didn't it?"

"I don't know any such man," asserted Benton. "At least, not by that name. Why?"

"He was here looking for you the day you disappeared," replied Gates. "Mighty mysterious about why he wanted you. Been back two-three times since. Last time, said he'd come to-day, and that, if you was here, for me to have you wait."

Then Remus had followed Slim here from the Bar-6-Bar Ranch. Ray thought of the two officers riding on his trail.

"I'm not stopping," he announced. "I have got to get my hoss and push on to town, down to the railroad. After that—"

His sentence halted, unfinished. Gates had turned suddenly, his right hand aiming his gun from the hip.

"You're staying, Dogan, or whatever your name is," he declared quietly. Benton raised his hands. That threatening gun was only a few feet from his body. To make a move for his own gun would be suicidal. "Thar's several things to be cleared up. This Cale Remus business, your name, whar Slim is at, if alive, and what's it all about. I'm a special deputy, and it's my duty to hold you. What's your rush to ride on?"

Ray stood silent. Staring across the foreman's shoulder, he saw a head peer around the side of a shed and then dodge back.

"Another mystery, eh?" began Gates.

Startlingly a revolver shot sounded behind him. Others followed in rapid succession—six altogether.

At the first shot Gates involuntarily turned his head. Instantly Benton's revolver prodded against his ribs.

"Drop that gun," ordered Ray coldly. He kicked the foreman's surrendered weapon behind him and snatched it up. "I would hate to do anything, Gates. I won't, if you let me alone."

"Whee! I hit a tin can twice in six shots," bragged Chuck Condon, the cook, stepping into view. Well-simulated amazement swept his boastful expression from his face. "Why! Whut's up?"

"Saddle my hoss pronto," snapped Ray, with pretended fierceness.

Ten minutes after he had galloped madly away toward the railroad town twenty miles distant, two weary riders on sweating horses turned in at the ranch house, demanding Ray Benton.

XVII.

BEFORE Ray had gone half the way, distant gunshots ahead came to his ears. Urging his horse to its best speed, he galloped recklessly ahead, heedless of the footing.

With his six gun held ready, and giving the horse its head, the cowboy plunged on. Had he been too late? Was Zelda Larimer in the range of those shots?

Abruptly he came upon a riderless horse slowing down from a frightened dash. At sight of Benton galloping toward it, the

animal turned around and ran back until it reached a thick clump of mesquite bordering the road. There it stopped, its head drooping as it turned to the left.

Lying half hidden in the clump was the body of a man in Western riding costume, to all appearances a well dressed cowboy. He lay on his face, showing his back perforated by three bullet holes.

Flinging himself from the saddle, Benton ran to the side of the man and raised his head. He was alive but gasping desperately, while the gray pallor had spread beneath his outdoor tan. About forty, Ray judged, wiry, sun-baked, and shaped to the saddle.

"Who got you?" asked Benton, holding the man as gently as he could. "Who are you, and what happened? Before it is too late."

"Four gunmen got me from behind," gasped the dying man. His dark eyes opened wearily, then stared in amazement. "The very man! You are Ray Benton."

"Right," admitted Ray, astonished. "And you?"

"I'm Cale Remus," whispered the mortally wounded one, while Benton's grasp flexed in his surprise. "I've been looking for you."

"How did you know me?" asked Benton.

Painfully Remus pulled a folded paper from an inside pocket—drawing paper bearing a speaking likeness of Ray, sketched by Zelda.

"Mrs. Larimer sent me this when she hired me to find you," Remus continued. "She asked an old Western friend of her granddaddy to put her in touch with a trailer who knew the country out here—and I was the man chosen. I've been after you for three months, and when I followed Slim Stanton here I was sure you'd come back again."

"Then you weren't going to arrest me?" asked Ray.

"My job was to find you and tell you that she believed in your innocence and wanted to come to you," panted Remus with an effort. "I wasn't to tell any one else why I wanted you. That made it hard, because your friends closed up when I fished for information. You've sure got some friends.

"To-day I was at the railroad station when the train from the East came in. I went thinking you might drop off. Instead, there was a girl. While I was standing back where I could see every one who got off, I spied an Easterner in riding clothes hop off the smoker, accompanied by a border mongrel. They dodged into a saloon across from the water tank—you know, a tough joint. When I looked around that woman had gone.

"This afternoon I was hanging around the hotel when a bad-looking *hombre* come in and asked for Mrs. Larimer. She come down from her room. After this fellow talked with her and went out, I went over and introduced myself. This *hombre* had told her that he came from you, that you didn't dare come into town, and that she was to go with him to meet you out this way. He promised to come back with hosses in half an hour, as soon as she could dress for riding, and she was to meet him on the edge of town.

"That didn't sound right to me, but she was all for getting to you. I had two hosses there, my mount and my lead hoss, so I got me another saddle while she made a quick change. Then we started for the B-Circle-J by a roundabout course. They must have circled ahead of us, and were waiting, for they shot me out of the saddle here, from ambush, and left me for dead. There's four of 'em, all hard birds, and they went that way, taking the gal."

"Cale, I hate to leave you, but I must save her," cried Ray, springing up. "Two officers are riding this way. They'll 'tend to you."

"Go," ordered the dying man. "You must save her."

Hurdling into the saddle Ray spurred down the road. Some precious minutes had been used to hear Remus's news, but on the other hand the gunmen could not travel at top speed while burdened with a prisoner. With this in mind Ray urged his horse to a furious gallop, determined to overtake the gunmen.

His gaze held steadily to the road ahead, where fresh tracks guided him. Occasion-

ally he scanned the horizon in front of him, all the while spurring on his mount regardless of his own peril. His mind held only one thought: He must overtake the gunmen and save Zelda!

Two miles were covered at breakneck speed before he came in sight of five riders loping ahead. Zelda and her captors, without doubt. As he raced toward them they caught sight of the lone pursuer.

Immediately two of the killers turned and dashed back toward him. The other pair hurried on with the captive young woman.

Never wavering from his path, Benton charged straight at the two desperadoes riding toward him. At sight of his unfaltering dash the sinister pair started firing, and then they jerked their horses to a standstill.

Instantly Ray had their measure. They were foot gunmen, barroom deadshots who were fast and straight with their guns when standing, but who had not mastered the art of shooting from the fighting top of a galloping pony. Nor were they accurate in winging a swiftly-moving rider, their next attempts proved.

One bullet knocked off Ray's big hat, while another burned across his pony's shoulder, causing the animal to shy violently. Spurring the horse back to the charge, Benton swept down on the two men blocking his path. At a standstill they offered perfect targets. They fired—wild.

Ray's gun blazed—once, twice—the two shots coming so close together that they seemed almost as one report. One of the opposing pair was knocked backward out of his saddle as though by a terrific blow, while the other gunman, grasping his saddle-horn, crumpled over it and slid, clawing, from his horse to the ground.

Without stopping a moment to cast a glance at the fallen pair, Ray tore past them.

Suddenly the tracks he was following turned off the road into a dim trail, overrun by brush which covered the region. Benton turned in at that point.

He knew this trail. It led to an abandoned homestead shack set back a mile from the main road. While punching for the B-Circle-J outfit he had been up this trail as far as the deserted house.

The trail wound back and forth between clumps of mesquite, making it impossible for him to see ahead more than a hundred yards. At the same time this screened his advance from hostile eyes—unless an ambush awaited him.

When, reckoning from his memory of the place, Benton had ridden as near to the house as he could without being seen from it, he dismounted. Leaving his horse beside the trail, he swiftly slipped through the brush, keeping to cover while he circled around the house.

Peering out, he saw three sweating horses standing at the hitching rack. As Benton prepared to slip forward from cover, he saw another man sneaking around to the door of the homestead shack, a man in Eastern riding clothes. As this man poised with one hand on the latch and the other gripping an automatic pistol, the level beam of the setting sun lighted the face of Vivian Carstairs.

Only for an instant. Then Carstairs hurled open the door and burst in, shouting in a commanding tone:

"You dogs! Release that girl!"

His automatic swung up to a straight arm from the shoulder. Then the shack roared with the report of a shot.

XVIII.

WEARING a sickly, surprised expression on his face, Carstairs sagged forward, his automatic dropping from his grasp while he clapped his hands weakly over his heart. A second or two before he had swung his pistol forward with a flourish, in the heroic manner of the duelist.

The swarthy, stocky man directly before him as Vivian Carstairs entered the door had started to raise his hands. So had the other—the tall, sinewy gunman with a big mustache, and with a knife scar on his right cheek. As his right hand started to lift it executed a lightning move.

Fire streamed on a line from his thigh. Surprised by a style of gun-fighting for which he was unprepared and against which he was helpless, Carstairs collapsed to the

floor, hit in two vital spots, and gasping: "Double-crossed!"

Immediately the two gunmen leaped upon him and jerked the mortally wounded man clear inside the room. Pressing against the far wall, Zelda Larimer watched the scene in fascinated horror.

"You dirty double crosser!" spat the knife-marked man, kicking Carstairs's pistol out of his reach.

Vindictive hatred was in the fellow's words and looks as he stooped over the dying man. His companion glanced hastily out of the door and turned, nodding reassuringly. The spokesman of the pair continued, his tone a bellow of rage and derision:

"You would frame us, hey? All you wanted us to do was to stage a fake abduction so you could pose as a hero, hey? Stand off the wild Western bad men with your gat and make a hit with this romantic girl, hey? That's all, huh?

"You've taken us in good and proper. No danger for us, and we get well paid before and better after for doing it, hey? Well, we done it. And then you double cross us and send us into a trap with your men shooting us up all along the line. We knocked over one of 'em, anyhow, and our pals ought to be here any minute with word that they finished off the other fellow. You can't play funny with us, and we don't mean maybe."

"I don't know what you mean," groaned Carstairs feebly.

"I suppose you didn't have men ready to jump us," sneered the killer. "Well, you've posed as a hero, and now you got what's coming to you. When you had Pete here come with you from Fort Worth to get you some bad men for yore fool game, you oughter found out that we play for keeps. Now we're going to take what you got on you, and we're going to keep the gal until her folks shell out. She's rich—you said so. Why do you suppose we risk coming here, where we agreed to let you stick us up in yore comedy, except to git you? After being double crossed we're a going to finish you. As for this gal—"

Leaping up, he snapped his gun toward the door, his partner doing the same. Through the entrance surged Ray Benton, a forty-five in either hand, both spitting fire.

The rickety shack rocked to the roar of the guns. Before their echoes ceased ringing in Zelda's ears she was caught in Ray's arms and was staring spellbound at the cowboy's reassuring face.

"I didn't dare take any chances, with you in line of fire," he apologized, with only a passing glance at the two gunmen sprawled motionless on the floor.

His sharp ears caught a sound of muffled hoof-beats. Against his breast he held the girl, while she buried her face on his shoulder to shut out the scene. "I'd have called on 'em to surrender and have given 'em a chance to shoot it out if it hadn't been for fear you'd get hit. We have got to get to Carstairs before he cashes in."

Gently disengaging her clasp, the cowboy stepped to where Carstairs lay and knelt beside him, feeling the man's feeble heart beats.

"You've only got a few ticks left, Carstairs," he said, speaking clearly in the dying man's ear. I evened up for you. It's Benton."

Carstairs's pain-filled eyes opened, and a gloating look filled them. With a ghastly grin he gasped:

"Now you'll be accused of killing the chief witness against you in the Larimer case.

"The man who lured Zelda out, said he was your messenger," continued Carstairs, with an effort. "It will still look like I was killed trying to save her. That will cinch the case against you when I am found here dead."

"Carstairs, don't you understand? You're going west," said Benton, speaking carefully. "This is no time for hate. You've got to clear up the Larimer case before you die. Get it off your soul, man. I know you killed Larimer."

"Then why bother me?" gasped Carstairs. "You are one to worry. You are accused of that job."

"Don't hold back from doing justice at such a moment as this, V. C.," pleaded Zelda. "You once said you loved me. Prove it by confessing."

"And clear this cow hand so he can have you?" sneered Carstairs. "Put you in his arms, when I hate him? Not a chance!"

"We only want your corroboration of details," persisted Ray patiently. "You had the motives—hatred of Larimer because he had blackballed you and had you barred from clubs, and also the hope that you could win his rich widow. You've been living by your wits, flying high and getting badly in debt. You were in the studio when Larimer told Zelda about blackballing you, after you had tipped him by telephoning to spy on us. What you heard then maddened you to plan a killing that would be profitable to you and that you could put on me.

"You worked on Larimer's jealousy and hid him in the studio to spy on us after arranging to come back and let him out. What he heard then convinced him that you had lied and that we had done nothing wrong. But that didn't matter to you then because you went back prepared to kill Larimer after Zelda left the studio. You had him helpless and killed him. Then you went out through that yard instead of through the alley, hurried uptown and met his chauffeur where you'd arranged to meet him. You drove back with him, ready to catch me.

"We know how you lured me to the studio—with that note Zelda had written to you. Later, you asked me to destroy it—the evidence linking you to the murder, and to go away so that suspicion would rest on me. From Larimer's car, you watched at a distance until you saw me go into the studio. You had left the door unlocked for me to go inside unsuspectingly. Then you followed with that chauffeur in time for you two to catch me standing over Larimer's body with my pistol in hand. As far as the chauffeur could see, I had just killed Larimer. No wonder you were so noble about being willing to help me escape—to take the blame.

"You trailed Zelda out here fearing that if we ever got together and compared what we knew, we would figure it all out. When we saw you spying at Fort Worth, I asked Zelda to come here knowing you would follow. I hoped to get you on my own stamping ground where I could force the truth out of you. But your own dirty scheme to discredit me and to make you a hero with her has brought on a flareback that ends my efforts and ends you as well. What I haven't figured out is: how you worked upon Jason Larimer to walk into your trap when he knew what you were."

"For such a bright cowboy, that ought to be simple," jeered Carstairs, between groans. "Without admitting anything, I might suggest that a jealous husband is putty in the hands of any man who offers to show him positive proof of his wife's unfaithfulness. But all your clever guesses don't explain how Larimer or I or any one could have hidden in that studio to spy, or why he had to have me come back to let him out. That doorlock opens by a knob from the outside as well as by key from the outside. Answer me that, and maybe I'll listen to you."

"I saved that to show you we know all," stated Benton. "You hid Larimer in the hollow inside of that dummy hoss—that old Trojan hoss, same as they did at the siege of Troy. You figured I was just a cowboy who wouldn't get your drift when you tagged him 'Trojan.' Its back had a tight-fitting lid with an almost invisible seam. I reckon when they used it in that show, maybe an actor was inside it to make it a talking hoss because there were tiny pin holes in the side for air—or spying.

"Anyway, you were in it when it was delivered to the studio, when you heard Larimer tell Zelda how he blackballed you. You'd forgotten that a saddle would hold down the lid, but lucky for you that day, I took off the saddle, just as I would from a real horse—sort of force of habit. That gave you your reason for getting Larimer to give you his key that lunch time when you hid him inside the Trojan bronc and resaddled it. You convinced him he needed your help to get out. And when he started to get out, you killed him. You sponged off the dummy hoss, but not quite clean. In examining it I found the pin holes. That enough?

"Now, Carstairs, you've only got a few minutes left to live with those wounds. You'll soon be beyond human punishment,

so you've nothing to fear here. Why not go clean? Right this wrong. If we write out a few lines of confession, won't you sign it?"

"Nothing doing," wheezed Carstairs, trying to raise his head. With a last burst of triumphant hate, his voice shrilled: "Why shouldn't I admit it to you two? It gives me a last kick. I did it, and I'm even with Larimer and you at one shot. I won't sign any confession—why should I clear you? It will make my revenge sweeter to tell you I killed Larimer, knowing you can't do anything about it. Your repeating it won't be any good to you. You're both suspects, co-conspirators, and your unsupported word won't be taken. I killed Larimer—but you'll go up the river for it. Your knowing it won't help you. Nobody else knows."

"You're wrong, Carstairs. We know," came a voice from the doorway. Followed by the New Mexican deputy, the New York officer walked in. "How are you, Mrs. Larimer? Hello, Carstairs. Remember me—Lieutenant Carney from headquarters? I met you on this case. We heard it all. This cowboy knew we were listening, so he led you on. Sheriff Barlow and I can make depositions as to this confession that will clear you, Benton. It looks like Carstairs has gone where we have no extradition agreement."

Ray was giving the officers the story of the fight at the shack in a few packed sentences, when he felt his arm being tugged. In a whisper, Zelda urged:

"Take me out of here, Ray. I want to see the sunset on the mesa—alone with you."

THE END

THE DEEP SEA PUNCHER

THIS is the tale of Samuel Dale,
Top hand of the Flying V,
Who left the land by the Rio Grande
In order to go to sea.

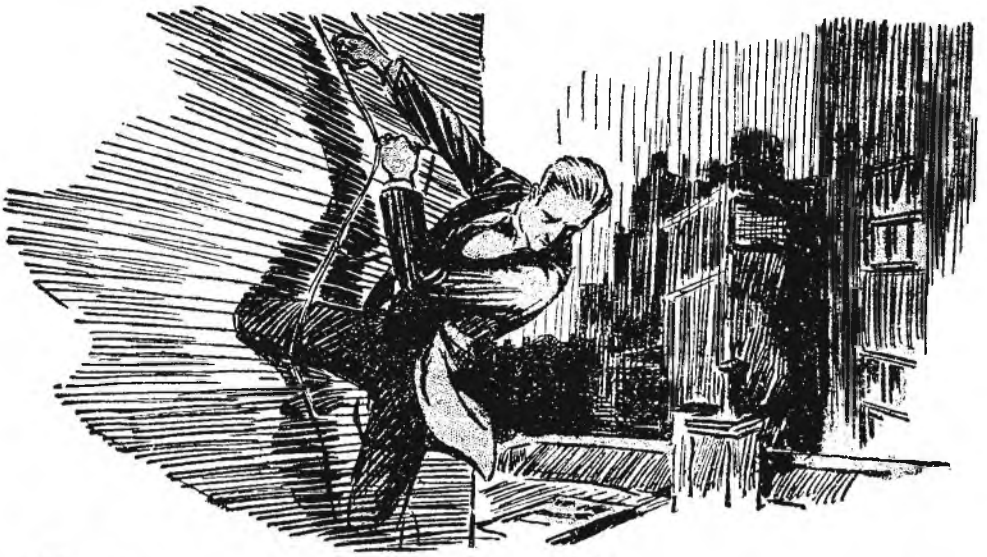
He changed for a cap his Stetson hat,
His chaps for a breeches' buoy;
He traded his quirt for a sailor's shirt,
His bronc for a windlass coy.

He spliced the sails to the gray mare's tails
And brought them well to heel.
He roped in their courses the wild sea horses,
And branded the steering wheel.

He gave a twitch and a diamond-hitch
To his seaman's pants, and then,
Being asked for a chantey, he raised the ante,
And stacked the deck again.

And this cowboy's lament as they homeward went
Back from a foreign strand,
Was, "How will they dream what I've really seen
Down by the Rio Grande?"

D. S. McIlwraith.



The Great Commander

BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE SEAL OF SATAN."

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

KING J. NELSON, multibillionaire, gains industrial control of the United States. He has taken advantage of the unusual national conditions existent since 1930 to work quietly with his great inherited and acquired wealth and his genius for organization, making puppets of other captains of industry, of Congress, the President, and the ostensible rulers of England and France. Now on top of the world in a material way, he craves hero worship. Through a mammoth though subtle publicity campaign he achieves this new prestige. Nelson is made the man of the hour when, by reason of his secret power, but presumably through the force of his personality, he settles a general strike he had really created for this opportunity. A powerful newspaper owned by Nelson demands that he become Dictator to keep the country from again tottering to the verge of revolution, claiming that the original form of constitutional government had proved inadequate in the great emergency Seemingly forced into the rôle, Nelson becomes Dictator, but calls himself Commander. His vanity craves a path to actual kingship. His one confidante, the daughter he loves deeply, knows of his ambitions and frowns upon them, while youthful Congressman MacGregor, in love with her, has suspicions of the real facts in the case.

CHAPTER IX.

LOVE FINDS A WAY.

JOHN MACGREGOR went home and to bed, but early next morning he was back at the Madison Avenue building with the intention of renting an office, if one happened to be vacant, and moving in at once.

It was a huge building, with twelve elevators, a vast entrance hall, a half dozen arrogant uniformed attendants, and a desk marked "information," at which sat a small girl, who by no possibility could know much about anything.

MacGregor paused in front of the building directory to scan the names of the tenants. Perhaps he might know somebody who was already in possession of an office. He ran down the list of names until he came to the W's, and was about to turn away when his eye caught a familiar name:

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 3.

Williams, Gregg G., attorney and counselor at law, Room 1018.

Gregg Williams was a friend who had been a fellow assemblyman in Albany, but who had abandoned politics for the more profitable occupation of practicing law.

John entered an elevator and was lifted with lightning speed to the tenth floor. Emerging, he looked over the floor plan.

It was a narrow building, a city block long, but shallow. The corridor was at the back, lighted by electricity, the elevators ran up the back wall, not a window visible.

There were no offices at the back of the building, but there was a door between the two batteries of elevators, which gave entrance to a small chamber, probably a room used by the cleaners for storage of mops and pails. That must be the room with a little window looking on the garden.

There was nobody in the long corridor; he was free to inspect the door. It opened with a Yale key, difficult to duplicate.

Shrugging his shoulders, MacGregor located the office of his friend, and entered a big, well-lighted room, the front of which was partitioned off into two small private offices. A pretty stenographer sat in the outer office.

"I'm a friend of Mr. Williams. Has he come in yet?"

"No, sir," she said. "Won't you sit down? He will be in any minute, now."

"Thanks, I shall. I haven't seen him for four or five years."

"Indeed," she said coldly. Evidently the man was trying to get her into conversation, so she began to tap upon her typewriter.

MacGregor picked up the morning paper —he had been too nervous to glance at one as yet—and he frowned to read under a four column head on the front page that King J. Nelson was arriving in New York for a conference with the leaders of several corporations, would go to his residence, which he was visiting for the first time since he had been summoned to take the helm of State, and hold a reunion with his beautiful daughter—"America's lovely princess," the reporter had written with sickening gush.

Nelson at home would mean an increase of guards, an augmentation of obstacles; too bad. On the other hand, if he could see Sydney, if she were of the same mind as before, they could confront the Commander and demand a showdown. All the more reason for reaching her side at once.

He read that the arrival of the Commander would be the occasion of a great parade, a spontaneous expression by the city of gratitude to the man who had saved her and was protecting her.

There were surmises of what concessions he would wring from the unwilling corporation chiefs for the benefit of the people. On the second page there was a four-column photograph of Sydney Nelson in a ball gown. Even the inky engraving could not dim her loveliness. He gazed at the picture fatuously.

He was smiling foolishly when the door opened and Gregg Williams bustled in, a brief case in his hand, an air of "get there" about him which marked the rising young attorney.

"Wow!" exclaimed Williams. "You old son-of-a-gun! I heard you were back from Ireland. It's about time you looked me up. It certainly handed me a laugh when they appointed you commissioner to Ireland."

"Why?" grinned MacGregor.

"The idea of a Scotchman giving things away."

"You forget I am half Irish. Of course, it hurts the Scotch part of me."

"Come into my holy of holies and tell me all your experiences. You don't look a day older. I bet you had a better time in Ireland than we had over here for the last eight months."

"You're all right now," said MacGregor," as they seated themselves. "You are on the brink of a wave of prosperity, thanks to Nelson."

"Yep," said Williams. "He's a great man. He certainly brought order out of chaos in quick time."

"H-m!" grunted MacGregor. "Suspiciously quick time."

Williams rose and shut his door. "What the devil do you mean?" he demanded.

"To tell the truth, I don't quite know."

"Yes," nodded Williams. "It was a slick job; almost too slick. We seem to have sold our birthright for a mess of pottage. You are a Congressman, too. Congressmen are obsolete. You are a fifth wheel on a coach. How do you like it?"

"Personally I don't care. Everybody I've met over here loves having a dictator."

"Yes," admitted the lawyer. "We had a terrible time. The Government broke down, and Nelson jumped in and set everything right in a jiffy, but he played hob with our laws. As a lawyer I admire the results but regret the methods."

"What's going to happen?" asked John.

"Oh, I suppose he'll get things going smoothly, then step down, receive the thanks of a grateful country, retire covered with glory—you know."

"But suppose he doesn't?"

"He has to."

"Why? Suppose he likes power. Wants to keep it. Who's to throw him out?"

"You know I have thought of that," Williams admitted. "We placed our necks under his heel and no mistake. I don't know how we're going to get rid of him if he doesn't want to go, unless somebody assassinates him. That's unthinkable."

"The greatest patriot in Rome assassinated Cæsar," John reminded him. "However, I didn't come to see you to start a revolution. I'm in a difficulty, and I need your advice and assistance."

"Want money?"

"No. I've got all I need. I'm in love."

"With my stenographer? She's a peach."

"Don't be an ass. With Sydney Nelson."

Williams whistled in surprise, then looked grave.

"Lucky I didn't talk treason. The prospective son-in-law of the Commander! I congratulate you."

"Keep them for a while. The trouble is that I can't get word to Sydney. She's practically a prisoner. I've got to see her."

"What can I do? I'm not on the visiting list next door."

"Are you afraid to do something that might in some remote way get you into difficulty with Nelson?"

"I'm not afraid of him. After all, I'm an American citizen, and we don't consider this fellow the king, at least not yet. I'm for love's young dream."

John grasped his hand gratefully. "You're a brick!" he declared. "All I want of you is the privilege of hiding in your office until night."

"You're welcome. But what for, for heaven's sake?"

"Because I have got to see Sydney, and the only way I can get into the garden is from this building; all other sides of the estate are guarded."

"But you can't get in from this building. There are no windows on that side of it, no doors. Are you planning to blow a hole in the wall?"

"There are windows. Very likely you haven't noticed them, but the little room between the elevators on each floor has a little window which overlooks the garden. What is that room?"

"Search me. I never noticed it."

"I imagine it is used for storage, and for the convenience of the cleaners. I've got to get into the room on this floor and go down by way of the window."

"It's a hundred feet to the ground from this floor."

"I'll have a rope ladder. It all depends on whether I can get through the window."

Williams was thoughtful. "The cleaners come on about eight in the evening, two women to each floor. The janitor wanders around to see they are on the job. You are sure to get caught."

"If I can get a key to the room on this floor I can be in the garden in half an hour. The trouble is that the room has a Yale lock."

"If you are crazy, I'll be crazy, too," said Williams. "I'll not go down your rope ladder, but I'll boss the job from up here; maybe I can save you from breaking your neck, and I'll hold the fort until you get back, if you have to run for it."

"No, no. There may be serious trouble; I won't have you mixed up in it."

"I am mixed up in it. You got me in when you entered the office. It's a romance, that's what it is—*Romeo* and *Juliet* reversed. You go down to her, instead of

climbing up. You are liable to get shot. There are sure to be dicks prowling around in the garden."

"I doubt it. They are all on the outside. It's a question of getting the key."

"When do you want to try it?"

"To-night. There's no moon."

"O. K. I'll work late to-night."

"I won't forget this, old man," John assured him.

"Forget it, now. I get a kick out of defying the power of old Nelson. I had an ancestor who helped throw the tea overboard in Boston Harbor. Do you plan to bring the girl back up the ladder?"

"Oh, no, I want to see her, find out how she feels, tell her how I feel. Just a social call. Not worth risking your entanglement in a mess, old man. Better reconsider."

"I'm in."

They shook hands. "I'll be back about five o'clock with a big suit case. I'll have about a hundred feet of rope ladder if I can buy it, and some tools. I'll find out if there is any way to pick a Yale lock."

"Meanwhile I'll be working on that problem. Trot along now."

Gratified that he had found a companion in his enterprise, MacGregor set off. Williams drummed on his desk for a few moments, then stepped into the hall and strolled down toward the little storeroom.

CHAPTER X.

A DESCENT IN THE DARK.

As he approached, the door of the room opened, and the assistant superintendent of the building emerged with a small paper box. Gregg saw him hail an elevator which was dropping past, enter, and shoot downward.

Turning quickly, he observed that the man had not shut the door; furthermore, he had left his key in the lock, and hanging to it were a bunch of keys on a steel chain.

Although he was a good lawyer, he was not deliberate in his actions at all times. He realized that a remarkable opportunity had been afforded him, a chance which was unlikely to come again. He pulled the key out of the lock, removed it from the chain, then closed the door and dropped the bunch of keys to the floor. He reasoned that the janitor's assistant had probably secured what he wanted from the room, but had forgotten his keys when he saw the elevator at hand.

If he returned, he would suppose that the door had been closed by a draft of air, and the slam had knocked the key out of the lock. In all probability he would pick up his bunch of keys without inspecting them and might not miss the particular key for a day or two.

Thus what had seemed to himself and MacGregor as the most difficult part of the task had turned out to be most easy.

At five MacGregor entered with a big bag, which he deposited on the floor of the private office.

"I had the darnedest time finding a rope ladder long enough to do the trick," he explained. "I finally got a sailmaker to splice three ladders together; it takes up a lot of room."

"Did you ever go down a hundred feet of rope ladder?" asked his friend.

"No, but I know I can if I have to. I'm more worried about getting the key to that room."

In a casual manner Williams drew the little brass key from his pocket and dropped it upon his table.

"Try that," he suggested.

John's face lit up. "You mean to say you have a key? How the deuce did you get it?"

Williams explained, and accepted congratulations with an air of modesty.

"To get along in this world, my friend," he declared, "you have to think quickly and have no scruples. You are in luck, too, upon the evening you selected. It's going to rain, and it will be pitch black. As the cleaners get here about eight o'clock, we'd better get into the room about seven. It will be night by seven thirty at this season of the year."

"I'll never forget this."

"Rubbish! If you land in jail I'll defend you and charge you a fat fee. You can buy my dinner. We'll go out at six and return at seven."

At seven precisely they looked into the hall, saw that it was deserted, and, carrying the big bag, they opened the storeroom door and slipped inside, closing it behind them. As the door was solid, there was no danger of the electric light being seen from the corridor. John gave vent to an exclamation of dismay when he saw the window. It was too small.

"Dished!" he exclaimed.

"Wait a minute. It's about fourteen by twelve, divided by the crossbar. If we could get the frame out, you could squeeze through. Let's see."

The window was set in a steel frame, and the frame was fastened into the side of the building.

"If it's riveted, we're sunk; if screws, we can get them out," declared John. "Let's have a look."

To their satisfaction, they found that the frame was held in place by long screws driven into the cement walls. He congratulated himself for his forethought in fetching tools. In a moment he had hammer and pliers and a long screwdriver, and was hard at work.

Since the architects had not supposed that anybody who was inside the building would be interested in removing the windows, the screws did not prove an insurmountable obstacle; but it was a good twenty minutes before the two men lifted out the steel window in its frame, leaving a gaping hole in the wall about sixteen inches by twenty.

John had the end of the rope ladder in his hand, and began to pay it out while his friend sought for means of making it fast. He secured it to steel cabinets, filled with supplies which made them heavy enough to stand the weight of three or four men.

"Pull it up, as soon as you find no weight on the end of it," instructed the adventurer. "Then stick the window in place, and beat it."

"But how are you going to get back?"

"I'll walk out. Nobody will stop me, because they will suppose I have a right to be there. If I see Sydney she will fix everything. If not, I'll brazen it out. I may want to do this again, and I don't want to betray my method of entering."

"For Heaven's sake, take care of yourself."

"Don't worry. I have too much at stake. It's dark enough outside now."

"Oh, they won't see you! Good luck!"

Cautiously he got upon the window opening, then turned on his stomach and lowered himself, fishing around with his legs until his feet struck a rung of the ladder.

For one who is not accustomed to climbing, there is nothing so unsatisfactory as a rope ladder. The rungs of this one were strong enough, but rather difficult footing. John had voyaged in airplanes—who had not in 1934?—but sitting in a comfortable car in mid-air and swinging upon a slender piece of rope unsecured at the bottom are entirely different experiences.

In a sense it was fortunate that it was pitch dark, as he could see nothing and was spared the terrifying sight of the gulf below him. It was raining, and the rope quickly became wet and slippery, but he had rubbed his hands with resin, and he clung with a desperate grip.

In no haste, he let himself down with infinite precaution, but as he descended twenty or thirty feet below the window his weight caused the ladder to begin to swing like a pendulum, a very sickening sensation indeed. Besides, it twisted, and he found himself being bumped against the cement wall of the building with more force than was pleasant.

However, a man in such a position, realizing that to lose his grip is certain death, will put up with many inconveniences and stand a lot of banging before he will let go.

Slowly, steadily he lowered himself. Time passed—it seemed to him that he had been an hour on the ladder before he groped with his right foot for a lower rung and found none. He quaked with fright, then realized that he must have come to the bottom of the ladder. He looked down, saw nothing, he lowered himself with his hands until there were no more rungs. Had he miscalculated the height of the window? Would he drop twenty or thirty feet and be killed?

The only way to find out was to drop, but he lacked courage, and clung by his

hands for several minutes before he dared let go. He braced himself, prepared to fall as lightly as possible, breathed a prayer, then dropped.

His feet struck ground less than six inches below, caught him stiff-kneed, and he toppled over in a heap, shaken up, but thankful.

There was a lot of shrubbery at that end of the garden. It happened that he had landed in a gravel path. He picked himself up and moved cautiously. There were lights in the bungalow, and the big house beyond was brightly illuminated. He decided to walk carelessly, as though he were a guest enjoying a stroll in the rain. He approached the bungalow without encountering anybody, stepped upon the little porch, and tried the door gingerly.

It opened at his touch. There was no servant in the hall, and he stepped in. He looked into the living room, which was dimly lighted, while a wood fire burned in the fireplace. Nobody there.

He passed into the back room, which was dark, then looked into the dining room, also dark. He did not have the assurance to go upstairs, lest he encounter Sydney in a state of undress. However, he remembered that her father had arrived that day. Most likely he was entertaining notables at dinner; of course she would be present.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was ten minutes of eight. From the time he had gone out through the narrow window only twenty minutes had elapsed; it seemed an eternity. He went to a window looking out upon the office building, and saw the light twinkling high above. As he watched, it went out. Evidently Gregg had pulled up the ladder, restored the window frame, put out the light, and slipped out of the room. There was a friend.

In the meantime, what was he to do? He had reached Sydney's cottage, and she was not there. Of course she would come; he must wait for her.

Looking in a mirror, he saw that he was dirty and disheveled; his clothes were wet. For the first time he realized that his hands were a mass of blisters and cuts; there was quite a little blood.

No servant in the place. Very well, he would find the washroom and clean himself, since he looked like a tramp. It took him five or six minutes to make himself presentable, then he wandered about the lower floor again, finally deciding to sit in the small room which opened from the living room at the rear, until Sydney put in an appearance. There was a door from this back room into the hall, through which he might slip if her father or other guests came with her.

The room was very dark, but he groped about until he found a big leather chair, sat himself down and waited. It was warm. He had passed through a harrowing experience; now he relaxed, found himself growing drowsy, fought it off without success. Finally he dozed.

Voices in the next room awakened him. He blinked and straightened up.

"This is what I call something like," said a rather uncultivated voice. "You can have your marble palace, boss, but give me this kind of solid comfort."

"I brought you here and sent everybody out of the house," said the person called boss, in a crisp, authoritative, but pleasant voice, which John recognized at once as that of the Commander. "We'll step into the small room back here and close the doors. What I have to tell you must not be overheard."

They were coming into the room where he was sitting. It was a secret conference of some sort, and he must not be caught; he would be ejected without seeing Sydney. Yet he could not cross the room without passing the living room door toward which the two men were headed.

CHAPTER XI.

LISTENING IN.

JOHN got out of his chair, looked around, saw heavy portières in front of a deep window, and stepped behind them just as Nelson pressed a button and lighted the room.

"Come in, Mr. Rottenburg," said Nelson courteously. "Take a chair. Cigars are on the table. Do you want a drink?"

"Had plenty, Commander," said the publicity expert. "This is cozy, too."

"My daughter has very simple tastes," explained Nelson. "She built this cottage and she lives here when she is in New York. I enjoy smoking a cigar in the living room. Magnificence is rather oppressive at times."

"Sure. You've got a swell house; but it's more like the library of Congress than a home, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Why not? This is a free country."

"Is it?" asked the press agent, with significance.

"Certainly. Always will be, I hope. As a matter of fact, they have more real liberty in England under a king than we have had under a President. It is my aim to give the people the fullest possible personal liberty, and take off their shoulders the burden of such representative government as we have had."

"Sure. Too many Legislatures making too many laws; it's a lot better with you on the job; they make all the laws they like, and you chuck them into the waste-basket."

"We won't go into that," said Nelson. "As you know, much against my will I have been forced to administer the government for several months."

"Commander," said Rottenburg familiarly, "we're alone, and we understand each other. What's the use of keeping up a bluff? You wanted this job. It was me who told you how to get it."

"Perhaps you will explain," said Nelson, with dangerous politeness.

"Away back last summer you called me in and said you wanted to make yourself popular, and asked me how to do it. I told you that you couldn't make a hit by giving rich people money. Look what happened."

"And what happened?"

"You pressed a few buttons and put the country on the bum. Then when it was down and out you come along and set it up again."

Nelson's voice was so cold and his regard was so sinister that the press agent shivered. He would have given worlds to recall his remarks, but it was too late.

"You have the impudence to insinuate that I was responsible for the series of calamities that befell the nation, to rectify and repair the damages by which I was invited by the existing government, to assume extraconstitutional authority?"

"Listen, Commander, I don't insinuate anything. I believe what you want me to believe. I'm for you, first, last, and all the time, and I want to take back what I just said."

Nelson lighted a cigar and hesitated. Rottenburg went through hell during that moment of hesitation.

"You have been very useful," said the Commander. "I should hate to have to dispense with your services. You have no information to justify what you insinuated, of course?"

"Certainly not. I was too fresh."

"You can be depended upon never again to give vent to such a surmise?"

"My mouth is locked."

"Very well. I overlook the offense. The task I have for you is a greater one than that of putting before the public in the proper light my actions since I reluctantly assumed the post of National Commander. The reward will be commensurate with the service."

"I'll put it over, whatever the job is."

Again Nelson hesitated. "Your interests are with me," he said. "You can be trusted to be true to your own interests. It is my desire to create a sentiment in this country in favor of a permanent government, one which is stabilized, which will not disturb business every few years with national elections.

"I want our people to realize the happiness of the British under a royal house; the advantages of a strong centralized government controlled by a strong man—a dictator, or commander, even a king would be preferable to the old system. Don't you think so?"

"A king!" exclaimed Rottenburg, surprised into expressing his real opinion. "Oh, say, boss—they'd never stand for that!"

"Not at present. But a sentiment could be created. I admit to a weakness. I would enjoy the opportunity to refuse the kingship."

"There was a guy named Julius Cæsar who refused to be king three times, and they murdered him because they thought he wasn't in earnest."

"I am probably better acquainted with history than you are, Mr. Rottenburg. I wish the sentiment of which I spoke to be very skillfully created—it may take time, several years, but it can be done. A demand which will sweep the country can be brought about by the astute management of the press and the effective use of money. Do you think you are able to handle this work? Do you want to handle it?"

"Sure I do. I know just how to work it. Say," he said reflectively, "a king needs a lot of lords, titles, and things like that."

"In time those might come."

The man's eyes kindled. It made Nelson smile satirically as he read his thoughts. "Lord Rottenburg!"

"One of the greatest weaknesses of a republic such as ours," the Commander explained, "is the inadequacy of rewards for signal services. It is responsible for the lack of interest always displayed by the very rich in public affairs; having all the money they could use, no monetary reward would interest them—there was nothing that the nation could do for them.

"In England they manage much better. If a business man has made a brilliant success, he is drawn into public service, his great ability is used for the benefit of the country; he is granted an order, the Bath, the Garter, he is given a title.

"He has some tangible evidence of the appreciation of the king for what he has accomplished, and while he may not care anything about such trifles himself, he is delighted to receive honors which can be handed down to his descendants.

"In America, the descendants of Lincoln, of Roosevelt, of Cleveland, Grant and other great men sink into obscurity. They should be the nucleus of an American aristocracy, a charmed circle into which no man could introduce his family until he has earned the right by public service."

"I get you, chief. The trouble is to make them see it."

"That is to be your business."

"But it may take two or three years. Suppose you quit the Commandership, or get forced out. Already they are beginning to talk about the time when the Constitution is restored. Everybody assumes you will resign just as soon as you think it's safe. You know they have a short memory, the people; pretty soon they'll forget what a mess you pulled them out of, and you're liable to have a revolution on your hands."

"There are other troubles brewing," said Nelson. "We may have a great war on our hands within a short time. There is nothing like a foreign war to unite the people behind whatever authority exists. The Soviet Republic of Russia would not have lasted a month if foreign invasions had not awakened national patriotism. The Russian people rallied around the small body in control, and when the danger was over the government was strongly intrenched."

Rottenburg nodded admiringly.

"You got to win the war, though. Look what happened to the kaiser."

Nelson smiled grimly. "We shall win. A republic might be defeated, but an absolute ruler can command efficiency. You mentioned Cæsar a few moments ago. Most likely you do not know how Augustus Cæsar was able to establish the first Roman Empire. Anthony, the friend of his uncle, Julius Cæsar, had gone to Egypt, fallen in love with Cleopatra, and joined his forces to the Egyptian army. There was danger that he might overthrow the Roman Republic, because he was the greatest general of the age, and set Cleopatra upon the throne of the Roman world.

"The Romans were terrified; they turned to Octavius; he assumed absolute power, crushed Anthony, and retained his dictatorship.

"I have been very frank with you, Mr. Rottenburg, because it was necessary that the man whose job it is to control public opinion should have some notion of my ultimate purpose. Let me remind you that no one in the United States has rights at present.

"The courts function only when I choose to permit them. Upon an order from me anybody can be thrown into prison or exe-

cuted, and the writ of *habeas corpus* is suspended."

"Bastile stuff," muttered the press agent, turning pale at the thought.

"Much like that. Some fifty persons have been arrested quietly and confined in Federal prisons during the past month or so, because they were dangerous to the State. They are there at my pleasure. I should hate to be compelled to send you to join them."

"I'm working for you; you pay me; I deliver the goods; I'm satisfied. Don't worry about me," the publicity man assured him. "I hate jails."

With a sudden squeaking of his chair, the Commander seemed to have risen. John heard: "Let us return to the big house. I think we understand each other now. As usual, all propaganda matter must be O.K.'d by me."

"Of course, sir."

Nelson was heard departing from the room, followed by his jackal, and darkness descended upon it, as the Commander had punched the light button as he departed. The man behind the curtain did not budge until he heard the front door slam, then he tottered out and felt his way to the chair in which he had been sitting.

He was trembling with excitement; on his forehead was a cold sweat; he had overheard the most damnable plot that man had ever conceived. Had such a conversation been repeated to him by a third person, he would have considered the person demented. He had been suspicious of the motives of the Commander, but in his imagination nothing as despicable as this had entered.

Obviously, Nelson was mad, stark mad, intoxicated with power, insane with supremacy. To dream of making himself king of free America was crazy enough, but to be willing to plunge the country into a war with Japan for no other purpose than to grasp the throne behind the backs of the soldiers was diabolical. For a gilt crown and an ermine coat this lunatic would condemn hundreds of thousands to death in battle.

No one would suspect his purpose except this press agent who was his willing tool. Certainly Nelson would not have dared to confide in his daughter, the sane and sensible Sydney. John MacGregor was the only patriotic American aware of the danger which threatened his country, and he was in the lair of the lion—his life wouldn't be worth a penny if Nelson found out that he had been eavesdropping at the most momentous conference of the age.

CHAPTER XII.

THE GIRL IN THE GARDEN.

IN the face of this situation, John forgot the purpose of his stealthy entrance into the cottage; how he had risked his life on the rope ladder to exchange a few words with a girl. Being the sole custodian of a terrible secret, he must escape as quickly as possible, for the future of the whole country depended upon it; even the interview with Sydney for which he had risked so much must wait; he had to get away and impart what he knew to others, so that his capture or death or both would not leave the tyrant unopposed.

John passed through the living room and opened the front door. In the dark, he saw a woman's form coming down the path toward the cottage. He flattened himself behind the open door and the woman entered. In the dim light from the living room he recognized Sydney, who was in evening clothes with a dark cloak thrown over her shoulders.

He yearned to speak to her, but he did not dare. Nelson must not find him in the vicinity of the cottage. However, the initiative was not in his hands; surprised to find the door open, the girl turned to close it saw the man and gave a slight scream.

"Ssh! Sydney, it's John MacGregor," he whispered. "Don't make a noise."

"John!" she exclaimed. He was delighted to recognize a note of gladness in her voice. "I thought you were in Ireland. How did you get here. Why hide behind my door? Why not notify me you were home?"

"Quick, Sydney! Walk with me back to the house and pass me out of your front door," he implored.

"But why? Now that you are here, make me a visit."

"Please, dear, do as I say. I assure you it is tremendously important. Can you get me out without attracting attention? Are there many people in the house?"

"I don't like mystery," she said with a frown. "I don't understand why you want me to do this, and you owe me an explanation."

"I'm dying to explain a lot of things, but it's vital that I get out of your father's house without attracting attention, and that no one must know of my visit. Please trust me, Sydney."

She smiled and gave him her hand which he bent over and kissed, causing her to draw it away quickly.

"I do trust you, John. I am glad you are back, because things are worrying and bewildering me. I want to talk to you."

"To-morrow! Give orders to admit me to-morrow. I've tried to get in touch with you for a week, but nobody will give you my messages and no one will tell you I am on the phone."

"I have suspected that I was being too well cared for. I hate all this pomp and ceremony. Where's your hat and coat?"

"I haven't any."

"How did you get here?"

"Down a rope ladder from the Nelson Building. I had to see you."

Her eyes lit up with excitement. "You really lowered yourself down from that building. How thrilling! All right, I'll get you through our royal guard."

He winced at her satire. The girl did not know how near the truth she had come.

"It will attract attention to let a hatless and coatless man into the rain. Here."

She took a man's hat and coat from a rack, probably her father's, and he quickly donned them. Then they left the cottage and started for the house.

"We have had a dinner to thirty people, very influential. I was never so bored in my life," she told him as they walked across the garden. "A lot more are arriving now, but I slipped away. I'm so glad."

"Can you get out of the house without being observed?"

"No. Every time I go out, a parade follows me. It's terrible."

"Then let me call on you to-morrow. You'll have to fix it so that I shall be admitted."

"I'll arrange it," she declared with an angry nod of her head. "I shall give father a piece of my mind for cutting off my friends as he seems to have been doing. He may be the Commander, but he doesn't command me. Come at three in the afternoon."

"Rather. Now listen. I overheard a conversation to-night that makes it impossible for me to be found here. To-morrow, I shall tell you all about it. I would probably be shot if it were suspected that I had obtained this information."

"Nonsense! These are not the dark ages."

"They are darker than you think," he said, enigmatically. They passed through a basement door, inside which sat a private detective who bowed as he saw the girl, and paid no attention to her companion. Then they ascended a flight of stairs which led to the long front corridor. It was empty save for two servants. Sydney conducted him to the front door, motioned to two footmen there to open, which they hastened to do, extended her hand and said loudly:

"So glad you were able to come. Remember me to my friends."

He clasped her hand gratefully, and went down the steps, past four policemen. It had been absurdly easy considering the trouble he had had in entering.

Then he walked around to the Nelson Building and rang the night bell.

"Is Mr. Williams still in his office?" he asked the watchman.

"Yes, sir," he said, politely. "Shall I take you up. It's the tenth floor."

As John left the elevator, he observed that the door of the storeroom was closed. He looked at his watch and saw that it was eight thirty-five. Only an hour had elapsed since he had launched himself from the little window. What a momentous hour!

He found Williams sitting at his desk reading a brief, and the look of delight which crossed his face proved what a good friend the lawyer was.

"You old son-of-a-gun!" exclaimed Williams, leaping at him and slapping him on the back. "I certainly didn't expect to see you for hours, if ever. I was hanging around hoping you would phone me when you escaped from the den of the lion."

"Lion is right, or rather tiger," said John as he dropped into a seat. "The most dangerous animal who ever prowled in America."

"Where did you get the hat and coat? Steal them?"

"They were given to me by Miss Nelson. Belong to the old man. Gregg, he is crazy—absolutely gone nuts!"

"You saw him?"

"I heard him. Eavesdropping. Get paper and pen and take this conversation down as I dictate it. I want to get it on paper while I remember every word of it. It's up to you and me to save this country, old man!"

"For heaven's sake! I don't feel up to it. Let Nelson do it."

"Cut the persiflage and do as I tell you. It's vital."

"All right," assented his friend, reaching for pen and paper. "Shoot, Congressman."

Before John was a third of the way through the report, Williams was as white as a sheet and biting his lips, while his pen raced over the paper. At the foreign war section of the document, he uttered an exclamation of indignation.

"If I didn't know you I'd say you were inventing this."

"Who could imagine a thing like it? Go on writing."

MacGregor finished his report of the conversation. Although he had never worked as a newspaper reporter, he had been so impressed by the dialogue that he was able to repeat it almost verbatim. Then he leaned back, crossed his legs and lighted a cigarette.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded.

Williams laid down his pen, drew a long breath, and shook his head like a man nonplused.

"It shows every symptom of madness. He'll have to be locked up."

"He is not mad in the ordinary sense. I presume he is the most competent individual alive to-day, the most far seeing, the most powerful and the most alert. His ambition is mad, of course, but he will reveal it to nobody until he has reached his goal. We know what he is after through a fortunate accident, Rottenburg knows, but he is completely under his sway. I am sure that his daughter does not suspect."

"But he can't imagine for a minute that America would stand for a king."

"America is standing for a dictator and liking it; he may bring this about as he created the demand for his services as despot. What are we going to do about it? It's up to us."

"Hanged if I know. We can't tell anybody this wild yarn. No one would believe us."

"And we'd quickly disappear. He boasted he had locked up fifty patriotic citizens who protested against his arbitrary methods."

"Yes," said Williams. "I begin to suspect what happened to Senator Malcomson. He made a fiery speech in the Senate against the suspension of the Constitution, then it was reported that he had gone abroad, but I bet he's in jail. And the writ of *habeas corpus* is in abeyance, the first act of a tyrant."

"I swore to support the Constitution when I took office," said John, gravely. "I have got to fight this man, but you are a private citizen. The odds are all against us; there is no use in your mixing up in it."

"I'm in it. It makes me wild to think of what he has in store for this unfortunate country; he'll have to jail or shoot me to keep me quiet. Only I don't know what we can do."

"If there was some way we could get this conversation published in the leading newspapers in the country, it would stop any propaganda in favor of the king business, but the press services are controlled by Nelson and so are most of the newspapers, all the big ones; they would turn the copy over to his agents, they would swoop down on us and we would never be heard of again."

"Besides, he is practically king now, and not a constitutional monarch," argued Wil-

liams. "It's not enough to prevent him from getting a crown. We've got to knock him off his perch. He'll bring on a war with Japan as sure as fate. He's got to do it to hold on. I see the logic of that. It's an old trick of tyrants."

"*Sic semper tyrannus*," quoted MacGregor, reflectively.

"Yes, that would solve everything. Unfortunately neither you nor I is an assassin. A bullet or a knife thrust which ended his life would automatically restore the old state of affairs. Everything hinges on his continuing to live."

"When you stop to think of it," stated John, "killing Nelson would be the most humane method, and the most efficient one. If he lives, he will cause the slaughter of hundreds of thousands in a foreign war. If we bring about a revolution, thousands may be slain. It's the life of one man against a multitude, yet we are not assassins."

"No, and, after all, history teaches that assassinations rarely achieved anything permanent. Brutus headed a band of Roman patriots and slew Cæsar, yet within a few years the thing they feared came to pass. Rome's republic was overthrown and an emperor reigned. Charlotte Corday did not prevent the empire of Napoleon, three of our own presidents were assassinated without securing any of the aims of the various murderers. We've got to do this job in some other way."

"If I should read this document in Congress, what would happen?"

"You'd be dragged out of the hall before you read a dozen lines. He has soldiers on guard in the House of Representatives. Haven't you heard?"

MacGregor uttered an oath. This was news to him.

"Take it to the general of the army."

"The American army wouldn't revolt. Nelson is tremendously popular with the army. All its traditions are to obey orders and he rules by the will of the President and Congress. After all, you are the only witness to the conversation; they would declare it was a fabrication.

"The best thing you would achieve would be to postpone the king business for awhile. Meanwhile, he is practically ruler. It's more important to stop this war he is planning, and we can't do that while he is in power. He has to be overthrown, and quickly."

"God, what a problem! I have no more ideas."

"I'll lock this document up in my safe. We'll sleep on this thing, and perhaps, by morning, one of us may have a practical idea."

"All right," agreed John. "To-morrow afternoon I am calling openly upon Sydney and I'll find out what she knows."

"Remember, she is his daughter, that her interests are his, and be careful what you say in his house because he may have a system of overhearing conversations. Suspicion always goes with tyranny. If he thinks he is going to be king, he won't want a nobody like you chummy with the girl. He probably intends to make her the queen of some foreign country."

"I'm damned if he does!" exclaimed John, furious at the suggestion, then paling as he realized that it was by no means an unlikely one.

"We'll get in touch with a number of safe, discreet men and give them the facts under an oath of secrecy. This fellow is very powerful, but we'll find some way of toppling him over."

"I learned enough from Sydney before I went to Ireland to know that Nelson controlled nearly every big business in America, perhaps all of them; be careful you are not pouring your confidences into the ears of one of his lieutenants."

"We'll investigate everybody before we tell any secrets. Let's go home. I'm all in, thinking about this. We've got to take care of ourselves, Mac, until we have a lot of confederates. It wouldn't do to be snuffed out with this knowledge in our exclusive possession. I'm not sure it's safe for you to go to Nelson's to-morrow afternoon."

"It's one chance I propose to take, and I'm safe enough. The old boy is more afraid of his daughter than any one else. God bless you, Gregg, I don't know what I should have done without you."

Williams looked very serious. "I am an ordinary sort of fellow," he said, simply.

"I've never thought much about patriotism and that sort of thing, but my ancestors fought in all our wars and I guess I have the stuff in me to lay down my life for my country if necessary. I thank God I helped you to get into that criminal's den to-night. We are Brutus and Cassius, we two."

"But we won't make the mistake they did."

"No. No knives."

CHAPTER XIII.

AMBASSADOR TO JAPAN.

NEXT afternoon at three o'clock, John MacGregor, wearing high hat, black cutaway and striped trousers, ascended the wide marble steps and rang at the portal of the palace of the Commander. The guards watched him as he gave his card to the butler, lost interest when that imposing menial bowed and said:

"Miss Nelson expects you, sir. She will see you in her cottage. Please come this way."

They crossed the garden, now charming in bright sunlight, and entered the cottage.

"Congressman John MacGregor," announced the butler at the living room door.

"Have him enter," said a male voice. Evidently the Commander himself was within. John found Nelson seated in a comfortable chair by the fireplace while Sydney, beautiful in a light afternoon dress smiled at him from a davenport.

"I'm glad to see you, Congressman," said the Commander, rising and extending his hand, which John grasped with the same inward feeling that one would grip a rattlesnake. But in broad daylight, this suave, urbane, agreeable, middle-aged gentleman, whose high forehead and clear eyes indicated great intelligence, who sat in a simply furnished living room like that of a ten-thousand-dollar suburban home, who was apparently an ordinary father receiving with courtesy an admirer of his daughter, seemed like anybody but a cruel, unscrupulous tyrant who ruled, despotically, the greatest nation in the world.

"It's nice of you to come, Mr. MacGregor," added his daughter, with a significant smile on her face. "You find us alone and eager for chatter. Tell us all about Ireland."

Nelson motioned to a chair, resumed his own seat, while the butler offered the guest a cigar, which he refused.

"You did splendid work in Ireland," said the Commander. "Fine work. The Irish government has written the President praising you in the warmest terms for your tact and your efficiency. It was a good appointment."

"Thank you, sir. I did my best."

"You find conditions greatly changed in this country since your departure?"

"A most astonishing situation," said John, frankly. "As a spectator, three thousand miles away, I could not understand why the government was forced to summon a private citizen and abdicate in his favor. We had plenty of laws to deal with the strikes and disturbances, and the executive could have settled everything without taking such extreme steps."

"Yes. Of course, you were three thousand miles away. Also, you are a Congressman and naturally feel that Congress should not have thrown up the sponge. Unfortunately, neither the executive nor legislative body knew what to do or had the power to do it if they knew the remedy.

"The Constitution stood in their path. They took the quickest and most effective way. Being sworn to support the Constitution, they could not suspend it, so they called me in. As a private citizen, I was able to disregard it without violating my oath. Having great influence with the money power of the country, I could force them to obey my orders. Speed was essential. Legal methods would have taken months and left a ruined nation. So what happened happened."

"But everything is prosperous now. Surely, you can turn over to the government its functions."

"It's an artificial prosperity, my boy. Capital and labor are like two tigers whom I am holding apart. If I let go, they fly at each other."

"Of course, I am in no position to know the facts," John replied diplomatically.

"You may be sure that I shall step out

of this amazing position as quickly as possible. If all our government officials had your ability, I could retire much sooner. Now, I am going to tell you something that will please you. It's really the reason why I intruded upon your visit to Sydney. You displayed so much skill in your difficult mission, that I am going to give you more work. Congress, at present, is no place for an active man. I am going to make you an ambassador."

"Why—why—I am overwhelmed. I do not understand."

"I need you, MacGregor. I am going to send you to Japan. There is trouble brewing there. We need a strong representative, a man who can deliver my messages in a manner which will have weight. You will go to Japan just as quickly as you can arrange your affairs."

"But surely, sir, I have just come home. I do not feel—I am not the man you—"

"I am afraid that personal views do not matter. You are conscripted, MacGregor, you've got to go."

"But what will happen if I refuse?"

"You won't refuse. Nobody can refuse the Commander. Now, Sydney, you can have your guest."

Leaving an astonished and a rather indignant young man, the despot bowed and left the room. Sydney frowned after him, then shot a glance of understanding at her lover.

"You owe this great honor to me, I am afraid," she said, in a low tone. "There was a great row about inviting you here. The ambassadorship to Japan is a trick to get you away from me. Father is afraid I might fall in love with you."

"For my part, I'm afraid you won't," he replied, earnestly. "Sydney, I must have a serious talk with you, not a proposal: you know my sentiments too well for that."

"Really," she said, lifting her eyebrows in a bewitching manner. "I am not sure about your sentiments. I haven't heard them for a long time. You must have met some beautiful Irish girls."

"I never met but one woman. You know who she is. Will you marry me?"

"I don't think I should like to live in Japan," she mocked.

"I won't go to Japan."

"My poor friend, you most certainly will. Father wields the high justice and the low. He conscripts diplomats as he would property and soldiers. He has just informed you that you must go."

"Just the same, I stay."

"It's really a splendid opportunity for you."

"Perhaps it is not such a splendid opportunity as you think. In any event, I shall stick around until I get an answer from you."

"If I did wish to marry you, I am afraid father would not permit it. He told me in no uncertain terms when I informed him that you were coming this afternoon, that he had another and a better destiny for me than marriage with an East Side Congressman."

"Sydney, put on your hat and coat and come for a walk with me."

"Preceded by a brass band and a platoon of police? No, thanks."

"Where can we talk for half an hour without interruption, with no chance of being overheard?"

"Here, of course."

He shook his head.

"Well, though it's a trifle cold, I'll throw on a wrap and walk with you in the garden. Is that satisfactory, Mr. Mysterious?"

"Yes. We'll be alone in the garden. We can be seen, of course, but not heard."

She rose and threw a cloak, with a hood, over her shoulders, pulling the hood over her hair. He donned hat and coat and they sallied forth. Although the gardens were denuded of leaves and flowers and grass, they were still beautiful. John admitted their beauty though he did not waste much thought upon it. As soon as they were out of earshot of the house he said:

"If I hurt you, I know you will understand. I love you more than any man ever loved a girl."

"More than Romeo loved Juliet?"

"That's my opinion," he smiled. "Now, listen, do you think your father is quite sane? Please don't be offended."

She sobered and her face grew serious. "There never was a brain like his, nor a more loving father, yet he frightens me at

times. I hate this situation. I implore him to withdraw from the Commandership, but he won't listen to me."

"You heard him tell me that he was forced to take the dictatorship. Do you think that is quite true?"

"John, I trust you. I wouldn't make this admission to anybody else in the world. Nobody ever forced father to do anything."

"As a matter of fact, he engineered the whole thing, didn't he."

"I—I am afraid so."

"And he has no intention of resigning, has he?"

"Frankly, I doubt it."

"What will the end be?"

"I shudder to think of it."

"Dear, I know you love your father, but you love your country. I am going to tell you something which would cost me my life if it were repeated."

"I won't betray you, John."

"He is plotting to make himself king."

"No! Oh, no!" she faltered. "He wouldn't be so mad."

"He will succeed unless something stops him. You will be the princess royal."

"I will not," said Sydney, fiercely. "I won't be a princess."

"He will marry you to some foreign king; that's why he wants to exile me."

The girl grasped his arm so tightly it hurt. "One day," she said, in a low, tense tone, "I went into his chamber in the big house without thinking to rap on the door. He was standing before the mirror. He had a gold crown on his head, a jeweled scepter in his hand, and an ermine cloak over his shoulders. He laughed when he saw me, told me they were the regalia of the Czar of Russia which he had purchased to add to his art collection.

"He took them right off and put them away, but there was a queer look in his eye; I was afraid. But I did not dream he actually thought it was possible that he could make himself king. He has money enough to buy some little kingdom in Europe, but never America. How did you find this out? What makes you think so?"

"I was crazy to see you, dear. They wouldn't admit me or let me communicate with you. So, last night, as I told you, I came down a rope ladder from the window in the tenth story in the Nelson Building.

"I slipped into the cottage hoping to find you there, but there was no one at home. Knowing you would come, I sat in the little room off the living room in the dark, waiting. Your father entered the cottage, accompanied by Rottenburg, the publicity man. I slipped behind the window draperies, they came into the small room and I overheard their conversation."

"But why should he confide such a horrible thing to that man? It's not like father."

"Because Rottenburg is supposed to mold the public mind to a point where the people would demand that he ascend the throne. The worst of it is that he plots to throw the nation into a war with Japan to give him an excuse to remain Commander until the people elect him king."

"Oh, that's too terrible!"

"It's a dreadful thing to tell a girl about her father, but apparently, human lives mean nothing to him."

"I know it," she admitted. "He permitted all those strikes and riots when he could have stopped them, I know that. The only explanation is that he is a monomaniac."

"He has some scheme for goading Japan into declaring war. Sending me there probably has something to do with it. What are we going to do, Sydney?"

"I don't know," she said, in a tone of distress. "He is my father. I can't oppose him."

"Under ordinary conditions we could expose the plot and get the courts to confine him until he recovers, but no court would dare take any action against the Commander. Will you run away and marry me?"

"John I do love, you," she said, honestly. "I think I loved you from the first moment I met you. I wish I had been courageous enough to admit it then. We might have eloped and nothing would have happened because father had not gone very far with his plans. But now, we could not marry without his consent. He would immediately annul the marriage, perhaps throw you in jail or have you executed."

"I'll risk it."

"I won't," she declared. "I should say not. We shall keep our engagement a secret."

"But suppose he forces you to marry somebody else, a prince or an emperor?"

"Father can't force me. I have a will as strong as his and he knows it, and my sense of humor has always enabled me to handle him. I can laugh him out of any scheme that concerns me. Perhaps, I can laugh him out of this king business. I'll try."

"I'm afraid not. He is a monomaniac."

"Look, he's coming after us."

Sure enough, the Commander, hatless and coatless, with fire in his eye, was coming rapidly toward them.

"Sydney!" he exclaimed, as soon as he was fairly close to them. "Haven't you any better sense than to risk pneumonia on a day like this? You are also endangering the health of our new ambassador to Japan."

"Not at all," she smiled. "It was stuffy inside, so we came out for a stroll."

"Your life is too valuable to risk. Go into the house. And Mr. MacGregor, I must ask you to excuse my daughter, now. She has engagements. Your time is too valuable, also, to spend with girls. You must be packing and get started across the continent as quickly as possible."

"I shall not be able to accept the honor of the ambassadorship," said John, firmly.

"You have no choice, my friend. I am the Commander."

"But you cannot expect me to start at once."

"Immediately."

"Then I risk your displeasure. I presume you won't jail an American citizen for refusing a foreign post, or cut his head off."

"How much time do you need?"

"I could not start within a month."

"You may have a month. But, in the meantime, I cannot permit you to see my daughter. Frankly, I am not interested in you as a son-in-law and I presume you consider yourself in love with her."

"I do, sir."

"I have other plans for Sydney."

Sydney's eyes were flashing dangerously. She faced her father boldly.

"I am not interested in your plans for my marriage, father," she declared. "I shall marry whom I choose when the time comes. I do not say I shall marry Mr. MacGregor, but it will be the man I love and nobody whom I do not desire to marry."

"Good afternoon, Mr. MacGregor."

"Good afternoon, sir. Good afternoon, Miss Nelson."

"Good-by, John. I am at home on Tuesday afternoons from four to six."

"I warn you you shall not be admitted," said Nelson.

"Do you mean that I cannot see my friends, that I am a prisoner?" demanded Sydney.

"My prohibition extends only to our ambassador," said the Commander, ironically.

MacGregor bowed and turned away. Behind her father's back, Sydney kissed her hand to him. The young man retreated full of delight at the understanding with Sydney, and greatly worried at the prospect of his ambassadorship. The only ray of hope was the month's grace which he had wrung from the reluctant despot. As for Sydney, he had come down the rope once; he could do it again.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

IT is given at times to a man to read another man's mind. In the eyes of the Commander, he had read menace, and it was connected with the ambassadorship. He would be the tool who would be responsible for the coming war, and he was doomed never to return from Japan if he went there.

In some way, he would be disposed of. It flashed to him that some Japanese agent of Nelson's might assassinate him, which would be sufficient in the inflamed state of the public mind in America to bring about a declaration of war. Thus the Commander would achieve his purpose and get rid of an annoying individual. He was sending out to be slaughtered a person for whom he had no use and whose death he would avenge with the power of America.

John resolved to go to Japan only if dragged there, and, in the meantime, he had a month to depose the tyrant. After all, a lot can be achieved in a month. Perhaps a way would be found to expose the pretensions of the madman and drive him from power. Gregg Williams was keen and resourceful. They would rally a number of bright minds and they would work rapidly.

In the meantime, Sydney had assured him that she would not be forced into marriage. She loved him and would be true to him. That was enough to give him courage and strength and ingenuity.

He walked around to the office of Gregg Williams to find out what that young patriot had accomplished since the night before, but was disappointed to discover that Williams was not in his office.

As he emerged after a brief chat with the beautiful stenographer, he saw a man loitering in the corridor whom he had noticed as he turned into Madison Avenue, and the man stepped into the elevator with him.

He kept his eyes open as he walked down town toward his hotel, which was located on Madison Avenue about ten blocks south, and saw that the person was still in sight, having walked along on the opposite side of the street about half a block behind.

"Followed," he thought. "The old boy is suspicious of me and has placed spies on my trail. That complicates matters. First thing I know, he'll have Gregg Williams and all the people we enlist on the suspect list. This is going to be even harder than I supposed. Of course, he only wants to make sure I don't see Sydney again. He can't have any notion of what I know about his plans. Just the same, it's perplexing. We're all a darn sight more likely to land in jail than to overthrow the Commander. God! What a situation in a supposedly free country in the year 1934!"

He sat down in his room and considered. Williams must be put on his guard. Most likely, his own telephone conversations would be reported. Gregg must be kept free from suspicion so that he could work fast and almost openly. While he was pondering ways and means, his phone rang and Gregg was on the line.

"Can't talk to you now, old man," he said, guardedly. "Hang up, and I'll call you back later."

Gregg would suppose that there were persons in his room, would not dream of listeners-in. Before he called again, John determined to reach him from a pay station outside the hotel. He descended and, as he passed through the lobby, he saw his shadow rise from an inconspicuous seat and saunter along after him.

"The Russian secret police! No wonder they killed the Czar!" he muttered. Tempted to face the spy, his judgment told him that it would be stupid. Much better a trailer whom he knew than one whom he did not. The man looked like an ordinary private detective: big feet, red face and hands, cheap clothing. In case of need, it should not be hard to lose him.

He called Gregg from a drug store and got his connection within a few seconds. As he spoke, he saw his shadow come into the store and look about; it happened that he had selected an isolated phone booth, and the spy, when he discovered his quarry, could not stand too near without attracting attention. Nevertheless, he lowered his voice.

"I am being shadowed, Gregg," he told his friend. "You must not be seen with me again. I saw Sydney, and was forbidden the house by Nelson. He has also ordered me to go to Japan as ambassador, a scheme to get me away from her. He intimated that he would accept no refusal of the position, told me he conscripted diplomats as he would soldiers. He gave me a month to get ready to leave."

"Wow!" exclaimed the lawyer. "Tonight you must lose your shadow, because I have arranged a meeting at my apartment of eight very big and able men. I want you to vouch for the conversation I have taken at your dictation and give them any further facts you may have."

"Are you sure they are not connected in some way with Nelson?"

"Positive. I live at the Hotel Merryville, East Sixty-Eighth Street. Come right up to Apartment 42. Nine o'clock."

"Very good. I'll contract to lose the spy. He looks rather thick."

Elated that Williams had been able to

get such quick action, John left the booth, and noticed that the detective came out close behind him. He took him for a long walk in a spirit of malice, eventually returned to his own hotel and made himself comfortable.

He dined alone in the hotel while he debated with himself the best method of throwing off the trailer. It was desirable to do it in such a way as not to awaken suspicion that he was aware he was being watched.

If the operator supposed he had lost him by accident, he would be careful not to report his own stupidity.

About eight o'clock, he took a taxi to the Hotel Commodore, going in by the Forty-Second Street entrance. Without waiting to see if the spy was following in a second taxi, he entered an elevator, rode to the second floor, walked down to the mezzanine, saw that the coast was clear, then hastened to the upper level taxi entrance which opens from the mezzanine on the west side of the hotel.

As several taxis were waiting, he leaped into one and watched through the back window to see if another taxi would immediately follow. But they turned into Park Avenue unpursued, and he settled back to consider what he ought to suggest to the group of men whom Williams had induced to assemble.

He had not dressed because he wished to be as inconspicuous as possible. Although his intention of overthrowing the dictator was only twenty-four hours old, already he imagined himself a marked man. The terrific weight of authority against a rebel was settling on his shoulders. What a terrific advantage established government possesses to drop upon incipient revolutions!

Revolution is not as simple a matter as it was in the days of 1776 in America when every farmer owned a musket which carried just as far as the gun of the professional soldier, before machine guns, long range artillery, or airplane bombs were invented.

An army, which sprung into being at the alarm spread to "every Middlesex village and farm" by Paul Revere, drove British regulars back to Boston in 1775, and that army, augmented by similar troops from other colonies, besieged the British professionals in Boston, later causing them to evacuate the place.

In the Constitution of the United States, the right of every citizen to bear arms is expressly stated, a right which has been violated by every State government in the Union, until in New York, it is a criminal offense to own a revolver unless by official license. And an army carrying squirrel guns like Washington's troops would stand as much chance before a tenth of its number with modern offensive weapons as a legion of Roman soldiers facing the kind of regiments who beat the Germans in 1918.

Mobs can be quelled by two or three men with poison gas equipment: a couple of airplanes with bombs and machine guns can disperse of a multitude armed with rifles. Every thing has developed to maintain *status quo*, so all modern revolutions have been effected by the aid of a disaffected army, as witness Mussolini in Italy and Rivera in Spain.

Though millions of Americans soon saw the peril in the unconstitutional reign of Commander Nelson, they were widely scattered, unorganized and unwilling to lay down their lives when they saw no chance of success. While a quiescent Congress and an obedient President upheld the position of King Nelson, there was no chance of an army or naval revolt.

Never sat a tyrant more tightly glued to his throne than this one. Business, which only thrives on order, wished no disturbance. The masses saw him ruling their employers, apparently with an iron hand, and found steady work with better wages than ever before.

Congress got its pay, gravely made laws, found those which had no influence upon the Commander's position passed on to the President and signed while bills of which he disapproved, if they went through both houses, were shelved without further action.

Misled by propaganda, the masses believed the Commander their protector against capitalistic aggression, while capital worked docilely for the individual who secretly controlled it.

John was aware that, at the moment, the leader who lifted the banner of revolution

would discover that public opinion was solidly with the dictator who was making things pleasant. Press and people, capital and labor, army and navy, courts, Congress and the Executive were lined up behind him.

It takes a long period of oppression to induce any people to revolt, and for more than a decade the American people had been taught the doctrine of obedience to authority, to submit to enforcement of any law, no matter how unpalatable, provided it was promulgated by the central authority. In that way, Prohibition had been made to work.

Revolution for a principle has been exceedingly rare in the world's history; usually, rebellion against abuses has been followed by a declaration of principles. John could see no prospect of a national uprising against a man who was responsible for prosperity.

CHAPTER XV.

NINE MEN IN A ROOM.

AFTER all, what could John MacGregor and a handful of high-minded men accomplish? Would it not be better to bow to the power of force and bide their time? Nelson could not conceal forever that he was straddling two horses. The champion of the masses against the oppression of capital was the chief capitalistic oppressor.

When he entered Gregg's hotel, he was despondent, ready to abandon the quixotic enterprise: perhaps self-interest was his strongest prop at the moment. If patriotism grew weak, his love was strong, and, unless Nelson was reduced to private life, Nelson's daughter could never be his wife.

Three men were already in Gregg's apartment, none of whom he knew—three men whose appearance created confidence, evidently persons of importance and intelligence. Introductions were quickly made and he found they were Professor Irving Strong, General Philip Bartol, and Henry Downing.

Professor Strong had the chair of history in New York's greatest university. He was a man of amazing erudition, of national reputation, a gifted writer and an international authority upon ancient civilization.

General Bartol was a retired army officer, nearly seventy years of age. John remembered that he had commanded an army corps in France in the world war and retired with the rank of major-general. He had a shock of iron gray hair and a strong, rugged face; he looked like a noble old lion, which he was.

Henry Downing was a Boston ship owner who had sold out his interests some years before and retired to enjoy a great fortune at the age of forty-nine.

Conversation was desultory until two other guests arrived. They proved to be Frank Hopkins, a daring aviator of the World War, now a well-known attorney, and Oscar Gruning, who had been candidate for mayor of New York a few years previously.

Two other arrivals completed the party: John Murphy, a New York politician, and Herbert Foster, a Baptist clergyman. MacGregor regarded the clergyman dubiously until he saw the fire in his eye and the strength of his chin.

Seated about the room in comfortable chairs, they waited curiously for an explanation of the summons to which they had responded. Before opening the meeting, Gregg made a tour of the apartment and looked out into the hall; though it was unlikely that the Commander's secret service was already aware that treason against him was to be preached, it was intelligent to take precautions. When he returned, he stood up by a table with a reading lamp and drew from a brief case the manuscript of the conversation overheard by MacGregor.

"You gentlemen are here," he said, "because I know you all to be high-minded, patriotic American citizens. I know you view with concern the present situation in America because you have separately and individually confided your opinions to me."

Such was the apprehension already created by the benevolent despotism in America that these picked men shot sidelong glances at one another. One or two frowned at Gregg for betraying their confidence.

"The situation is so much worse than you are at present aware," he said, swiftly, "that I have called you in to consult with you upon what can be done to combat it. If any of you are unwilling to hear any further I would be obliged if you would say so and depart. I have dangerous information to impart to you. You may regret staying. And I know, if you do leave, you are honorable men, and you will permit what I have already said to go no further."

"Shoot," said the general. "Nelson seems all right, but a dictatorship is intolerable in America."

"Hear, hear!" murmured others. Nobody moved to depart.

"Fine," smiled Gregg. "Now we know where we stand. I shall make some charges which I am prepared to prove. Please let me finish before asking for proof.

"King J. Nelson was called to Washington because he had plotted to become dictator; he did not go reluctantly as he declared."

Several present nodded their heads. They had suspected as much.

"Nelson had obtained control of every big business in America. He ordered the coal company and the railroad company to reduce wages, which brought on the big strikes. He shut down the big industries, he deliberately threw the country into the turbulent situation from which he rescued it when he became Commander."

"You can't prove those things, my boy," said the general.

"You'll be convinced. Wait. He is not satisfied. He is plotting to retain power by bringing about war with Japan."

"Impossible." "This is too much." "Wake up, Gregg," declared various persons in the room.

"In the moment of victory over Japan, he will be proclaimed King of America."

A burst of laughter was the response. It was too much for the American sense of humor.

"Now I am going to tell you how we got this information," said Gregg. "I expected you to laugh. Congressman MacGregor, who is present, has been appointed ambassador to Japan by the Commander. He has to take the job or go to jail. Fact.

"Last night, with my assistance, MacGregor got into Nelson's garden by means of a rope ladder from the tenth story of the Nelson Building which overlooks the ground.

"I helped him. He is in love with Nelson's daughter. That's why he took the chance. While hiding in the cottage in the garden where Miss Nelson lives, he overheard a conversation between the Commander and Rottenburg, the publicity man.

"He escaped without being discovered, and dictated the conversation to me an hour later. Naturally, there were no other witnesses, but his standing is such, and the conversation itself is so remarkable, that I do not think you will doubt its authenticity. I am going to ask the Congressman to read this manuscript."

"You read it, Gregg," smiled John. "No one but a lawyer can read a lawyer's handwriting."

"Very well. Here goes."

He plunged into the dialogue between the Commander and Rottenburg, the import of which was so startling that he was not interrupted until he had finished. Then a burst of indignant exclamations rewarded him.

"Now you know what America is up against," said Gregg, as he sat down. "One at a time. What do you think of it, general?"

"I can't doubt it," admitted the old soldier.

"He's mad, but that doesn't make the situation any less serious," declared the clergyman.

"His Roman history cannot be disputed," said the professor. "He has modeled himself upon Octavius, craftiest despot who ever lived. We are destined to have a king or emperor unless something is done."

"Let's start a revolution," exclaimed the fiery Hopkins.

"Sure, we've got to kick him out before he declares war. It's too frightful to contemplate," commented Downing.

"Then let us put our heads together and find out how we are going about it," suggested John. "That's what we are here for."

"I am sorry to say that a revolution is impossible," said the general. "I would

gladly put myself at the head of a rebel army, but we should be crushed in no time."

"The regular army would join it as soon as they knew the facts," insisted the clergyman.

"We have no facts," replied the general. "No reflection upon you, Congressman, but what we have just heard would not be believed. I believe it, and so do all here, but we couldn't make the public believe it.

"As far as an armed revolt is concerned, no body of rebels would make headway against planes, and gas, and bombs, and heavy artillery, and machine guns.

"The days of revolutions in civilized countries are gone. Nelson is an appointee of the President, and is indorsed by Congress. As such, his orders transmitted by the President will be obeyed by the army without question. If he had overthrown the government the army would have driven him out, but he has been so crafty that he has all legal authority behind him. I have seen too much bloodshed to wish to shed it uselessly in America."

"If you will permit me," said Oscar Gruning, "I would like to set the situation before you as I see it. Nelson's plans are known to himself alone, this ghastly plot is in his brain, he has no confederates. He has cowed the government into obeying his orders, but it is still the government, capable of resuming its functions when his hand is lifted.

"The vast power he wields through control of all business is shattered if he no longer directs it; it will break up as all great combinations have broken up in the past if the master hand is removed. This is the greatest conspiracy of the age, but it should be the simplest to defeat. All that has to be done is to remove Nelson."

There was silence for a moment, then as the significance of the suggestion was understood there was a simultaneous protest.

"Assassination is not to be thought of," said Williams. "We are not men of that sort."

"I merely summed up the situation and showed you the way out."

"An ancient Greek tyrant once expressed the wish that all his subjects had one neck so that he could cut it through," said the professor. "In this case our country's enemy has one neck. But I could not countenance assassination, as you say, Mr. Williams."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed John, as he leaped to his feet. "That's out, of course. But why not remove Nelson. Why not kidnap him? Isn't that feasible?"

"It has my vote," the general declared. "Spirit him away and the constitution automatically resumes, government functions, the various heads of business operate without further direction. Only it's going to be difficult. I happen to know that a regiment will be assigned to him as a bodyguard when he returns to Washington."

"And where could one hide King J. Nelson? There would be a search. The fool government would try to find its boss," Gruning assured them.

"Kidnap him and I'll hide him," Downing exclaimed excitedly. "Listen! I own an island in the Bahamas. It is miles from anywhere. Get him there, and I guarantee to keep him. That will be my job."

"The sea would swarm with destroyers, the air would be filled with planes, every islet along the American coast would be searched. Concealment of a man like Nelson is impossible." This from the general.

"Last summer I discovered a cave on my island, big enough to hold a thousand people, the entrance almost impossible to locate. Don't worry about concealing him if we get him there," replied Downing.

There was a hum of excitement. Then the professor made a suggestion.

"If it was possible to substitute for Nelson some one who looked exactly like him, who could carry on for a few weeks, restore the government, dissolve the big trust into its component parts, when the Commander was finally released he would be shorn of his strength like Samson."

"Where to find a double with nerve enough to play the part?" asked Gregg Williams.

"An actor," suggested Gruning.

"No," replied the professor. "An actor might make up to look like him before the footlights, but grease paint would show in daylight. And while he could mimic his

voice, he could not imitate his handwriting, and would lack courage to carry on. These things happen in fiction, but I am afraid I made an impossible suggestion."

"If his disappearance could be concealed; if it were given out that he was ill, could see nobody except his doctor and his daughter, if his orders were in writing—with time we could imitate his signature—"

The general cut MacGregor off almost rudely.

"His daughter and his doctor are not in the conspiracy. He is so great that if he got the slightest ailment a conference of specialists would be called—that's out."

"I may say for Miss Nelson," said John, blushing, "that she hates this situation; we could depend on her for a certain amount of cooperation. Provided his safety was assured I believe that she would help us."

"How do you know?"

"We are engaged," he confessed. "And she is afraid her father will end by being assassinated."

"All right," said the general. "We have ruled out an uprising because we couldn't get a corporal's guard to uprise. That leaves the kidnaping. We know where we may hide him if we get him. The problem is his capture. Let us have suggestions. In my opinion there is a chance of success because of the boldness of the notion. But how to do it?"

Silence fell upon the conspirators. Then fire engines clanged by the hotel in furious contrast.

"If no one has anything to say," observed the general, "let me give my view. A small band of determined men must accomplish this, men who expect to lose their lives, men who will form a forlorn hope. They must be young men—most of us are eliminated by our age—they must have great resource, dauntless courage, and be led by one who can meet any emergency; a dozen men at the most, enough to fight their way out of a tangle; not too many, because a mob would draw unwelcome attention."

"I agree with the general," said MacGregor. "I am young enough, and I shall volunteer."

"Count me in, then," declared Hopkins. "I can still fly a plane, and we'll have to take him to the Bahamas in an airplane."

"I'll join the forlorn hope," announced Gregg Williams.

"And I," the minister said firmly. "It's a cause worth the risk of one's life."

"Four out of eight," nodded the general. Downing will play his part with his island. I will lay out the details of whatever plan we decide upon."

"I," Gruning informed the party, "own a speed boat big enough to run to the Bahamas, with accommodations for twelve people. It can make forty knots an hour, and get there in less than twenty-six hours from New York."

"If we capture him in New York," adjudged the general, "we shall need your boat. If we take him from Washington the airplane is the method. We shall need two planes, one to reach the coast of Carolina, the second a big water plane to make the hop."

"We shall have to get recruits for the forlorn hope," said Gregg. "Who knows the right kind of men and can enlist them?"

"I have a son," said the general. "Count him in. I vouch for him."

"Bert Stafford in my office will join us," said Gregg. Two or three other names were selected, and then it was decided to meet in the same place at the same hour next night with the recruits.

"In the meantime," suggested the general, "let us all devote ourselves to the details of the plan. It won't succeed unless every line is plotted in advance. We must be prepared to cover all eventualities, and leave as little as possible to chance. Who knows just how long he will stay in New York?"

"The newspapers said three or four days," some one informed them.

"It seems to me that New York is our best bet," suggested John. "I know the lay of the land in his house and grounds; I have already obtained entrance. Although the approaches to the house are guarded, I doubt if there are twenty men outside the estate, while probably not more than half a dozen armed watchmen are inside. At

the White House, especially if regular troops are protecting it, the difficulties will be increased ten-fold."

"Well, let us all prepare plans and we shall discuss them to-morrow night," declared the general. "At my age I feel a bit shaken to be involved in a conspiracy against the ruler of America. My old army training handicaps me."

"I suggest that we depart singly and as unostentatiously as possible," proposed MacGregor. "My shadow may have got upon the trail again, although I do not think it possible."

After shaking hands all around the party broke up, leaving Gregg and John alone in the apartment.

"Wonderful work, Gregg!" commented the Congressman. "What a lot of splendid fellows! And isn't that old general a corker? If this crazy plots succeeds we shall H, hell!" grumbled the girl.

"I have known the general for years: a finer soldier and better citizen isn't alive. Did you notice how he offered his son for a mission which probably means the death of all of us. A Spartan father!"

"I am convinced we must strike in New York within a couple of days," John said. "For one thing, you can't keep a conspiracy quiet. Men like these can't meet very often without attracting the attention of the spies whom Nelson seems to be employing in large numbers. At present he can have no notion that there is a big plot against him, but I wouldn't be surprised if he got an inkling very soon."

"I presume you are figuring on getting down to the garden on the rope ladder again. I had a duplicate of the key made to-day, and turned the original over to the janitor on the off chance that he might have the lock changed if he missed it."

"It seems to me to be the plan with the best chance of success," said John. "If we could catch him in his cottage we could get into the street by the route Sydney showed to me with little difficulty. My idea is to have the job done by three or four men at the most. The others would be posted outside to keep the guards busy if they started to interfere."

"What will Sydney say if she finds you plotting against her father?"

"I hope she will forgive me. I think she will be neutral, but if she should turn against me, it's my contribution to the cause."

"She won't," said Gregg. "If a girl loves a man she will forgive him anything; and she is opposed to her father's plans, anyway. So you told me."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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A DREAM

SURELY it is a dream that once we knew
Bugles at daybreak on a windy hill,
The wistful echoes following the shrill
Before the black of night could burn to blue—
A dream of weary men who stumble through
The dripping canvas of a tented town.
And take the road to battle, trudging down
By ghostly hedges glimmering with dew.

By steaming meadows with their stacks of hay,
And little gardens locked with bar and chain,
As in a dream we grope our misty way.
Hearing at last above the driving rain
In haunted orchards dim with a nameless dread,
The deep-mouthed baying of the guns ahead.

Will Tasker.

The Big Chance

By L. PATRICK GREENE

"OH, hell!" grumbled the girl.

She had a sort of doll-like prettiness—she would have been almost beautiful had she been content with the original chestnut brown of her hair and the coloring nature gave her.

"I'm sick of this place," she continued in a petulant voice. "I'm sick of serving suds of beer to miners who've got money an' only think of booze. At that, they're a damned sight better than the police an' the *gentlemen*"—there was a world of sarcasm in the emphasis she put on the word—"of the civil service. They've got nothing except a thirst—which they ain't got the money to quench—an' what they call breedin', which is much the same as a hog's."

She glared angrily at the man who was lolling with a studied nonchalance against the bar, and who was, apparently, too deeply interested in the flimsy newspaper he was reading to heed her.

"D'you hear, Dandy?" the girl almost screamed with pent-up boredom. "I say I'm sick of this hole where nothing ever happens an'—"

The man looked up from the Salisbury *Times*, the official organ of Rhodesia, South Africa's youngest colony.

"Yes, Aggie," he said mildly. "I heard you the first time. But I don't see what you've got to grumble at. I've kept my part of the bargain. Here we are, owners of a flourishing bar—" The grandiloquent wave of his hand indicated the tin shack which did service as a drink emporium, besides being the eating and sleeping room of the man and woman.

"Yes" the man continued, "owners of a flourishing bar, and"—he bowed sarcastically—"I married you as per agreement."

"You'd have squirmed out of that if you'd had the chance," Aggie replied sullenly. "But you didn't have the money to pay for your passage until you got the bit I'd saved; and I wasn't giving you that until you'd married me. Don't know why I was so keen on marrying you, anyway. Before, I was a barmaid with pay; now I'm a God-knows-what without pay. Why don't you tell folks we're married, Dandy?"

"Because," the man began patiently—"because the pickings are better this way. Fools—they don't see a woman from one month to another—who come into the dorp, after a long prospecting trip, 'll pay more for a drink served by a single woman, an' won't be so particular about what they're drinking, neither.

"An' when they're playin' poker, their eyes are on you, Aggie, instead of on their cards; and that makes it easier for me! And, too, the blasted police ain't so keen on getting evidence against me for this and that when they know that anything that happens to me'll throw you out of a job. They'd do more for my sister than they would for my wife. Use your head, Aggie!"

She tossed it indignantly.

"Pickings," she sneered. "It ain't no better than snitching milk, like I used to when I was a kid in W'itechapel. What do you get? A few shillings at poker; a few more on a crooked bet; a couple of bob extra on a bottle of whisky. Oh! And he calls it pickings."

"You're living better than you did in the slum from which I took you. And, as for the pickings—why, the little bits mount up!"

"Just about enough to keep you in them fancy cigarettes you smoke—that's all, Dandy. As for me, I ain't got a rag to my back, an'— How long have we been in this hole? Two years? I don't know what the other end of this street looks like."

"You ain't missed much, Aggie. It's just a dirt track with tin, wood and mud huts all mixed together. It's ankle deep in dust now, and knee deep in slush and mud during the rains. You're better off here; you—"

She waved aside his interruption.

"I tell you what, Dandy—I'm goin' to tell the boys to-night that I'm your wife! Get that!"

She paused, alarmed at her own bravado.

He looked at her, his close-set, beady black eyes half veiled by their long lashes; his fingers closed about her wrist in a grip of steel.

"You'll keep your mouth shut, Aggie. *Get that?*"

She forced a laugh—a feeble, self-conscious cackle.

"I was only joking, Dandy," she assured him hurriedly. "Only joking, boy. You know that. You—"

He released his hold on her wrist and, placing his paper on the beer-stained counter, turned over one of the print-smeared pages.

"You ain't mad, are you?" she asked with a pathetic eagerness. "I promise—"

Apparently he was uninterested in what she had to promise. She gazed miserably through the open doorway where the glare of the midday sun exposed the white desolation of the outside world and, by contrast, accentuated the grimy sordidness of the shack.

Two grease-smeared, naked Mashonas, half intoxicated and further dazed by the hemp they had been smoking, lolled in the barren shade of a stunted tree and clumsily plucked the feathers from a scrawny fowl killed for the evening meal of their baas—Dandy Harris—and his woman.

"I wish I'd run off with that settler, the way he wanted me to, and gone to live with him 'way out back o' beyond," the woman muttered. "Couldn't be any lonelier than it is here."

The man frowned, as if her murmuring had interrupted his train of thought. His long fingers beat a rapid tattoo on the bar counter.

Aggie looked at him, wondering at the furtive smile which now pulled down the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. Then she turned again to the open doorway.

A Chinese laundryman shuffled slowly by, creating a cloud of suffocating dust. A coolie fruit seller followed closely at his heels crying his wares in a nasal singsong.

A horse's footsteps sounded and a trooper of the mounted police came in sight. He reined in as if about to dismount for a drink.

Aggie preened herself, but when the trooper rode on again—having, no doubt, come to the conclusion that high noon and the beginning of a long trek was not the

time for boozing or basking in a lady's smiles—discontent descended upon her again like a heavy pall, and, resting her chin on the palms of her hands, she glared morosely through the doorway.

And that was all she knew of Africa—that little sun-scorched spot. She could have gone out and found Africa as it is—an alive, life-giving Africa.

But the days were too hot, or too wet; she was afraid of her complexion; she could not ride; and, Dandy was never tired of telling her, it was bad form for a white woman to walk. And at night! At night Africa, a phase of Africa, came to her—came through the open doorway like moths attracted by the sooty, gluttering glare of a candle.

"Aggie?"

"Yeh?" she questioned listlessly, yet subconsciously wondering at the note of excitement in her husband's voice.

"Here—read this!"

He pushed the newspaper before her and pointed to a paragraph headed:

OUR LAW-ABIDING COUNTRY

"Read it," Harris insisted, as she made a peevish gesture indicating lack of interest.

And Aggie, keenly alive to the peremptory note in his voice, read aloud, skipping words here and there, running others together in a manner peculiar to persons who are almost illiterate:

"If any proof 'swanted of Rhodesia's law-'biding citizens, one's only to consider . . . manner . . . which the various mining prop'ties, is'lated as . . . are, have been immune from violent attacks 'pon . . . their wealth. Australia had its bushrangers, the American West its bad men, but here, in Rhodesia—with ever'thing favoring the criminal-minded—not one 'hold-up' has been recorded.

"In 1881 this country was und . . . sway of . . . savage treacherous despot. The only law of . . . land was . . . law that might's right. To-day, twenty years later, the head of . . . civ'lized gov'ment has his house where the savage king's kraal once stood and, so confident are they that right's might, the proprietors of . . . Lonely Mine announce that . . . future they 'tend to dispense with . . . military escort for their monthly gold shipments.

"Save for . . . sup'ficial precaution of withholding information as to when and how they will make shipments, the Lonely Mine proprietors are exercising no more care than if they were dealing in gravel instead of gold specie.

"This marks . . ."

"Never mind the rest," Harris interrupted. "Now read this."

He turned over a page and indicated one of the items in the "Want" advertisement column. Obediently Aggie read:

WANTED—By lonely settler, a housekeeper; must be attractive; domestic ability not essential as companionship is chief requisite; ultimate object—matrimony. Apply in person to Hercules Robinson, Grand View Ranch, 80 Mile Peg, Marandellas, Mashonaland.

Aggie giggled.

"Oh, my Lord, I never thought the boys 'ud do it."

"Do what?" Harris asked sharply.

"Put that ad in. They was talking about it the other night. Half drunk they was. It seems this Hercules Robinson is nearly everybody's friend. They're always talking about him an' saying what a real man he is, an' how he was one of the pioneers an' had the sense to settle on the land the company granted him; an' how he was cleanin' up big, an'—"

"Yes; I know all about him," Harris interrupted testily. "But what about this advertisement?"

"I'm comin' to that. As I was saying, they was talking about him—they wasn't half drunk—and they got to weepin' about him being so lonely living out there all by himself. 'Let's get him a wife,' says Corporal Dixon. 'How?' asks another. 'We will insert an ad in the *Times*,' Dixon says. An' then an' there they wrote out this I've just read. But I didn't think as they'd really put it in. My! Won't this Robinson chap be mad? There'll be some black eyes goin' if he's half the scrapper they say he is."

She giggled again. Then: "Why, what is the matter, Dandy? You never thought it was on the level, did you?"

The man did not answer. His bushy eyebrows met in a puzzled frown.

"An' if it was, what about it?" she asked

suspiciously, after a feeble attempt to deduce the reason for her husband's interest in the two news items.

He vaulted onto the counter bar, and sat there looking down at her, stroking her hair.

She all but purred under his caress.

"Look, Aggie," he said presently. "I know you're fed up with this place—so am I. I'm tired of small pickings as well as you. But I've only been waiting my time—I've been keeping my eyes open. Me and Rat Snyder have been waiting for the big chance—waiting so's we could clean up big and get away from this blasted country—London, Paris. Where do we care, as long as it's gay, eh?"

"You've said it, Dandy," she murmured softly. "Just the same—as long as we're together I don't care much where we go. You don't want to put too much stock in my grousings."

He moved impatiently, lighted a cigarette, and then, after a few lazy puffs, continued:

"Yes, I've been looking about, and here"—he pounded the paper with the palm of his hand—"here's a plan all made for us." He smiled triumphantly.

"Go on, Dandy," the girl urged.

He put his hand under her chin, and, tilting back her head, looked into her eyes. They returned his stare, holding in them something of the trusting adoration a dog gives its master.

He nodded, well satisfied.

"Listen," he said. "We'll hold up a shipment from the Lonely Mine. It 'll be as easy as pie once we know when and how they make their shipments. No risk—and our get-away 'll be easy. The Portuguese border ain't so very far away. We'd be there, safe from extradition, before the police got a report that the stuff was stolen."

"But how are you going to find out about the—the shipments, Dandy?"

He laughed.

"That's where you come in. You said a little while ago—I heard you!—that you wished you'd gone off with some settler. Well—you're going to find out what the life of a settler's woman 'ud be like."

She looked at him in bewilderment.

"Talk sense, Dandy."

"I am. This Hercules Robinson now! Well, his ranch is just over the river from the Lonely Mine. Not more than four or five miles away. Well—you're going to him in answer to his ad."

"Don't be a fool, Dandy," she interrupted tartly. "I tell you, it's just a game they're playing on him. It ain't serious. An', even if it was, it wouldn't mean anything. I'm already married, ain't I?"

Dandy Harris nodded impatiently.

"I'll admit that knowing that that ad isn't on the square makes it a bit awkward," he said slowly. "But we can manage, just the same. I know Robinson—heard a lot about him. He's a soft-hearted fool. Listen, Aggie. You'll go out there to him, as I said, an' tell him you've come to answer this ad. Take a copy of it with you. He will have to keep you overnight, at least: he can't turn you out on the veldt after a trip like that.

"Then, once you're there, it 'll be up to you to see that you stay awhile. Break your leg, or get fever, or—oh, I'll leave that to you.

"You won't need to stay long, maybe. Soon as the men at the mine know there's a woman at Robinson's place, they'll be swarming around like bees round a pot of honey, and it 'll be your job to find out from them when the gold shipments are made, and how. See?"

She nodded dumbly: her wide open eyes were fixed intently on his face.

"Rat Snyder—maybe me, too—'ll be hanging around. We'll find a way of getting the word from you. And then"—he drew a deep breath—"after we've collared the gold—"

"You'll do a slope with it, leaving me flat," she finished grimly.

"Aggie!" he expostulated. "You know me better than that. I was going to say that we'd leave the gold with you—nobody 'ud ever think of looking for stolen stuff at Robinson's place: he's one of Rhodes's special pets, they say—and then, when the excitement's died down, we'll leave the country as openly as you please, an' no one will ever suspect us."

"I don't see how—" she began slowly.

"You say you'll do it," he insisted.

"But this man Robinson, Dandy. He may not have me around even overnight. He may—"

"I'm leaving that to you, Aggie. You can make any man do what you want him to. All you've got to do with Robinson is play the innocent. See? Golden hair and baby blue eyes—that stuff. No powdering or paint—and we'll get you some nice quiet dresses and—"

"You forget, Dandy," she reminded him, "that some of the men at the mine may know me an'—an' I can't play the innocent then!"

"I'd forgotten that," he muttered, scowling fiercely. "But look here, Aggie, they don't know you're my wife; they think you are my sister. All right! You tell them that you got sick of tending bar and came out to Robinson's hoping for a quiet, honest life.

"That's the idea! You tell Robinson all about yourself as soon as you get there. Tell him you pined for the outdoor life; tell him you wanted to see nature make things grow. That 'll be sure to make a hit with him. He's batty about land, love, and fool stuff like that."

He looked at her beseechingly. "You'll do it, Aggie?"

"I'll do the best I can, Dandy," she said after a moment's hesitation. "Only, if I can't get him to let me stay, don't blame me."

"That's my pal!" Harris cried exultantly. "I'll go and get Rat Snyder. Then the three of us 'll put our heads together and go over the plan. When we've settled on that, I'll take you down the dorp to buy you some clothes. That 'll be great, eh, Aggie?"

He jumped down from the bar counter, adjusted his white pith helmet to a rakish angle, tightened the knot of his flaming bow tie, flicked the dust off his riding boots with Aggie's handkerchief, and then, twirling the ends of his waxed mustache jauntily upward, sauntered out through the open door.

Aggie stared after him, stared until long after the sound of his footsteps had died away in the distance. Her eyes were still filled with glorious visions of the man she supposed him to be. Blind to all his faults, she saw only the virtues with which she herself endowed him—the only virtues he possessed.

A wisp of hair floated down into her eyes. Mechanically she brushed it away, and with that movement her vision vanished. She was consciously staring out through the open door at a white patch of sun-parched ground; just beyond, under the scanty shade of a stunted tree, two grease-smeared natives snored noisily.

"Oh, God in heaven!" Aggie wailed, and buried her face in her hands.

II.

HERCULES ROBINSON entered his skoff hut, ready for his evening meal, with the appetite of a man who is conscious of a good day's work well done.

His smooth, clean-shaven face seemed the color of mahogany against the clean white shirt he wore. There was something, too, of the hardness of mahogany about his features.

Not cruelty, but the hardness which comes to a man whose daily round is a constant battle against the forces of nature; a battle which had tightened the lines of his generous mouth, had squared his jaw and had created a network of tiny wrinkles at the corners of his mild, blue eyes.

The red thatch of his hair bristled fiercely for all that it was still damp from his evening shower. In some degree, that upstanding shock of hair was symbolical of the little man's life; symbolical of his high spirit and grim determination to win through no matter what the odds against him were.

Born with the desire to own land—much land—that desire had stayed with him through the long years he had spent as a pot-boy in a New York water-front saloon; had supported him through the long seven years he had spent at sea before the mast.

He wandered contentedly about the hut, straightening a leopard skin rug, arranging a collection of native weapons to better advantage, and then sat down at the neatly

laid table with its snowy white cloth, and drummed on a small tom-tom.

Almost immediately, a white-clad native entered, set a plate of steaming buck soup before his baas and noiselessly withdrew.

As he ate, the Runt—only as descriptive of his courage and spirit was his mother's name for him correct—gazed with peaceful contentment through the open doorway.

He had built his homestead on the crest of a gently sloping hill, commanding a view of miles of undulating bushland, broken here and there by clumps of trees and, at the horizon, reddened now by the rays of the setting sun. A line of jagged kopjes were silhouetted against the sky. A river, snow white against the olive green of foliage, wandered in and out of vision as aimlessly as do native paths.

Close at hand was a large sheet of water which represented the Runt's most recent achievement: a dam which gave him water for his stock and his three thousand thirsty acres through the longest of dry seasons.

Three thousand acres! All his. All cleared save for a thousand acres, which he called his game reserve, and which he felt he could well spare to the wild folk.

Two thousand acres cleared; five hundred of them cultivated by the Runt and the natives who squatted on his land—he could see the smoke of their cook fires, and the tops of their huts from where he now sat.

They called him "the Little Baas" and, sometimes, "Little Great Heart," and therein announced to the world the affectionate respect they had for him.

The native suddenly entered again and set another place opposite his baas.

"Some one comes, Little Baas," he explained. "No doubt he will be hungry."

The Runt nodded.

"Is it some one from the mine, Sixpence?" he asked. "Or a policeman?"

Sixpence shook his head.

"Whoever comes, Little Baas, has trekked far and rides not well. I go now to cook more soup."

As the native left the hut, the Runt strained his ears to catch the sounds of a stranger's approach. Presently, he heard a horse's footfalls and, a little later, he heard a woman's voice tearfully urging her mount to better speed.

The Runt frowned, then pushed back his chair and hurried out to greet the woman who rode into the clearing.

She stared at him wildly.

"Oh, heaven above," she cried, and almost fell from her bony horse into the Runt's arms.

He half carried, half dragged her into the hut, seated her in a chair and poured her out a stiff drink of brandy.

She gulped it down greedily, spluttering-ly. Color came into her wan cheeks.

"I—" she began hysterically.

"No. Don't talk. Eat first. You looks 'alf starved an' no mistake." Occasionally, in moments of excitement or mental stress, the Runt spoke like a cockney. It was a legacy from his sea-going years; most of the ships he had sailed on had been lime-juicers.

"Heat," he said again. "Don't tork."

As he spoke, Sixpence entered and placed a plate of soup before the girl.

"When you've finished that," continued the Runt, placing the tom-tom within her reach, "beat this and Sixpence 'll bring you in some more grub."

He left her at that and went outside to where one of the stockboys was unsaddling the girl's horse.

"Look, Little Baas," the native said, disgustingly, as he pointed to saddle galls on the scrawny beast's back.

The Runt frowned. His land love was surpassed by his love of all animals.

He gave the native instructions for the proper care of the horse, watched it led away and then paced restlessly up and down.

"Wonder who she is an' where she's goin'," he mused. "She ain't bush-wise, that's plain. Reckon I'll 'ave to send one of my boys on with 'er, an'—'ell!—I'll have to lend her one of my horses. It's a fac' she can't ride that old screw of hers any farther. It's a wonder the poor devil didn't founder under 'er."

The beating of the tom-tom impinged on his thoughts.

"My—" the Runt grinned. "She must 'ave been hungry. 'Sfunny! Don't feel

noways hungry myself—but I did, afore she come."

He sat down in a deck chair placed where he could command a sweeping view of the surrounding country.

Very faintly to the north, he could hear the metallic chatter of the stamps at the Lonely Mine. He scowled slightly. Having no quarrel with the miners as men—some of them had come to be his pals—he was violently antagonistic to their means of livelihood.

Somewhat inarticulate, he had never been able to frame properly his objections. He felt vaguely that the gold mines, owned by men in London offices, were non-productive: were taking wealth out of the land. The future of Rhodesia, as he saw it, was bound up in the products of the soil and the men who tilled it.

And, musing on this, he forgot all about his guest.

The short half hour of twilight passed—darkness came. Marking the location of the kraal where his laborers lived, the blackness of the night was tinged with the red glares of cook fires: a light, capricious breeze filled his nostrils with the pleasingly pungent odor of wood smoke.

"Little Baas!" Sixpence was standing beside his chair. "The woman has finished eating. She—she cannot speak our tongue—I think she wants you."

Going into the hut, he stood before her, nervously fingering his collar. He knew very little of women—cared less.

"You ain't Mr. Hercules Robinson, are you?" she asked incredulously.

The Runt admitted it, wondering at her flushed cheeks and unnaturally bright eyes.

"But I thought, by the way folks talked, you was a big man: a giant, like your name. Why—you ain't any taller than me."

There was a strained silence; the Runt was apt to be touchy about his lack of inches.

"But that don't matter as long's the heart's in the right place, does it?" she continued hurriedly. "Me? I'm Aggie Harris, sister of Dandy Harris who keeps the Hillside Bar, y'know."

"I've heard of him," the Runt admitted.

"An' I've come to see you 'bout this."

She held out a copy of the *Salisbury Times*, pointing to a marked item in the want column.

The Runt read it through very slowly—and laughed. Then read it again, and cursed.

"You don't mean," he said, doubtfully, "you don't mean that you thought I inserted this and you've come to apply for the job?"

She looked at him archly.

"Of course! What else do you think brought me here? I tell you Mr. Robinson, I fair jumped for joy when I saw that." A plaintive note now came into her voice. "I got so tired an' sick o' serving booze to the chaps who came into Dandy's bar: that ain't no life for a lady. Besides, being indoors all the time was killing me. I pined for the outdoor life—allus have, even when I was a kid in London slums."

"Poor kid," the Runt muttered. "Just like me."

Aloud he said:

"But I didn't put that ad in, miss. Somebody must have done it for a joke. The —— fools! Excuse my language, miss."

She stared at him owlishly.

"You mean to say," she said, despairingly, articulating thickly, "that you don't want a housekeeper? That you ain't looking for a—a wife? That I can't stop here?"

"Yes, miss. That's right."

She rose from her chair.

"God save us!" she moaned. "An' just because some fool thought he was funny, I've got to go back to being a barmaid. I've got to ride all that way back. Four days it took me—an' I got lost—an' there was snakes an' things—an' I lost my valise an' grub—an'—

"But I could put up with it all on the way here. I kept tellin' myself that I was goin' to a place where I could really live, an' that I'd soon learn how to ride an' all about the bush, an' milking cows. I didn't mind even the snakes when I thought about that. But going back, there won't be anything like that to cheer me. I'll be going back to serve suds of beer over a sudsy counter, an' Dandy'll laugh at me: maybe he'll beat me. Oh, well! Let me go. You tell your blacks to get my horse."

"You can't go back to-night, miss. It ain't no use talking. To-morrow I'll—"

"I'm goin' now," she cried. "Let me go. Let me go—I was a fool to come. I ought to 'ave known—"

She began to laugh hysterically, pointing a shaking finger at the bewildered Runt.

Of a sudden, she collapsed in a huddled heap upon the ground and did not move.

"'Ell!" the Runt exclaimed as he stooped over her. "She's got fever!"

He picked her up and carried her to the large, well-appointed guest hut, placing her on the bed.

To Sixpence, who came running in response to his call, he gave a number of orders, then sat down by the bed and waited.

Ten minutes later, he handed Aggie and his medicine chest into the charge of a woman from the kraal; a woman to whose knowledge of the medicine lore of her people was added the training received at the medical mission she had attended for several years.

III.

MALARIA affects some people no worse than a slight cold and a swiftly passing headache. To others it presents all the dangers and complications of a major illness—and Aggie Harris happened to be one of these unfortunates.

And so it was that Fate furthered the plan of her husband's—for she was too ill to be moved back to Salisbury—and, despite the Runt's urgent letter, Harris refused to come out and look after her; neither could the Runt find any white woman prepared to come from the township to combine the duties of nurse and chaperone.

For over a week, Aggie had but few conscious moments; her strength flowed from her until she looked like a fragile waxen image of her former self. But the Runt and the native woman—helped by other women from the kraal—never relaxed their efforts and, in time, despite the fact that Aggie evinced small desire to recover, the fever left her.

The rest was comparatively easy. All that was necessary now was to nurse the patient back to strength.

To do this they kept her out in the sun all day, and at night made up her bed under the star-canopied sky. They fed her with eggs and milk; port and red, juicy steaks cut from the Runt's prize cattle.

Gradually, her cheeks filled out; her skin tanned; her hair—it had been cropped close while the fever was high—clustered about her head in tight, brown ringlets. The false golden color was no more to be seen.

During this period, the girl was quietly subdued—her illness had changed her in some subtle way; she had more depth—less artificiality. She was almost abject in her expressions of gratitude to the Runt and the native women who cared for her.

All day she sat in the deck chair gazing over the rolling landscape, never tiring of the unchanging scene; and at night, after the sun had set, the Runt would sit and talk to her of the work he had done, of the work he planned to do.

At first, the little man was tongue tied until, finding in her a sympathetic listener, he told her all his hopes and dreams; in a sense, he thought aloud.

And, in a measure, the girl came to see the land through his eyes and found it very good.

As she got still stronger, she went on little trips with the Runt about his farm, riding a wide-backed, gentle-gaited mule. She was dressed at such times in a pair of the Runt's riding breeches and white shirt. On her feet she wore a pair of native-made sandals; her legs were bare; a white pith helmet covered her brown curls.

She learned to use her eyes, learned to see the thousand and one things nature hides from those who are not bush-wise. In a little while she knew the names of the sixteen oxen in the Runt's pet transport team. They would come to her call, suffer all manner of indignities at her hands, waiting patiently for their reward—a carrot or a lump of sugar.

Sometimes men from the Lonely Mine came over to entertain the convalescent. Their advent was always greeted by the Runt with sighs of relief; it left him free to give his whole attention to his day's work.

One man, Jim Sayre, came more fre-

quently than all the others. He was assistant paymaster at the mine—a quiet, sober fellow, and a great friend of the Runt's—and was looking forward to the day when his capital would be large enough to take up land and farm.

Between Aggie and Sayre a strong bond of affection quickly arose, ripened into something more, and the Runt, watching it all, grinned contentedly. He made up his mind to loan Sayre enough money to start him on a farm as soon as he had married the girl.

One day Aggie came back from a ride—she and Sayre had gone off on a picnic together—alone.

"Where's Jim?" the Runt asked with idle curiosity as he helped her dismount.

"He had to get back early," she mumbled, averting her face. "He has to go into Salisbury to-morrow with the gold shipment and he said he had to get to bed early."

Something in the girl's voice puzzled the Runt.

"Aggie—" he began.

She turned to face him; her eyes were swollen; there were marks on her cheeks.

"Why, what's the matter, Miss?"

"Nothing," she said tonelessly. "Nothing—only I think I'll have to go back to Salisbury to-morrow before Jim comes back."

"Why, miss?"

"'Cause he asked me to marry him?"

The Runt beamed happily.

"Anybody with 'alf a heye could see that was in the wind. He's a good sort, miss, Jim is. You'll make no mistake about takin' 'im. An' he'll do well as a farmer, he will. He's got the right spirit—"

She put her hands over her ears.

"Stop!" she cried. "I'm not goin' to marry him."

"But why? I thought you and him, miss— Why?"

"Because I can't," she wailed.

She turned and ran into one of the huts, slamming the door after her.

The Runt scratched his head in bewilderment.

"Women are moody animals," he muttered. Then, at the sound of a rasping cough, turned to face two horsemen who had ridden up to the homestead.

One was Dandy Harris; the other, a vicious looking Boer with yellowed teeth showing between thick, sensual lips, was Rat Snyder.

The Runt frowned and thrust his left hand into his belt close to his revolver. He instinctively distrusted both men.

"Well?" he snapped.

Harris dismounted.

"I've come to see my sister—no objections, I suppose?" he said glibly.

"She's in there." The Runt jerked his thumb in the direction of the hut. "She's kind of upset about something. Better not bother her."

"I'm going to have a talk with her," Harris said flatly. "I'm going to find out when she'll be strong enough to come back home. She's been here long enough—too long. People are talkin' about you and her. She—"

He stopped abruptly, intimidated by the Runt's expression.

"I'm goin' to see her," he ended lamely. "And I'm goin' to see that she goes back with me to-morrow."

"I 'ardly think she will," the Runt replied slowly. "It's a long trip an'—"

"She's strong enough to go for rides with Jim Sayre," Rat Snyder yelled shrilly. "I've seen 'em together lots of times."

The Runt shrugged his shoulders.

"Anyway," he said to Harris, casually drawing his revolver and toying with it absently, "I don't reckon you're goin' to bother your sister now, are you, Dandy? You don't want to make 'er ill again."

"Of course," Harris stammered, his face black with wrath, "if you put it that way—"

He turned to his horse. He had heard too many well authenticated accounts of the Runt's shooting prowess to argue any further.

And at that moment Aggie threw open the door of the hut.

"Dandy," she called dispiritedly, "I want to speak to you."

The Runt returned his revolver to his holster, scowling thoughtfully as Harris, with a triumphant leer, went to the girl.

The door closed behind them.

"Nice place you've got, Runt," Synder remarked easily.

"Name's Robinson to you," the Runt growled.

Snyder tittered.

"Ach sis, ma-an! Don't get mad. I'm harmless. It ain't my fault if Dandy gets to thinking things about you an'—"

"You shut your dirty mouth an' keep it shut!" the Runt interrupted curtly, and his eyes blazed with the cold blue light of a killer.

Snyder opened his mouth as if to make a heated retort, thought better of it and contented himself with muttering curses under his breath.

From the hut sounded Harris's voice raised in anger.

"You'll tell me, or—"

The threat was uttered in a lower key.

"No, Dandy," the girl was pleading tearfully, "I—"

Followed a confused murmuring.

The Runt shifted uneasily from one foot to the other and was on the point of going to the hut and ordering Dandy away from the place when the door opened and Harris, grinning triumphantly, emerged, mounted, and the two rode swiftly away.

IV.

LATE that night three natives came to the hut which the Runt used as an office. One was Tikkey, his head stock boy; another, an old gray-beard named Kawiti, who was one of the herd tenders. The other was a young woman, Tikkey's head wife.

"Well?" the Runt asked, looking up from his papers.

"We have a story to tell, Little Baas. Speak, Mabele," Tikkey commanded, and the woman began:

"I was working in the corn patch that is at the far side of the Little Baas's land. It was nearly sundown. Two white men came riding; they rode through the corn. I ran to them, saying that the Little Baas would be angry because they had trampled down the corn. I said, if they had lost the way, I would show it to them. They laughed at me; they made evil requests. Then they rode on, striking me with their sjamboks when I tried to bar the way."

"Show the Little Baas the marks of the whip, Mabele."

The woman turned at her husband's order, showing her naked back. It was scored by long, angry looking welts.

"Au-a!" the Runt murmured—his wrath mounting rapidly. "And why did you not come straightway to me with the tale so that I could have caught up with the evil ones before dark?"

"It was my husband's *indaba*," she answered simply. "I went to my hut and waited for him. When he came he brought me here to you."

The Runt nodded and, turning to Tikkey, said:

"The evildoers shall be punished. They shall make an atonement. To-morrow, with the sun's rising, I will take after them and—"

"Wait, Little Baas," Tikkey interrupted. "There is more. Speak, Kawiti!"

"I was returning with the cattle," the old graybeard said. "I 'tend the cows with calf—that is known to you, Little Baas. Two white men—their hearts are black—rode by. One, a Boer, he is, dismounted and caught one of the calves and cut its throat. Then he mounted, and the two rode away, swiftly. I ran after them—but, wo-we! I have only two legs and am old! So I went to the kraal and waited there for Tikkey to whom I am responsible. My tale is told."

"It is an evil tale," the Runt answered slowly, "yet a small thing compared to the first. It shall be added to the count and to you, Kawiti, no blame is laid."

He turned to Tikkey.

"And is there yet more?"

"Aye, Little Baas. The sun had set when these same two men came to the horse kraal, where I was tending the leg of the missy's horse. They bade me catch two of the horses for them. When I refused they tied me up, beating me with their fists, and put a stick in my mouth so that I could not give the alarm. Two horses they caught—Blackie and Lion, they took—and rode away. When, after a long time, I had freed

myself I came straightway to you, passing my hut on the way. And hearing the tales of Mabele and Kawiti I brought them with me that they might tell it to you."

"Your tale is worse than Kawiti's, not so bad as Mabele's, yet bad enough. There shall be a reckoning. Wo-we! A heavy reckoning.

"To-morrow, before the first light of dawn, saddle the Imp and bring him here. That is all."

"Do I come with you, Little Baas?"

"No," the Runt answered after a momentary hesitation. "It is a white man's *indaba*. In my own way I want to deal with the two evildoers—I ride alone!"

V.

THE rugged tips of distant kopjes were splashed with the red and golden rays of a rising sun; and a few swiftly fading stars were still visible overhead in a leaden gray sky when the Runt picked up the trail of the two horsemen he wanted.

There was a stiff breeze blowing, a cold, biting wind, and the Runt's numbed fingers could scarcely hold on to the reins. He buried his chin yet deeper into the turned-up collar of his dew-saturated great coat, and tentatively urged his horse to a better speed.

A poor horseman, the Runt's mount was well selected for the task before it. An undersized but sturdy Basutu, it could keep up for hours its triple gait—the "rocking chair" gait peculiar to the breed.

But, if his riding ability was a minus quantity, the Runt gave second to no man in the matter of bushcraft. His eyes were superkeen and he experienced no difficulty in keeping to the trail.

Evidently the men had been in a great hurry, for they left the well-made dirt road whenever it made a wide detour to avoid some obstacle or marshy ground, and headed straight through the bush. And finally, coming to the bounds of the Runt's holding, where his road turned uncompromisingly south for Salisbury, eighty miles away, the spoor showed that they had followed it at a fast gallop.

Coming to a place where the ground was almost solid rock, the Runt was at fault for a few moments and obliged to cast about before he could pick up the spoor again.

He found it presently, doubling back upon itself, following a line through the bush that was parallel to the road.

"Clever," the Runt muttered. "That was Snyder's trick. If I hadn't been on the lookout, I'd have taken it for granted that they'd taken the road all the way into Salisbury."

The sun rose higher; his great coat steamed. He took it off, turned up his shirt sleeves, rejoicing in the sun's caressing warmth. Later, it would be unbearably hot.

He never increased his horse's pace, content with its space destroying gait. There was something grimly implacable about him; something which seemed to suggest that he would keep to the trail no matter where it led, confident that at its end—as all trails must end some time, somewhere—he would find the men he followed and mete out to them the justice they deserved.

All through the long morning hours he followed the spoor; having eyes for nothing else; only subconsciously noting the herd of impala buck that leaped gracefully in the bush to his right; apparently all unconscious of the troop of zebras which kept pace with him for a hundred yards and then vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

Just before noon he came to a river, with steeply sloping banks. It was very shallow and its crystal-clear water magnified the jagged bowlders which strewed its bed.

And here the Runt was faced with a problem: The spoor he was following entered the river—he could see where the horses had slid down the steep bank—and there vanished.

He dismounted, turned his horse loose to graze and roll, and sat down to a frugal meal.

While he ate he endeavored to reason out the way his quarry had headed after entering the river.

"I don't reckon they'd go downstream," he said slowly. "If they did, an' came out this side, that 'd bring 'em back to my place. An' they ain't such fools as to do that. They'd know I'd be after them to-

day, some time. And if they went downstream an' came out the other side—why, that 'd bring 'em too near my place an', besides the country round about is a hell of a place. No water fer days, once they leave the river—don't see what they're getting at, anyway.

"So that means they went upstream—then wot?"

With his forefinger he traced a crude map of the district, plotting in the spoor he had followed.

"I can't understand it," he confessed. "They can't be meanin' to 'ead for the mine road an' follow that into Salisbury. Wot good 'ud that do 'em? An' it's a sure thing they won't try to 'ide up at the mine. An' if they go on, cutting straight across the mine road, 'eading east, that 'll bring 'em into the nastiest bit of country I've 'eard tell of. There ain't nothin' there—sour grass, thorn scub, miles of bloomin' 'ot lava rock; no kraals, no 'omesteads, nothing. 'Smatter of fac', they ain't nothing between here and Forty Mile Peg—no matter which way you turn—save my place an' the Lonely Mine.

"Well, then! They wouldn't go there just to escape gettin' arrested for wot they did at my place. Ten to one the magistrate 'ud only fine 'em, anyway. And Harris, by all accounts, makes enough from that bar of his to pay a ten-pound fine."

Then he whistled softly. He had suddenly remembered what the girl had told him about Sayre going into Salisbury with a gold shipment; and on top of that came the recollection of Harris's heated discussion with his sister last night—his threats, her tearful entreaties, his triumphant departure.

"Wot a fool I am, sittin' 'ere wasting time! Course—that's their game. Highway robbery, an' then they'll beat it for Portuguese territory."

He rose swiftly, caught and saddled his horse, mounted clumsily. Then he halted, a look of indecision on his face.

"Reckon I'll let 'em go," he muttered. "Wot do I care if they 'old up the gold! Good job, too, I says. An' they'll get theirs—that's sure. Riding across that stretch 'll be a taste of 'ell. They'll have earned all they get before they reach Portuguese territory. Ten to one they'll never get there. Not Harris, anyway—he's soft. He don't know the bush."

Then he thought of his horses; the calf they had killed; their ill-treatment of Mabele—and hesitated. He thought of the girl, mentally dubbing her a treacherous hellcat, and then vaguely feeling sorry for her, making excuses for her.

"Her brother made her do it," he muttered, suddenly sensing the whole plot. "She came out to my place on purpose to get information from some of the mine boys. It was just luck that she had that dose of fever—an' that gave her a change o' heart. And then Jim Sayre came on the scene—"

It was thought of his friend, Jim Sayre, which decided him. He knew Jim wouldn't deliver up his charge without a fight—and two against one! They might not even give him a chance to fight. They wouldn't! They'd wait in ambush—at the ford, most like—an' shoot him in the back.

The Runt hesitated no longer then, but spurred his horse forward, following the river bank upstream.

Fifteen minutes later he halted, tethered his mount, and went forward on foot. Presently, on the bank of a small stream which was tributary to the river he saw ahead of him four horses tethered to a tree. Two of them—his horses—were saddled ready for trekking; the other two had on halters and crudely made packsaddles. A small fire blazed near by, and on it was a blackened billy full of coffee. A joint of veal was slowly roasting on a wooden spit.

The Runt went down on his belly and wormed his way through the long grass, revolver in hand. In this way he contrived to get up very close to the camp, but could see no sign of the men he wanted. He considered the advisability of making his way up to the ford, two or three hundred yards farther upstream, concluding that something had delayed the man Sayre and that the holdup had not yet been pulled off.

He was on the point of moving from his place of concealment, when he heard

a splashing in the river and the sound of men's voices.

He crouched low and became absolutely motionless.

There was a sound of hobnailed boots on slippery rock, then two men climbed up the bank of the stream and made their way to their camp. Their soaked clothing clung tightly to them, the water in which they had been wading reached to their shoulders.

Each man carried two small canvas bags of evident weight.

Just as the Runt was about to rise to his feet the two men separated, Rat Snyder coming over to the fire, Harris going to his horse and putting the bags he carried in his saddle wallets.

The Runt cursed softly; he had missed his chance. He was forced to wait now until they came together again.

"*Ach sis,* ma-an," Rat Snyder said triumphantly. "Now we will eat and drink. Then we will trek."

Harris turned swiftly; his face was ashen, his teeth chattered.

"For God's sake!" he exclaimed peevishly. "We ain't going to stop now. Let's trek."

Snyder laughed.

"There's no hurry, ma-an, I tell you. Not for six or eight hours—maybe not for three or four days—will they know what happened at the ford. And two hours' start is enough. Ach sis! I know the country, I tell you. It is so easy. We trek up this stream, in the water we trek, for seven or eight miles—due east it goes for that distance. Then we leave it and trek across country. And I know that country. No one can follow us there. We can go at our own pace, and in a week, maybe less, we will be safe in Portuguese territory. So come on an' sit an' dry your clothes. Else, maybe, you'll catch fever. But why should I care? Then I will get your share. Come on!"

Harris shook his head doubtfully.

"Maybe we won't get an hour's start. The Runt may be on our trail now."

"Almighty!" Snyder sneered. "What a fool you are! And he is a fool too. If he takes the trail after us alone—what matter? He is one, we are two. A bullet through his guts 'll settle him. But he won't come, I tell you, ma-an. He will ride to Forty Mile Peg and tell the policeman there that we stole his horses and killed one of his calves. Almighty, yes! Like all *verdoemte* Englisher, he go whining to the police; he won't take the trail alone.

"An' he couldn't follow the trail I made, even if he wanted to. I was too *slim* for him, me! Even if he started last night, in the dark, he couldn't get to the policeman until to-night. And the policeman couldn't get on our trail until to-morrow, or the next day. And he might follow it to here—and then what? Two days' start we would have had—

"Ach sis, ma-an! Stop your mewling! Come and eat and drink."

"The Runt ain't an Englishman, Snyder," Harris said slowly. "He's a Yank—and Yanks don't do things the way you expect. He'll take the law into his own hands, I'm betting, an' take our trail alone or with a black trekker."

"If he does," Snyder mumbled, his mouth filled with a big lump of meat he had cut off the joint, "I'll know how to handle him."

He poured out some coffee into a tin cup and gulped it down noisily.

Harris had moved over to a hollow stump and was putting in it a canvas bag. There was a malicious sneer on his face as he came over to the fire and sat down beside Snyder.

"'Ands up!" the Runt shouted.

"I told you," Harris cried despairingly, as he and Snyder swiftly responded to the curt summons.

The Runt rose and advanced from cover, his revolver covering them.

"Stand up!" he ordered. "You, Harris! Take out your revolver and throw it here."

Dumbly Harris obeyed.

"Almighty, Runt!" Snyder said. "What is this you do? We only borrowed your horses and took a calf because we were hungry. That's nothing much. We're on a prospecting trip an—"

"So am I, Snyder," the Runt said grim-

ly, "an' I reckon I've struck pay dirt." He stooped over and cautiously retrieved the revolver Harris had tossed at his feet. "Get Snyder's revolver, Harris, and throw that here, too."

Harris moved slowly to obey. He seemed to have trouble in undoing the flap of Snyder's holster.

"Quick!" the Runt snapped.

Harris moved swiftly then, leaped behind Snyder—so that he shielded him from the Runt—drew the revolver, and fired.

The bullet passed through the crown of the Runt's helmet, whipping it from his head. But, before Harris could fire again, Snyder dropped on all fours.

"You've missed, you fool!"

A report from the Runt's revolver punctuated Snyder's yell.

Harris spun round at the impact of the heavy bullet, then crashed lifelessly to the ground.

Snyder cringed on the ground; there was no fight left in him.

"Lay flat down on your belly and put your hands behind your back. Quick! I've got something else to do."

Swiftly and expertly the Runt lashed him hand and foot.

"That 'll hold you, I reckon," he said, and then, mounting one of the stolen horses, rode swiftly up to the ford.

Sayre, he found to his great relief, was sitting on a bowlder, midstream, bathing his forehead. There was a deep cut over his right eye. He smiled wanly as the Runt dismounted.

"All right, Jim?" the little man asked anxiously.

"I'm alive, Runt. Nothing much the matter with me—physically—save this cut and a bump as big as an egg back of my head."

"Never mind—I've got them," the Runt told him encouragingly; and he briefly outlined what he had done.

"I'm glad of that," Sayre said. He was slow of speech, as are many big men. "But I'm sorry for—for the girl. I trusted her, Runt. I told her all about this shipment I was taking in. I told her she mustn't tell anybody, not even you. But Harris—he's her brother, and blood's thicker than water—must have got it out of her some way. I'll swear she's straight, Runt. Even now. I—"

"How did they get you?" the Runt interrupted.

He did not want to talk about the girl now. First, and unknown to Sayre, he wanted to retrieve the canvas bag Harris had put in the hollow tree. It suddenly occurred to him that that might answer many questions which were troubling him.

"When I came to the ford Harris and Snyder were washing gold or something. I stopped to have a chat with them. Then, all of a sudden, Snyder holds something up in his hands. 'What's this?' he says excitedly. Thinking perhaps he'd found a diamond, and not suspecting anything, I bent over. And that's all I remember.

"They must have given me a hell of a clout!" He tenderly fingered the bump on the back of his head. "When I came to, I was lying on my back in that clump of reeds over there. They must have thought I was dead or they'd have finished me off—sure. God knows what happened to my horse and pack mule. Bolted, most like."

"No; there they are!" The Runt pointed to two distended carcasses which were moving slowly downstream, their feet sticking grotesquely up in the air. "They must have stuck 'em. I didn't hear no shots."

"Oh, well!" Sayre rose unsteadily to his feet. "Let's go. But, say, Runt, help me to keep the girl out of this."

VI.

At sunrise next morning Sergeant Kennedy, in charge of the mounted police post at Forty Mile Peg, was listening to the account of a foiled attempt to hold up the Lonely Mine gold shipment—as told by Runt.

"Too bad," he said, when the little man had finished, "you couldn't have got Snyder as well!"

"Don't be greedy," the Runt answered. "Here's 'Arris, even if he is dead, an', according to Sayre, the gold's intact. If you want Snyder, go get him. He was 'eading east last time I saw him."

The sergeant laughed.

"Fat chance me, or anybody else, 'ud have of catching him now. But we'll get him if he ever comes back to this territory. But he won't."

The Runt nodded agreement. There were some things he had not told the sergeant. He reasoned that that man would not approve of the bargain he had made with Snyder—a chance to escape to Portuguese territory in return for silence regarding the girl's complicity in the holdup.

"But why were they such fools as to take your horses and sneak one of your calves just before trying to pull off a big thing like this?" the sergeant wanted to know.

"They thought they was safe," the Runt replied slowly. "They'd been 'anging around a long time—at least this is how I figger it—waitin' for something to break. An' they must have run short of grub. If they'd asked me, I'd have given 'em plenty, the fools. An' they most like needed the extra 'orses for pack, or to eat on the way, supposin' they couldn't shoot no buck.

"Yeh, they was fools to take a chance like they did; they ought to 'ave known I think more of my stock an' my people than a 'en does of her chicks. At that, it was just luck as put me on their trail—luck an' the fac' that the girl tipped me off that 'er brother was up to no good."

The sergeant nodded. "I feel sorry for her," he said.

"Oh, well—she'll get over it some day," the Runt replied wearily. "I'm goin' 'ome now. Been away too long. An' I'm goin' to take Sayre with me. He's all in; needs a woman's attention." He grinned at the sergeant. "If you want us for witnesses, you know where to find us. Some of your men can take in the gold. Right?"

"Right," said the sergeant.

VII.

It was sunrise of another day when the Runt rode up to his homestead. The girl came to the door of one of the huts and stood there, watching him listlessly. She was very pale and spiritless.

"There's a 'ell of a mess," the Runt cried excitedly. "I got to get some grub an' take the trail."

There was terror in her wide-open eyes as she watched him dismount.

"What's the matter?" she gasped.

"Jim Sayre's missing with the gold shipment. They think he's headed for Portuguese territory. There's a posse—"

The girl passed her hands before her eyes.

"Jim didn't do it," she said in a dull, monotonous voice. "It was Dandy and Snyder. And—they've killed Jim." Her voice ended in a dry sob.

The Runt went up to her, pulled her hands down from her face.

"What do you mean?" he demanded fiercely.

"I"—she half choked over the words—"I'm Dandy's wife. It was all a put up job. I was to come out and get you to let me stay so's I could find out about the shipment. I did it because—because I thought I loved Dandy, and I wanted to get away from this country. An' then, when I got here, I got malaria, an' you took such care of me—I'd never been treated like that before—an' I got to know an' understand the country. An' I didn't want to leave it any more; it's so big an' clean. An' it opened my eyes—it 'elped me to see Dandy as he really is. An' then Jim came, an' I forgot I was Dandy's wife until Jim asked me to marry 'im. You remember?"

The Runt nodded, his eyes intent on her face. He heard the jingle of a horse's bit in the bush beyond the clearing, and smiled covertly.

Sayre, unobserved, was listening to the girl's confession.

"Go on!" the Runt said curtly.

"Then Dandy came," she continued, "an' made me tell him what Jim had told me about the shipment. God help me! I told Dandy all about it. But I wouldn't say a thing until Dandy promised he wouldn't hurt Jim. An' he promised. He said he'd leave Jim tied loose so he could free himself. But he couldn't have—not if Jim's disappeared.

"They must have killed him—an' it's all my fault; me, as 'ud rather die than 'ave a

hair of Jim's head harmed. Dandy said he'd kill him if I didn't tell about the shipment. That's why I told. An' Jim's dead, an' I'm married to the man who killed him!"

With an effort she pulled herself together. "Have my horse saddled."

"Why—where are you going?"

"To do the only thing I can do—clear Jim's name, an' then give myself up." She shook her head impatiently. "You see, I wanted Dandy to take me with him—that was the only thing to do. I couldn't stay here and face Jim again, could I? But Dandy said I was too ill to travel with him. So he said he'd leave his share of the gold in a hollow tree close to the ford. He drew me a map to show where it was. And, when things had blown over, I was going there to get it and join Dandy in Lourenco Marquez.

"I got to be fair to Dandy. He did it most for me. If I hadn't grumbled about being fed up, he'd never have done nothing like this. But he broke his word about Jim. So— Get my horse, Runt, please. I'm going to give myself up—but first I've got to get the gold."

"You don't have to," the Runt said slowly. "It's here. I got it out of the hollow tree."

She stared at him in bewilderment.

From one of his saddle wallets he took a canvas bag, opened it, and took out a note, which he handed to the girl.

She let it fall to the ground unread, holding out her hands for the bag, for the evidence that was to clear Jim Sayre.

"Give me the gold," she demanded.

"This ain't nothin' but brass filin's, miss," the Runt said, and emptied the bag onto the ground. "You'd better read your note."

She stared dumbly at the little golden mound, and then picked up the paper.

"Good-by, Aggie," she read, knitting, her brows over Dandy's ornate handwriting. "You won't see me again. I'll drop you a card, maybe, from Paris.—Dandy."

"He couldn't play fair," she moaned. "He was too small. He cheated all round —I might have known! He— And now I can't clear Jim. The police won't believe me without the gold. I—"

"Listen, miss," the Runt began hurriedly, beckoning for Sayre to come out from his place of concealment. "Jim ain't dead —but Dandy is. I had to kill him—or he would have shot me. An' the gold's in the bank now—safe. An' Jim's safe. Do you hear? Jim's safe!"

She dropped to the ground in a huddled heap, sobbing softly.

The Runt bent over her.

"Out of my way," Sayre cried, rushing forward. "I told you she was straight, Runt. I knew this was a fool plan of yours. You—"

He picked up the girl and carried her into the hut, kicking the door shut.

The Runt listened anxiously. At first only Sayre's voice sounded—calmly, soothingly. Then the girl's voice joined his, making a confused murmur of sound.

"Well"—the Runt drew a deep breath as he slowly started to off saddle—"that's all right. Now I can do a bit of work. But, 'ell—what fools women are. And," remembering the look on Sayre's face, "men, too, for that matter."

THE END

The Radio Planet

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Author of "The Radio Man," "The Radio Beasts," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II.

MYLES CABOT, a radio expert, who has settled down as the husband of Princess Lilla, a queen of Cupia on the planet Venus, called by its inhabitants "Poros," returns to the earth for a visit.

When he goes back to Poros by wireless a storm throws him off his course, and he lands on the wrong continent, across a boiling sea from Cupia. On this strange continent he finds Formians, a race of scientific ant-men, who are old enemies of his, with the exception of one, Doggo, with whom he had made friends years before. Cabot finds that Prince Yuri, a renegade Cupian, now ruling the Formians, had flown back to Cupia to make trouble. Myles manages to find Yuri's radio station, and sends a message of cheer to his wife, but he has no listening apparatus, as Cupians and Formians do not have ears like men. However, when he escapes from the Formians he finds furry people who are still living in the age of wood and flint; there are savage furry people called Roies, and civilized ones called Vairkings. The Vairkings take Myles into custody, but he persuades them into helping him find and manufacture all the minerals needed to build a radio set. On one prospecting expedition Cabot makes friends with one faction of the savage Roies, but on a second trip he is captured by another faction. These Roies tie him, and only release him long enough to rescue one of their number from drowning in a mountain torrent. Then they tie the earth-man up again, and resume their march to the court of their chief, Att the Terrible.

CHAPTER XII.

COMPANIONS IN MISERY.

ON the morrow Myles Cabot was to be brought before Att the Terrible, king of the Roies—for execution in the diabolical manner common to these furry aborigines, namely, by being strung up by the heels and then used as a target for the archery of the king.

In spite of this, he slept soundly and dreamed of radio sets and blast furnaces and galena mines, until he was awakened by a soft furry paw shaking his shoulder.

A voice spoke close to his ear: "A life for a life."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 26.

"So you have that proverb on this continent as well as in Cupia?" was his reply. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I am the soldier whom you saved from the raging mountain torrent," said his invisible visitor, "and what I want is to repay that favor. Is it really true that you are a friend of Otto the Bold?"

"Yes."

"Then come. The forces of Grod the Silent, Prince Otto's father, are encamped but a short distance from here. I am on guard over you for the moment. Come, while there is yet time."

Cabot arose in haste. The other promptly severed the cords which bound his elbows. Oh, how good it felt to have his arms free once more! He held them aloft, and flexed and reflexed the lame and bloodless muscles. Excruciating pain shot through the nerves of his forearms, but it was pleasant pain, easy to bear, for it portended peace and rest to his tired members.

He wiggled all his fingers rapidly, and the pain gave way to a prickly tingling, which in turn gradually faded off as the blood coursed freely through his veins and arteries once more. He drew a deep sigh of pleasure and relief.

"Come!" commanded the guard.

Together the two left the tent, and threaded their way among the other tents out of the camp, and down a rocky hillside path, the Roy in advance, with Myles following, holding the other's hand for guidance.

Myles lost all sense of direction in the jet black, starless night, but the other, born and reared on Poros, and hence used to the daily recurrences of twelve hours of absolute darkness, walked sure-footedly ahead, and seemed to know exactly where he was going.

Finally, after about two hours of this groping treadmill progress lights appeared ahead, and presently there came the sentry's challenge: "Halt! Who is there?"

"Two messengers with word for Grod the Silent," Cabot's conductor replied.

In an aside, Cabot interestedly inquired: "How does it happen that this camp is guarded, whereas the camp which besieged the village of Sur was not?"

"There is no need to post sentinels when fighting against the Vairkings, for Vairkings never go out in the dark, but we Roies are different."

"Why, then, did we meet no sentinels when leaving your camp?"

"Because we were going *out*. We passed one, but he did not challenge us. Coming back would be different."

At this point the hostile guard interposed: "Stop that whispering among yourselves. Ho there, a light!"

Whereat a small detachment arrived on the double quick, with torches. The leader shaded his eyes wth one palm, and inspected Myles and his companion carefully.

"This is a Vairking," said he in surprise, noting the leather trappings of the earthman. "You are spies. Seize them!"

In an instant they were seized and bound, and thrown into separate tents under guard.

When morning came, Myles was fed and then led before Grod the Silent. The earthman smiled ingratiatingly as he entered, but there was no sign of recognition on the stern face of the King of the Roies.

"Who are you?" asked the latter, "and what are you doing here?"

"I am Cabot the Minorian," was the reply, "a recently escaped prisoner of Att the Terrible."

"Do not mention that accursed name in my presence!" thundered the king; then: "I do not seem to recall your name, but your face looks familiar. Where have I seen you before?"

"In the ravine near Sur."

Grod's brow clouded.

"I remember. You felled me with your fist," said he, darkly; then brightening a bit: "But you spared me. Why?"

"Because your death would please the Roy whose name you do not permit me to mention."

"You improve," said Grod, smiling. "Know, then, that we Roies hold to the maxim, 'A life for a life.' Accordingly, I shall set you free, and shall content myself with shooting arrows into merely the soldier who brought you here."

"You give me a life for a life unconditionally?" asked Myles.

"Yes."

"Then give me the life of the poor soldier who saved me from the unmentionable one. Shoot your arrows into my body instead."

"Very magnanimous of you," said Grod. "And really, it makes but little difference to me just whom I practice archery upon. Ho, guard! Bring in the other prisoner."

One of the soldiery accordingly withdrew, and presently returned with—Quivven! Quivven, of all persons!

Cabot gasped, and so did the golden-furred Vairking maiden; then both uttered simultaneously the single word, "You!"

The savage chief smiled.

Said he, "A slight mistake, guard: I meant you to bring the Roy soldier who was captured with this furless Vairking early this morning. But evidently it has turned out to be a fortunate mistake, for it has brought to my attention the fact that this common Vairking man and this noble Vairking lady are acquainted."

While the Roy was speaking an idea occurred to Cabot. He was entitled by the code of honor of this savage race to save a life. Chivalry demanded that he save the life of this maiden rather than that of himself, or even of the soldier who had rescued him from Att the Terrible. Yet what would Lilla think?

Did he not owe it to Lilla to save his own life in order that he might some day return across the boiling seas to save *her* from the unknown peril which menaced her? For him to sacrifice himself and her, or even merely himself, for the sake of some strange woman, would fill Lilla with consuming jealousy.

Luckily Lilla was not here to see him make his choice. He was an officer and a gentleman, to whom but one course lay open. And if he decided in the way that would displease Lilla, then that very decision would forever prevent Lilla from knowing.

So, his mind made up, he spoke: "Oh, king, you still owe me a life. Inasmuch as your guard has made the mistake of substituting this young lady for the Roy warrior, whose life I had elected to save, I now accept the substitution, and elect that you shall spare her life in place of mine."

Quivven the Golden Flame stared at him with tears of gratitude and appreciation in her azure eyes. Grod the Silent smiled knowingly in a manner which infuriated Myles, but fortunately Quivven did not notice this, so Myles let it pass. Then the Roy king spoke.

Said he: "We shall see about that later. Meanwhile, guard, bring in the *right* prisoner."

The guard sheepishly withdrew, and soon returned with the soldier who had befriended Myles.

"Why did you rescue this furless Vairking, who was a prisoner of your forces?" asked Grod of the newcomer.

"Because he rescued me from a mountain torrent, O king," was the reply. "A life for a life."

"Quite true," admitted Grod, nodding his head contemplatively. "But was it altogether necessary to that end that you leave your own forces?"

"No, oh, king," replied the soldier; "but I fain would battle on your side. I have had quite enough of the fat one who commands our outfit."

"Good!" cried Grod, clapping his hands. "We shall need every man that we can muster. Thus have you bought your own life and freedom. Unbind him, guards, and give him weapons, so that he may fight for us. As for you, you yellow minx, the quicker you get out of here the better it will suit me. We are at war, and women have no place in warfare. Therefore I gladly give you your life, which this furless one has purchased.

"Do not think," he continued, "that I do not know who you are, or that I do not realize that I could hold you for high ransom. But for the present it suits my purposes to release you; for my mind is a one-cart road, and at present I am engaged in an important and highly personal war.

"Besides, if I were to keep you my enemy might get hold of you and collect the ransom himself, which would never do. Twelve days from now, if I should be in need of carts, a messenger from me will call at the palace of Theoph the Grim; and if you are at all grateful you will make me a present of about twenty sturdy wagons.

"As for you," turning to Myles, "your life is mine, since you failed to redeem it. Some day I may call upon you for it, but for the present I wish to use it. You are detailed, as my personal representative, to escort this lady safely to Vairkingi. Now both of you get out of here, for I have more important things to attend to. I must put my army on the march."

One of the guards stepped up to Myles and cut his bonds. Quivven had not been bound.

"May I have arms, Oh king, so that I can fulfill your mission with credit to you?" asked Myles, with a twinkle in his eye.

"You keep on improving," replied Grod. "Yes, you may. Here, take my own sword. You are a brave man and an able warrior, as my chin well remembers. May the Builder grant that some day we shall fight side by side."

This gave Cabot an idea.

"Why can that not be now?" he suggested. "Why not form an aliance with Vairkingi against the unmentionable one?"

But Grod the Silent shook his head.

"No," said he positively, "it cannot be. In the first place, the unmentionable one is seeking such an alliance himself against me; and in the second place, this is my own private fight. I have spoken."

Then Cabot had a further idea.

"About the wagons," said he; "would you mind sending for them to my brickyard north of Vairkingi? That would be more convenient."

"Very well," replied Grod.

Roy warriors then supplied the two prisoners with portable rations, and escorted them for quite a distance from the camp, until they struck a mountain trail. This, the escort informed them, led to Vairkingi. There the Roies left Myles and Quivven alone.

The first thing that she asked was, "With all these mountains full of warring Roies, do you believe that we shall be safe?"

"I think so," Myles replied. "The very fact that they are at war will keep them much too busy to bother with about us. Come on."

As they hurried down the trail each related his or her adventures to the other. Cabot's you know already. Quivven had gone with a few soldiers to hunt for Myles after his prospecting party had returned and reported his disappearance by the river; but her party had been ambushed, all except Quivven had been killed, and she had been taken prisoner.

"Did Grod treat you with respect?" Myles asked, with clenched fists.

"Absolutely," she replied, tossing her pretty head. "I never knew a man so impersonal. I am accustomed to have men recognize my presence and pay some attention to my existence. But this brute—why, I might just as well have been a piece of furniture or one of his servants. I don't believe he knows now what color my eyes are, or whether I'm pretty or not. And you're just as bad as he is," she added somewhat irrelevantly.

"Your eyes are blue, and you are very pretty," he replied. "In fact, you closely resemble my own wife, the beautiful Princess Lilla, who waits for me far across the boiling seas."

"That reminds me to ask," said Quivven abruptly. "How successful was your expedition, apart from your being captured and getting yourself into all kinds of trouble?"

So he told about the glistening metallic particles in the sands of the river. Also how he had found what were probably zinc-blende and galena. Then they discussed in detail his plans for his various factories. From time to time they munched some of the food which had been given them.

The day quickly sped, and evening drew near, yet still they were upon the mountain road with no sight of Vairkingi or of any landmark familiar to either of them. Quivven was for stopping and resting, but Myles urged her on.

"No matter how tired you are," said he, "it is not safe to stop in this strange country."

So still she struggled on. The sky darkened without the usual pinkening in the west. All too well they knew what that portended—one of the heaven-splitting tropical storms so common on Poros. And they were right. The storm broke, the thunder roared in one continuous volume of sound,

the lightning and the rain alike poured down in continuous sheets. The trail became a mountain torrent, so that they had to cease their journey and crawl upon a huge bowlder, in order to avoid being engulfed by the water.

The rain stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Again the silver sky appeared overhead. The extempore brook rapidly disappeared, but left in its wake a wet, muddy, and slippery trail, down which the two took up their journey once more.

Several times Quivven stumbled and fell, until at last her companion had to help her in order to keep her going at all. But, in spite of this assistance, she finally broke down and cried.

"I shall not go one step farther," she asserted.

Myles sat down beside her and talked to her as one would soothe a child. And that was what she was, a tired little child.

"You can't stay here," he urged, "the ground is damp, the night is coming on, and your fur is sopping wet."

"I don't care anything about anything," she sobbed. "All that I know is that I positively cannot go on."

So he decided that it would be necessary to change his tactics.

"I am ashamed of you," he railed. "You, the daughter of a king, and can't stand a little exercise! Why, I believe you are just plain lazy."

For reply she jumped to her feet in a sudden rage.

"Oh, you beast!" she cried. "You insulting beast! You common soldier, you! I'll show you that I can stand as much hardship as the pampered womenfolk of your Cupia, though the men of *my* country, even our common soldiers would be gentlemanly enough not to force a lady to endure any more than is absolutely necessary. Oh, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

"You are not being forced to endure more than is necessary," replied her escort harshly. "In the first place, it *is* necessary to go on; and, in the second place, I am not forcing you. *You* can go on or not, just as you see fit, but as for me, *I* don't intend to spend the night here in this wet valley. Good-by!"

For reply Quivven raced ahead of him with: "Oh, how I hate you!" and disappeared around a turn in the trail.

CHAPTER XIII.

FURTHER PROGRESS.

HIS change of tactics had worked, although it made him feel like a brute. But only by arousing Quivven's anger could he stir her to continue the journey; and to remain would have menaced her safety and her health.

She had a good head start of him. The silver sky was turning crimson in the west. Night was coming on. So he hurried after her down the wet and slippery trail.

At last it became so dark that he had to slow down and walk; and finally merely grope his way, shoving his feet ahead, one after the other, in order to be sure to keep to the trail and not to stumble.

Time and again his foot would touch something soft, which he would picture as some strange and weird Porovian animal, a gnooper for instance. Quickly he would withdraw the foot. Then, waiting in suspense, for the creature either to go away or to spring upon him, at last he would cautiously push his foot forward, touch the object again, kick it slightly, and find that it was only a clump of Porovian grass or a rotted piece of lichen log.

Poor Quivven! How terrified *she* must be at such encounters!

After awhile he got a bit used to these occurrences, and accordingly each succeeding one of them delayed him less than the preceding.

"You know," he said to himself, "this will keep on until finally one of these obstacles will actually turn out to be a gnooper, and it will eat me alive before I can get out of the way."

Just then his groping foot touched another of these soft objects.

"Get out of my way," shouted Cabot, and gave it a kick. But this time it was not attached to the soil. It yielded and wriggled a bit. Then it gave a peculiar groaning sound.

Myles leaped backward and waited. But

nothing happened; so he tried to circle the creature. Again the groan. His scientific curiosity got the better of his caution. He approached once more and investigated more closely. It was covered with fur, wet, muddy fur.

It was Quivven!

Tenderly he raised the crumpled form in his arms, and groped on down the treacherous trail.

Myles wondered how long he could bear up with this dead weight in his arms. But just as he was beginning to stagger a bit, the road gave a turn and flattened out, and there before him were lights, the flares and bonfires of a city! They had reached the plain.

"Quivven!" he cried joyfully. "There is home! There is Vairkingi!"

But she made no reply. Her body was cold and still.

Quickly he laid her on the ground and placed one ear to her chest. Thank the Great Builder! Her heart still beat. So he chafed her hands and feet, and worked her arms violently back and forth until she began to groan protestingly.

"Quivven," he cried, "wake up! We are home!"

"Are you here, Myles?" she murmured faintly.

"Yes."

"And you won't make me walk any more?"

"No."

"Then I'll wake up for you," said she, cheerfully, and promptly fell fast asleep.

Again lifting her tenderly in his arms, he resumed the journey.

On reaching the city he circled the wall until he came to one of the gates, where he stood the girl on the ground and shook her gently into consciousness.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"At the gates of Vairkingi," Myles answered.

She ran her hands rapidly over her mud-caked fur.

"Oh, but I can't go in like this," she wailed, "I'm covered with mud from head to foot! Think how I must look! No, I refuse to go in."

"If you stay out here," he urged mildly, "then when morning comes every one will see you, the Princess Quivven, bedraggled with mud, hanging around outside the city gates. Better far to go in now, and take a chance of being seen by only one sentinel."

"Oh, you beast, you beast!" she sobbed, beating him futilely with her tiny paws.

For reply he seized her in his arms, swung her across one hip, and shouted: "Open wide the gates of Vairkingi for Cabot the Minorian, magician to Jud the Excuse-maker, and to his Excellency Theoph the Grim!"

The gates swung open, and the sentinel stared at them with surprise and some amusement. Myles whipped out his sword, and the smile froze on the soldier's face.

"Thus do I teach men not to laugh at Myles Cabot," said the earth-man sternly. "Remember that you have seen nothing."

And he handed the soldier the choice blade of Grod the Silent. The soldier smiled again.

"I have seen nothing but a Roy, whom I robbed of his sword and drove off into the darkness. It is a fine sword, and I will remember that I have seen nothing. May the Great Builder bless Myles Cabot the Minorian."

Cabot glanced at his burden, Quivven, the beautiful. No wonder she did not want to be seen. It always humiliates a lady not to look her best in public. But by the same token, no one could possibly recognize her. He might perfectly well have saved the sword.

So he passed on through the city streets. Finally he had to put the girl down, and ask her to help him find the way, which she did grudgingly. At the gate of Jud's compound, Myles again swung her across his hip, before he demanded entrance. No swords this time, for diplomacy would take the place of payment.

"Myles Cabot demanding entrance," said he.

The local guard inspected them carefully by the light of his torch.

"It is Cabot all right," he replied, "and you look as though you had seen some hard fighting. But who is this with you?"

"A girl of the Roies," answered Myles. "That is what the fighting was about."

"Not for mine!" asserted the soldier, positively. "Though there is no accounting for tastes. They are filthy little beasts, and spitfires as well, so I'm told. My advice to you, sir, is to throw it down a well."

Quivven wriggled protestingly.

"Perhaps I will," said Myles as he passed through the gates.

At their own gate at last, he placed her once more on her feet, whereat she shook herself free, raced to the house, slammed the door of her room.

Cabot himself went right to bed, without waiting to wash or anything, and dropped instantly to sleep the moment he touched his pile of bedding; yet, so intent was he on wasting no time in getting Cupia on the air that he was up early the next morning.

He found his laboratory force sadly demoralized, owing to the absence of Quivven and himself, but he quickly brought order out of chaos, and set the men to work on their first real construction job, to which all the other work had been mere preliminary steps.

Quivven kept to her rooms, but one of the other maids roguishly informed him: "The Golden One says she hates you."

Now that his fire bricks were ready, Myles Cabot laid out on paper the plans for his smelting plant, all the units of which were to be lined with fire brick.

First he designed a furnace for roasting his ore. This furnace was to be in two sections, one above the other, the lower holding the charcoal fire, and the upper holding the ore. Later he planned to use the sulphur fumes of this roaster to make sulphuric acid, which in turn he would use to make sal ammoniac for his batteries. But at present he had not yet figured out this process in detail.

The smelting furnace, for smelting the roasted ore into copper-matte, was to consist in a chimney about two feet in diameter, sloping sharply outward for about two feet, and thence sloping gradually inward again for a height of about ten feet. Near the bottom were to be a number of small holes leading from an air passage.

This air passage and the vent for the hot flames from the top of the smelter were to be run in parallel pipes made of hollow brick tile, to two chambers containing a checkerwork design of fire brick. The two pipes were to be interchangeable; so that, when the exhaust had heated one of the checkerwork grids to a red heat, the pipes could be switched, and the incoming air warmed by passing through the heated grid. From gnooper hide and wood he could easily construct bellows to pump in the air for the blast.

Molten copper-matte and slag would be separately run off through two separate openings at different levels near the bottom of the blast furnace.

To further refine the matte he designed a Bessemer converter, that is to say, a barrel shaped box of layers of fire clay, the inner layer being very rich in quartz sand. This barrel, when filled with molten matte, would be laid on its side; and a hot blast introduced through holes near this side would convert the matte into pure copper in about two hours.

The first converter which he made was rather small, as he expected that it would not last very well without metal reënforcements, and of course he would have no metal for reënforcing purposes until after he had run off at least one heat.

For the extraction of iron, he made crucibles of fire clay, which he set in deep holes in the ground.

On the second morning after the unpleasant homecoming, Quivven appeared. All the fires of her rage had burned out, and she was meek and subdued.

With downcast eyes she reported to Myles: "I am ready to go to work now."

With a welcoming smile he patted her golden-furred shoulder, whereat her old anger started to flare up again, but this one remaining ember merely flickered and died out, and she submitted with a shrug of resignation.

So the radio man explained to her his plans for the furnaces; then, leaving her in charge of the work, he set out once more to the river of the silver sands, this time accompanied by a heavy guard of Vairking soldiers, and flying a blue flag, as agreed on with Prince Otto of the Roies.

As he was departing, Quivven flung her arms around him and begged him not to go

to certain destruction, but he gently disengaged himself, smiling indulgently at this show of childish affection.

"My dear little girl," he admonished, "most of our troubles last time came from your following me. This time I warn you that I shall be very displeased if you fail to stick closely to home and complete my two magic furnaces for me. Promise that you will."

So, with tears of dread in her blue eyes, she promised; and the expedition set forth. They were gone about five days. The trip proved uneventful from any except a scientific viewpoint. They returned, bearing several pounds of silvery grains, placer-mined from the river sands; also some large lumps of galena crystal, and nearly a ton of zinc blende. They found that, under the skillful direction of little Quivven, the furnaces were nearly completed.

Quivven the Golden-flame was overjoyed at Cabot's safe return, while even he had to confess considerable relief. He complimented her warmly on the progress of the furnaces, and noted her pleasure at his expressions of approval.

A few details which had perplexed her were quickly straightened out, and the work rushed to completion.

He next tested the silver grains which he had brought from the river. His method was a very simple one, invented by himself. It consisted in filling a clay cup with water and weighing it, then weighing a quantity of the metal, and then putting this metal in the water and weighing the whole. A simple mathematical calculation from these three weights, $b/(a+b-c)$, gave him the specific gravity of the metal. This process was repeated a number of times to avoid error, and gave as an average the figure 21.5, which he remembered as the specific gravity of pure platinum.

As a further test he hammered some of the supposed platinum into a thin sheet, and attempted, without success, to melt it. Then he laid a sliver of one of his lead bullets on it, and tried again, with the result that the lead melted and burned a hole through the metal sheet. This test convinced him that he truly had found platinum.

Cabot next turned his attention to glass-making. For ordinary glass he would need quartz, soda, potash, and limestone.

The reason for his employing both soda and potash, instead of merely one or the other, was that together they would give him a glass which would have a lower fusing point, and thus be easier for him to handle with his crude equipment. For glass for his tubes he would use litharge in place of the limestone.

The quartz and limestone were already available. Soda would be a byproduct of his sal ammoniac when he got around to making it, but this would not be until he had made sulphuric acid from his copper ore, which was a most complicated process as he remembered it.

Potash could be got simply by dripping water through wood-ashes, evaporating the water, roasting the sediment, dissolving again in water, letting the impurities settle, and then evaporating the clear liquid, and roasting again. He started this process at once.

But he had no idea how to make litharge. Furthermore, he could not blow his glass until he had metal tubes, so he abandoned further steps for the present.

While he was pondering over these problems a messenger arrived, demanding his immediate presence at the quarters of Jud the Excuse-maker.

Jud was in a state of great excitement when the earth-man arrived.

Said he, "Do you remember what you told me about the beasts of the south, who swim through the air, talk soundless speech, and use magic slingshots like yours which you recaptured from the Roies near Sur?"

"Yes," replied Cabot. "I hope that by this time I have given sufficient demonstration of my truthfulness so that you now believe that story."

"Oh, I believed it at the time," hastily explained Jud, "but now I have proof of it, for we have captured one of these beasts. That is, we *think* it is one of them. I want you to see and identify it, before we present it to Theoph the Grim."

"Thereby displaying an unusual amount of foresight," commented Myles. "Where is this Formian?"

"In a cage in the zoo," replied the Vairking noble. "Come; I will take you there."

So together the two threaded the streets of Vairkingi to the zoo. This was a part of the city which the earth-man had never before visited. Its denizens fascinated him.

There were huge water snakes with humanlike hands. There were spherical beasts with a row of legs around the equator, a row of eyes around the tropic of cancer, and a circular mouth rimmed with teeth at the north pole. There were—

But at this point Jud urged him on into another room, where he promptly forgot all the other creatures in the sight which met his eyes.

In a large wooden cage in the center of the room was an enraged ant-man gnawing at the bars, while a score or so of Vairking warriors stood around and prodded him with spears.

"Stop!" shouted Jud at the soldiery, whereat they all fell back obediently.

This called the attention of the imprisoned beast to the newcomers, so he looked up and stared at them.

Cabot stared back.

Then he rushed forward to the cage!

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD FRIENDS.

"DOGGO!" he cried. "Doggo! They told me you were dead!"

But of course all this was lost on the radio speech sense of the prisoner. Vairking soldiers interposed their spears between Myles Cabot and what they believed was sure destruction at the jaws of this black beast. Cabot recoiled.

"Jud," he called out, "order off your henchmen! I am not crazy, nor do I court death. This creature is the only one of the Formians whom I can control. He will prove a valuable ally for us, if I can persuade him to forgive the indignities which your men have already heaped upon him."

"I do not believe you," replied Jud, "for how can men communicate with beasts, especially with strange beasts such as this, the like of which man ne'er set eyes on before?"

"Remember that I am a magician," returned Myles somewhat testily. Then seeing that Jud was still obdurate, he addressed the guards. "You know me for a magician?-"

"Yes," they admitted sullenly.

"And you know the magic on which I am now engaged, and to which all my recent expeditions relate?"

"Yes," replied one. "You seek to call down the lightnings of heaven, and harness them to transport your words across the boiling seas."

"Rightly spoken!" asserted the radio man. "Therefore, if you do not stand aside, I shall call those lightnings down for another purpose, namely, to blast you. Stand aside!"

One of the guards spoke to another, "Why should we risk our lives to save his. Let the magician save himself!"

So they stood aside. Myles stepped up to the cage, and he and Doggo each patted the other's cheek through the bars in greeting.

Jud the Excuse-maker sheepishly explained, "I knew that you were speaking the truth, but I wished to learn what method you would use to handle the soldiers. You did nobly."

"Bunk!" replied the earth-man, well knowing that the Vairking would not understand him.

"What means that word?" inquired Jud, much interested.

"That," replied Myles, "is a complimentary term often applied on my own planet, the earth, to the remarks of our great leaders."

Jud, highly complimented, let it go at that. Myles now ordered paper and a charcoal pencil, and began a conversation with his ant friend.

"They told me you were dead," wrote he, "or I never would have left the city of Yuriana or deserted your cause."

"My cause died with my daughter, the queen," replied Doggo. "I alone survive. I escaped by plane, and have been flitting around the country ever since, until my alcohol gave out. Then these furry Cu-

pians captured me. They got me with a net, so that I could not fight back.

"Also, I was distant from my airship at the time, or it would have gone hard with them, for the ship is well stocked with bombs, and rifle cartridges, and one rifle. Now tell me of yourself. How do you stand with these furry Cupians?"

"They are not Cupians," wrote Myles, "but Vairkings. They are a race much like myself, who send messages with their mouths and receive with their ears, instead of using their antennæ for both, as the Cupians and you Formians do. Do you remember the old legend of Cupia, to the effect that creatures like me dwell beyond the boiling seas? Well, it appears to have been true, though how any one could have known or even suspected it is a mystery to me."

"You have not yet told me how you stand," the ant-man reminded him.

"They recognize me as a great magician," Myles answered, "and I have promised to build them a radio set, and to lead them to victory over the Formians."

"Just as you did for the Cupians," mused Doggo, "but you will have a harder task here, for these furry creatures appear to know no metals, nor any of the arts save wood-carving."

They patted each other's cheeks again. Then, before any one could interfere, Myles Cabot unbolted the door of the cage, and out walked Doggo, a free ant once more.

The soldiery, and Jud with them, promptly scattered to the four walls of the room.

"Come over here, Jud," Myles invited, "and meet my friend—that is, unless you are afraid."

"Oh, no, I do not fear him," replied Jud the Excuse-maker, "but I do not consider it consistent with the dignity of my position to be seen fraternizing with a wild beast."

It was typical. Myles laughed. Then he led the huge ant home with him to his quarters.

Quivven was amazed, but not at all frightened at the great black creature; and when an introduction had been effected on paper she and Doggo developed quite a strong liking for each other.

As soon as the Formian had been fed and assigned a room in the ménage—some improvement over the menagerie, by the way—his host and hostess took him on a tour of inspection of their laboratory.

With the true scientific spirit so characteristic of the cultured but warlike race which once dominated Cupia, Doggo plunged at once into the spirit of the almost superPorovian task which Myles had undertaken; and it soon became evident that the newcomer would prove to be an invaluable accession. His scientific training would dovetail exactly with that of the earth-man, and would supplement it at every point.

Almost at the very start he suggested a solution of several of the problems which had been puzzling Myles.

Cabot's recollection of the process of sulphuric acid manufacture had been that it required a complicated roasting furnace, two filtering towers, and a tunnel about two hundred feet long made of lead, and into which nitric acid fumes had to be injected. His recollection of nitric acid manufacture was that it required sulphuric acid among other ingredients. So how was he to make either acid without first having the other? And furthermore, where was he to procure enough lead to build a two-hundred-foot tunnel?

Doggo solved these problems very nicely—by avoiding them.

"What do you need sulphuric acid for?" he wrote.

"Merely to use in making hydrochloric acid," wrote the earth-man in reply.

"And that?"

"To use in making sal ammoniac for my batteries."

"Do you need nitric acid for anything except the manufacture of sulphuric?"

"No."

"Then," suggested Doggo, "let us make our sal ammoniac directly from its elements. We shall build a series of about twenty vertical cast-iron retorts, as soon as you have smelted your iron. These we shall fill with damp salt, pressed into blocks and dried. We shall heat these retorts with

charcoal fires, and through them we shall pass steam, air, and the sulphur fumes of your ore-roasting.

"After about fifteen days we shall daily cut out the first retort, dump out the soda which has formed in it, refill it, and place it at the farther end of the series. The liquid which condenses at the end of the series will be dilute hydrochloric acid. By passing the fumes of roast animal-refuse through it we shall convert it into sal ammoniac solution."

Accordingly, the quicker they started their foundry operations, the better.

By this time chalcopyrite, quartz, and charcoal were present at Vairkingi in large quantities. The ore was first roasted, and then was piled into the smelter with the quartz and charcoal; the air-bellows were started, fire was inserted through the slag-hole, and soon a raging pillar of flame served notice on all Vairkingi that the devil-furnace of the great magician was in full blast. By this time it was night, but no one thought of stopping.

Of course there were complications. The furry soldiers deserted the pumps at the first roar of green-tinged flame, but Doggo instantly stepped into the breach and operated all of the bellows with his various legs. Finally the warriors, on seeing that Myles and Quivven had survived the ordeal of fire, sheepishly returned to their posts, and were soon loudly boasting of their own bravery and of how their fellows would envy them on the morrow when they should relate their experiences.

Along toward morning Cabot drew his first heat of molten matter into a brick ladle and poured it into the converter. It was an impressive sight. The shadowy wooden walled inclosure, lit by the waving greenish flare of a pillar of fire, which metamorphosed the white skin of the earth-man into that of a jaundiced Oriental, tinged Quivven with green-gold, and glinted off the shiny carapace of Doggo as off the facets of a bloodstone. In the darkness of the background toiled the workers at their pumps.

Then there came a change. The fires died down, the pumping ceased, oil lamps were lit, the ghostly glare gave place to a faint but healthy light, although over all hung the ominous silence of expectancy.

The ladle was brought up, a hand-hole-cover removed, and out flowed a crimson liquid, tinting all the eager surrounding faces with a sinister ruddiness.

Again the red glare, as the ladle was poured into the barrel-shaped converter. Then the pumps were started again, and the blast from the converter replaced that of the furnace with its ghostly light. Two hours later the converter was tipped, and the pure molten copper was poured out into the ladle. Once more the sinister ruddiness.

Quickly the molds were filled, the red light was gone, the spell was broken, conversation was resumed. The first metallurgy of Vairkingi was a *fait accompli*.

Day came, and with it a loud pounding on the gate. Cabot answered it, carelessly and abstractedly sliding back the bolt before inquiring who was outside. The gate swung open with a bang, almost knocking Myles into a flower bed, and in rushed a Vairking youth with drawn sword and panting heavily.

"You beast!" he cried, lunging at the earth-man as he spoke.

But in his haste and anger he lunged too hard and too far: so that Cabot, although unarmed, was able to step under his guard and grasp him by the wrist before he recovered. Quick as lightning the boy's sword arm was bent up behind his back, and he was "in chancery," as they used to call it in New England.

Slowly, grimly, Cabot forced the imprisoned hand upward between the shoulder-blades of his opponent, until with a groan the latter relinquished the sword, and it fell clattering to the ground.

Smiling, Cabot stooped down and picked it up, and forced the young intruder against the wall.

"Now," said the earth-man," explain yourself."

The boy faced Myles like a cornered panther.

"It's Quivven," he snarled. "You have stolen my Quivven."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Myles. "What do you mean?"

"I am Tipi the Steadfast," replied the youth. "Long have I loved the Golden Flame, and she me, until you came to this city. When you arrived I was away on a military expedition, winning distinctions to lay at the tiny feet of my fair one. Last night I return to find her working at your laboratory. One or the other, you or I, must die."

"You are absurd!" asserted Myles.

"In *my* country," returned Tipi, looking the earth-man straight in the eye, "no common soldier is permitted to dictate manners to a gentleman. I repeat that Quivven—"

But at this point, Myles cuffed the young Vairking over one ear, knocking him flat upon the walk; and, as he scrambled sputtering to his feet, dealt him another blow which sent him reeling into the street. Then Myles barred the gate, and turned toward the house.

In the doorway stood Quivven, shaking with laughter. Myles was immediately embarrassed. He hadn't known that his encounter had been observed. He hated to show off, and was afraid that his actions had appeared very melodramatic.

"Isn't Tipi silly?" she asked.

"But he may make trouble with your father," Myles said.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of father."

"But he will put an end to my experiments."

So Quivven went home to chat with her father before young Tipi could get there to stir up possible trouble. She returned later in the day to resume her work. While she was gone, Cabot conferred with Doggo.

"Why are you building this radio set?" wrote the ant-man. "I did not ask you before in the presence of the lady, for I felt that perhaps you did not wish her to know all your plans."

"Doggo, you show remarkable intuition," wrote Myles in reply. "It is true that I do not wish any of the Vairkings to know. My idea is to communicate with Cupia, learn how Lillà fares, and encourage my supporters there to hold out until in some way I can secure a Formian airship and return across the boiling seas."

"Then cease your work," wrote Doggo, "for my plane, in perfect condition lies carefully hidden in a wood not a full day's journey from this city. All that we need is alcohol for the trophil-engines."

CHAPTER XV.

PLANS FOR ESCAPE.

"WE can make the alcohol in a few days in my laboratory," wrote Cabot, "but it will not do for us to escape too precipitately, lest our plans be discovered and blocked. The Vairkings like sleight of hand, and wish to keep me with them as their court magician. Let us bide our time until they become sufficiently accustomed to you, so that they will not question your accompanying me on an expedition. Then, away to the plane, and thence to Cupia!"

The ant-man assented. It seemed logical. And yet I wonder if this logic would not have done credit to Jud the Excuse-maker. I wonder if Cabot was not subconsciously influenced by a desire to complete his radio set in this land of people who used only wood and flint. I wonder.

At all events, the work proceeded.

He had planned to use the slag from the copper furnace as the "ore" for his iron, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that its high sulphur content would probably ruin any steel which he produced. Fortunately, however, he ran across a deposit of magnetic iron ore near Vairkingi.

This he ground and placed in his crucibles with charcoal, and then built charcoal fires in the pits around them. The slag he skimmed off with copper—later iron—ladles. The melting had to be repeated many times in order to purify the iron sufficiently, and further in order to secure just the right carbon content for cast-iron steel, or wrought-iron, according to which he needed for any particular purpose. This securing the proper carbon content was largely a matter of cut-and-try.

With iron and steel available, he now made pots, retorts, hammers, anvils, drills, wire-drawing dies, and a decent Bessemer converter.

Copper tubes for glass-blowing, and copper wire were drawn. A simple wooden lathe device was made for winding thread around the wires. This thread, by the way, was the only Vairkingian product which the earth-man found ready to his hand for his task.

As soon as the iron retorts were available, the joint manufacture of sal ammoniac and soda was started, as already outlined by Doggo.

In iron pots, Cabot melted together finely ground white sand, with lime, soda, and potash, and blew the resulting glass into bottles, retorts, test tubes, and other laboratory apparatus; also jars for his electric batteries. He used both soda and potash, as this would render the glass more fusible than if made with either alone.

Lead was melted from galena crystal in small quantities for solder. This suggested to Doggo the manufacture, on the side, of bullets, gunpowder, and cartridges for the rifle which Myles had in his quarters, and for the one which lay in the concealed antplane.

Tales of the copper-smelting had spread among the populace, who evinced such great interest that double guards had to be placed and maintained about the laboratory inclosure. And every returning military expedition brought with it samples of unusual minerals, in the hope that these might prove of value to the great magician.

Meanwhile, Cabot instituted a regular campaign of getting Vairkingi accustomed to Doggo. Every day, Doggo would parade the high-walled streets, with Quivven the Golden Flame perched upon his back. The ten-foot-long ant inspired great interest and considerable fear on the part of the natives, but Quivven's presence served to allay the latter to some extent.

She enjoyed her rides thoroughly, not only for the novelty of the thing, but also because her seat on his six-foot-high back brought her head above the level of the fence palings and thus enabled her to survey the private yards of every one in Vairkingi.

Tipi had not been seen or heard from since his encounter with Myles; nor did inquiry disclose whether he was in vengeful hiding or had sulkily left the city. Myles went armed for fear of reprisals.

Arkilu the Beautiful thoroughly made up with the earth-man, and even admitted that her love for him had been a mistake. Plans for her wedding with Jud went on apace. When this coming union was publicly announced, Att the Terrible, sent in a Roy runner with the message that he didn't in the least care whether or not she married Jud. He, Att, would get her yet, or words to that effect.

Quivven now lived in the palace, so as to be near her father, but came to work regularly each day. Theoph the Grim interposed no objection to this, and in fact, frequently accompanied his daughter to the laboratory. He loved to mess around the bottles and retorts, and lost much of his grimness when engaged in this childish meddlesomeness.

So every one was happy except Tipi the Steadfast and Att the Terrible, whose loves were unrequited.

Jud continued the operation of the brickyard, even though Cabot had no more need of bricks, for Jud planned to build himself a brick palace which would outshine even the palace of King Theoph.

Myles was going strong.

He had to confess, however, that he was a bit stumped by his vacuum tubes. How was he to make a pump which would exhaust the air.

The solution, when it finally occurred to him, was absurdly simple: he utilized atmospheric pressure.

He made a closed glass tube thirty feet long, filled it with hot water, stood it on end, and then sealed off the vacuum part with a blow-pipe. The glass which he used for his purpose was made according to a special formula. Of this same glass, Cabot fashioned lens for the goggles which he and Doggo planned to wear on their trip home across the boiling seas.

One of the constituents of this special glass is lead monoxide, commonly known as litharge. This gave the radio man some concern, until Doggo suggested melting lead in a rotating cylindrical iron drum with spiral ribs. By pumping cold air in one end of this drum, fine particles of litharge

were driven out through the other, where they accumulated in a stationary container.

Needless to state, the distilling of alcohol in large quantities, ostensibly for the laboratory burners, but actually for Doggo's airplane, was commenced as soon as Myles had blown his first glass retorts.

Melting the platinum for the wires presented another problem, until Myles thought of electrolizing some ordinary water into its constituent hydrogen and oxygen, and then burning these two materials together in a double blowpipe, much like that used in oxyacetylene welding. This, however, he could not do as yet, until he had completed his electric batteries. He would have used acetylene, only he could not quite recollect how to make calcium carbide.

The platinum proved to be quite free of iridium, and so was easily drawn into wires.

One day, in the midst of all this technical progress, as Myles was passing through one of the streets of Vairkingi on some errand or other, and admiring the quaint and brightly-colored wood carvings on the high walls which lined the way, his attention was arrested by the design over one of the gateways.

It was a crimson swastika within a crimson triangle, the insignia of the priests of the lost religion of *Cupia,* the priests who had befriended him in their hidden refuge of the Caves of Kar, when he was a fugitive during the dark days of his second war against the ant-men.

Could it be that the lost religion was also implanted upon *this* continent? Myles had never discussed religion with Arkilu, or Jud, or Quivven, or Crota, or any other of his Vairking friends; and somehow, the subject had never come up. Full of curiosity, Cabot knocked on the door.

Immediately a small round aperture opened, and a voice from within inquired: "Whence come you?"

For reply, the earth-man gave one of the passwords of the Cupian religion. To his surprise, the gate swung open, and he was admitted into the presence of a long-robed priest, clad exactly like his friends of the Caves of Kar.

"What do you wish?" asked the guardian of the gate.

Having made his way so far, Myles decided to continue, on the analogy of the religion of his own continent. Accordingly:

"I wish to speak with the Holy Leader," he boldly replied.

"Very well," replied the guard; and closing the gate and barring it, he led Myles through many winding passages, to a door on which he knocked three times.

The knock was repeated from within, the door opened, and Myles entered to gaze upon a strangely familiar scene. The room was richly carved and colored. On three sides hung the stone lamps of the Vairkings. Around the walls sat a score or more of long-robed priests, some on the level and some on slightly-raised platforms. On the highest platform of all, directly opposite the point where Cabot had entered, sat the only hooded figure in the chamber, quite evidently the leader of the faith.

Him the earth-man approached, and bowed low.

Whereat, there came the almost-expected words: "Welcome to Vairkingi, Myles Cabot."

Then the chief priest descended, took the visitor by the hand, and led him to a seat at his own left. A few minutes later, the assembly had been temporarily suspended, and Myles and his host were chatting together like old friends.

Myles told the venerable prelate the complete history of all his adventures on both continents of the planet Poros, not omitting to dwell with considerable detail upon the vicissitudes of the lost religion of Cupia. This interested the priest greatly, and he asked numerous questions in that connection.

"Strange, strange!" he ruminated. "It is undoubtedly the same religion as ours. So there must at some time have been some connection between the two continents."

"Yes, there must have been," assented the earth-man, "for the written language of both Cupia and Vairkingi is the same. Yet the totally different flora and fauna of the two continents negatives this theory."

"Where did the Cupians originate, if you know?" asked the priest.

"We do not know," replied Myles, "but

there are two conflicting legends. One is that the forerunners of the race came from across the boiling seas. The other is that they sprang, fully formed, from the soil. Then there is also a legend that creatures like me dwell beyond the boiling seas; and *this* legend, at least, appears to be borne out by the existence of you Vairkings."

"Strange. Still more strange!" said the prelate. "For we have but *one* story of *our* origin. The race of Vairkings descended from another world above the skies. Who knows but that we, like you, came from that place which you call the planet—Minos, I think you said."

After some further conversation, the conclave was called to order again, and Myles took this as the signal for his departure. He was given a warm invitation to return.

Truly, a new avenue of speculation had been opened up to him by his chance meeting with the Holy Leader. Myles firmly resolved to return again at the earliest opportunity. But, from this time on, events moved with such rapidity, that never again did he enter the sacred precincts.

The radio man now had sal ammoniac and jars for his wet cells. He needed carbon and zinc. For carbon he pressed charcoal into compact blocks.

To extract zinc from the blende ore he made long cylindrical retorts of clay, with a long clay pipe for a vent. The ore, after being thoroughly roasted in the copper-roasting furnace to remove all sulphur, was ground, mixed with half its weight of powdered charcoal, and then charged into the retorts, where it was baked. The result was to distill the pure zinc, which condensed on the walls of the tubes. The tubes were frequently changed and broken up, the zinc being scraped off and collected.

He now at last had all the elements for his batteries, and so was able, by employing about seventy cells in multiple, to get the two volts, three hundred fifty amperes, necessary to electrolyze the oxygen and hydrogen for melting his platinum.

About this time the king and Jud began clamoring for results, so Cabot made a few electric lights with platinum filaments. And entirely apart from pacifying his two patrons it was well that he did this, for the speedy burning out of these lights showed him that he had a new problem to face, namely: the elimination of all traces of oxygen in his tubes. He got rid of considerable by placing his tube in a strong magnetic field while exhausting, but this was not quite enough.

It looked as though his experiments would have to end at this point; for with an immense quantity of alcohol completed, and with pyrex glass for their goggles, everything was all set for the conspirators to locate Doggo's hidden plane and fly across the boiling seas to Cupia.

The Vairkings were now sufficiently used to the huge ant-man and to his participation in Cabot's scientific experiments, so that no objection would be raised to his accompanying the radio man on one of the latter's expeditions in search of certain minerals which he believed could be found in the country.

Two carts, laden with tents, food and bedding, were taken along, and beneath these supplies he placed the alcohol and goggles. There was no need to conceal these, for none of the Vairkings, except Quivven, ever had any very distinct knowledge of what he was about, and to her he explained that the alcohol was for the purpose of loosening certain materials from the solid rocks, and that the goggles were to protect his and Doggo's eyes from the fumes.

A squad of soldiers pulled the carts. Doggo had demurred at this, and offered to pull them himself, but Myles pointed out how easily he could scatter the Vairkings when the time came, by threatening them with his "magic sling-shot" (rifle).

Early in the morning they set forth, just as the unseen rising sun began to tint the eastern sky with purple. When the time came to say farewell to Quivven, Myles found to his surprise that his voice was positively choked with emotion.

"Good-by, Golden Flame," said he. "Please wish me a safe journey."

"Of course I do," said she. "But why so sad. You sound as though you never expected to see me again."

"One never can tell," he replied.

"Your food has disagreed," she bantered. "I feel confident that you will return. For have you not often quoted to me: 'They cannot kill a Minorian'? Run along now, and come back safely."

Thus he left her, a smile on her face and a tear in his eye. He hated to deceive Quivven, who had been a good little pal, for all her occasional flare-ups of temper. He looked back and waved to her where she stood like a golden statue upon the city wall; it would be his last glimpse of a true friend. Then he set his face resolutely to the eastward.

Not only did he feel a pang at leaving Quivven, but he felt even more of a pang at leaving his radio set half finished. The scientist always predominated in his make-up; and besides, like the good workman that he was, he hated an unfinished job.

But he realized that this radio project had been only a means to an end—the end being to get in touch with his friends and family in Cupia—and that this end was about to be accomplished more directly. Just think, to-morow night he would be home, ready to do battle for his loved ones against the usurper Yuri! The thought thrilled him, and all regrets passed away.

Lilla! He was to see his beautiful, dainty Lilla once more; and his baby son, Kew, rightful ruler of Cupia! He resolved that, once back with them again, he would never more leave them. Lilla had been right; his return to Earth had been a foolhardy venture; results had proved it. As Poblath, the Cupian philosopher, used to say, "The test of a plan is how it works out."

Cabot was eager, even impatient, to see the ant-plane which was to carry him home. He was bubbling over with questions to ask his ant-man companion: the condition of the plane, its exact location, how well it had been concealed, and so forth. But his only means of communication with Doggo was in writing, and it would never do to delay the expedition for the purpose of indulging in a written conversation. So he merely fretted and fumed, and urged the Vairking soldiers to greater speed.

But along toward evening a calm settled over him, a joyous calm. He was going home, going home! The words sung in his ears. He was going home to Cupia, to baby Kew, and Princess Lilla. A nervous warmth flooded through his being, and tingled at his finger tips. He felt the strength to overcome any obstacles which might confront him. He was going home!

Just before sunset the party encamped on the outskirts of a small grove of trees, which Doggo pointed out as the hiding-place of his plane and other supplies. It had already been agreed that they should not inspect the machine before morning, for they did not wish to give even the slow brains of the Vairking soldiers a chance to figure out their ulterior purpose, and perhaps dispatch a runner to Vairkingi with a warning to Theoph and Jud.

So Myles was forced to possess his soul in patience, and await the dawn. To keep his mind off his troubles he sat with the furry warriors about their camp fire, and told them tales of Cupia and the planet Earth.

Never before, in their experience, had this strange furless leader of theirs been so graciously condescending or so sociable. It was an evening which they would long remember.

Finally they all turned in for the night. The earth-man slept fitfully, and dreamed of encounters in which, with his back to the wall, he fought with a wooden sword alone against Prince Yuri, and ant-men, and Vairkings, and Cupians, and whistling bees, in defense of Lilla and her little son.

Yet such is the strange alchemy of dreams that sometimes Lilla's face seemed to be covered with golden fur.

With the first red flush of morning Cabot and Doggo bestirred themselves, and informed their campmates that they intended to do a bit of prospecting before breakfast. Then they set out into the interior of the wood, the ant-man leading the way. At last they came to a small clearing and beyond it a thicket, which Doggo indicated with one paw as being the spot which they sought. There was to be the plane!

Parting the foliage, they looked inside. But the thicket was empty!

On the farther side the bushes had been recently chopped down, and thence there

lay a wide swath of cut trees clear out of the wood. It was only too evident that the precious plane had been stolen!

CHAPTER XVI.

AFTERTHOUGHTS.

THERE could be no doubt of it. Doggo's plane was gone, and with it had vanished all hopes of a speedy return to Cupia. Sadly the two returned to camp, and gave directions to pack up and start back to Vairkingi.

But Myles Cabot was not a man to despair, or he would have yielded to fate many times in the past during his radio adventures on the silver planet. Already, as the porters were loading the carts, his agile mind was busy seeking some way whereby to snatch victory from defeat.

So when the expedition was ready to start he led it around the wood until he picked up the trail of the stolen airship. Quite evidently the theft had not been made by ant-men, for they would have *flown* the machine away, upon clearing the wood. No, it had obviously been taken by either Roies or Vairkings, who had wheeled or dragged it away. If he and Doggo could follow its path, they might be able to locate and recover the stolen property.

The trail led north until it struck, at right angles, a broad and much-rutted road which ran from Vairkingi to the northeast territory of the Vairkings. And at this point the trail completely vanished.

Myles held a written conference with Doggo, at which it was decided to return at once to the city and make inquiries there as to the stolen plane. If no one there knew of it, Doggo was to be dispatched on a new expedition into the northeast territory, and in the meantime Cabot was to rush the completion of his radio set. So they turned to the left and took up the march to Vairkingi.

It was a tired and disgusted human who returned that evening to the quarters which he had never expected to set eyes on again. Myles Cabot gave himself up to a few moments of unrestrained grief. As he sat thus a soft, sympathetic voice said:

"Didn't you succeed in finding that which you sought? I am so sorry!"

That evening when Jud returned from the brickyard, Myles sought an audience with him and demanded news of the plane. Said Myles:

"This beast friend of mine came near here in a magic wagon which travels through the air. Possession of this magic wagon would mean much to Vairkingi in your wars, and especially if the beasts ever take it into their heads to attack you, as they undoubtedly will do sooner or later.

"Yesterday Doggo and I embarked on a secret expedition to bring in this magic wagon as a surprise to you and Theoph. But we find that it has been stolen. We have traced it to the northeast road, and there the trail ends. It must be either in this city or in the northeast territory. Will you help me to find it?"

But Jud smiled a crafty smile, and said: "It is not in Vairkingi—of that I am certain. Nor will I send into the northeast territory to find it for you; for I well know that you would use it to return to your own land beyond the boiling seas. We wish you to stay with us and do wonders for us. We believe that we can make your lot among us a happy one.

"But remember that, although you are treated with great honors, you are nevertheless and still my slave. Any attempt on your part to locate the magic wagon will be met with severe punishment, and an end will be put to your experiments. I have spoken."

Myles Cabot met the other's eye squarely.

"You have spoken, oh, Jud," said he.

Myles was now convinced that Jud knew more about the missing plane than he was willing to admit; so the only thing to do was to lay low, bide his time, keep an ear out for news of the plane, and continue the manufacture of the radio set. Thus the earth-man ruminated as he walked slowly back to his quarters.

And then the linking of radio and airplanes in his mind gave him an idea. He had felt all along that he was doing the correct thing in building a radio set rather than in manufacturing firearms with which

to attack the Formians, or in trying to fabricate an airplane for a flight across the boiling seas.

His intuition had been correct; his subconscious mind must have guided him to make the radio *in order to phone to Cupia for a plane to come over to Vairkingi and get him.* Why hadn't he realized this before? It gave him new heart.

With a laugh he reflected that this afterthought was pretty much like those so characteristic of the man whom he had just left. Jud the Excuse-maker, always bungling, and always with a perfectly good alibi or excuse, thought up afterward to explain why he did something which at the time he did it was absolutely pointless. Myles had always looked down on the Vairking noble because of this failing.

But now that he found himself going through exactly the same mental processes, he began to wonder if perhaps Jud were not guided by a fairly high-grade intuition. Perhaps Jud's afterthoughts and excuses were but the breaking through of a realization of some real forethought on the part of Jud's subconscious mind. Myles wondered. He was still wondering when he fell asleep that night.

The next morning he plunged into his work with renewed vigor. He now had copper wire, copper plates, wood, mica, solder, platinum, glass, and batteries—everything that he needed for his radio set except a perfect vacuum for his tubes; but without that he was as far from success as when he started.

Of course he knew what he wanted—simply magnesium. But it was one thing to step into a drug store on the earth or a chemical laboratory in Cupia, and take magnesium off the shelves, and quite another matter to pick this elusive element out of thin air in Vairkingi.

Nevertheless, in spite of this lack, Myles kept on working. He wound his inductances, transformers, earphones, and rheostats. He assembled his variable condensers and microphones. He fashioned his sockets and lamp bases. He strung his antennæ. He wired up his baseboard and panel.

Small sets were installed in Quivven's rooms at the palace, at Jud's house, and at the brickyard. Each of these were equipped with a transformer-coupling for Doggo's antennæ, as well as with mouthpieces for the others, so that now at last oral conversation was possible with his Formian friend. Later he would prepare a portable head set such as he had worn in Cupia.

Laboratory experiments demonstrated the success of his sets in everything except durability of tube. Yet in spite of this drawback he was able to communicate across his laboratory, and even with Jud's house, and under favorable conditions with Quivven at the palace by using a cold-tube hookup. But this was not powerful enough to send as far as the brickyard, let alone Cupia.

At this juncture there appeared one morning at his gate a Vairking soldier in leather tunic and helmet, requesting entrance with important secret news. Myles grudgingly left his workbench and gave audience. The fellow had a strangely familiar appearance and smiled in a quizzical manner; yet Myles could not place him.

"Who are you?" asked Myles.

"Do you not know me?" asked the other in reply.

"No."

The soldier doffed his leather cap. "Do you know me now?"

"No."

The soldier ripped off his leather tunic, still smiling his exasperating smile. "Do you know me now?"

"No."

"A life for a life?"

"Now I know you!" exclaimed Cabot. "You are Otto the Bold, son of Grod the Silent, who is King of the Roies. To paraphrase one of the proverbs of my own country, 'A face that is familiar in Sur is oft a stranger in Vairkingi.' I did not recognize you away from the surroundings in which I met you. What good fortune brings you here?"

"Not *good* fortune, but *bad*," replied the Roy. "It is true that Grod, my father, is our king, but it is also true that Att the Terrible likewise claims the kingship. Att loves Arkilu, and is even at this moment on

the march against Vairkingi with the largest army of Roies ever gathered."

Myles smiled.

"We are grateful for the information," said he. "With this forewarning we are secure against attack."

"If you will pardon me," continued Otto, "I think that you are not. For one of your own Vairkings, Tipi by name, marches with Att. Att has promised Tipi the glorious golden Quivven in return for Tipi's support. And Tipi has many partisans within this city."

Myles continued to smile.

"We can deal with traitors," he asserted smugly. "There are many lamp-posts in our city."

But Otto kept on: "Sur has fallen."

"What!" shouted the earth-man, at last shocked out of his complacency. "The rockbound impregnable fortress of Sur fallen? Impossible!"

"Not impossible to those who travel through the skies and drop black stones which fly to pieces with a loud noise," replied Otto calmly. "The beasts of the south have made alliance with Att the Terrible, and are marching with him. Good Builder! They are upon us even now. Quick, the beasts enter this very room. Come, draw, defend yourself!"

Wheeling quickly, Cabot confronted Doggo standing in the doorway. Much relieved, he explained to Otto who this newcomer was; then, seizing a pad and a lead stylus of his own manufacture, he hurriedly sketched the situation to his Formian friend.

In reply Doggo wrote: "At last I have magnesium ore. Some soldiers brought it in, attracted by its pretty red color. There is no time to be lost. To the laboratory. You must complete our set and summon aid from Cupia. Meanwhile I will get Jud on the air, and call him here for a conference. We have no time to wait upon him, or even Theoph, in this emergency."

Myles read the message aloud to Otto.

"It is well," commented the latter. "Now, if you will excuse me, I must be running along. My disguise as a Vairking soldier will get me safely out of your city, and I must join my father, who is planning to counter-attack, if a fit opportunity presents itself. Till we meet again."

"Till we meet again, in this life or beyond the waves," replied the earth-man. "And may the Builder bless you for your help this day."

Then Myles rushed to the laboratory. Doggo was already tuning the set.

"Jud is not at home," he wrote. "Shall I waste a tube on the brickyard?"

"No," signified Myles with a shake of his head; then, seizing the pad and stylus again, he wrote: "I will try and get Jud. You meanwhile attempt to extract magnesium from this piece of carnallite."

The ant-man knew exactly how to proceed. Grinding the ore, he mixed it with salt and melted the mass in an iron pot, which he connected electrically with the carbon terminal of a battery of wet cells. In the boiling pot he placed a copper plate connected with the zinc elements of his cells.

By the time that the earth-man returned from calling Jud on the wireless, a coating of pure magnesium had begun to form on the copper anode.

An hour or so later he scraped off his first yield of the precious metal, the final necessity of his projected radio set.

At this stage Jud appeared.

"Pardon the delay," he started to explain. "You see, I—"

But Myles cut him short with: "Never mind explanations now. It is enough that you are here. Sur has fallen. The beasts of the south and Att the Terrible are on the warpath. They seek to rob you of your Arkilu. With their aërial wagons they will drop magic rocks upon this city and destroy it. Give Doggo back his plane, and we will try to combat them."

But Jud shook his head.

"You would merely escape," he replied. "and then we should be worse off than now."

"Then you admit that you know the whereabouts of Doggo's plane?" asked Myles eagerly.

"Not at all, not at all," replied the Vairking suavely. "I was merely stating that, even if I knew where this 'plane,' as you call it, is—"

"For Builder's sake, man!" cut in Cabot. "This is no time to quibble over words! Give us the plane, if you would save Theoph, yourself, and Arkilu."

"It's hardly necessary," asserted Jud, unruffled. "Don't get so excited! If Att wants Arkilu, he certainly won't drop things on the palace. And we can defend the palace against all the Roies in Vairkingi."

"But not against magic slingshots," replied the earth-man."

"Perhaps not," said the noble with a crafty smile; "but we shall see. Now I go to prepare the defense. You are at liberty to come with us, if you will, or putter around your tubes if you had rather. Good-by."

"Shift for yourselves then!" Myles shouted after him, and frantically resumed his work. His attempt to get the plane by stratagem had failed. Perhaps Jud did not know anything about the plane after all. It would be typical of him.

Myles had plenty of sets of grids, plates, and filaments all prepared. Also plenty of long tubes of pyrex glass. All that remained necessary was to coat the platinum elements with magnesium, fuse them into the tube, exhaust the air by the water method as before, seal the tube, and his radio set would be complete.

"Where is Quivven?" he wrote to Doggo. "She ought to be here helping with this."

"On her way from the palace," the ant-man replied. "I phoned her there."

Presently she entered, and jauntily inquired what all the excitement was about. Myles explained as briefly as possible.

Her only answer was to shrug her golden shoulders and remark:

"Tipi is a little fool. He can have me if he can get me."

Then she took her seat at the workbench.

After awhile she inquired: "Why the rush with the radio set, when Vairkingi is in peril?"

Myles replied: "Our only hope now is to get Cupia on the air, and persuade my followers there to send across the boiling seas enough aërial wagons to defeat the beasts of the south, or 'Formians,' as we call them."

"And will you talk with your Lilla?" she asked innocently.

"Yes, if the Builder wills," said he eagerly and reverently.

To his surprise, she jumped to her feet with flashing eyes, and, seizing a small iron anvil from the workbench, she held it over the precious pile of platinum elements.

"And if I drop this anvil, you will *not* talk to her. Is not that so?"

Myles, horrified, sat rooted to his seat, unable to move.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BATTLE FOR VAIRKINGI.

BUT the flaming Quivven did not drop the anvil on the precious tube elements. Instead she flung it from her to the floor and sank limply into her seat, her golden head on her arms on the workbench.

"I couldn't do it," she said between sobs, "for I too know what it is to love. Talk to her, Myles, and I will help you."

He gasped with relief.

"You wouldn't spoil all our days and days of labor, I am sure," said he. "What was the matter? I don't understand you."

"*You* wouldn't," was her reply, as she shook herself together and resumed work.

After awhile one of the soldiers attached to the laboratory brought in word that the Roies and Formians were attacking the walls, and that "planes" were sailing around in the sky overhead. Cabot gave word to mass his men to defend the laboratory at all costs, and went on working.

One by one the tubes were completed and tested.

From time to time Quivven would step into the yard, glance at the sky, and then report back to Myles. The Formian planes were scouting low, but were not dropping bombs. Jud had apparently been right in one thing—that the beasts would not risk injuring the expected prizes of war, namely Arkilu and Quivven.

From time to time runners brought word of the fighting at the outer wall of the city.

It would have been an easy matter for the ant-men to bomb the gates, and thus let in their Roy allies, but evidently they were playing safe even there. At last, however, word came that traitors — presumably friends of Tipi—had opened one of the gates, and that the enemy were now within the city.

Still Myles worked steadily on.

Suddenly Quivven returned from one of her scouting trips in the yard with the cry:

"One of the air wagons has seen me, and is coming down!"

At that the radio man permitted himself to leave his bench for a few moments and go to the door. True, the plane was hovering down, eagerly awaited by a score or so of Cabot's Vairking soldiers armed with swords, spears, and bows. As the Formians came within bowshot they were met with a shower of arrows, most of which, however, glanced harmlessly off the metallic bottom of the fuselage.

The ant-men at once retaliated with a shower of bullets. Two Vairkings dropped to the ground, and the others frantically rushed to cover within the building, forcing back Myles and his two companions, as the fugitives crowded through the door.

"Where is *your* magic slingshot?" one of them taunted him as they swept by.

The earth-man shook himself and passed the back of one hand across his tired brow, then hurried on his living room. Seizing his rifle, he cautiously approached one of the slit windows which overlooked the yard, and peeked out. The plane was on the ground. Four ants were disembarking.

Here at last was a chance to secure transportation!

Myles opened fire.

The Formians were taken completely by surprise. Oh, how it did his heart good to see these ancient enemies drop and squirm as he pumped lead into them. They made no attempt to return his fire, but scuttled toward their beached plane.

Only one of them reached it; but one was enough to deprive the earth-man of his booty. Up shot the craft, followed by a parting bullet from Myles. Then he proceeded to the yard once more. His furry soldiers, brave now that all danger was over, were already there before him, putting an end to the three wounded ant-men, with swords and spears.

A strong and pungent odor filled the air. Myles sniffed. It was alcohol in large quantities. The plane could not last long, for he had punctured its fuel tank.

Each of the dead enemies had been fully armed, so that, although Myles had failed in his plan to secure the airship, the encounter had at least netted him three rifles and three bandoleers of cartridges. These he bestowed on Doggo, Quivven, and the captain of his guards.

Said he: "You three, with four or five others, had better go at once to Jud's compound, before the fighting reaches here; for, now that the Formians have located Quivven, they are sure to attack again, sooner or later."

But the golden-furred princess remonstrated with him: "Let us stay together, fight together, and, if need be, die together."

"For the Builder's sake, run along," he replied testily. "We are wasting valuable time. I will join you if the fighting gets too thick hereabouts."

"But how can you?"

"By the back way which you taught me."

"But you need the help of Doggo and myself."

"No longer, for the set is complete. All that remains to be done is to tune in and either get Cupia on the air or not. Now, as you are my true friends, please run along!"

So, with a shrug and a pout, she left him. And with her went Doggo, and the captain, and five of the guard. Much relieved, the radio man returned to his workbench. Although the move truly was a wise one for the safety of Quivven, the real motive which had actuated Myles was a desire to have her absent, when and if he should talk to his Lilla.

He leaned his rifle against the bench, hung the bandoleer handily near by, and set to work. A few more connections and his hookup was complete. He surveyed the assembled set with a great deal of satisfaction; for, although it really was a means

to an end, yet it was a considerable end in itself after all, as any radio fan can appreciate.

Once more Myles Standish Cabot, electrical engineer, had demonstrated his premiership on two worlds. He had made a complete radio set out of basic natural elements, without the assistance of a single previously fabricated tool or material! It was an unbelievable feat. Yet it had been completed successfully.

With trembling hands, he adjusted the controls, and listened. Gradually he tuned in a station. It seemed a near-by station.

A voice was saying: "We could not report before, oh, master, for we have only just repaired the set which this Cabot wrecked. The Minorian lied when he told you that he had affairs well in hand, for even at that moment he was a fugitive.

"He is now with the furry Cupians who live to the north of New Formia. To-day our forces are attacking their city. It is only a matter of a few parths before he will be in our hands. I have spoken, and shall now stand by to receive."

This was the supreme test. Could Myles Cabot hear the reply? Adjusting his set to the extreme limit of its sensitivity, he waited, his hands on the wave-length dials.

Faintly but distinctly came the answer in the well-known voice of Yuri the usurper: "You have done well. Now I will hand the antenna-phones to the Princess Lilla, and I wish you to repeat what you have just told me, so that she may hear it with her own antennæ and believe."

A pause and then Cabot heard the ant-man stationed at the shack on the mountains near Yuriana recount the tale of Doggo's abortive revolution and flight, of Cabot's wrecking the radio set and disappearing, of the Formian alliance with Att the Terrible, of the fall of Sur, and of the attack on Vairkingi, ending with the words which he had already caught.

As he listened to this narration, the earth-man was rapidly making up his mind what to do, and, as soon as the ant-man signed off, Cabot cut in with: "Lilla, dearest, do not show any sign of surprise, but listen intently, as though the Formian were still speaking. This is your own Myles. I am sending from a station which I have only just completed after many sangths of intensive work.

"It is true that the Formians are now attacking our city, but they cannot win. Sur fell because we were taken by surprise, but we were warned in time to defend Vairkingi. Already I, myself, have driven off one plane and killed three Formians.

"As yet I have been unable to secure an airship, or I should have flown back to you. Please get in touch with Toron, or some other of my friends, and persuade them to fly across the boiling seas and bring me back.

"Yuri has made it twice, and 'what man has done, that can man do.' Now I am about to finish. When I sign off, please request Yuri for permission to talk to the Formian at Yuriana, to ask him some questions. Then tell me as much as you can of yourself, our baby, and the situation in Cupia, before Yuri shuts you off. I have spoken, dearest."

And Myles stood by to receive.

With what a thrill did he hear his own Lilla's voice answer:

"Oh, Formian, I have Prince Yuri's permission to speak to you. You may answer what I ask you, and reply to what I tell you, but he himself will receive, lest I hear something which I ought not. This leads me to believe that affairs are not so bad with Cabot as you report."

"She is doing fine," remarked Myles to himself, admiringly. "So far, Yuri will not suspect that she is talking to me, instead of the Formian station at Yuriana."

Lilla's voice continued: "You and the other Formians may be interested to know that Prince Yuri is in complete control here. Baby Kew and I are well, and are being respectfully treated by Prince Yuri as his guests in the palace at Kuana. He has promised me, that, if I will marry him, Kew can have the succession after his death. And this I might have accepted for the baby's sake, but now that I know that you still live, this cannot be."

"She has made a slip," moaned Cabot.

Evidently she realized it herself, for her voice hurried on: "You see, the whistling bees—"

Then Yuri's voice cut in abruptly with: "Congratulations, Cabot. I don't see how you did it. Your ex-wife would have got across a lot more information to you if she hadn't inadvertently let me know to whom she was talking by her careless use of the word 'you.' I don't know what you said to her, but I shall be on my guard. No more radio for the Princess Lilla, until my henchmen in New Formia report your death, which I hope will be soon. Good-by, you cursed spot of sunshine. Yuri, king of Cupia, signing off for the night."

So that was that. Myles switched off the set, and sat submerged in thought. Lilla and his baby were safe. He doubted not that she would sooner or later find means to send him a plane. He had given Yuri cause to doubt the glorious story told by the Formian radio operator. The new set had fulfilled its mission.

But how had Yuri succeeded in climbing into power again in Cupia, nine-tenths of the inhabitants of which were loyal to Princess Lilla and the baby king.

Then Myles remembered her closing words: "The whistling bees—" It was as little Jacqueline Farley had prophesied on her father's New England farm, during Cabot's brief revisit to the earth. He had stated: "There can be no peace on any continent which is inhabited by more than one race of intelligent beings"; whereat little Jacqueline had pointed out that the whistling bees were intelligent beings.

Doubtless, Yuri had stirred up trouble between the bees and their Cupian allies, and had ridden to the throne on the crest of this trouble. Portheris, king of the bees, had undoubtedly been deposed: for he was too loyal to Myles to stand for this.

The earth-man's reverie was rudely interrupted at this point by one of his soldiers who rushed into the laboratory shouting:

"Sir, there is fighting in your very yard!"

Myles slipped the bandoleer over his shoulders, adjusted the straps, picked up his rifle, and hurried to the door. In the yard, his guards were struggling in hand-to-hand combat with a superior force of Roies.

He could tell them apart, not only by the contrast between the fine features of his own men and the apelike faces of the intruders, but more easily by the contrast between the leather tunics of the Vairkings and the nakedness of the Roies. So, standing calmly in the doorway, Myles began picking off the enemy, one by one, with his rifle. It was too easy; almost like trap-shooting.

But it didn't last long, for the Roies soon learned what was up, and, breaking away from their opponents, crowded out through the gate, followed by a shower of missiles and maledictions.

Cabot's Vairkings were for following, but their master peremptorily called them back, and directed them to barricade the laboratory. It was well that he did so, for presently the heads of the enemy began to appear above the top of the fence. Evidently they had built a platform in the street.

Soon arrows and pebbles began to fly at the windows of the house. The Vairkings replied with a volley, but Cabot cautioned them to conserve their ammunition, and watch him pick off with his rifle, one by one, the heads which showed themselves above the paling.

This soon ceased to be interesting. So, giving the rifle and bandoleer to one of the more intelligent of his men, and instructing them to hold the laboratory at all costs, the earth-man set out, sword in hand, by the back way to rejoin Doggo and Quivven.

The alleys which he threaded were deserted. He reached the rear of Jud's compound without event, and passed in to one of the inclosures through a small and well-concealed gate in the face of the wall. Quivven had pointed this route out to him before, but never had he traversed it farther than this point. He looked cautiously around him. Then he rubbed his eyes, and looked again! He could hardly believe his senses!

There stood a Formian airplane in apparently perfect condition. Approaching it gingerly with drawn sword, he circled it carefully to make sure that it contained no enemies. But it was deserted. A hasty inspection disclosed that everything was in working order, except that the fuel tank was empty.

Probably then, this was the plane at which he had fired. But no, for this plane did not even *smell* of alcohol. The tank had evidently been dry for some time, and there was no sign of any bullet hole in it. Gradually the fact dawned on him that this was Doggo's plane, which Jud had concealed from them for so long. He must reach Doggo and tell him.

At the farther side of the inclosure from the side at which he had entered, there was a door. Myles raced toward it, and flung it open. Beyond it there was a second inclosure similar to the first. Myles raced across this one as well, and flung open another door, whereupon out poured a crowd of Roies, upsetting him and throwing him sprawling upon the ground.

But they were as surprised as he was at the encounter, and this fact enabled him to regain his sword and scramble to his feet before they were upon him again, with parry and thrust.

Good swordsman as he was, they had soon forced him with his back against the wall, defending his life with his trusty wooden blade. Time and again one of their points would reach his tunic, but he kept his neck well guarded, and so was able to stand them off.

When he had drawn his breath and got his bearings, and his defense had become slightly a matter of routine, he recognized the leader of the enemy as none other than the traitor Tipi. His first thought was to run Tipi through for his treachery. But then he reflected that quite likely Quivven really loved Tipi after all. It would be a shame to kill this boy merely because his unrequited love had caused him to lose his head.

From then on, Myles had no time to reflect on anything, for he was engaged in the difficult task of trying to defend himself without hurting Tipi.

The young Vairking had recognized the earth-man, and was hurling vituperations at him, but Myles saved his breath for his sword-play. Even so, he gradually tired. His sword hand no longer instantly responded to every command of his agile brain, and even his brain itself became less agile. It was only a matter of time when he would be certain to make a misplay, and go down before his opponents. Yet, still he struggled on.

And then suddenly a new complication entered the game, for he was seized from behind beneath the arms and was lifted struggling and kicking off the ground.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

HONESTLY!

A QUEER combination, in boyhood days.
Was a youngster we called Jim.
While other kids played in kidlike ways
His dreams more than suited him!
For his feet were large and his legs were thin,
And his hands trailed as he walked.
His teeth stuck out and he wiggled his chin.
When he, very rarely, talked!

But boyhood days and boyhood ways
Have gone to make the past,
And the things that we did when we were a kid.
Are things that cannot last!
And the ones who talked while Jimmie walked
Seem faded and old and done.
While Jimmie's an author, rich, and fat—
The dreamin' son-of-a-gun!

Charles Francis Coe.

A Little Action

By GORDON STILES

"C'MON, gents!" Steve Trainor raised his glass, half filled with what the new generation calls whisky. "A little action, gents! Here's a go!"

Some twenty men, ranged along either side of the long table, responded with little waves of their "service tumblers" and rumbled, "Here's a go." The last word mingled with the gurgling of raw liquor down case-hardened gullets.

Then the others of the company followed Steve's example and sat down, their eyes instinctively turning to the full quart bottle which stood at each man's place. Steve certainly was doing things in style.

And why shouldn't he? Was not this dinner he was giving in a private room of a Denver restaurant a sort of official announcement that he had made his pile and could do what he chose with his money—and meant to? Also, it was the occasion of what promised to be an extensive farewell.

For many years Steve Trainor had been of that army of placer men which, since the days of forty-nine, has ranged the wilds from Alaska to Mexico, had, through the ups and downs of the game, become as hard boiled as the next, at least to all outward appearance. Certainly the expression "hard-boiled" would apply to any of Steve's guests that night in Denver.

A year earlier Steve had driven his pick into a hillside and a disk of scaly crust had flown up, then rolled down the slope on its edge. Under that crust Steve had found the beginning of what to-day is the Fly Top mine.

For eleven months Steve had labored away; at the end of that time he had one hundred thousand good dollars salted in a Denver bank—more than he had ever dared hope to win from the obstinate earth. Then the Transatlantic Development and Mining Company had paid him one hundred and fifty thousand more in cash and given him stock which promised to yield higher figures than Steve could add up to.

So now Mr. Trainor was a capitalist and

no longer a miner. He was going to see the world, get what he always demanded in a poker game, at a horse race or in any party —a little action.

"I'm gonna throw a party up to Denver," he had announced to his circle of special cronies. "You fellers is comin' along o' me. You gotta look decent, too, an' any of you guys what ain't got clo'es, why I'll stake y' to 'em. But you gotta come."

Come they did, and the preponderance of stiffly new store suits indicated that Steve had done some "staking."

To-night Steve wore a carnation in his buttonhole, an admission of what his friends always had termed his "soft streak." That was part of it—flowers. Whenever he could get them, they had been by him.

In the most drunken of sagging cabins there had been tin cans of flowers sitting on the rickety table. He would muck away in mud and water and slime with a pale violet clinging—pathetic and protesting—to the buttonhole of his jumper or stuck in the band of his battered hat.

The other part of his soft streak was women. Quite unashamed, Steve would pore over rotogravure sections of such newspapers as came to hand, gazing with unconcealed yearning at the faces of beautiful women, studying their features as if trying to read the thoughts behind such loveliness. He ignored uncouth gibes, and presently he would lay the paper aside and sit smoking thoughtfully for a long time.

That was it—flowers and women.

Much food had been consumed, practically in silence. The liquor lines in the bottles had dropped appreciably. Heavy clouds of smoke from gigantic cigars already were forming a dense canopy over the heads of Steve and his guests. Conversation was in order.

"I'll say you done it up brown, Steve," bellowed a giant from the opposite end of the table. "You sure did!"

"Told you I aimed to," acknowledged the host. "But we ain't through yet. Jes' gittin' started." Boisterous laughter.

"I s'pose, Steve, you'll git high-toned as hell when you git East. Wear b'iled shirts and git y'r finger nails manicured, hey? By Christmas, if you ever come around me that way, I'll—I'll—"

"You pore fish," bawled Steve, "you pore fish! What'd you do? Jes' f'r that I gotta min' t' do it, I have! An' make ya like it!" This was the signal for howls at the expense of the other.

Then, from another quarter: "Maybe you'll git married, git t' be a family man. An' go t' church an' all. Hey?"

Steve turned solemn. "Boys! Lemme tell you sumpin. I seen a lotta pretty girls an' ladies—in towns and in pitchers. An' I ain't never seen one I'd git honest-to-God hitched to. But, lemme tell you this: if I ever do see such—an' by Cæsar, I'll know if I ever do—I'll marry yer spite o' hell an' high water!"

"Oh, gosh!" groaned a half tipsy diner. "Oh, gosh! Ol' Steve's ripe f'r pickin'. He's sunk a'ready!"

Steve cut the riot short. "C'mon. We're goin' to a show."

II.

Steve had been domiciled in the Transylvania Hotel for two days. He was a disappointed man. He had come to New York quite prepared to be astonished, and he hadn't been.

The Woolworth Building looked much as it did on picture post cards, only the color scheme was not so good. The Brooklyn Bridge was all right, but not so hot. Riverside Drive, Park Avenue, and Fifth Avenue were swell streets, sure enough. The tales he had heard of running ice water in hotel rooms and free morning papers had been proved beyond question. But withal, Steve was bored.

He was practically cut off from human society, here among the millions who ran about with strained expressions on their faces and seemingly to no purpose. He had exchanged words with two persons outside his hotel.

One of these, an alert-eyed, stoutish person, had approached Steve out of curiosity, drawn, no doubt, by the great proportions and obvious power of the man. Steve had been gazing at Madison Square Garden,

Here, at least, there had been more or less action.

The man said: "Been some pretty good scraps in there."

"Sure have," Steve agreed.

"They're going to tear it down next week."

"All right," said Steve. "They kin go ahead. I've seen it."

"You're a wise cracker, ain't you? Where you from? Jersey?"

Steve snorted. "Cripes, no! But from all I've heard since I hit this blame town they's on'y one place outside New York, an' that's Jersey. I'm sick o' hearin' the word. The Jersey tunnels, an' the Jersey side, an' the Jersey ferry. Don't nobody ever git no farther away from here than Jersey?"

The other laughed. "No," he said. Then: "What you lookin' for, anyhow?"

"Me. I'm lookin' f'r a little action."

His companion considered. This bird looked like a safe bet. He fished in his pocket, brought forth a card.

"I can put you on the trail of a little action, if you're set for it. Cost you money, of course. Never take a drink, I suppose." He grinned knowingly.

"I do when I c'n git one," Steve told him. "Couple boys over t' my hotel offered t' git me some liquor an' w'en it come 'twas like so much water. I swallered two quarts an' didn't git no answer. You know where I c'n git a drink that's got some authority?"

The other scribbled on the back of the card which bore the words:

PAPYRUS CLUB

1064 West 40th Street

Name of member.....

NOT TRANSFERABLE

"Here. Stick your moniker on the dotted line—or any old name, an' they'll take care of you. My brother-in-law runs the show."

"Much obliged. 'F I git me some action an' decent liquor up there I'll buy you a diamond bracelet."

"Good luck," remarked the man, and drifted away.

Steve stared after him.

Five minutes later he might have heard his new acquaintance telephoning from a pay station to his relative by marriage: "You can't miss him. He's the biggest guy you ever seen in these parts, outside a circus. You'll find out if he's got the jack quick enough."

That night, at the Papyrus Club, Steve was accorded a welcome that went far toward offsetting the loneliness of the past days. The proprietor received him in person, found him an excellent table and said: "I always make it a point to buy when a new member shows up. What'll it be?"

And Steve learned that there was still good whisky in America. For two hours he sat there; frequently the boss came to join him for a few minutes.

For the most part Steve occupied himself in watching the crowd that huddled about the tables and swarmed over the tiny dance floor. The women were very young, he thought. But, at that, they were exaggerated editions of the women of the West. Lips more vivid, perhaps; eyelids more heavily beaded.

The liquor was good, but in the end Steve decided he did not care for the place. Here was no action. A lot of runts of men were lapping up booze and not being able to carry it—working terrifically hard at having a good time and then not having one.

The girls seemed bored, their smiles artificial. He reckoned he'd wander back to the hotel. He called the waiter, paid the somewhat startling score, and eyed appraisingly his final drink. At that moment something happened.

A commotion at the door, voices raised in argument, a crash. Then as one person, those in the place sprang to their feet, only to subside again at the command: "Sit down! Everybody sit down!"

A score of hatted strangers filtered swiftly through the narrow spaces between the tables. Steve knew it for what it was—a raid. Here, perhaps, was a little action at last.

He waited for it to begin, failing to note that drinks had been hurriedly removed,

spilled or hastily consumed at other tables. His remained where it was.

A fat detective edged up, his hand shot out and his fingers closed about Steve's glass. He opened his mouth to speak. But on the instant Steve was on his feet. His viselike grip found the other's wrist.

The owner of the hand looked for all the world like a terrier awed by a mastiff as Steve removed the glass from the other's fingers and remarked: "You made a mistake, stranger. That there's mine." Saying which he calmly drained the glass.

The detective let out a howl—half pain and half rage. His free hand plunged beneath his coat; being the left, the operation was awkward.

By now the entire crowd was on its feet, milling and swaying toward the scene of trouble. Steve took in the situation, released his hold on his adversary's wrist. Then, placing the outstretched fingers of his right hand against the other's face, he gave him a mighty push. As he did so he turned and made for the door.

The detective went backward and downward, first among a snarl of arms and bodies, then among a tangle of feet. His brethren, hastening to his assistance, could gather no clear idea of what had happened before Steve, flailing his way toward the exit, had gained the outer hall.

At the sound of excitement within, the guard that had been on duty in the hall had pressed inside so that the only opposition Mr. Trainor encountered was that of a single officer stationed at the outside portal and he was occupied in shooing away the insistent crowd which had gathered on the sidewalk.

On entering the place Steve had noted where the attendant had placed his hat; now he paused long enough to snatch it off the shelf and jam it on his head.

For the single officer now confronting him he had the utmost contempt. That individual, however, did not understand this. Out came his gun. Steve felt it jammed against his stomach.

"In a hurry?" queried the sentinel.

Steve had stopped instantly. He had been in like situations before.

"No," he drawled. "I ain't."

One of his hands, which he had raised instinctively, descended like lightning, the gun clattered to the floor. Brushing the other aside as if he were a child, Steve plunged through the door.

Into the crowd he dived; it fell aside with a docility that astonished him. A moment later an alert taxicab driver, experienced in such maneuvers, had a fare.

In the cab Steve smoothed out the dents in his hat, adjusted his tie.

"Gosh! If anybody'd give me a fight I'd a got a little action!" he said.

III.

PERHAPS the (to Steve) mild flurry of the evening before had whetted his appetite for further adventure. At any rate, next morning, after an astounding breakfast, he determined to eschew the rubberneck wagons which had served him on his sightseeing expeditions, and do some exploring on his own account.

To that end he walked east until he came to the Third Avenue Elevated and boarded a train which landed him at City Hall. Wandering aimlessly along Park Row, he presently found himself in Chatham Square. He continued along into the Bowery, wondering why so ample a thoroughfare should be afflicted with such miserable and ramshackle buildings.

A stroll of a few blocks convinced him that the Bowery had been flagrantly overrated. If it once had been the wild spot it was reputed to be, all trace of its wickedness had disappeared.

Well, he'd walk the length of it, anyhow—give it a chance. He moved slowly, glancing into shop windows, observing the frowzy street population.

He loitered before the glass case of a photographic establishment, casually examining the work of the artist who must lurk at the top of those dingy stairs. His eyes wandered over the collection, focused themselves instantly upon one print. After that, there were no others!

What he saw was the likeness of a young girl; she might have been a little over or a little under twenty. She had been posed, half leaning on a mantel, her pretty rounded

chin cupped in her hand, her eyes lifted slightly as if she were gazing at something above.

This showed to advantage the long, curling lashes, the delicate contour of her young cheek, the straight line of her nose. It seemed to Steve that there were traces of foreign descent, as in some German or Scandinavian girls he had seen—only much nicer. More delicate and refined, somehow.

But about the whole there was a sort of glow that held him spellbound. He stared and stared. He wanted to break the glass so that he could bring the picture closer to his eyes.

"Christopher Columbus! But there's a peach!" he breathed. "Holy Cæsar! It ain't possible! They never was nobody as purty as that!" But his eyes continued to drink in her beauty, and his heart essayed something like a Charleston. With a wrench he finally tore himself away.

But with every foot of distance which he placed between himself and the photograph Steve's depression grew. It was as if he were going away from something more precious than anything he had known, something that was necessary to him.

He stopped abruptly. "Hell!" he said. "Why didn't I think of that before?" He retraced his steps swiftly.

In the dim reception room at the top of the stairs Steve faced, rather looked down upon, a small, frowning individual with a long nose.

"What you like, pliss?" inquired the latter.

"I want t' show you sumpin—downstairs," boomed Steve, his voice filling the tiny room. Then, as the man hesitated, "Come on."

He led the way and the other followed, gingerly. In the street Steve pointed to the photograph.

"Who's that?" he demanded.

"How should I remember?" parried the artist. "How should I tell if I don't look it up. An', anyhow—"

But Steve was dragging him up the stairs. There he commanded, "Look it up!"

The little man hesitated again. "You a cop?" he faltered.

"None of your danged business who I am," Steve told him. "I wanta know who that lady is. Pronto!"

"I ain't supposed to give no names an' addresses out. I—"

Steve's hand shot to the other's collar, lifted its wearer clear of the floor. "Now, by Judas! Are you gonna give me that name an' address? Or ain't you?"

Half strangling, the little man nodded. Steve let him go, kept a keen watch on him as he rummaged through his records.

This took a lot of time, and Steve growled with impatience. The little man looked up at his oppressor, furtively, and his fingers trembled. At last he said, "Here it is." He wrote on a slip of paper:

MISS PAULA FABER
1612 EAST HOUSTON STREET

Steve examined the inscription, folded it. "If that ain't right, I'll come back here an' wring y'r damn neck!"

He threw a five-dollar bill on the counter. "Stick that in y'r jeans." With that Mr. Trainor strode out.

IV.

THE Bowery was transformed; New York was transformed; the world was transformed! Steve looked with approval at the gray paving, at the grimy children, at the foreign women, greasy and slatternly, at the gaunt structure of the L overhead.

Fine! All of them! New York was the greatest old town in the world! The Bowery—its finest street! Who said the Bowery wasn't a world-beater? Who said things didn't happen there any more? Show him the man, by Judas!

Because Steve had found her!

He knew! When he started to move away from that picture he knew! She might be only twenty or eighteen, for that matter. He was forty-five. But she was the girl! Now he had to go and find and marry her!

Well, he was on his way. He called a taxi, gave the East Houston Street address.

A couple of blocks farther on he tapped on the glass. "Say. Take me some place where I c'n git me a new flower."

He glanced ruefully at the drooping rose-

bud. The driver chuckled to himself, drew up at a flower stall. Steve selected a larger and redder rose.

It was a pretty awful-looking house, smelly tenements above a Roumanian restaurant. A row of buttons in a grim and dark hall. But, by lighting a match, Steve made out the name, Faber.

Steve was quite mad, of course. But he did not know it. All he knew was that he had found the girl!

He had no idea what he should say when he faced her. Just tell her, he supposed—if he supposed anything at all, which he did not. That was the way of it when he pressed the bell.

Once he pressed it. Waited. Again. Still no answer. He wondered if she would come to the door herself.

A man came in, punched another button. In a moment there was a click, click, click. The man pushed open the door and disappeared. Steve watched the door closing, slowly. He heard it snap with a feeling that he was shut out and regretted that he hadn't gone in on the heels of the other. Then he rang once more, strained his ears for that click.

Slowly he turned toward the street. She must be out. Well, he'd get a little action, somehow. Down the steps into the restaurant he went.

"Where's the boss around here?" he asked of a man behind a cash register.

"What boss? I am. What you want?"

"Them tenements upstairs — they yours?"

"Oh, *non*. You mus' the yanitor to see. Een basement. So." He indicated an iron gate in the area outside.

Steve found a button, a harsh buzzer sounded. After a delay, a stout German appeared, yawning. "Wod iss id?"

"Miss Faber, she lives upstairs, don't she?"

"Zure," returned the other, frowning. "Candt you zee id by der pell? Vy you bodder me?"

"D'ya know when she'll be home?"

"Gott im himmel! Go vay. How shall I know?"

He turned to go back into the house. Steve's arm shot through the bars and his fingers closed upon the red suspenders of the departing janitor. That individual was dragged smartly back against the grille. He raised his voice in pain and anger.

"Shut up 'r I'll choke the daylights outen ya!" rumbled Steve. "'F y' don't know how t' be civil, I'll learn ya. Y' say y' don't know when Miss Faber 'll be in. That right?" He shook the other slightly.

"She gomes in w'en she get t'rough work, I s'pose. Aindt id?"

"What time is that?"

"Ha'f pas' five," said the German, sullenly. Steve's fingers relaxed. "Here's a dollar f'r ya, Dutchy," he said. "Y'd a got two 'f y' hadn't been so smarty."

"Danke!" murmured the other and returned to his nap.

Steve stood about uncertainly. At first he had a notion of camping where he was until five thirty, perhaps sitting in the restaurant until that time, purchasing such food as was necessary to satisfy the proprietor.

But the way he felt this wouldn't answer. He craved movement; he'd go dippy sitting still, and he knew it.

Therefore he embarked on a walk which he remembered nothing at all about afterward. He did recall finding two parks and sitting down on benches, only to be up and off again within a few moments.

Somehow or other the hours crawled by. Time and again he was sure his watch had stopped, but it had not. And when finally he did hail a cab, he had inadvertently wandered so far afield that he did not arrive in East Houston Street until almost six o'clock.

V.

It was not until he had rung three times that the click, click of the lock sounded. He pushed the door open and began gingerly to mount the stairs. Far above he heard the sound of an opening door, and hurried.

On the fourth floor, by the dim light of a flickering gas jet, he made out a woman's face peering through an aperture about four inches wide, across which stretched a chain. He couldn't see her well and this manner of reception was a trifle disconcerting. That

is, it should have been. But to Steve, it meant only one thing—he was facing the girl he was going to marry!

Steve snatched off his hat.

"Miss Faber in?" he asked.

The woman started at his big voice. "No," she said after a pause. "She isn't."

"C'n y' tell me when she'll be in?"

"Why—why—she's out o' town—for a week."

Steve's heart sank, then rebounded. "C'n y' tell me where she's gone?"

The woman stared at him from her gloomy retreat. "I can't give you her address. It's somewhere in Jersey."

Not so good. Jersey again. Damn Jersey! Steve hesitated. Then: "You any relation to her, lady?"

"Her mother," said the woman, quietly. She waited, moved as if to close the door.

Steve snapped into life. "Her mother! Wal, wal! Howdy, ma? Shake!"

He extended his great hand. The woman drew back.

Steve said quickly: "I reckon I was kinda suddent. But I gotta talk to you, lady. I gotta, I have."

Something in Steve's tone must have told her that he was not insane. For she regarded him gravely for a few seconds, then said: "Come in, please." Swung open the door.

In the cramped flat, the two faced each other. Steve rose to the moment.

"I didn't go t' be suddent like that," he said. "But—wal—y' see." He plunged into his story. Finished. "So, thar it is. I never seen nothin' but her pitcher. But th' girl what sat f'r that is th' finest an' best an' nicest that comes. D'ye see, lady—Mrs. Faber? D'ye see? I ain't no piker an' I ain't smooth like some o' these guys I seen in this town. But I'm a square shooter an' I'm clean, plum' crazy 'bout your little girl."

She raised her eyes to his face. He saw then the resemblance to the daughter.

Now, he felt a little awed. He had not counted on parents.

She said: "I guess you are square, Mr. Trainor. But she won't be back for a week and—"

"Say, look here," cut in Steve. "Maybe you ain't got used t' th' idee yet. But I am goin' t' be y'r son-in-law, sure's shootin'! An' 'twouldn't do no harm f'r us t' git acquainted some. You come 'long an' eat with me t'-night. I ain't got nothin' t' do an' I'd rather talk t' you than poke 'round by myself. What say?"

"Oh, I couldn't. Honest, Mr. Trainor, I'd like to. I ain't been any place for so long. But I haven't got any clothes, and I look so mussy. I—"

Then Steve shone. Clothes! Clothes, indeed! She would go with him right then, to whatever shop, still open, where she could get a frock that would do for the evening. No talk about it. Hurry up. Then she could come back and change, and they would have one grand dinner.

She demurred, of course. Valiantly. But in the end, Steve carried all before him.

When he left her at her door that night, she said: "I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed myself, Mr. Trainor. And I can't thank you enough for what you've done. When Paula comes, I shan't mind you seeing her at all."

"We'll talk about that t'-morrer night," declared Steve. "I'm comin' at th' same time f'r you. We'll eat early an' see a show."

And so it was.

VI.

At the end of six days they had dined together six times. Steve had gathered that Mrs. Faber held a poor job in the office of a fur company, that she had had a rough time, supporting first, a worthless husband, and after he died of delirium tremens, Paula.

With all his heart Steve urged her to quit business. He would see that she was well cared for whether Paula listened to him or not. But never, for a moment, did he waver in his confidence that he could win the girl.

His companion had said: "No. Wait and see. I've worked hard for so long that it doesn't matter much now."

"You certainly got a lotta spunk," Steve had said, admiringly. And glowed with inward satisfaction to see how she had brightened up in so short a space.

And now—Paula was coming home the next evening. Steve had said: "Le's go to the train to meet her. Too bad you lost her friend's address or we'd 'a' gone out there an' fetched her."

She said: "No. And I think it would be better if you didn't try to see her to-morrow night. Better make it the next night. She—she'll be tired and—"

"All right, if you say so." he agreed. He could see that the mother was nervous.

But when the next night came. Steve discovered that he could not wait. It was no use. He'd got to see Paula before he slept. He'd risk her being tired. He'd risk anything. He'd see her.

He had to make her love him, didn't he? Well, the sooner he got on the job, the sooner it would happen. He took a cab and went to East Houston Street.

It was half past eight—dusk. His heart pounding, not with fear, but with exultation, Steve made his way into the narrow hall. As he did so, he ran upon a young man, slick and smart, dressed in the latest mode. And said young man was in the very act of pressing the Faber bell.

Aha! Aha! And what the hell! thought Steve. So that was it, eh? A New York runt! A sissified, shiny-haired runt! Daring to hang around a girl like Paula! Daring to ring her doorbell, even!

Blind rage descended upon Mr. Trainor. His hand flew to the immaculate collar of the interloper.

"Come outa that!" he growled, and jerked the other away from the bell, down the steps and into the street.

The young man snarled and pummeled at his captor. A crowd sprang from nowhere. Three policemen came all at once.

Sizing up Steve, a burly patrolman took no chances. Whang! His nightstick connected with the skull of the man from Nevada. Steve subsided into an inert heap.

To the other prisoner, an officer said, after scrutiny: "Up to your old tricks again, I suppose. Jake. Ringin' bells to get inside the hall, eh? Don't look as if you'd cleaned out anybody's flat this time."

Jake grumbled sullenly: "Aw! Cut it. I didn't ring nobody's bell. Dis bimbo bumped into me on the sidewalk and when I give him an argument, he crowns me. See?"

"Tell that t' the judge. Here comes the wagon."

Steve came to on a bench in the station house. They swabbed his head and took him to night court. The magistrate listened to the story of the officers. Steve declined to defend himself.

Then the court said: "Five dollars—or two days."

Steve dug into his pocket. But the judge went on: "In view of the assistance you have rendered in rounding up a notorious sneak thief and parole violator, I will suspend sentence. You may go."

In the anteroom he found Paula's mother. She came forward anxiously. "Are you much hurt? I heard about the row and knew it was you. So I went to the station. They told me you were here."

Anxiously, he inquired: "Did Paula come?"

"Come and see for yourself," she said. They went out. But on the drive she would answer no questions.

The cab rolled evenly along. The soft air of June drifted through the lowered windows. Suddenly something queer clutched at Steve, something akin to panic stirred within him.

He glanced at his companion. She was looking out of the window. The line of her cheek was like Paula's, disturbingly so. Her neck must have been beautiful once. By Cæsar, it was beautiful now!

What a fine woman Mrs. Faber was, anyhow. Paula couldn't be finer herself. He had to sell himself to Paula, even as he had sold himself to the mother. And, suddenly, he had little heart for the task.

His brain was awhirl with conflicting thoughts. Funny, what a mess little things could make of a man. Ha, ha, yes—funny.

She turned a bit toward him and his arm slipped around her shoulders. "I been an awful fool." he said. "'Tain't Paula I want. It's you."

Her eyes sought his face; she looked very pale, very white, in the darkness. But the fingers he had found pressed his ever so slightly and she said: "Hush. Tell me about it when we get home."

The flat was empty when they entered. Steve said: "Where do you suppose she is?"

For answer she drew from a cabinet a photograph, replica of the one that had fascinated Steve in the display in front of the Bowery shop. She laid it on the table before them.

"Steve," she said, "isn't it strange what trouble will do to us? That is a photograph of me, taken twelve years ago. I always loved it. It was taken just before I married. But I've always gone by my maiden name because I had to work."

Steve struggled to speed his dawning comprehension. "Gosh! By Cæsar! So *you're* Paula, then! An' you ain't got no daughter? Say, ain't I the dumb-bell not to of knowed it? Why, you look *exactly* like the pitcher now. You do, f'r a fac'!"

They bent over the table together. "Yes, sir!" declared Steve. "If I hadn't 'a' been blind I'd 'a' seen it right offen th' bat! But, say! Look here. Whaddya wanna pull that stuff on me the first day I come. 'Bout Paula bein' out of town? What was th' idee, anyhow?"

"Oh, Steve, I've wished so many times I hadn't. I had to keep up the lying. But, you see, I was 'way behind on the installments for my piano. I'd been sick and away from work. I got behind, and they hounded me to death. I didn't want to lose it. When I saw you I thought you were a collector—or maybe somebody to take it away. I took a chance that you didn't know me and said Paula Faber wasn't in.

"But, Steve, after you told me why you came—well, I liked you. And—and—I haven't had many good times, Steve. So you see, I just let the thing go on. I loved going out with you. And—I was going to tell you to-night, anyway. You're not mad at me, are you, Steve?"

She was in his arms, half crying, half laughing on his shoulder.

Steve was saying: "Sure, I'm mad! Mad, crazy, wild—about you, Paula. And you're goin' t' have plenty lotsa more good times. You're comin' West with me. T'-morrer. Out where we c'n git a little action!"

THE END

VICARIOUS

THE sea is far away—I cannot guess
How it may look, or what its way may be;
I have not trembled to its spray's caress,
Nor shuddered at its surf's high tyranny.

I have not seen the stretches of its blue
Seamed to the sky by one long curving thread,
Nor breathed the wine that many sea-winds brew
To quench a heart, and leave it comforted.

Far off the breakers rage and beat the sand
To whiter pulp than I shall ever see,
Or settle, at a calmer wind's command,
To softer cribs than ever cradled me.

But sometimes, rushing, wailing by my door,
A sea-wind strikes me, salty-clear and keen;
And I am hesitant and dumb before
Something that I have loved, but never seen.

Ruth E. Hopkins.

Worth Millions

By RICHARD BARRY

Author of "Jes' Sal," "Sea Lure," etc.

CHAPTER XXV.

TOBOGGANING THRILLS.

PETER had said that "the little outcast" would have to marry "the next scoundrel who gets her." Scroggins reminded him of this, with his tongue in his cheek, a long, long time afterward.

Meanwhile, after her return from the north woods, Imogen seemed unlikely, if left to her own devices, ever to meet any young man again, scoundrel or otherwise. She seemed strangely listless and uninterested in anybody.

Scroggins had noticed this when he took her away from the cabin in the flivver. It had not seemed to strike her as peculiar that he did not have a Killigrew car. She asked no questions about it. Which made things easier for him, because he did not want to tell her about Master Peter—not yet.

Scroggins feared Imogen in one way, as much as she feared his employer in another. She always kept him on the *qui vive* because of her inaccessibility. She made him feel that she was not a fixture at the Lodge, but a mere transient, likely to migrate at any moment.

He didn't like this. He wanted her there always.

This feeling was not engendered through any reticence on her part. On the contrary, she was attractively frank. For instance, she told him and Aunt Maria everything that had happened to her while with Darcy Jennifer, even to the use of the knife and the binding of the wound.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 12.

She worried about the difference it might make if the girls at school heard the news. Perhaps not with Clare and Gwen and the gold plate crowd, but with the solid gold crowd—well, she would hate to have the puritanical Selene Henton know it.

Not telling this worry absolved her from discussing the problems that grew out of it in her own mind, so that Scroggins and Aunt Maria remained in ignorance of what really ailed her.

What they saw was a girl naturally reticent, and very shy, suddenly thrown back into herself, and rendered twice as shy, much more reticent than before.

She got back to the Towers the Monday morning before Thanksgiving. After breakfast Carl drove around in the Deisel-Mascisti to take her to school, but she begged Aunt Maria to phone and have her excused for the day. She said she felt too fatigued, what with the Pullman the night before, and almost no sleep the night before that.

She was excused from school that day. Tuesday she begged off, also, and then asked to wait until after the holiday.

There was a truly Thanksgiving feast in the Lodge the following day, with the prize turkey from the farm, and dressing made of chestnuts grown on the place. Scroggins and his wife were vocal with their rejoicing. Imogen wept.

Scroggins and Maria solaced her as best they could. Alone, later, Scroggins demanded, "What's up with her, Maria? Do you think that scamp really harmed her, and she's not telling, to protect him?"

"No, I don't think so."

"What is it, then?"

"She's a very high-strung girl, and oversensitive. That's all. Most girls would think that was fun. She's taken it to heart."

"Don't seem natural," Scroggins justifiedly protested.

Monday morning Carl drove up again in the Deisel-Mascisti, and Maria sent the maid to call Imogen, who had been allowed to sleep late and have her breakfast served in bed, although she had specifically before this refused all such pampering.

The maid came down in fright, crying, "She's gone, Mrs. Scroggins!"

The room over the porte cochère, the room dedicated to Imogen, with its lovely expanses looking over the broad lawns and down to the very distant Hudson, was deserted. The bed had not been slept in that night.

Scroggins was called in and a hasty conference disclosed nothing.

After a little thought, however, Scroggins said he saw light. "I know where to find her," he announced.

"Where?" Maria demanded.

"Wait! I'll have her here in an hour or two!" He dashed off in the Deisel, straight for Dobbs's Corners.

He found her in the old garden, clearing up the frosted shrubs and fallen leaves in her hardy chrysanthemum bed.

"Why, Imogen," he protested, as she went into his arms and buried her head on his paternal breast, "how could you run away and distress your Aunt Maria like this?"

"Didn't *you* worry any?"

He tweaked her nose for this saucy remark. "Not when I thought of your old garden," he replied. "You see, I know you better than you think."

"Then why don't you know I hate that school!"

Scroggins whistled. "Is that it? You don't want to go to school?"

She shook her head vigorously.

"And will you come back if you don't have to go to school any more?"

She smiled wanly. "If you want me to."

"Can't live without you. Come. Carl's waiting."

So she returned in the Deisel-Mascisti, but not to Mrs. Morton's. That exclusive resort at Pumice Bay knew her no more. And Scroggins had the devil's own time to get back any of the five thousand paid for the year's tuition, though less than a third of a year had been used.

Mrs. Morton finally gave back five hundred—"board allowance," she said. The balance was liquidating damages for "preventing the matriculation of another pupil."

Selene Henton came to call during the second week-end in December. She wanted to be sure that Imogen really did live at the Lodge and not at the Towers, and to quiz

her about Mr. Killigrew. But whenever his name was mentioned Imogen changed the subject, difficult though that was with an experienced girl like Selene.

"What did you do to Darcy Jennifer?" Selene asked before she went.

"Nothing. Why?"

"His sister, Lenly, says you have hypnotized him—that he is desperately in love with you."

Imogen changed the subject.

Selene went away miffed, but she had succeeded in setting up in Imogen's mind another source of worry to prey on her, and to render her even more shy and reticent.

She began to think about Darcy in retrospect with more tolerance. Had he really loved her? His whole action had been so strange, so compounded of respectful attention and wild abandon, such an extreme of vicious youth and gentle bearing!

She wondered if some devil had not driven him on to offend her as he had. She thought only of excuses for his conduct, never of accusations.

Not that she cared for him. No. She couldn't care for him. But if he was desperate with love for her! Still, if so, why did he not try to see her again? There had been no effort.

Of course, Imogen would not have seen him if he had, still— Selene must have been exaggerating, though rather a precise girl, and striving to give the impression that she did not gossip.

These were her only thoughts, except those she gave her flowers, for Scroggins had sent a gardener over to Dobbs's Corners to transplant all the roots that would bear it at that time of year. The ground was not yet frozen hard, and he managed to get up her giant artichooke, her peonies, and iris, and the Circassian lilies.

Scroggins had a bed prepared for her own bulbs in the corner of the garden. She spent much of her time there early in December. Then came a snow which covered the ground, and drove her into the greenhouse with Verhens, who had always been her friend.

The holidays came and went. Shortly after the first of the year Scroggins got a check for five hundred dollars from Mrs. Morton. He told Imogen of it rather boastingly, saying he had deposited it to her account.

"Can I do what I want to with it?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"Then I want to go on a holiday."

This seemed queer. Scroggins looked at Maria. She was as nonplused as he.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"To Lake Placid," Imogen said without hesitation, "to see the winter sports."

After a moment's thought Scroggins smiled. "I see," he replied; "your last visit to the Adirondacks was so pleasant you must go again."

Immediately he was sorry he had said it, for she blushed furiously. She insisted, however, she wanted to go to Lake Placid.

There was no particular reason. She just wanted to go. Alone?—they asked. Not necessarily, she said. In fact, it would be better if she had some one to be with—a woman, of course.

Mrs. Scroggins, who had suffered unmentioned pangs at Imogen's withdrawal from Mrs. Morton's school, having had the slenderest opportunity to avail herself of the social prerogatives belonging to the guardian of a pupil there, could see no charm in Lake Placid.

"In the wintertime the mountains must be awful cold," said Aunt Maria. "Why don't you go to Florida—or California—or the West Indies?"

"It's not just—just a pleasure trip," Imogen modestly asserted. "It's something I don't know how to explain, couldn't explain it to myself. I just want to go there and—and toboggan!"

Scroggins insisted that she be humored. He did not want to have her leave the Lodge; but she seemed pining for this trip, and he wanted to indulge her. Master Peter had gone back to the city for his winter residence in the town house, and there was little to do on the farm, so Scroggins would miss Imogen. Nevertheless, she must go.

They secured a governess through an acquaintance who was superintendent of an estate in Purchase, a woman of mid-

dle age just over from Scotland, formerly governess to the children of a peer on an estate in Northumberland; Miss Petrie, a serious-minded, competent, trustworthy person.

Imogen seemed to like Miss Petrie immensely. She expressed herself as extremely grateful to Scroggins for finding her.

They prepared to go to Lake Placid the middle of January for two weeks, and, if they liked, to stay another week, or even longer. They outfitted in knickers, sweaters, woolen jackets, short skirts, leggings, and furs.

Scroggins told Imogen her five hundred paid for the clothes, the governess, and the trip, together with the hotel expenses for two or three weeks. Maria protested vigorously to him, in private, for he had dug into his savings to foot the bill, which was a whole lot more than five hundred.

"Makes no difference," he replied to his wife. "It's the only thing Imogen's ever really wanted, and she's going to have it. Mrs. Morton's school was your idea. She didn't want that—didn't need it. So this is really coming out of her money."

"I wash my hands of it!" Maria cried. "You'll ruin us for that girl if you don't call a halt!"

Of this, of course, Imogen knew nothing.

She went, accompanied by Miss Petrie, on a Sunday night. Monday morning they breakfasted on the glassed-in portico of the casino, and looked out to see the early morning enthusiasts skating on the ice.

An hour later, having joined a group formed from the hotel desk, under a guide, they trudged the way to the top of a long hill, and a little later were sliding down the fairway, high-banked with walls of snow so steep they seemed to be going through a white tunnel.

On the jump the toboggan turned slightly and Imogen was plunged into a snow bank. Miss Petrie rushed to her assistance, greatly alarmed. Instead of finding an upset girl, she discovered one radiant with a joy somewhat more than just physical reaction to the robust sport.

Imogen fairly beamed with delight. "Now!" she cried. "I know why I wanted to come to Lake Placid!"

"Why?"

"Oh!" Imogen tried to speak, and gave it up, concluding rather lamely with "Oh! Because!"

But she, herself, knew why. It was for the exhilaration of that douse in the snowbank, the sharp stimulation of that snow on her delicate skin, the icy tang of the whole winter experience.

And for something more that it symbolized—something deeper, something spiritual—the springs of her life!

It took her back to that dash into the snowbank behind the deserted cabin a few short weeks before when pursued by Darcy Jennifer. She flushed with latent shame when she began to reflect that possibly she had enjoyed that experience, after all.

Was it not the time she could remember most vividly? Peril survived! What more stimulating!

When the realization of this came to her, she was at first puzzled, then ashamed, and then riotously pleased. After all, it proved—did it not?—that she was a normal girl—and was not satisfied alone with flowers and to be a recluse.

Yet, to whom could she tell this? Not to Miss Petrie. Not to Aunt Maria. To Uncle Isaiah? Maybe—but not quite.

The days sped on wings. The snow, the rarefied air, the exhilarating sports filled her with ecstasy.

But she avoided personal contacts. Except for Miss Petrie and the guide they employed from the hotel, she spoke to no one.

Until one day when she was out skiing. Her indefatigable energy had tired Miss Petrie out, and she lay down after lunch. Imogen proceeded alone up the seven-mile trail, to the east and north of the hotel. At the top of a peak she paused to survey the grandeur of the rugged landscape, with its evergreens laced in white.

Over beyond, not so many miles, she said to herself, lay the cabin where she had spent that perilous night. Dangerous? Yes, but exciting. Perhaps the thought made her just a little bit giddy, for when she started to slide down the incline one ski was not straight. She landed at the bottom on her head!

The next moment a young man was at her side, helping her right herself. She thanked him, and passed on, back toward the hotel.

He seemed going in the same direction. He did not ask to join her, nor did she say anything more to him. Of course, she could not help noticing him—just a bit.

His mouth and chin were not loose or weak—like Darcy's. That was the first thing she saw. But she thought maybe his brow was not so broad. Maybe it was, though. He had a rather long face, and seemed very serious, for so young a man.

She wondered if he was lonely. He looked like it. Once or twice she thought he glanced in her direction, but she could not be positive.

They reached the hotel at the same time. By then she was a bit fearful that maybe he had kept on with her for a further chance to speak. She became distrustful of herself, especially after she had just been saying to herself that the real reason she liked the snow was because it reminded her of the time when she had come into dangerous contact with the only villain of her acquaintance.

So, when they reached the hotel, she ran from him for fear he might try to speak again.

The next morning, there he was on the veranda with his skates. She, too, had her skates. He smiled at her. She hardly dared return the smile, and thought she had not done so. But when they reached the hockey ring he spoke to her, saying: "Good morning! I am glad to see you are not injured."

"No, thank you," she said, and hurried on.

That afternoon she was with Miss Petrie, walking along the trail through the woods leading from the toboggan slide, when he suddenly appeared in the path, and lifted his cap.

"Who is that?" asked Miss Petrie, rather suspiciously.

"I don't know," replied Imogen, truthfully and with alarm.

The next day there he was again. This time he would not be refused. He came forward cordially and held out his hand.

"Good morning!" he said. "I think we ought to know each other, don't you?"

"Y-yes," she faltered.

"I also think we should be introduced, don't you?"

This being her thought, she gasped: "Y-yes."

He glanced across to the desk where the manager was leaning over in conversation with a guest. "Pardon me," he said, "just a moment."

Shortly he returned with the manager in tow. She saw him whisper something previously to the hotel man, who now beamed on her most expansively.

"Ah, Miss Nelson," said the manager, "may I present a very good friend of mine, and of the hotel—Mr. ah—Mr. Peter Jones."

Mr. Jones bowed, rather charmingly. The manager smirked at him, and went away. Imogen disliked the manager. There was something *too* friendly about him.

Then Miss Petrie came up, and Imogen introduced her. Mr. Jones evidently did not relish the presence of the governess, and withdrew shortly, saying he hoped to see Imogen again. She repeated the expression of hope.

"Who is Mr. Jones?" Miss Petrie demanded.

"The man who picked me up when I fell on my skis. Isn't he a perfect dear? His manner! His reserve! What breeding!" Imogen was a bit carried away.

"Jones?" queried Miss Petrie. "A common name. I would not advise you to have much to do with him."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SHOCK.

IMOGEN fondly imagined that she was having the time of her life on the last remnants of the auction of her father's antique bed. It was the first vacation she had ever had, and, she thought, probably would be the last. Going to the Morton School had been a severe trial, for she was on her mettle there every moment.

Of course, she could not stay on with Scroggins after the spring came. He had

taken her bulbs out of the garden at Dobbs's Corners, and she had permitted it, but that was during a weak moment.

Her money would be gone when she got back from Lake Placid, and she could not endure the thought of living on charity. That is what it surely would be if she stayed at the Lodge any longer.

So she entered into the sports with a zest which comes only to those who feel obliged to put everything they have into one extravagance.

Most of the guests at the fashionable hotel were merely enjoying a pleasant interlude in many other expensive diversions. They accepted it in the nature of the lake they patronized—placidly. They dressed for sports, and dressed for dinner, and yawned, and calmly enjoyed themselves without too great an exertion, with plenty of steam heat.

The social atmosphere, therefore, was restrained, languid, and anything but exhilarating.

Early in the week of Imogen's arrival, there descended on the resort a movie company, headed by one of the queens of the silver sheet. She flared everywhere—in yellows and greens and reds, and made up, seemingly, at all times, for the camera or the footlights.

"Plenty of color in her," remarked the manager of the hotel to one of his old patrons.

"Yes," admitted the patron, "as colorful as a scarlet tanager!"

"If you like color," went on the manager, "there is the real thing."

He pointed to a slender girl walking demurely past with her skates under her arm. Her knitted suit was of white, with a slender band of Alice blue. Saucy red curls peeked from under a rakish tam. Her cheeks glowed with a health which matched the hair.

"If there's art in that make-up," the manager boasted, "it's of a higher order than they produce in the movies."

"Simplicity of nature it looks like. What a little peach! Who is she?"

"A Miss Nelson—sort of a mystery here."

"This her first winter?"

"Yes."

"Where from?"

"Registered from 'Westchester.' That's a village, you know, as well as a county. I wanted to ask her, but didn't like to presume. I have a hunch she is not 'Miss Nelson' at all."

"Who, then?"

"Some well known heiress, perhaps. She has a way about her; carries herself in that self-possessed, strangely shy manner that only girls of the greatest families know how to affect. And—she has a governess."

"Ah! A governess? Does that prove she is an heiress?"

"Doesn't prove it, but it helps."

"Incognito—eh?" the patron ruminated. "Is that common here?"

"No, but it's done."

"Do you permit it?"

"How can I prevent?" the hotel man asked.

"You require satisfaction of the identities of your patrons, don't you?"

"If they act like ladies and gentlemen, and pay their bills, and have enough luggage to protect us, why—" the manager shrugged his shoulders.

The patron's curiosity was much aroused. "I wonder who she is. Looking at her now from here, I don't know but that you are right. What an aristocratic profile! And the poise of her head! And look at the little feet and their high arch! And the perfect taste of her clothes—quite without affectation—the simplicity of a grand duchess, or a stenographer!"

The manager laughed. "Where did you get that stenographer?"

"She's an imaginary stenographer."

"Thought so. I never met one like that."

The mysterious "heiress," meanwhile, had been overtaken by Mr. Jones, who asked if he could not accompany her for the morning on the rink.

She seemed quite contented with his companionship, and let him put on her skates. Then they joined hands, cross fashion, and skated for a long while, silently. Imogen's silence was only matched by that of Mr. Jones.

For half an hour neither said a word.

The rhythmic *swish-swish* of their sharp skates cutting curlecues in the ice made the only sound. Their pace seemed perfectly matched, their stroke the same. They turned in unison, without the slightest hesitation, with neither asking a question nor making a remark.

"Tired?" he asked at length.

"No."

They skated another half hour in the same way.

"Shall we stop?" he asked.

"If you like."

"I thought you might be tired."

"No," she said simply. "I could go on like this forever!"

"So could I."

"Lets!"

They went another hour—without a smile, without a miss of stroke. She was half a head shorter than he, and yet her stride seemed as long as his. Curious. Yet she did not exert herself, nor did he lessen his stride to accommodate himself to her. Very curious. Unusual.

Yet neither spoke.

When they finally sat down at the landing stage and he knelt to take off her skates it was as if by mutual consent, for still neither spoke. It seemed as if neither wanted to break a strange little spell that enveloped them—a heady, crystal-clear, invigorating spell redolent of pine cones and balsamic perfumes.

Again he was the first to speak. "Sorry to quit," he offered apologetically, "but it's luncheon time."

She sank back on the seat, and sighed. "I'm not hungry!" she said.

He looked into her blue eyes, gazing up at him silently, took in those rakish wisps of red hair racing from under the tam, saw the spread of the blushing pink in her cheeks, and suddenly put his hand to his forehead, and sat down, too.

He felt a bit dizzy. Perhaps the rarefied air.

"Does the altitude affect you?" he asked.

She turned on him, gasping: "Is that it?"

"Then you do feel a little—what shall I say?"

"Yes—" Hesitatingly: "I do!"

"So do I!"

They sat for many minutes in silence, during which he removed his skates.

"Buoyed up, kind of?" She ventured at last, glancing at him timidly. "Sort of like a cork on water."

"Or a balloon!" said he.

"Like being in an airplane!" She began blushing furiously.

He looked at her, and noted her change of color.

"Do you like airplanes?" he asked.

"No, no," she hastily answered, "I—I like this better!"

"Skating, you mean?"

"Yes. S-skating!"

"I think the ice is better to-day than yesterday," he asserted.

"Oh, much better!" she agreed. "It's perfect to-day."

"Quite—perfect!"

Another long pause. Then he suggested: "I suppose we had better go to the hotel—the dining room will be closed."

She sighed. "Yes, I suppose so. But I'm not hungry."

"You will need your luncheon, though." He was regarding her solicitously.

"Often I don't eat any."

"Please, to-day—will you—with me?"

"I'd like to, but—well, Miss Petrie is waiting."

"Can't we give her the slip?"

"I don't know how."

"We'll have luncheon served on the gun-deck—up there!" He pointed to the glassed-in sun parlor over the long veranda.

"I didn't know you could."

"Let's see!" he suggested.

So they lunched alone in the sun parlor. The servants seemed most willing to do anything for Mr. Jones.

To record more of their conversation at this time would be repetitional. The most important things they uttered were not conveyed by means of words.

After lunch she felt she was obliged to hunt up Miss Petrie, but the Scotch governess was deep in a book—something about psychology, or was it physiology—and told Imogen not to mind her, to run along and have a good time, and to be sure and get back before dark.

Imogen said nothing about Mr. Jones.

By discreet silence she let it be inferred she had lunched alone. She found him waiting up on the trail to the toboggan slide. It was nearly time for the three o'clock slides to begin.

They were ready for the first, and he piloted her to the front seat, while he was just behind. She looked off down the fairway, with its banked tunnels of glistening snow.

Then he said—and it seemed to her he was extremely timid about it—"If you don't mind I'll hold on—so—" and put his arms around her.

Nothing strange about that, for every one else did it on the toboggan. She looked back over her shoulder into his face, and those blue eyes under the reddish hair, flanked by the glowing cheeks, brought him another feeling of rapid buoyancy.

"The air *is* rare!" he said.

"Precious!" She snuggled closer, for the guide was pushing off.

Then the descent, the unutterably swift descent down the incline, receptive as a greased hollow to a spear shaft. She thought her heart would lift right out of her bosom. She shrieked, and he begged to know if she was injured, and she muttered, "No—I'm terribly happy—but the wind goes so fast."

But it was over so soon—in a few seconds, it seemed.

Then they climbed the long incline again. That was fun, too, going along slowly, stopping from time to time for a better view of the valley as they rose above it, step by step. And another slide!

The next time he dared say to her, "I wonder if you ever read poetry?"

"Of course—don't you?"

"Did you ever read, 'If I Were King?'"

"You mean Tennyson?"

"No. This is a play—by McCarthy, I think."

"Can't you repeat some of it? I love poetry."

They were arranging themselves again. He had managed, for the third time, to get her the front seat, and was getting fixed behind. It seemed almost natural—quite the proper thing—to have him slip his arms around her—to be secure, of course, for the swift slide.

"It runs like this," he said, while she glanced over her shoulder into his face, "'The best of all reasons for a woman's loving a man is because her heart is of just the right size to hold in the hollow of his hand.'"

He faltered over the last, adding lamely, "Only that is not the meter, just the idea. I never was good at poetry."

Lucky the guide pushed off at that moment, for she knew not what to say in answer, but the exhilaration of the toboggan's rush was not equaled by the lift in spirit. Was it the poetry or the firm clasp of his long arms which seemed lifting her into the blue sky, above the tops of the tallest trees, over the vast mountains?

Yet he seemed distraught when the toboggan came to a halt, and it was time to help her up. He seemed almost afraid to touch her again.

And he did not propose that they slide again, but started back down the trail toward the hotel. Something had broken the spell—the perfect spell of their playtime. Had he become self-conscious with repeating the line of François Villon?

He was, in fact, thinking to himself at that moment, "Villon was a vagabond, a worthless wanderer," and his mind, working as if pursuant to subconscious directions, began probing something she had said way back at lunch. It was about an airplane.

He went at it bluntly, without the slightest realization of where it would lead him. He only knew he had a sudden unaccountable antagonism for this reddish-haired ingénue. For a matter of six or seven hours she had held him in utter thrall.

Nothing like it had ever happened before, and surely there must be something very wicked about a girl who could do that to him. "When were you up in an airplane?" he asked, dully.

"Several months ago," she answered quickly. She too felt the passing of the spell, not because she was losing it, but because something had come into his face—something that rendered him suddenly very old, world-weary.

At first she had thought him a very young man, not over twenty-five. Now he seemed aged—fully forty.

"Funny," she added, nervously, at a loss to say something to please him, "it was up here in the Adirondacks, too. I flew up the Hudson and way up over Lake George, and over a little place they call Elizabethtown, I believe it was."

He turned on her with almost a savage snarl. "You!" he snapped.

It was like a blow in the face.

"Why, yes," she faltered. "Of course. Why not?"

"What kind of an airplane?"

"One with little boats on—to stay up in water."

"A hydroplane?"

"Yes."

Her wide-set, innocent blue eyes almost unmanned him. He looked away as from forbidden things. "Excuse me," he murmured, and hurriedly walked away.

They had reached the veranda of the hotel. He was so rude he did not even open the door for her. She was almost as shocked as when Darcy Jennifer leaped the table to reach her that night in the cabin.

He sought the hotel manager without delay. "Who is this Miss Nelson to whom you introduced me?" he demanded.

"I don't know. Registered as Miss Imogen Nelson and governess, Westchester," replied the manager.

"Westchester what?"

"That's the queer part of it. I don't know. Village, I suppose, or county. I believe she's an heiress."

"Why do you think she's an heiress?"

"I don't know."

"Well, why don't you know? What kind of a hostelry are you running?"

His eyes blazing, Mr. Jones talked down further explanation by ordering, very curtly, "Get me a wire to New York, call Midtown 37978, and keep the wire clear."

A few minutes later in his room he said, into the phone: "That you, Mac? I'm in my room at the hotel at Placid. Listen. Get Scroggins on the wire and find out where that girl of his is, and her full name, and other particulars, who she's with, and so on. Get it without delay, and relay it to me here. I'll wait. No. Don't tell any one, especially not Scroggins. Name? Ah, yes. Peter Jones."

Then he sat gloomily in his window and consumed cigarette after cigarette, looking out desperately at the chill winter landscape. The sun had just gone down. He bitterly asked how any one could be fool enough to come to the woods in the winter time.

In half an hour the bell rang. He picked up the receiver. "Yes, Mac," he called.

"Imogen Nelson," the reply came. "She's at Lake Placid, same hotel you're at, with her governess, Miss Petrie. Is that all? Very well. Good night."

Peter Jones checked out that night. He had his dinner in his rooms, and did not see Imogen again.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PETER CHANGES HIS PLANS.

THE following morning Peter Killigrew arrived at the offices of the Killigrew estate just after the clerks were opening for the day, and quite some time before Mac came in. He greeted his force curtly, explaining that he had reached town from a trip in the early morning, and had come straight from the train.

He performed the unusual service for himself of opening his mail. He glanced through it hurriedly. Nothing interesting. He called up the Montauk boathouse and asked how soon they could get the Tumbleweed into commission.

The boat engineer was surprised. "Why, Mr. Killigrew," he exclaimed, "I thought you intended to leave her here until spring!"

"Changed my mind."

"When do you want her?"

"To-day—this afternoon."

"I'm dreadfully sorry, but that's impossible."

"To-morrow, then. I'm starting on a tour of the South Seas at once."

"But, Mr. Killigrew, she's is dry dock, and her stern plates are off. They were buckled, you remember, by that iceberg near Spitzbergen last fall. And the engines are fouled too. They are apart, and we have ordered a new crankshaft for the starboard turbine."

"Don't go into details. When can I get her?"

The boatman was evidently distressed. He could not remember having known Mr. Killigrew in this unreasonable frame of mind ever before. "Really," he pleaded, "it will take a bit of time."

"How much? Quick! Tell me—day after to-morrow?"

"I'm afraid, Mr. Killigrew, the Tumbleweed could not be ready to sail for a fortnight, at the best, and if we could have fully three weeks—why, sir—pardon me, I must say this is sudden!"

The phone had been hung up on him.

Killigrew called to his head clerk. "Look up Atlantic liners," he said sharply, "and make a reservation on the first one that lifts anchor out of this port. I don't care where she is bound for. Only it must be the other side."

"Yes, Mr. Killigrew. At once, sir."

"And reserve a cabin for me—a suite. Be sure it has its own private dining saloon and a private entrance to the officers' deck. Examine the plans yourself. Be sure the suite is situated so I can avoid all passengers. Make no mistake about that."

"Yes, Mr. Killigrew. Thank you, sir."

Every head in the office bent over its task. All felt the tensity, the extreme and unusual tensity in the atmosphere.

"And don't tell any one I'm sailing," the master fired across the room at the clerk, who was already lifting the telephone receiver. "Keep it out of the press. Book me as Peter Jones."

"I understand, sir."

Peter walked to the outer door and looked up the sidewalk. There were the usual hurrying few passers-by of an ordinary morning on a side street near Fifth Avenue. But his secretary was not visible.

Peter came back, flexing his fingers, pulling the lobe of his ear, scowling. One clerk had whispered to another that he looked like the devil. So he did, as if he had not slept well. The corners of his mouth sagged.

"What's the matter with Mac?" he demanded.

Having addressed no one in particular no one answered. All bent soberly and industriously, appearing not to notice his mood.

"Answer me, some one. When is Mac due?"

The nearest clerk, the head bookkeeper, a man of middle years, employed in the Killigrew offices since he was a boy, replied, "He comes in about ten, always, Mr. Killigrew."

The clock indicated nine forty-five.

Peter looked at the clerk as if he would like to annihilate him, but said nothing. Every one eagerly awaited Mac's arrival. He had been coming in an hour later than the rest of them for too long a time. They hoped he would be brought up standing.

Peter walked around the large desk from his side to Mac's, and stood looking down at the little pile of mail before Mac's place, letters addressed to him personally. He thought he recognized the handwriting on the top letter. He turned it over. On the reverse flap was printed: "The Lodge, Farview Road, corner White Plains Road, Westchester County, New York."

From Scroggins, of course. Must be estate business—the superintendent of the Towers writing to his secretary. He turned away and walked to the window and looked out on the lone grass plot, brown on top, with dull green indistinct below. The snow had melted, except for one little ridge along the north wall, where the sun never hit.

The view changed, and his mind's eye saw white mountains and evergreens laden with clinging white draperies, and a long toboggan slide! And an oval, girlish face with blue eyes and reddish hair. Not red hair, though. There was blue in it, or mauve. No, dash it—that was her eyes!

He went back to Mac's side of the desk with a savage exclamation, picked up the top letter absent-mindedly, and slit it open with a paper cutter.

Inside was a letter from Scroggins, and an inclosure. The letter said:

DEAR MAC:

I inclose the weekly report from the dairy. See how the Holsteins are picking up. It's old-fashioned bran mash. I knew they would.

And, say, Mac, you gave me a surprise yesterday phoning in to know about Imogen. I was rather pleased to think Mr. Killigrew might want to know about her, because I

have always felt his disapproval of her being here. And, Mac, she's a mighty nice girl. My wife and I like her very much, and we're so used to her now we'd not know what to do if she left us. I only let her go up there to Lake Placid because she had her heart set on it, and I love her as though she were my own daughter.

Now I want you to know what a simple little girl she is, Mac, because the time might come for you to put in a good word for her, and if I ever had to let her leave the estate it would just about break my heart, and my wife's, too.

So I send you herewith, confidentially, you know, the letter we got from her yesterday. It's just like her—a regular wildflower, I call her. Different from most girls nowadays.

Of course I suppose Mr. Killigrew won't want to know more about her, but if he does and you think it proper and fitting, you can let him see this letter.

Yours very truly,
I. Scroggins, Superintendent.

Peter placed the letter back with its inclosure into the envelope, and left them on Mac's side of the desk. Then he walked to the window again and looked out.

The dirty ridge of nearly melted snow was still there; the skyscrapers were towering above them; and the clerks in the room were working hard, heads bent over their desks.

He looked at his watch. Still five minutes to ten, only. He sat at his own side, and then boldly reached over for Mac's mail, and made a point of opening it all, looking about to see if he was observed. Apparently no one paid any attention.

He drew forth the inclosure from Scroggins's letter, and read in sprawling, unformed, girlish chirography:

Dear Uncle Isaiah:

I am so happy here. The snow is everywhere, not like it is at Far View, melted off in spots like a poor horse with the mange and his hair falling out. The coat of snow on the mountains is rich and without a hole, like that fur coat you wanted to buy me and I wouldn't let you get.

Miss Petrie is a darling, goes with me everywhere, and we have lots of fun. The skates you bought fit so well, and I hired a pair of skis, and the tobogganing is thrilling—you fall and fall, just scared half to death, and then wake up and want to do it all over again.

I am so glad I came, and I haven't met anybody except a young man the manager introduced to me, a Mr. Jones. He picked me up when I fell coming down a slide on my skis. Mr. Jones, I mean. He is very nice and shy, and I only saw him that once. I only tell you about him because I promised to write about everybody I meet, and he is the only one so far.

Lots of love and kisses to Aunt Maria and you—and a great big extra hug for you.

Lovingly,
Imogen.

P. S.—Miss Petrie says Mr. Jones has a common name, but I rather like him just the same. I wonder if it is on account of his name, for I'm afraid I really like common people best.

A step sounded in the entryway. Peter glanced up. Mac was coming in, brisk and efficient, on the minute of his accustomed time; for the hands of the clock pointed just to ten.

Peter thrust the letter back in its envelope and quickly slipped it into the middle of the pack.

Scratching pens ceased. No one moved. The entire force was in suspended animation to listen to the expected blowing up of the chronically late secretary.

"Good morning, McKenna," said Peter absent-mindedly. "I got in a bit early. Opened your mail to kill time. There!" He tossed it over.

A sigh of disappointment spread over the office. Was that all Mac would get? Then he could go on getting down at ten, when they had to get down at nine? Huh! Some people have all the luck.

Mac began the day's business briskly, delving into the details of stocks and bonds and real estate. Casually, in the midst of it, he remarked:

"I suppose you saw this letter from Scroggins?"

"Yes. File it."

"Shall I say anything to him?"

Peter tried to be casual about it, but feared he blushed. Finally he ordered curtly:

"Tell him to forward any other letters he gets from that girl—at once!" He thought he noted a sly smile on Mac's lips, so he added hastily: "She's an odd character. If Scroggins's reports continue favorable, we may want to do more for her."

"Yes, sir."

The head clerk came over. "I have engaged the Presidential suite on the Leviathan, Mr. Killigrew," he reported, "sailing to-morrow for Southampton. It has three rooms, bedroom, private dining room, reception room, and bath. There is a private staircase to the hurricane deck, and a private rail down that to the bridge. You may be quite protected from the public, sir."

"Very good."

"The head steward requests information as to the number in your party."

"Only myself—and my valet."

For the next three hours Peter plunged into work. He had been off on a few days' vacation, and he was planning to take another for an indeterminate stay, and he charged Mac to think of everything that might come up while he was away.

The office was accustomed to these erratic movements of the youthful master of millions. To all practical intent McKenna, for a large share of the time, was the head of the estate. Yet they never could tell when Mr. Killigrew would descend on them and demand a strict accounting.

This seemed to be one of these occasions. He studied every item with exacting questions. One after another he had each clerk on the carpet, quizzing him, probing his methods and his accounts with the severe cross-examination of a prosecuting attorney. Peter seemed driven by some devastating force bent on finding trouble. An exact and cautious man, in these respects being advanced far beyond his years, he seemed now on the track of some devious and baffling fraud.

Mac was puzzled, but met the quiet, steely questions with engaging frankness, feeling he had nothing to conceal. But he was grateful for the arrival of one o'clock. He did not want to appear as if he liked to get away, even for the customary noonday respite, and he welcomed Peter's comment that it was time for him to go. The head clerk usually stayed in between one and one thirty, when the chief bookkeeper, who went at twelve thirty, came back. Thus there was always some one in.

This day Peter said to the head clerk as soon as Mac and the others had gone: "You can go to lunch now."

Without comment the head clerk went. That left the Killigrew offices in the sole possession of their proprietor.

The moment he was alone Peter went to the file and got out the letter from Scroggins, extracting from it the scrawled epistle from the Lake Placid Hotel. Then he sat down in comfort, alone, his back to the door, and read and reread it.

He chuckled and smiled now, for the first time that day. "A common name!" he softly repeated. "I'm afraid I really like common people best."

He must have had plenty of time to memorize it fully, for he did nothing else than look at it from one to one thirty, when the chief bookkeeper came back. Then he thrust it into his pocket guiltily.

A few minutes later he left the offices with word to Mac to call him at his club. He felt indignant at himself that he should be in the position of sneaking into his own files, and of indulging in intrigue to deceive his own clerks—about a trifling letter from a shabby little penniless orphan.

Imogen's letter remained in his pocket. He found it there as he was eating his lunch alone, and seemed pleased. He read it again.

He did not go back that afternoon to his offices. Instead, he played billiards in the club rooms until late, and then went for a sparring lesson to the athletic club. He felt physically keen. Perhaps the air in the woods had been good for him.

The next morning he was in the office again before any one—at eight forty. Mac came early too, but not before Peter had gone through all his mail. There was nothing from Scroggins.

He came back from lunch rather promptly, to see the two o'clock mail. He asked Mac when the other mails came in. There were four more—up until 5.37 P.M. He mumbled something about looking for a government report on oceanography.

At three, the head clerk reported that the suite on the Leviathan was ready for him to go aboard and occupy at any time after five in the afternoon. The ship would weigh anchor at midnight.

"Thanks," said Peter, glumly.

The offices closed usually at five. The

clerks that night saw Peter at his desk for the first time in their experience when they were leaving for the night. Mac said he would stay. Peter told him to go, and meet him at his club in two hours.

At five forty-one—a few minutes late—the postman came in with the last mail of the day. He handed Peter a half dozen letters, with the remark: "It's a rare thing to see you here this time of day, Mr. Killigrew!"

Peter could hardly wait for him to leave, for he had seen in the batch of letters one with Scroggins's handwriting. He went to his desk, striving to be casual, but, missing the cutter, tore open the envelope with his finger.

Yes. An inclosure, a fat one. He devoured it.

It said, pathetically, it seemed:

DEAR UNCLE ISAIAH:

Miss Petrie and I have decided to come back the end of this week. It is nice here, but I think it is nicer at the Lodge.

I told you I would tell you everything about any one I met, and so I must tell you about that Mr. Jones. It is awfully queer. I don't seem to have any luck with me. First there was Mr. Jennifer, and now there is Mr. Jones.

I don't mean to compare them, please don't think that, Uncle Isaiah, because Mr. Jones has a good, firm chin, and I like him very, very much; only he just evaporated like a snowball in the sun, only quicker—more like a duck dropping into a lake in the summer.

I can't understand it at all. You see, we went skating together and then tobogganing. Oh, yes! And we had luncheon on the top of the veranda, where it's all glassed in.

And we had such a good time. He seemed just like a member of the family. Somehow I thought of him as if he might be a son of yours—he was so thoughtful and really nice. You do know what I mean, don't you?

He quoted poetry—dear poetry—but somehow I can't recall the lines—something about a king and a girl who loved him. It wasn't Tennyson, but it sounded like Tennyson. We seemed to be such good friends, and I was just beginning to wonder if I couldn't tell him all about you and Aunt Maria, and maybe ask him to come and call on us.

We were coming to the hotel, and he asked me about riding in an airplane, and I started to tell him about that awful ride—you know, in the one with boats on—when, suddenly, with hardly a word, he turned and left me, and never came back.

I asked Miss Petrie to find out about him, and where he lived; but she said nobody would tell her, and that when she asked a bellboy he laughed and said everybody knew Mr. Jones was not his name. Miss Petrie says she felt sure he was a criminal, but that seems so foolish to me.

Why, Uncle Isaiah, a criminal wouldn't know poetry, would he, and be so *nice?* You have no idea how *nice* he was! Of course I'll never see him again, but it does make me wonder why he ran away that way.

There must be some bad luck about me. So I am coming back in two days. Lots of love and kisses to Aunt Maria, and a great, big hug for you.

Lovingly,

IMOGEN.

P. S.—I am telling you all about this because I want you to know I didn't really care anything about Mr. Jones, only the queer way he acted made me wonder so much.

Love,

IM.

Peter looked into the January gloom for a few minutes. Then he did some telephoning on his own hook.

At the club at seven Mac came to him. "Your valet," he said, "has all your things on the pier waiting for you."

"Not going," said Peter.

"But Ahrnen paid for the suite; had to buy it away from the Duchess of Nottingshire and her retinue."

"Find the duchess, and tell her she can have it—with my compliments!"

"She may have other plans—"

"Make her a present of it. I'm not going on the Leviathan!"

"Oh!" said Mac. He was not in the habit of asking questions; so he waited for further orders. They came promptly:

"Send my valet to Grand Central," said Peter. "I've changed my mind, and am traveling inland."

That night he occupied a drawing room on the Adirondack Express.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NIRVANA.

PETER KILLIGREW was certainly a lonely soul. He got what he wanted when he wanted it—nearly always. He wanted to be alone—nearly always. That was what he arranged for in reserving

the drawing room on the Adirondack Express, just as he had expected to get it when he took the Presidential suite on the Leviathan.

And then when he had what he wanted, he found that was not what he wanted at all. After the train left the Grand Central he sat for some time and watched the ice in the Hudson and the cliffs of the Palisades beyond. It was too early to go to bed. He was afraid he would not sleep anyway.

So he left the seclusion of his drawing room with its mahogany and green velours, and went out into the public smoking room, and sat down moodily in the corner, and looked out. Two drummers were smoking and swapping yarns.

One was saying: "They're all alike. I told her so."

"And what did she say?" queried his companion.

The first drummer leaned closer, and whispered something. Both went into gales of laughter. Without looking at them again, Peter got up and walked out into the sleeping car.

That was worse than loneliness.

The porter was making up the berths. In the first was a woman with a baby, nursing on a bottle. Ordinarily, Peter disliked babies in public, especially little ones, too squally, too messy. And he pitied mothers; such a lot of sordid details to absorb their time. Necessary, maybe, but—

He walked slowly past this mother and her infant, waiting across the aisle while their berth was made ready. The baby looked up into his face and must have noted the scowl of sympathy, or something, for he reached forth and seized one of the buttons on Peter's coat, and started to climb right over the seat.

The mother saw the child's maneuver, and quickly brought it back to her arms, apologizing to Peter. He was forced to accept the apology. As he did so he was overwhelmed with the look on the mother's face! Serenity! Utter content! So far from being annoyed by the baby she was completely immersed in thought for it—and radiant with a strange joy!

Peter got a look at his own face in the mirror of the next compartment. Hollow eyes! Lantern jaw! Lines in his forehead! Bah! A miserable face!

He passed several middle-aged couples, matter-of-fact, easy-going, making themselves comfortable. And then, in the end seat, he came upon a sight that sent an odd wince of pain through him.

A young man about twenty-five and a girl a bit younger—holding hands, slipped down in the seat, looking at each other, vacantly. What was that vacuity in their countenances—ecstasy?

His foot ground on a hard substance in the aisle near by. He looked down—grains of rice. Then he saw rice in the girl's hair, and in the coat collar of the young man. And out of the young man's coat pocket hung an old shoe, tipsily, while above them, from the rack, hung a cheap suit case, labeled: "Newlyweds—don't disturb!"

He went back to his drawing room, and closed the door. There was no place for him out there. He had to be alone with his thoughts. They were not entirely pleasing.

He had canceled the suite on the Leviathan—unnecessary expense, a violation of the Killigrew principles of thrift; for the Killigrew fortune was not one of those new fortunes made overnight in which waste in accommodating the pleasure or convenience of chief executives is looked upon as legitimate expense. Any wasting of any Killigrew dollar was always looked upon as a species of crime.

That, however, did not cause him such anguish as it did to face the fact, as he must, that he was retracing his steps to Lake Placid for the distinct purpose of placing himself again in the atmosphere of temptation.

To subject himself to the spell of a girl! And such a girl! A nobody! A penniless orphan! The foster child of one of his own employees!

His father would have been terribly shocked. His grandfather would turn in his grave. His great grandfather would have disowned him!

Peter Killigrew had been well trained. He was the product of the careful, shrewd, laborious discipline of seven generations of level-headed, clear-thinking ancestors.

They had endowed him with a will like steel, a character proof against most of the blandishments of the world, a shrewd instinct to guard against most of the world's ingenuities. And they had presented him with a complex money machine of many millions.

He was a fit driver for a fit machine.

Only an accident, a misfortune had left him unprotected—the death of Ann Hilary, shortly after that of his father. His father had approved of Ann for his wife, and it was Peter's nature to accept everything his father approved.

But Ann was dead. His father was dead. He was alone—and vulnerable.

This, and much else, ran through his brain to the tune of the grinding wheels on the Adirondack Express.

The much else had to do with red hair and blue eyes. Of course, it was inconceivable that he should take this little outcast seriously. There was a trick in it, surely; some weakness of his mood, or some witchery of the girl; some wickedness of a designing little adventuress luring him on.

The best way to settle it was to expose her—in his own eyes. Lay bare her charms. See enough of her to become positive that she was indeed only a trifling adventuress, a wicked little schemer, willing to grab a scamp like Darcy Jennifer one moment, or flirt with a commonplace idler like Peter Jones the next.

Or did she really know who he was?

The latter thought pleased him. It made him feel he had good reason for going back to Lake Placid. He was going to prove that she was scheming all the while, that she knew he was Peter Killigrew masquerading as one Jones, and pretending innocence for the sake of more effectually charming him.

Let him only prove that and he would be content. He could be through with her, and go on his way and forget her—and keep away from all women thereafter!

On this casuistry he slept—fairly well.

He detrained at Placid in the early morning.

It was very early, barely six o'clock. Too late to go to bed again, not late enough for any of the habitués of the hotel to be about. They breakfasted between eight and nine, and some as late as ten.

A girl like Imogen, of course, he thought, would be apt to sleep late, and be around about ten. What could he do with four hours?

A hike up a seven-mile peak seemed a good way to stretch his legs, and fill in the time. He started out briskly, about six thirty.

A mile from the hotel, he saw a tiny figure in white woolens, with a thin band of Alice blue, trudging ahead.

He hastened along. She stopped to rest, and he overtook her.

"Miss Nelson," he said, "you are up early. It's not seven o'clock."

Daylight was barely in the sky.

"I couldn't sleep very well," she replied casually, listlessly. Not especially glad to see him, he thought.

This annoyed him, though if she had been glad he would have attributed it to the "design" of a "schemer."

Evidently she was going to say no more, for she shortly began trudging along up the path. He felt obliged to go on with her. How would be begin the conversation? Certainly not by apologizing for his behavior in leaving her so abruptly two days before. He felt justified in that—thoroughly justified.

They went on in silence for a mile or more. The sun began to show above the far rims of the mountains by this time, a red sun, without any halation, a little pink above, but mostly a round red sun—honest, direct. A fair day.

She did not stop again until she reached the halfway house, a little rustic shed in a clearing on a plateau jutting out over the long valley. From it one could look down onto the great toboggan slide, deserted now, waiting for another day and its stimulating sports.

She stood looking down the mountain, while he looked at her. He felt indignant at her, such a wee wisp of a nonentity to force him to cancel a trip to Europe and come back to this bleak mountain! And then to snub him!

He longed to make her smart for it!

But what could he say? What could he

do? He was not even sure yet that she knew who he was.

"I haven't seen you for two days," he remarked. It annoyed him more to think that he was speaking first.

"Yes, I missed you." She said it simply, as if stating an obvious fact. Nothing yet to put his finger on.

"Had to go back to town—sudden business call." He owed her no explanation, he felt, yet here he was making one.

And she did not even appreciate that he was almost humbling himself. "I see!" she replied casually.

She expressed no further interest in him directly. She did not even ignore him so that he could persist in bringing a personal expression into play. Instead she said, "I'll think I'll go back now. Miss Petrie will be up."

The name "Miss Petrie" annoyed him still more.

"Haven't you had your breakfast?" he asked.

"Only a cup of coffee. I'll have breakfast with Miss Petrie about eight."

"Why not with me?"

There he was pursuing her again, pleading with her. He felt terribly self-conscious, as if she had put something over on him. She looked down abruptly, and he felt his heart bound a trifle, as if he had made a gain. "Why, I don't know!" He thought he saw she was trembling. "If—if you want to—"

"Of course I—"

"Join us."

He gritted his teeth. "Us?" She meant Miss Petrie, too.

"Can't we breakfast alone—on the gun-deck?" he persisted.

"I'm afraid Miss Petrie wouldn't like it," Imogen slowly objected.

"She won't mind. Please."

Then, while she still hung back, a resolution he had made—the resolution not to apologize—suddenly became as water, and he impulsively exclaimed, "I acted awfully rude the other day—running off as I did. Won't you please forgive me?"

The blushes mantled up over her neck and cheeks so prettily. He could see plainly now, for the sun was above the horizon. Her long lashes dropped over her blue eyes.

Then she looked at him fully and frankly and held out her hand, saying, "Of course."

And he took the hand and held it for minutes, while neither of them said a word.

Then he felt the altitude again—as if they were up in a great height. And all of his worry and sleeplessness and everything disappeared. Caution and doubt and hesitancy left him.

He thought of the look on the mother's face the night before in the sleeping car, and of the young man and the girl on the front seat, and the chalked sign on the cheap suit case—"Newlyweds—don't disturb."

And as they started down the mountain side—hand in hand, a fact of which both seemed unconscious—he was saying silently to himself, "As pure as this snow, and as guileless as a pine cone!"

A little farther he was saying—still silently, for neither had spoken again, "If this is love let me never wake up!"

And then he began to worry, and to plan how he would prevent her from knowing he was Peter Killigrew.

But how could he prevent that?

Of course he could prevent it. This was only a lark—a wintry interlude. Presently he would be back in town again, in his office or at the opera, or sailing for the South Seas on the Tumbleweed.

Look out! He must not be a ninny and fall to the level of that country clerk, oblivious of the old shoe, and the chalked luggage, and dripping telltale rice.

Yet Nirvana beckoned! Oh, Nirvana!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THRILLS AND DOUBTS.

PETER had a dog, a collie named Nelle, the only creature whom he believed loved him for himself alone. He was devoted to Nelle. Whenever he could he took her on his trips, except by sea. He had tried once to take her on the Tumbleweed, but she became seasick. He feared she might die if kept on board; so, two days out, he put back from a long

cruise, just to get her safely ashore, where she would be more comfortable.

Nelle never questioned anything he did, never took offense at anything he did, never showed her teeth to him, and never asked for favors. If he was in bad humor and spoke to her crossly she showed no resentment, and when he spoke to her again kindly she was instantly as grateful as if he had been continuously affectionate.

A perfect companion, the accordion of his moods.

He kept thinking of Nelle as he sat at breakfast with Imogen. Nelle was the only living thing he felt would be the same to him if he were poor.

And there was an unaccountable, an eerie luxury in thinking that this slip of a girl—this nonentity, as he persisted in regarding her—had no thought of his money, did not look upon him as Peter Killigrew, master of millions.

It was a new experience, as fresh to him as the taste of a potato to an Eskimo.

At first he had resented the fact that she had not fawned on him when he reappeared; but her quiet dignity, her unspoken rebuff, now seemed quite appropriate, and convinced him that she had no idea of his identity.

A heavenly human being, of course, yet absolutely sincere. Something to think about there. Especially when he had never known any one like that before—not any one with red hair and blue eyes, and a soft, purry voice, and hands softer than velvet.

He began to tell her about Nelle, how Nelle would lie at his feet while he read, with her head across his instep; how Nelle liked to climb on his desk, but only if there were no papers to disturb; how she never interfered with his work or his eating, but only rejoiced in being near him.

"She must be a great comfort," said Imogen. "I like dogs."

"You have one, I suppose."

She shook her head. "Not now; he died."

"Then you did have one?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"

"Years ago, when I was a little girl. He came running into the garden one day when I was working on the Japanese iris. He had no muzzle on nor a collar, and the dog catchers were out. He seemed to know it."

"Ah! A stray?"

"He didn't belong to anybody near where we lived. So I kept him in the garden and fed him, and the dog catchers didn't get him, and after that he never left me—until he died."

"What breed?" Peter asked.

"I don't know. Just a dog."

"Mongrel, I suppose."

"No. A wonderful dog. Brown and black and white, with straight hair, and big brown eyes."

"You don't know what kind?"

"Father called him a mutt, but he was just like the description of your Nelle—the finest companion. Once he bit a tramp that came to the door and tried to push his way in when I was alone. You should have seen the tramp run."

Peter felt a bit miffed to have his thoroughbred Nelle, four times winner of championships in dog shows compared to a stray "mutt;" but he did not voice this resentment.

He was feeling indulgent now toward Imogen. Proximity to her, close observation had dissipated any previous thought that she was a "siren" or an "adventuress." She was too transparently naïve for that.

He came into quite a glow of self-satisfaction. His infatuation, or whatever it was, was wearing off. She was such a simple little creature she could hardly lure a man. He was enjoying his adventure incognito, now that he felt sure there was no danger in it. No reason why he should ever let her know who he was.

"When your dog died," he went on, "why didn't your father get you another?"

"No other dog happened along."

"Why didn't he buy you one—when you were so fond of dogs?"

Imogen laughed. "Father," she said, "spent money only on plants and seeds."

"Ah! Rather strict, eh?"

She flashed instant denial. "The most generous man that ever lived," she asserted. "He gave me everything in the world."

He barely restrained a smile at this. Here would come the amusing part—he would lead her on to embroider with lies a fictional account of her destitute father, the Patrick Henry Nelson who had willed him a worthless estate.

"Very indulgent, was he? Everything you wanted? How fine!"

"Yes!" she sighed. "I lacked for nothing."

"Sent you to Europe, I suppose, and boarding school, and bought you plenty of pretty dresses."

"Oh, no! Not Europe, and not so many dresses. You see, I didn't want that, but—" she seemed abashed—"he did send me to boarding school—for awhile—until I got tired of it."

No direct lie there. He must lead her into one. "If he got you everything you wanted, what was it?" Peter boldly asked.

"He was with me—always," she replied simply, "and read to me, and taught me, and I was never lonely. He had a rare mind; he knew everything, and he was very wise. He taught me all about plants and flowers and nature, and books, too. I always felt I was richer than any one else.

"Every one else knew so little, and such petty things; and he knew so much, and told it all to me. My father was a great man. If he had ever cared to go in for politics or anything like that he would have been as famous as Abraham Lincoln, I am sure. He was just that kind of man—just like Lincoln, kind and wise and true. But he gave his whole life to me, while Abraham Lincoln had to spread his over a nation, and that is what made me so much richer than any one else."

"I see!" Peter felt a lump in his throat.

He could not fail to think of Peter Killigrew IV, although he loved his son, absorbed in the estate and his money, forever going from one board meeting to another, seldom talking of anything but to give directions to servants; turning over his son to tutors and governesses; talking to him chiefly about methods of conserving the estate, dwelling always on one thought—not to dissipate the accumulations of his forefathers.

Suddenly Peter became prey to a strange, unaccountable jealousy. A species of psychic sneer passed across his mind. He felt he must de-rate this obscure deceased flower hunter who occupied so high a place in the esteem of his chance companion.

"What did he do for a living?" Peter asked rather brusquely.

Imogen's head went up. "He ran the factory!" she asserted with a sort of defiance as if daring any one to deny it.

"Ah! He owned a factory!" Here would be the lie! Peter would be gratified at last.

"No. He didn't own it, but he knew more about it than the owner; and without him it would have failed long before it did."

"Ah! It failed?"

"Because women bobbed their hair so much. You see, it was a hairpin factory."

"And your father managed it! How interesting!"

"Well—no, he didn't manage it. Mr. Mullins did that. He was the owner."

"But how did your father run it if he wasn't the manager?"

Imogen was a trifle vexed for the first time. "Why, he told Mr. Mullins what to do, and kept track of everything for him. Don't you see?"

"But what was his position in the hairpin factory?"

"Mr. Mullins called him the bookkeeper, and he did keep the books; but that was just a sort of way of entering him on the pay roll."

"Oh! The bookkeeper!"

"But he was much more than that," Imogen exclaimed. "He did all the ordering, and all the selling, everything. Sometimes Mr. Mullins stayed away for days, even weeks at a time, and my father kept things going just as if he owned the factory. He was a wonderful man. He knew everything. He could have managed the village just as well, or the county, or even the State. He used to tell me how they ought to be run, and his ideas were *so* sensible. Always right!"

"Did he ever hold political office?"

Imogen seemed shocked. "No! No! He would never stoop to that. Politics has such a low type of men, men so filled with hypocrisy, and false statements, and

promises they never keep or intend to keep. No. My father never believed in politics."

"Nor did my father," said Peter.

"Then he must have been a wise man, like my father," Imogen averred with a prim little set of her mouth.

Peter was wobbling from one feeling to another. This amusing, ignorant, bombastic, absurd, adorable little girl was thinking too fast for him. If it were not for that indefinable alchemy of her curious personality he would have no time for her. As it was she was opening new vistas of thought for him.

However, he did feel indulgent toward her when she idealized her father. He had always felt that *his* father was the greatest man in the world. But he did not want to talk about him, the eminent Peter Killigrew IV, sound link in the chain of one of the preëminent American fortunes—not to this daughter of a village bookkeeper in a tiny bankrupt factory.

Imogen, however, felt she had a sympathetic audience. She had never before been able to talk about her father very much, except to Mr. Perkins, and he was skeptical about Pat Nelson—"envious and jealous of superior ability."

She was voluble, especially after the second pot of coffee, and the maple syrup on the rice cakes, as they sat back in lolling chairs, alone on the gundeck, and watched the morning crowd assembled on the terrace below.

"Did your father care for flowers like my father?" she asked.

"Yes. Very much." Peter refrained from mentioning the rack of cups and medals and decorations in the billiard room on Fifth Avenue taken from horticultural shows by the Killigrew exhibits.

"Then he must have been a good man. My father said only good men really cared for flowers. I mean for themselves, not for show. Wicked men, he said, cultivated them to show off; but good men loved to see them grow and to bring them up with their own hands.

"I often heard my father say: 'There's old Peter Killigrew with a regiment of gardeners, and he never knew how to transplant a marshmallow till I showed him.' That was the Mr. Killigrew who died a few years ago."

Peter could have no thought, after this, that Imogen knew his identity. She was not actress enough to look at him blandly as she did when she so casually said that.

"Then your father knew m—" Peter checked himself in time—"knew Mr. Killigrew?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed. He knew everybody, like he knew everything."

Out of the past Peter was recalling what Scroggins had tried to make him hear, the story of the episode of the meeting of the flower hunter on the road near Dobbs's Corners the June afternoon many years before. When Scroggins had told him he had paid little heed, but now there was a sharp click on the plates of his memory.

Peter remembered the old horse-driven brougham, Scroggins driving, young Peter—himself—with his father behind; the old man seen indistinctly across the meadow in some swampy ground; the stopping of the carriage, the calling to the old man; his coming forward, bearing a baby, and a tangled mass of wild flowers; the leaving of the baby while he returned to dig some roots; his—Peter's—climbing down to the grass to play with the baby; he was about eleven then, eight or nine years older than the little girl; the return of the old man with the roots done up in gunny sacking; the offer of payment; its refusal; the return to the brougham; the farewell; the kiss.

It came back to him as if it had happened yesterday. And this was that baby girl—the golden hair red, the soft angelic mouth dropping nonsense and sunbeams.

"What did your father think of Mr. Killigrew?" he asked very gently.

"He felt sorry for him," Imogen replied.

Peter's mouth fell open. "Really!" he stammered. "W-why?"

"Because he had so many gardeners, and knew so little about flowers."

"But—but," Peter expostulated—"it seems to me I remember about reading that Mr. Killigrew often took prizes at flower shows."

"That's nothing!" Imogen airily waved aside the suggestion. "My father said his

gardeners took the prizes. Father said lots of people owned flowers and never possessed them. The only way to possess them was to prepare the ground yourself, and plant them yourself, and water and weed them yourself, and pick them yourself. If a gardener brings a flower to you from the garden, or you buy it in a shop it doesn't belong to you. It belongs to the man who grew it. He may sell it, but he never parts with it."

Peter blinked. "But if he takes the money for it," he objected.

"Oh! Money doesn't mean anything!" Imogen airily went on.

"No?" Peter observed, patronizingly.

"No. Father told me that, and I know it's true. Rich people own houses for servants to live in, and they belong to the servants. They own automobiles for chauffeurs to drive, and they have so many, and they can never use more than one at a time, that the others belong to the servants. They own buildings, and the people who live in them and pay rent really have them, while the rich people have nothing but responsibility."

"True!" Peter agreed, sympathetically.

Encouraged, Imogen rattled on: "My father felt sorry for all rich men. I mean men with money; for he was very rich himself, as I told you, in things that don't harm one."

Peter was not quite so sympathetic now, but he managed to ask: "What did he mean by that?"

"He said a rich man never had a friend. Everybody tried to get his money; never could trust a servant; always had to set one to watch another. No relative ever loved him except for what money they hoped to get from him. Never had time for his children, because he had to make more money or keep what he had. Never could be sure of what his own wife thought about him, because he would always have the haunting fear she married him for his money."

A long sigh escaped from Peter. "How did your father know so much about—about rich men?" he asked.

"I told you he knew everybody and everything."

"I see!"

Peter looked out dully over the lake where the hockey players were assembling for the morning practice. He felt the lines deepen in his countenance, and that baffling weariness so much with him began to settle down again, and to rob this rare morning of its buoyancy.

He thought of a line he had often heard, without understanding what it meant, "Out of the mouths of babes."

This girl, prattling of her absurd father, had uttered truths which struck home to him as nothing had ever done before. He had heard things like that said from the pulpit and had read them in newspapers, but they never meant much before, except, perhaps, to describe other *rich* men, never himself.

Now he was hit, hit hard. He felt there might be a little grim satisfaction in rubbing salt in the wound. So he proceeded along a line that was more productive of salt than he had anticipated.

He turned on her rather abruptly, asking: "Have you ever known a rich man?"

"A man with money, you mean."

"Certainly—real riches." He could not let her get away with everything she had said.

"Not very well," she admitted.

"Well, don't you think your father may have been drawing on his imagination, perhaps?"

"Not in the least. I know he wasn't!" she asserted, with a show of spirit.

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because I came in contact with a rich man not long ago. I didn't see him, and he didn't see me; but I overheard him, by accident, and I don't think he has one drop of human feeling in his whole body. He is all eaten up with suspicion; without any real reason for being suspicious, but just on general principles. He doesn't know a thing about life, or human beings, or love, or anything in the world except money—and maybe not that, for he inherited it. If it was not for some kind servants he employs he would be a cruel, detestable little cad!"

Her eyes were snapping, her head in the air.

"A young man, you say?" Peter persisted.

"I suppose so. I didn't see him. I don't ever want to see him. In fact I know my father was right. I hope I never know a rich man. They must be dreadfully inhuman!"

There was quite a silence after this. Then Imogen became calmer. She turned on Peter impulsively: "Oh, Mr. Jones," she exclaimed, "why did you let me talk like this? I never did before to any one, and I am so happy and have so much to be grateful for I don't want to ever speak ill of any one. And perhaps I was mistaken, too; perhaps I didn't understand the other side of—his side. My father always told me not to make hasty judgments, and that if I waited to understand all I would never condemn anybody."

"But you were right," Peter insisted. "I feel sure you must have been right."

"Well, let's not talk about it any more. Luckily you're just Mr. Jones, and not rich. So we can have a good time, can't we?"

He did not trust himself to speech. He merely nodded his head.

It was mid forenoon by this time. They were made aware of the fact by a precise voice which broke in upon them. It was Miss Petrie. She was much disturbed. Where had Imogen been? Not down to breakfast in the dining room?

Up with Mr. Jones on the gundeck all this time? Why didn't they go out in the snow and have some fun with the others?

To get rid of Miss Petrie they did go out, with their skates, to the hockey rink. They skated until lunch time without a further word about rich men or poor men.

Peter felt well again. This was a splendid vacation. Never had such a good one before. Why had he never thought of Placid? A bully place, better than anything in Europe; he ought to build a camp up here and come regularly.

Before noon he had made up his mind what to do about Imogen. Of course he would keep out of her way after this little episode. Couldn't afford to see her again, naturally. She called Mrs. Scroggins "Aunt Maria." Ugh! And Scroggins "Uncle Isaiah." That must be his name. His initial was "I."

Nevertheless his personal investigation had satisfied him her case was quite exceptional. He would see to it that she was well provided for. Scroggins would have his orders. There would be no repetition of that curt dismissal of the case as an "appeal to charity." On the contrary, he would take real pleasure in seeing that she had everything money could buy.

In this pleasant frame of mind, whose source, of course, he did not communicate, and quite content with the world, they went to lunch. Peter even permitted Miss Petrie to join them, but he was glad to hear her say she did not like to ski.

So they went skiing after lunch, and upset, as at their first meeting, and recalled that as if it had been ages and ages ago. Were they not old established friends now?

At tea time Peter got a real blow, however. Imogen remarked, casually it seemed, that she was going home that night. He protested that it was utterly impossible. Having seen her letters to Scroggins he felt sure she could stay if she wanted to, but of course he could not reveal his source of information. But he did insist that she stay.

"Miss Petrie has the reservations. Got them yesterday," Imogen explained.

"Have them changed.

"Oh, no! They expect me. I'm going home."

"Who expects you?"

"My aunt and uncle."

"Wire them you are staying on another week."

"No. No. No. I can't. I told them I'm coming to-night. I have to go."

She was adamant. He couldn't understand it. How aggravating! The unreason of women—she wanted to stay; she could stay; and yet she wouldn't stay. And he could never see her again—of course not. For the next time she would surely find out his identity.

The train was to leave at eleven. He proposed they spend the last evening in night tobogganing. She readily agreed.

The slide was illuminated at regular intervals with huge kerosene lamps, and by flambeaux of oil-soaked rags.

It was a popular sport. Nearly everyone at the hotel joined in. The scene under the

great trees, with the far-set lamps and the intervening deep shadows, was enchanting—romantic!

Peter managed to get the front seat every time, and to put his arms well around her as they started off on the swift glide down the fairway, rendered more mysterious by the darkness.

She snuggled more closely up against his chest. No telling what might be beyond those lights—in the blackness. She felt very safe.

Finally it was almost time for her to go if she did not want to miss her train, and they prepared for the final slide. No embarrassment now about folding his long arms down over her shoulders, and holding her firmly with his huge fur-lined gloves.

This time they had a spill. Every one laughed and climbed uproariously out of a snowbank, and Imogen found herself standing with Peter brushing the flakes from her eyes and hair.

"Thank you!" she said; and the next thing she knew her mouth was closed and arms were all about her, and something was happening that swept her far out of herself—a long, long kiss!

She was not afraid, nor did she resist. She felt again as if the rarefied atmosphere had taken her away—far above the trees, beyond the clouds.

People were all about, too, but neither of them minded. After the kiss she lapsed back to the trail with a little sigh, and started for the hotel, he after her.

She stopped and faced him just before she got to the lights. She put out her hand, and he took it.

"I'm so sorry!" she said.

"Sorry for what?"

"That—that kiss!"

"I'm not!" He drew her close and kissed her again. This time she did not seem to give in so easily. "Why?" he demanded.

"Because—because I shouldn't kiss—people!"

"Oh! People?"

She shook her head violently.

"You are not used to it?" he added, his voice strangely harsh.

She shook her red curls.

"You kiss your aunt and uncle, don't you?" he asked.

"Y-yes."

"Who else?"

"Nobody."

"How about that young man you went up with in the airplane?"

Her eyes flashed as they had on the gundeck when castigating the rich young man. "Oh, him!" she rasped. "I detest him!"

"You never kissed him?"

"Certainly *not!*" He got the glint from her eyes.

His arms were about her; for he had drawn her into the shadows at one side of the hotel. "Tell me," he pleaded, "that you don't feel that way about me."

"You're nice," she admitted. "I know you aren't wrong inside—in your heart!"

For the first time in a long while, a tear came to his eyes.

"Then," he whispered softly, "kiss me once more—just once—good-by!"

She saw the tear. She lifted up her face for the kiss. He felt as he had when the baby tried to pull upon the button of his coat in the car the night before—only with infinitely more poignancy.

After the kiss he said: "Good-by, Imogen, I'm coming—" No. That wouldn't do. "You'll—you'll," he stammered, "you'll hear from me!"

And he rushed off, bewildered.

"Good-by—Peter!" she called, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXX.

TROUBLE.

PETER KILLIGREW did not want to marry Imogen Nelson. None of the Killigrews had ever married beneath them, or outside of their class, except a great uncle, Horace Killigrew, who had become involved with a country school-teacher up in Dutchess County where one of the Killigrew farms was located in the last century.

And Uncle Horace had been a reproach in the family for three generations. He had been obliged to withdraw from all as-

sociation with the Killigrews, his father—Peter's great grandfather—had cut him off with a meager allowance, and he had lived his life out to a very advanced age, over ninety, up there in Dutchess County.

Strange that Uncle Horace had been contented and had lived so long, but he was looked upon as the black sheep of the family.

Peter expected to marry in due course, but not until he was at least thirty-five, and then a woman of some old family and with established fortune. His father had chosen Ann Hilary and he had been satisfied with Ann; but Ann died, and his father died.

Now he had enough canny Killigrew instinct to believe he should not trust his own judgment until he was quite mature. A wife for the reigning Killigrew, and a mother for the next Killigrew generation must be chosen with a very particular care.

She must be of the most prescribed pattern, hedged in by restrictions of entailed estates as well as of established and unblemished family.

And Peter felt the responsibility of seven generations of Killigrews weighing upon him to make the proper choice in matrimony.

When he got back from Lake Placid—and those kisses under the stars—he felt content for a time, the time during which he considered and reconsidered what he could do for Imogen to establish her so that her future would be secured.

There were a number of things he could do, but, before he decided, and the very first day, he made a short codicil to his will, had it properly witnessed, and placed in the vault. In this codicil, he left a hundred thousand dollars to her in the form of a trust fund, to be administered by his bank.

He told nobody about this. It was only a form of insurance, if anything happened to him. Never before had he thought that he might not live to the customary advanced age of the Killigrews. But you never can tell!

See what happened at Lake Placid! Out of a clear sky!

A bit of stray wild pollen had drifted in an idle wind over the high hedges of the restricted property, and had fallen on the carefully cultivated bloom of the rare, expensive flower in the exclusive estate.

Annoying! Yes. But never mind. The stray wild pollen could be plucked out—as soon as the gardener found the exact spot where it fell.

That was about how Peter felt. He was in love, perhaps, but it would pass, and before he was married, some ten or fifteen years hence, he would have forgotten the adventure. It would have been absorbed in the cycle of romantic experience necessary to all young men, rich or poor.

Meanwhile, he would find the way to take care of Imogen, tactfully, of course, without offense to her; for she must never know that Peter Jones and Peter Killigrew were one and the same.

Probably he would do it through Scroggins. He could trust Scroggins. But he would have to go slow.

It was two weeks before he sent her a letter. It was no use to keep the thing up frantically. He had been indiscreet enough to kiss her. Better let the flame die gracefully.

However, he wrote a number of letters before he sent one. It was no harm to write if you don't send the letters. So he amused himself writing letters and tearing them up and putting them in the waste basket.

Peter faced a good many difficulties when it came to writing a letter. He didn't want any one to know he was writing her, and he didn't want her to connect him with Peter Jones.

He very seldom wrote a letter, his social correspondence being conducted in long hand by Miss Laffan and his business correspondence by typewriter through Mac's or his own dictation. He had never used a typewriter himself.

After two weeks of trying, he evolved a letter which he thought he would be discreet in sending. He need not be harshly judged for thinking of discretion in connection with Imogen. He no longer doubted her innocence or her goodness of heart, but a lifelong training, to say nothing of sad experience, had taught him that no rich man in America in his time could be really safe from the pursuit of the blackmailer and the

breach of promise hound. No need to suspect Imogen, either, to recognize these perils. Some one might get the letters from her, or it was not impossible that with the passing of years even she, herself, might change.

The latter was a dreadful thought, to be sure, but it was characteristic of Peter's caution that he did think of it, and, as the lawyers say: "Without prejudice."

So he decided that the letter he should send—for he must send one, as he had promised she would hear from him—would have to be typewritten. To avoid letting any stenographer know what he was doing, he bought a typewriter and had it sent to his house, and set out to learn how to use it.

Slow work, but he accomplished it, with two fingers only, and several wrong keys struck. Finally, he had a single sheet, on which any one might read:

DEAR IMOGEN:

I am well, and hope you are the same. It was a fine vacation, and I am so glad I met you. I hope you will be a good girl, and wish you would write me and tell me all about yourself. With warm regards.

Very truly yours.

PETER JONES.

My address is Post Office Box 211, General Delivery, New York City.

Peter had never been accused of being able to express himself in writing. The literary was not a Killigrew instinct. None of his ancestors had possessed it.

He went every day to the post office box, privately, of course, as none of his secretaries or clerks knew anything about his having one. To begin with he went twice daily. Then he grew ashamed of himself, and went only once each day.

The answer came a week later. It was:

DEAR PETER:

I am glad I met you, too. I don't know how I can be any good-er, but I will try by going back to Dobbs's Corners in the spring. Maybe you can come there some time, and see my garden.

Yours truly.

IMOGEN NELSON.

This was annoying. It was all right for him to be restrained, but why should she be so? It was hard to get out of the feeling that all others must pursue and play up to a Killigrew.

However, he would prevent that by going to Dobbs's Corners. Plenty of time, though. It was only the end of February.

The day after the letter came, and before he could decide how to answer it, he attended the quarterly meeting of the Charity Amalgamation Board of whose management he was a member. While listening to the reading of a report he looked up and on the wall saw a sepia engraving of the painting: "King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid."

While the cut and dried references to cold statistics were being glibly restated by the smug secretary he studied the king—the proud arch of his noble head, the kindly glance in his downcast eyes, the youthful happy tilt in his forward reaching hand.

And the beggar maid—her tattered smock, of which she was as oblivious as was the king smiling down upon her under his robe and crown. But that pristine glow of innocence and surging love on her gentle, oval face! "A face beautiful as the day!" That romantic uplift of her beaming eyes as she rose from her lowly station by the side of the road to advance to the beckoning finger of her liege lord, cast before him for sordid trial; then raised beside him as his consort!

Peter was cast into a brown study, which lasted until the meeting was over. He only came out of it as a minister was saying a benediction and then was roused only by the words:

He hath cast down the mighty from their seats;
He hath exalted those of low degree!

He went to his office, greatly perplexed. The misery was creeping back on him. It was time for the Tumbleweed to be out of dry dock. He would phone and see about it.

But when he got to the office old Nick Rainey was waiting for him.

"The last cretin's gone—pegged out this morning, Mr. Killigrew," he announced.

"Too bad," said Peter, though now he could take up that recent offer for his grand-

father's residence; for the last of Belle's blood was gone. Old Nick hung by his desk, plainly perplexed, smoothing his hat.

Finally he became bold enough to ask: "What 'll become o' me an' the missus, Mr. Killigrew? For I suppose y'll be sellin' th' property one o' these fine days?"

"Don't let that worry you, Nick. I'll look after you and Mrs. Rainey. Stay on there. You'll have plenty of time to turn around, and I'll find you another place."

The old man was vastly relieved. He poured out his thanks volubly. Then, as he was about to go, he turned and exclaimed impulsively:

"Too bad, Mr. Killigrew, there wa'n't new blood in them dawgs three or four generations ago. Because, sir, the property hadn't ought to be sold. Look at how the stuff's goin' up around Fift' Avenue, an' this's just as good. If them dawgs could live on fer five or mebby ten years longer y'd git twict 's much 's y' will today."

"Possibly, Nick. Well, I haven't sold yet," Peter indulged the old man by remarking.

"It's new blood the old blood needs for mating, Mr. Killigrew," Nick persisted. "It's th' only way t' keep th' line up. I'm tellin' y', sir, an' I know. I've kep' dawgs, man an' boy, all m' life."

And he was off. But it was a long time before Peter could forget that haunting refrain of Nick's: "It's new blood the old blood needs for mating."

The next morning Peter had an appointment with his ship engineer to go to Montauk Point and look at the Tumbleweed; for she was ready to slip from the ways. Instead of going to Montauk, however, he phoned he would not be there that day. Instead he drove to the Towers.

About four months earlier than usual; he had been there only once before in the winter time—at the funeral of his father.

Only half the house was heated. The housekeeper was upset, but dared not express astonishment. She ran the Towers on a small retinue every month in the year except June, and now when the master arrived thus unexpectedly she declared she must have double the help.

Peter compromised with her, and let her get two more maids and a laundress. He said he would be there only a day or two, and would send up his cook from town. Meanwhile, tell Scroggins to see him.

Scroggins tramped in presently from the office, glad to see Master Peter, but not asking any questions. Peter inquired about the dairy, went into details about the Holsteins and their food, examined the charts, wanted to know what was doing on the pine reservation, checked up the new nursery stock, said he wanted to go out and look at the Cochin China boar bought the summer before in Iowa.

Scroggins went over it all methodically, painstakingly, as was his wont, but wondering. This was not what brought up Master Peter.

Finally, making it as casual as possible, Peter asked: "How is the girl, Scroggins?"

The superintendent became immediately troubled. "I'm deeply worried about her, Master Peter," he replied.

"Why—not well?"

"No—she's far from well."

"What's the matter?"

"Nobody knows."

"What does the doctor say?"

"Says it's nothing, or maybe nostalgia, a kind of homesickness. And I can't believe it. Why, the home she came from, Master Peter, isn't half as comfortable as the stall we made for that Cochin China."

"There must be something more to this," Peter insisted.

"Yes," said Scroggins, "there is. She won't admit it, but I'm afraid it's a man."

"A man!" Peter started. "She's been going out again, then?"

"No!" Scroggins sighed. "Only on a trip we sent her, with a governess, all respectable and guarded, to Lake Placid. I sent Mac the letters she wrote from there. He said you saw them."

"Believe I did, come to think of it. Then you know who this man is?"

"No, we don't. A shady, contemptible devil who made up to her—open and aboveboard he seemed to be, but a skate underneath, evidently. For while she told him all about herself and who she was and

everything, he acted mysterious, gave her no address, nothing, and when he wrote to her did it without even signing his name with a pen, but on a typewriter, and from a post office address. A regular skunk!"

"What was his name?"

"Jones, he told her; but he was probably lying about it."

"Does *she* think he was lying?"

"No. Not Imogen—she's too innocent. Believes anything. That's the hell of it. Of course, there can't be any doubt he was feeding her hot air—just a lounge lizard such as they say hang around those fashionable resorts. The trouble is, Imogen took him seriously. I think she's dying of unrequited love—that's all."

"Hum!" said Peter.

"Yes," growled Scroggins. "Wish I could lay my hands on him. I think I'd give him a good charge of buckshot. I've got the thirty-six loaded—both barrels!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DÉNOUEMENT.

THEY were in the library at the flat-top desk when Scroggins delivered his threat, and with more heat than his employer had ever seen him display. Peter rose and turned his back, without replying. He walked to the window and looked out. It was still winter, with patches of snow on the lawn, but he seemed to be looking into June.

And this is what Peter Killigrew saw: A boy of eleven and a girl of three playing with a chain of violets and daisies—the white and the yellow. The boy, impatient, tore the stems from the fragile heads. The girl, only a baby, protested, showing him how to unclasp the flowers, one from the other, without injuring them. Then an old man in a carriage near by called to the boy, taking the floral chain gently from his hands and giving it over to the girl, as he said: "My son, you should never crush a flower!"

Peter blinked. June was gone, and mottled March confronted him, bare and bleak. Out of the grave called the voice of his ancestors!

Were the Killigrews degenerate? Were they weaklings? Was their vision as the water that is passed? Were they as half dead dogs, imbecile through sloth and interbreeding? Could they no longer leap a twelve-foot fence and back again?

The first Killigrew had stalked those fields out there when they were thickets hiding ambushing Indians. The second had risked the fortune won by the first in swamp lands no one else could foresee as the foundation of skyscrapers. The third had flung clipper ships across the face of the world in the teeth of storm and war and alien greed, to treble the gain of the second. The fourth had reached on and up, abreast with the leaders of the nation.

Were these only rich men, sired in fear, bred in caution, entombed as slaves of habit and dull routine? And was the fifth to be one of them, daring to put his hazard to the touch to win or lose all; or was he to be a dullard, inert, passing by the richest gifts of life because he dared not be himself?

Cophetua? Was this king the first or the fifth of his line? Not the last, surely, else why the beggar maid?

Cophetua! Cophetua! The prince of kings! Thrice royal in that he stooped lower and lifted higher than any others of the favored line.

This, with much else, raced across the rapid drift of Peter's brain as he looked out of the window, while Scroggins respectfully waited. It was but a few moments. Scroggins did not believe the moment long; for Peter was disposed to think slowly and to act only after deliberation.

But once his mind was made up he moved swiftly and according to full plan, not to be changed until it was effected.

"Scroggins," he said, "send Carl to the front door with the Pershing. And on your way out tell the housekeeper to serve luncheon to me here on a tray—immediately."

He picked up a telephone directory, and began phoning. He got a number in White Plains, then two more, then one in Ossining, and finally one in Port Chester before he found what he wanted.

"You'd think the country would be full

of them," he complained as his lunch was set before him.

Later he took the Pershing. Carl asked no questions. From Scroggins down no one asked questions.

In Port Chester he found what he was looking for—a used flivver. He bought it, and left the Pershing with the garage man, with the address of the Towers and instructions to hold it for Carl to call for—on the morrow—or himself, later.

Then he jumped into the flivver and started to drive, but it backed and coughed on him, and he could not make it go. Eight-cylinder cars and some sixes he could manage, but not the lowly fliv. He was obliged to employ the garage man to give him a lesson.

This took more time than he had anticipated. It was growing dark as he started on the road up Westchester Avenue toward Purchase. Pretty late for what he had planned, but still he pushed on. He could not bear the thought of another night passing without rectifying the mistake he had made.

Once having resolved to see her, he was now frantic to get there. He began cursing himself for all his foolish dallying. First buying the typewriter, and then renting the post office box, and now rushing 'way off to Port Chester and finding a used flivver so that he could call on her, when she would probably never see it. Traveling around his thumb to find his finger; yet he felt he had to do them all.

Only the motive had changed. At first he had studiously striven to disguise himself through fear he would be injured in worldly esteem or in pocketbook, if he were found out. Now he was consumed with unholy fear lest she find out who he was, and be influenced to overlook his mistreatment because he was Peter Killigrew. He wanted her to forgive his neglect and deception because she loved him. If it were any different than that, all of life hereafter would be stale and unprofitable.

If he could win her as Peter Jones, then he could sing and lift his head and be a man—and a Killigrew again!

Thinking thus, he battered on in the flivver. When he left the cement highway at the end of Lincoln Avenue, and hit the dirt road something went wrong. He tried to speed up before the engine could quit, but stalled, and was obliged to run into the ditch and look for help.

From half a mile away the help came. He was soon on his way again, reflecting on his accustomed advantages with eight cylinders.

It was after five o'clock when he turned in between the granite pillars and came to a tinpanny stop before the Lodge. He, the owner of the estate.

A maid, who had never seen him, having never been in the Towers, came in answer to his ring, took one look at the old Lizzie below and said, "Service entrance to the rear," closing the door in his face.

Dutifully he walked down, cranked up again, and ran the car around to the back. Once there, another maid answered, and he asked if he might see Miss Nelson. The maid seemed suspicious, but he slipped a bill in her hand and said: "Tell her it's Mr. Jones."

"All right. Wait in here," and she shoved him into a small closet off the pantry nearly filled with an icebox. He took off his hat and stood up against the icebox of the kitchen of his superintendent's house while the maid went upstairs.

In a moment the maid returned, with a broad wink, and led him to the servants' "social hall," a dining-living room to the rear of the kitchen. There she told him to wait again, that Miss Nelson was coming right down.

It was the first time he had ever been in this cranny of his domain. He looked around. On one wall was an old lithograph of Washington crossing the Delaware, on the opposite one a print of the Constitution fighting the Guerriere. Oak furniture, plain, serviceable, scrupulously clean.

There Imogen came to him—under a very bright electric light without shades. This cruelly revealed the hollows under her eyes, the pitiful shrinking in her naturally slender form, the wistful pathos in her saucerlike eyes.

The eyes swam as in a fever. She came in, and then leaned back against the jamb of the door for support.

His whole heart went out to her. His fortune seemed like nothing. For the first time in his life he lost consciousness of his millions.

He held out his arms, and she seemed to slip into them. Otherwise she would have fallen to the floor. He kissed her hair on her forehead, and she placed her head in against his heart.

"Oh, my dear!" said he. "My sweetheart!"

She sighed, unable to speak.

Neither knew how long they stood thus, without a word, when both at once were conscious of a rasping voice calling through the distant rooms, "Imogen! Imogen!"

"It's my aunt!" she whispered. "She thinks I'm in bed—ill!"

"You've been ill. Why didn't you let me know?"

"It's nothing—nothing at all. I'm not ill."

"But you do look so—your face is drawn!"

"Not *now!*"

Confession could have been no sweeter. Her eyes fell before the intensity of his glance, and the blushes mantled over her neck and cheeks. Again he held her.

Again the rasping voice, "Imogen! Where are you?"

She said softly: "I'll have to go. It's dinner time."

"I came to see you—in my flivver," he lied glibly. "It's outside. I want you to come and take a ride with me. I've got to talk to you. I've something to say."

"No! No! I couldn't!" She shrank away.

"But I must see you to-night. I'll come back after dinner."

"How can I see you?" she pleaded. "Aunt Maria thinks—and Uncle Isaiah thinks—" she stopped.

He realized she was too considerate to say what they thought, but he knew—at least what Uncle Isaiah thought.

The voice of Mrs. Scroggins was more insistent and nearer.

"Listen," said he, hastily. "I have a plan. Meet me, right after dinner, in the greenhouse, the last one, up toward the big house."

"They are locked at night. We couldn't get in," she objected.

"Never mind," said he. "I know Verhens. He'll let me in. You'll find the south door in the middle section open. Be there as soon as you have dinner. I'll be waiting."

She looked bewildered. "But I don't believe Mr. Verhens—"

"Yes, he will. Trust me. Be there."

"Very—very well."

He lifted her for a kiss. She accepted it as a morning glory accepts the first salute of the returning sun—copiously and without shame. Then she ran away, and he slipped out the rear door.

He ran the flivver into some bushes and walked up to the Towers.

An hour later he was waiting in the poinsettia room of the greenhouses, the central section on the south. She came to him alight with mantling dewiness.

"I didn't know Mr. Verhens would do this for any one," she observed, looking at him with awe.

"Oh! Yes. He will for me. Come. These poinsettias are too violent in color." He led her on to the orchid house. In the corner stood a date tree under which Verhens had trained violets to grow. The violets were in full bloom, looking down on the cypropediums with their tawny yellow slippers.

"Do you know what I wanted to tell you?"

She shook her head.

"Can't guess?"

"No." She seemed not to be greatly interested, though she clung closely to him, and let him put his arm about her.

"I wanted to tell you what I've known from the first—but wouldn't let myself believe because it's the first time I ever felt that way, and I wanted to be sure—that I love you."

She nestled close to him. He cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her face to his. Tears were brimming in her eyes.

"And with you—" he asked gently. "Is it that way?"

She nodded slowly.

"And I want you to—to—m-marry me!" he went on.

The tears fell from her eyes, one big drop from each. She looked at him a bit wildly, and then exclaimed with pent-up passion, "No! Not that!"

"But—why—why?" he stammered, nonplused.

"I can't marry you!" she cried, breaking away.

"You must!" He reached out to clasp her in his arms.

She ran from him, out the poinsettia door, leaving him crushingly surrounded by his own orchids.

He was after her quickly, however, and overtook her before she reached the kitchen door of the Lodge. He led her back to the greenhouse silently. Again under the light he searched her face.

"Why can't you marry me?" he demanded.

She just shook her head. It seemed outrageously unreasonable. He had not anticipated this.

"But I can't live without you!" he went on wildly, seemingly as distraught as she was. "It seemed an age while you were at dinner. I have been in a perfect hell ever since I left you at Lake Placid. You are the only girl I ever cared for, or ever can. There is no reason why you shouldn't marry me."

He paused for an answer. None forthcoming, he asked, less confidently, "Is there?"

Now she faced him squarely. She seemed to have conquered her feeling, and became matter-of-fact.

"Yes. A very good reason," she asserted. "I'm only a pauper living here on the bounty of a dear old man, who is only a servant, and no one could ever really want me!"

He laughed with relief and cried, "Then it's not because my name is Jones?"

She looked at him in amazement. "Oh! I think Jones is the nicest name in the world!" she confessed.

"Darling!" He kissed her.

She added, for further proof of her inviolable contention, "Besides, I will never marry. I am going to die an old maid—and take care of my garden in Dobbs's Corners, and go on dreaming beautiful dreams—like this one!"

She smiled at him, with that roguish little tilt at the corners of her mouth.

"Very well, then," said he. "Then it is settled. We drive to Greenwich to-night in my old flivver out there under the trees, and get married in the old church where my grandfather was married."

"Oh, no!" she pulled away, quite serious again. "I couldn't!"

"Why? Give me another weighty reason like the last one."

"Well," she hesitated, "because Uncle Isaiah would be hurt if I did that—besides, he made me promise I would always live with him."

"I thought you were going to live at Dobbs's Corners?"

"Part of the time."

He felt more assured now—felt his doubts all resolved; and of superior knowledge, the male marauder proud of his skill and craft in providing for his mate.

"All right," Peter agreed. "I'll fix it so that Uncle Isaiah can live with us."

"Why, he has been on this estate all his life. He wouldn't leave here!" she protested.

"Never mind. You saw I fixed it with Verhens. Trust me with Scroggins too. I'll manage him."

"Oh! But Mr. Scroggins is a great man, and very set in his ways."

"The sort I like. Will you trust me to fix it with him?"

She nodded her head.

"Then come!" He started to lead the way.

"But not now—I'm not dressed, and—"

"Never mind—"

He was masterful. Nothing could stop him now. She loved him for himself! And Jones was the greatest name in the whole world!

They rattled into Greenwich in the old Lizzie a little after nine o'clock. The minister he sought was not at home, and he was glad of it when he reflected that with the minister the responses would have been necessary, and his right name would have been revealed. He found a justice of the peace. A little prearrangement with him fixed it so the register was signed by them separately, Imogen first, and the justice

never spoke their last name, saying only, "I, Peter, take thee, Imogen, to be my lawful wedded wife," and "I, Imogen, take thee, Peter" and so forth.

So she started back in the flivver thinking she was Mrs. Peter Jones.

At Port Chester he stopped in a garage and exchanged the flivver for a bigger car, a Pershing. She paid little attention. She seemed to be in a dream. Not even when the garage man ran after them shouting "Hey, mister, what'll I do with the fliv?"

"Keep it!" Peter called back, "for a wedding present!"

Then she took notice. "But, Peter," she objected, "you must not be extravagant. I want to be an economical wife."

Nor did she notice the difference in the riding qualities of the flivver and the Pershing; for she snuggled close to his arm all the way back, not once asking where they were going until they stopped before the door of the Towers. Then she drew back.

"Come," said he, taking out a key and walking up the steps.

She seemed frightened, asking, "What are you doing? Nobody goes in here while Mr. Killigrew is away."

"We're going in," he asserted, "and fix it with Scroggins."

A moment later they were in the library, in a divan on the edge of the Ispahan carpet. When Scroggins came in Peter said, "Well, we're married. I want your blessing!"

"Peter Jones!" Imogen gasped.

The old man began to shout, "You've deceived her, Master Peter. It's an outrage on a young girl to shock her like this. Your father—"

Neither spoke for the next few minutes, for they were both engaged in reviving Imogen, who had fainted.

Which is the true history of the courtship and the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Killigrew V.

THE END

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WAITING FOR KATE

I DID a reckless thing to-day. I told my Kate I'd meet her
When all her shopping had been done, and to her luncheon treat her.
I've waited on the corner here from one to half past two,
On one foot, then the other, for my shoes, alas! are new.

Slowly the hours pass along, while I grow thin and thinner.
I want no date, I want no Kate—I only want my dinner.
I've read three papers through and through; I know them like a book.
I know who wants an office boy. I know who wants a cook.

I held my hat within my hand to cool my head a minute.
A kind young lady passed along and dropped a nickel in it;
And one man said in passing, as I stood here in the sun:
"Why don't you cry your papers, boy? You'll never sell a one!"

I've lost my job, I know it now, and knowing feel no sorrow;
If one must starve to death to-day, what cares he for to-morrow?
But lo! a footstep trips along, and here at last comes Kate.
"Oh, have I kept you waiting, dear, I'm just a trifle late."

Nellie Goode.

Without Bloodshed

By HOWARD E. MORGAN

SIME MORTON laughed when he first heard that Essex County was to station a deputy sheriff at Pineville. Pineville had grown in the past two years from a shack-littered village of some fifty inhabitants, to a thriving mining town of two thousand—all due to Simon Morton's energetic efforts in exploitation of the Golden Eagle Mine.

The mine was worthless. So also, quite naturally, was the stock which Sime advertised in three-inch scareheads in the papers, at sixteen dollars and eighty-five cents per share.

Yes, Pineville was now large enough to warrant the services of a sheriff. And he, Simon Morton, was responsible for Pineville's growth; hence, *he* was also responsible, indirectly, for the coming of the law. He, who had less use for the law than any other man in Pineville. Not that he gave a damn. It was a good joke, that was all.

For thirty years he had lived on other people's money. The law had not caught up with him yet. Why should a thick-skulled, backwoods sheriff concern him? He was not concerned particularly. But there was just a suspicion of doubt peeping from behind the colossal egotism, which egotism, during thirty years of successful crookedness, had falsely endowed him with a sense of perpetual security.

Even this slight doubt vanished, however, when he met the new deputy. He had, somehow, expected to see a queer individual, but his wildest imaginings fell far short of actuality.

Jud Halpin, his name was—a little, thin-haired, bow-legged runt, with mild, apologetic blue eyes, and a perpetual grin. He didn't even carry a gun; law and order without bloodshed, was his motto, according to report. He talked like a Texan, but there the resemblance ceased.

A drab, mouse-hearted little cuss; the lack of gumption and spunk was evident in every feature of the weather-browned, wrinkled face, in every hesitant movement of the undersized, crablike body. A joke, right enough.

After shaking the little deputy's limp hand this day, Sime repaired to the glittering offices of the Golden Eagle Mining Combine, lit a cigar, stretched his immaculate, leather-clad legs out in the general direction of Canada, and let his thoughts dwell pleasantly on the golden crop, which, within the next few months, would be ready to harvest, with himself as sole reaper.

But for some unknown reason, this pleasant topic did not intrigue him as usual. His thoughts wandered. That little deputy, for instance, had been in town for a week. And why—during that time—had he not called on Simon Morton, Pineville's leading citizen? Didn't know any better, perhaps?

Still, it seemed that everybody else had met Jud Halpin. Some of them already called him Jud. It was strange.

And, too, there was something vaguely familiar about Halpin's wrinkled face. When, where had he seen those pale blue eyes? Those slim, clawlike hands?

He closed his own eyes against the morning sun glare reflected from the street, and pondered.

After a bit he shuddered, and jerked erect, upsetting an inkwell on the polished desk.

Pat Horgan; that damned blue-eyed Irishman again! Whenever he closed his eyes, lately, he saw Pat Horgan's mutilated face staring up at him out of the mud.

He had killed Pat Horgan. Ten years since, down in Wyoming. And Steve Horgan, Pat's brother. He had beaten Steve; nearly killed him, too. Ten years ago. Down in Wyoming.

Steve did not know the identity of Pat's slayer. He, Sime, had become assured of this, for there was a third brother, a noted gunman. If the identity of Pat's murderer had been known, this third brother, John his name was, a bad egg—would have followed the thing up. But John Horgan had never crossed the killer's path.

Morton shrugged his thick shoulders fiercely in an effort to shake off these unpleasant reminders of the past, relit his cigar and smoked furiously. What had he been thinking about, when—oh, yes—that little deputy, Halpin. Jud Halpin. Why—

The screen door opened and closed softly. And Jud Halpin stood there, fingering his big hat, an apologetic, three-cornered grin on his wrinkled face.

"Busy, Mr. Morton?"

"Why, no—no—come right in—sheriff."

Halpin flushed at this. And Morton laughed inwardly. The bandy-legged little fool—

Halpin refused a cigar and sidled into a chair across the shiny desk from Morton. Morton's hand shook, ever so slightly, as he applied a match to the fresh cigar. It was that Horgan business; always left him jumpy.

Emerging from a cloud of smoke, he noticed that the little sheriff was fumblingly smoothing out a newspaper clipping on the desk.

"What d'you know about this, Mr. Morton?"

Halpin grinned timidly, and slid the wrinkled sheet across the desk.

Morton knew what that clipping said without reading it; there was a picture there, too. It was five years old, that clipping—taken from an Eastern paper.

It detailed the doubtful exploits of a land swindler by the name of "Samuel" Morton. The swindler had been arrested, had jumped his bail and had never been apprehended.

The picture could easily be recognized as Simon Morton, despite the fact that "Samuel" Morton wore a beard and Simon was smooth-shaven and nearly bald.

Sime read the clipping through, carefully. Then he shook his head in mock sadness.

"Poor Sam!" he muttered, as though to himself. And then—"Yes,—I know—about that, sheriff. Poor old Sam! Black sheep of the family; but with a heart as big as his body, sheriff. A relative of mine. Frankly, Jud, my own cousin."

He looked the little man squarely in the eyes and there was a well simulated sadness there. Almost it seemed that he was about to weep.

"Looks like you, sure enough." With which noncommittal statement Jud Halpin folded the clipping and thrust it into a battered billfold.

"March 10, 1921, that there clippin' is

dated, Mr. Morton. Where was you—in March, 1921?"

Morton was flabbergasted. His wits failed him. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again without saying a word.

A sickly grin spread over his face. But Halpin apparently didn't have sense enough to follow up his advantage. His attention wavered to the vivid maps on the wall.

"Been lookin' over the mine," he confessed shyly.

"Yes—" Morton chewed fiercely on his cigar.

"Found some color, they tell me. Not much—"

"No, no—not much yet. But it's there. You see—"

Morton branched off into a convincing exposition anent the possibilities of the Golden Eagle Mine, a speech so often repeated that its glowing phrases flowed mechanically. He welcomed this respite to collect his scattered wits, and even as he recited the set speech, his mind was busy with the disturbing situation resurrected by this simpleton of a country sheriff.

"Interestin', right enough, Mr. Morton. On'y thing is—" Halpin paused in apparent confusion. His wavering blue eyes refused to meet Morton's snapping black ones.

"Just one—little thing—in yore advertisements you say as how gold is comin' outa that there mine by the carload. An'—an'—thet ain't quite the truth.

"O' course," he hastened to add, "they's gold there, prob'ly—on'y a matter o' time."

Morton ground his teeth in impotent rage. Was the little devil trying to make a fool of him?

"But the mine ain't payin' now. An' these pore cusses who are buyin' the stock, don't know thet. O' course, they's lumber there, which is wuth purty nigh the money you've collected, so fur. An' so—I don't think you really oughta sell any more shares in thet there mine, Mr. Morton."

Morton's heavy face had gone red. From red to purple. The meddling little sap. His fingers clutched a gun in the outside pocket of his serge coat. But no—not that—yet.

Halpin's watery eyes were wandering again. They rested now on a neat array of copper gold nuggets on a glass-topped table in a corner. His slim, clawlike fingers tapped the edge of the desk nervously.

He looked up at Morton quickly, and grinned. Morton forced a laugh.

"You don't understand, sheriff. This proposition is big—big stuff. There's a lot more to it than just that mine—and—the lumber."

He leaned across the desk, and in a hoarse whisper went on: "It's coal, Jud. Anthracite coal. Worth more than gold. Far, far more—you know that as well as me. There's some gold, of course. Our prospectus does not lie altogether. But what we're after, ultimately, is coal.

"We need money for development. Now, the suckers won't buy stock in a coal mine, that is, I mean to say, you can't attract reputable investors with coal. Even you must appreciate that. But it's there—Queen Mountain is made of—coal!"

Halpin seemed impressed. Morton was proud of the ready invention which bade fair to hoist him gently out of the mess into which he had stumbled. He surreptitiously flicked the sweat out of his eyes and lit a fresh cigar.

"Now, that there's too bad, Mr. Morton." Halpin shook his head sadly.

"What's—too bad?"

"Somebody's been kiddin' you. They ain't no coal in Queen Mountain. Government mineralogists went over this country with a fine tooth comb, a couple o' years ago; there's a copy of their report in the State records. Every foot o' this country is charted, an—they ain't no coal."

Inwardly, Sime Morton seethed with a murderous rage. Outwardly, he smiled, a knowing smile, and winked broadly.

"Surely you don't credit the government with being infallible, sheriff?"

Halpin laughed nervously. "No," he said.

"Well, there you are. We've found—what they missed—coal."

He came to his feet, hoping that Halpin would take the hint and terminate this interview which had turned into such unpleasant, not to say startling channels.

Halpin, too, seemed willing to call it a day. He shuffled toward the door, hat in hand, then turned and came back, grinning.

"Mebbe I didn't quite make myself clear, Mr. Morton. I ain't much on talk. Perhaps I kin kinda sum things up, so's you'll understand. Y'see, it's my job in Pineville t' enforce the law. Now, the law says as how a feller cain't sell somethin' whut he ain't got. Even you must understan' that.

"Now, like I said, I looked over thet there mine, an' they ain't no gold thar, not much, that is. Yo're a sellin' somethin'—whut ain't. I gave you the benefit o' the doubt, figurin' as how somebody put somethin' over on *you*—mebbe—ontil I run acrost this clippin'.

"You ain't convinced me altogether, Mr. Morton—on nothin'. An' so, the thing lines up like this: you jes' pack yore bag—an' mosey along, pronto, or I'll turn this here clippin' over to the newspapers. Ef I do that, public sentiment'll prob'ly demand thet I arrest you. Which same I'll do. But I'm a feller whut allus sidetracks trouble, if an' when possible, Mr. Morton.

"An'—I got a notion you been bamboozled on thet mine yoreself. An' so—I'll give you a chanst now t' go away. I'll see thet a committee o' respectable citizens is app'inted t' take over the affairs of the Golden Eagle Minin' Company; the stockholders, as I figure it, will erbout break even, whut with cashin' in on the lumber, an' the like o' thet. O' course, you'll turn over all the money you've c'llected t' the committee."

For the first time in his life Sime Morton was scared. He was trapped, like a rat in a rain barrel. And by this watery-eyed, everlastingly grinning, ape of a hayseed deputy sheriff. His goose was cooked, unless—

His fingers closed on the heavy automatic. A thrill of hope shuddered through his big body. The damned little meddler. Yes, there was still *one* way out.

"This is just one o' my unpleasant jobs in gittin' Pineville lined up fer law an' order—pertectin' its citizens like I'm paid t' do. But I allus pick the easiest way, Mr. Morton. I never jump on a man, when he's down. Allus believe in givin' a feller a chanst, I do. I don't never pack no gun. Law an' order without bloodshed—is my motter."

Morton gripped the gun fiercely. His thoughts were moving swiftly and logically now. He moistened his dry lips. Almost managed a smile.

"A—a—splendid motto—Jud. And now, about my case; I—I've been bamboozled, as you say. But I'm an old hand at business deals of this er—ah—sort, and I fully appreciate that, the fact that *I* may have been fooled, will *not* convince these poor people whose money I have taken—in good faith—of my good intentions. And so, I may be forced to agree to your suggestion that I er—ah—turn the affairs of the Golden Eagle Mining Combine, over to a—receiver—and—go away.

"However, I would like to think it over. Naturally, I wish to check some of your statements. I will not take long. Say three o'clock this afternoon. I will be at my house. Come and see me—at three o'clock. I may have some surprising information for you. At any rate, we'll settle this thing—at that time. Three o'clock—"

Sime Morton was once again his old commanding self. He towered head and shoulders above the diminutive deputy. Halpin, forced gently out through the door by the big man's slowly advancing bulk, nodded and fumbled nervously with his hat.

"Yes, sir. That'll be fine. Three o'clock."

II.

In a lifetime replete with criminal adventure, Simon Morton had but once before felt the irresistible urge to kill a man. The very nature of his calling demanded that his feelings be always well under control. He watched Sheriff Jud Halpin's stooped figure shuffling along the dusty street, however, with murder in his heart.

And as the hours passed, this murderous inclination grew, rather than lessened. How he hated that bandy-legged little cuss. And—murder was the only way out. With Halpin out of the way, all would be clear sailing. He could reap that golden harvest then. Make good his get-away and live com-

fortably—in California, perhaps—for the rest of his life.

In making the appointment for three o'clock, he had had no definite scheme in mind. He had merely wanted to gain time. Time to think.

Sime Morton's house was a simple, well built, log-walled bungalow on the outskirts of the town. There was no other house within half a mile. He lived alone. Had his meals in town. An ideal spot—for his purposes.

At three o'clock he stationed himself on the wide front porch, commanding a view of the rutted roadway leading to Pineville. Through slitted eyes, he watched Jud Halpin's bent form approach.

"Sure's hot," the little man called.

Morton showed his teeth, but he did not laugh. His part called for pained resignation—at first.

Mopping his face with a big red handkerchief, Jud Halpin stamped up on the porch.

Morton came wearily to his feet. His face was sad. He poured his visitor a glass of sparkling water from a glass pitcher. Then thrust both hands deep in his pockets. His lips twitched involuntarily, as the safety catch gave way on the gun in his right hand pocket.

"I've decided, Jud—that your suggestion is—the only way out. I—will go away. I'll leave it to you to appoint a suitable committee."

His fingers tightened on the gun.

Jud Halpin slammed the half empty glass down on the table. A look of undoubted relief lighted his dark face.

"Good fer you! Thet's whut I calls bein' sensible, Mr. Morton. An' now I'll hev t' hurry right back an' tell the boys. Too hot fer them t' travel, ef they don't hev to."

He started purposefully away, paused on the stone step and turned.

"Y'see, Mr. Morton—I got t' thinkin'—after I left you this mornin', as how you might—object—t' goin' away. An' so I drafted me half a dozen deputies. I told them the whole story an' planned on bringin' them along as kind of a bodyguard. But the more I thought about it, the more sure I got thet thet warn't the right thing t' do. Law an' order without bloodshed is my motter, an', ef I come up here with a posse invitin' trouble, y'might say, w'y, it would look as though thet motter o' mine didn't mean much.

"An' so, at the las' minute, I decided t' come alone. But, like I said, the boys know the whole story, an' ef I ain't back in a hour, they'll be out here—ah—lookin' fer me—an' fer you."

Sime Morton's sweaty fingers relinquished the gun. He swallowed hard.

"They was purty mad. Took a lot o' oratin' t' keep 'em from comin', anyhow. I finally got 'em t' promise not t' start nothin' ontil—t'-morrer. Thet means you got ontil t'-morrer mornin' t' git away. They's one more train t'-day—goin' South; it leaves at four thutty. I'd sure take thet train, ef I was you, Mr. Morton."

Sime Morton nodded dumbly as Halpin backed away down the gravel lined driveway and out into the rutted road.

"Sure glad you listened t' reason," the little man called.

But Sime Morton did not hear. He had slumped into a chair, and, head buried in his hands, rocked savagely back and forth.

Trimmed, beaten to a hopeless frazzle by that—

And he had even been deprived of the satisfaction of killing the grinning idiot. The little devil had provided against that possibility, too.

He couldn't have committed a murder, hidden the body and made his get-away in an hour. Those six ugly deputies down there forbade that. And now there was nothing left but to—beat it.

Four thirty. Going south. He would make that train. He would run away. Yes, he would run away from a simple-minded, little backwoods law officer.

III.

Half an hour later, Deputy Sheriff Jud Halpin was sweating and swearing in a private telephone booth at the Eclat Drug Store in Pineville, striving to get through a long distance call to Colbyville, Colby County, Wyoming. And if Sime Morton could have listened in on that conversation

chances are that he would have changed his opinion in regard to Jud Halpin, particularly applying to the possibility of the little man being simple-minded.

"Mr. Steve Horgan, sheriff o' Colby County, Wyoming, thet's who I wants, lady. An' I wants him pronto."

Following the hundredth repetition of this demand, with certain sulphurous, under-the-breath variations, a familiar voice sounded over the wire.

"S'thet you, Steve?"

"Yep."

"This here's yore li'l brother, John, speakin'. Otherwise known as Jud Halpin, deputy sheriff o' Essex County, State o' Montanny."

"Yeah, so I hear. An' how be ye, ye little, sway-backed, flea-bitten—"

"Shet up, Steve, an' put yore elephant ears t' work. Now, listen t' this, Steve, an' listen clost. *I got Sime Morton!*"

There came a gasping sound over the wire.

"No—I didn't—kill him, Steve. Never teched him. I'm a law officer, an' my motter is—law an' order, without bloodshed. Anyways, we ain't got much on him, down here—"

"But good Heaven, Jud—hev you fergotten—Pat—"

"No, Steve, I ain't fergot. Now you listen t' me. Sime Morton is a leavin' Pineville t'-day. He goes on the nex' train. I'll see thet he don't miss it. Anyways, they ain't on'y but one train, an' this here one is pintin' south—an'—the next stop after leavin' Pineville, is Colbyville, Wyoming. It 'll stop at Colbyville at about eleven o'clock t'-night."

"You mean—"

"Yo're sheriff o' Colby County. You collec' Sime Morton in Colby County, an' he's yore man. The State o' Wyoming wants him right bad fer the murder o' Pat Horgan."

"I git you, John."

"One more thing, Steve—yo're sure he'll be convicted? Absolute sure?"

"Absolute, John. Like I told you, Mary Lossing will testify. She seen it. She seen Morton kill Pat."

"Aw-right, Steve, jest so long as yo're sure. We're law officers now, an'—an' we're a playin' the game accordin' t' law. Howsomever, ef they was any chanst o' Sime cheatin' the rope, w'y, I was kinda aimin' on wirin' in my resignation—an'—"

"Doin' fer Sime yoreself?"

"Wal, yes. I've hed a hell of a time, Steve, t' keep from pluggin' him. My finger's been itchin'. Thet damned killer ain't got no idee how clost t' hell he's been fer the last week. He's a simple hombre, though. Har, har; one of them kinda birds as thinks they got *you* buffaloed, an' all the time you kinda feel like laughin' in their face. You know—wise like a ostrich. Wal, we've waited a long while fer this, Steve. Write an' tell me all about the trial, 'n' everythin'."

"Sure will, John."

"An' you might tell thet coyote, Steve, ef you happen t' think of it, as how Deputy Sheriff Jud Halpin was Pat Horgan's brother."

THE END

ASK NOT

YOU ask me why I cannot laugh
Who used to laugh so much before:
Were I to answer, you would quaff
Your cup of joy no more;

The garlands on your brows would fade.
The roses from your cheeks depart—
Ah! bright one, question not my shade,
But leave me to my lonely heart.

Richard Le Gallienne.

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