ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

MARCH 17

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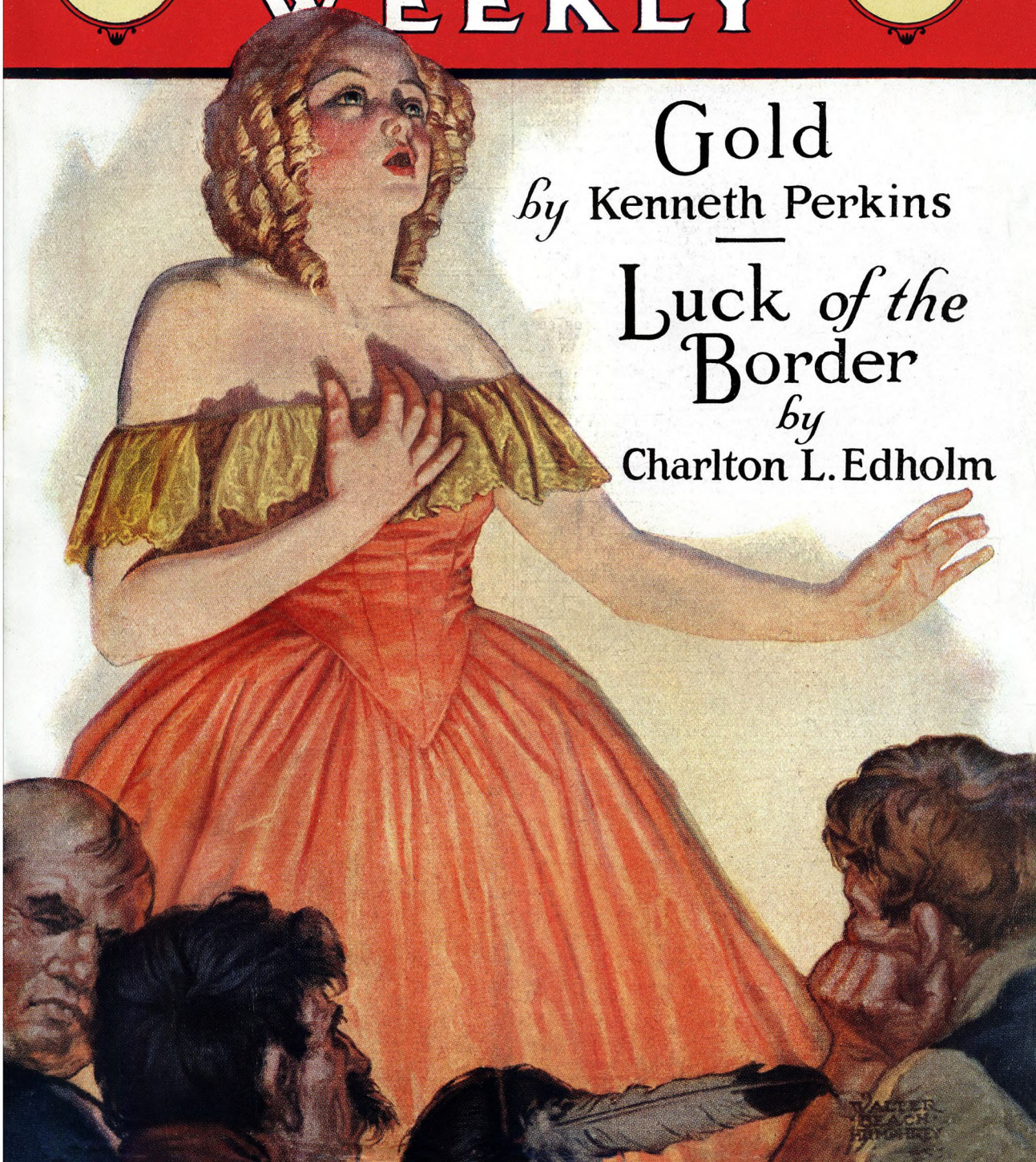

Gold

by Kenneth Perkins

Luck *of the* Border

by

Charlton L. Edholm

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

MARCH 17, 1928

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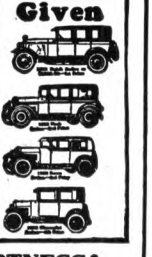

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 193 CONTENTS FOR MARCH 17, 1928 NUMBER 4

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ONE COMPLETE NOVELETTE

THREE SHORT STORIES

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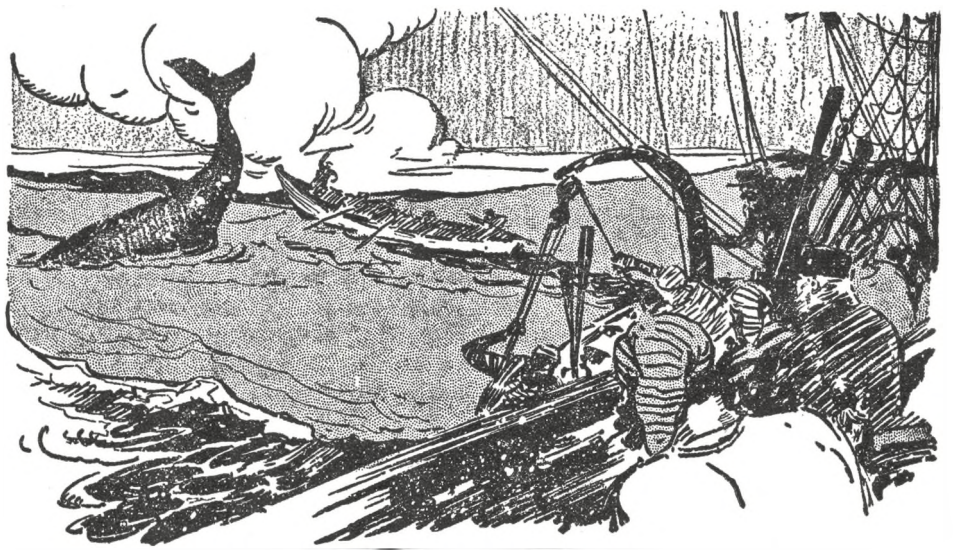


Gold

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "The Canon of Light," "Night Hawk's Gold," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAD SHIP.

WE the undersigned officers, seamen, and others have engaged ourselves at New Bedford on board the ship Cape Cod from the 29th day of June, 1847, promising to serve in the navigation & fishery of the North Pacific, to look out for & secure the town all such whales as by God's providence shall be cast up in their several bounds.

Article 1. That we shall be present at morning and evening prayers, on penalty of a fine such as the commander shall be pleased to fix.

"All hands lay aft!"

The boatswain went forward to give the order. Just how many of that ill-fated crew would obey there was no telling. Three of the Portuguese were too sick, and the doughboy had an arm burned by the hempen line when the last whale had sounded and got away. The seventy-year-old sailmaker was too sick in his mind. Lights had flitted over the surface of the last man buried at sea. That meant disaster.

"Lay aft for prayers!" was the order.

"Not me," the sailmaker said. "I'll pray no more with a woman on board."

And Tom Brass, cooperer, would not lay

aft. He had sworn that he was through with whaling on this cruise. The skipper must be made to understand it now, if ever. Thus he had sworn for days. But he always showed up mumbling and spewing his oaths.

Swope, the first mate, stood at the lee rail watching these brain-sick men as they shuffled aft. He was a spare man, this mate, with yellow sideburns, pale fishy eyes, and a laconic grin.

The skipper arrived, trailed by three scrawny cats—a one-eyed cat, a bobtailed cat, and a tabby. Under his massive arm was his Bible, stained with sea water, worn by fifty years of storm and calm. Captain Adam Bartlett was short, stocky, with clear gray eyes that peered under the shaggy brows like the eyes of an old belligerent monkey. He had hairy mallet fists, on one of which was a tattoo mark, now faded and spread in the thick hide. It said "God is Love." But men were afraid of it.

"Good morning, sir," Swope said, rubbing his hands like a steward.

"You say good morning, with a breeze like this?" the skipper growled.

"What with the Japan current a topsail breeze is quite satisfactory, sir."

"Satisfactory my eye! Where's the rest of these scurvy heathens?"

"Still down for'rd, sir. A bit slow to orders."

The skipper, wetting his huge thumb and turning to Genesis, looked up. "You notice it? Five months of this and they'll be slow, mark my words. The Horn in August! Blow me! They'll all go crazy."

"They're crazy now, sir. You ought to hear Sails talk. And that lubber Brass. A match would ignite the whole damned crew. They've got chilblains, every lubber of 'em. And scurvy. Need onions. Need shoes."

"Do they say that?"

"They intimate it, sir."

"Who intimates it?"

"Brass."

"To you?"

"Oh, no, sir—not that. I overheard him talkin' to Sails."

"The snivelin' old cockroach. I'll fix him."

"Here he comes now, sir."

They all came—that is to say, all who were not lying up. Even Brass, as I said above, came mumbling oaths. "Rotten hell-ship. Rotten, Bible-thumbin', mealy-mouthed skipper. Moldy hardtack. Sea gulls for supper. Boiled-out greaves, scraps of blubber for our bellies. Skin diseases. I'm goin' to jump ship soon as we see land."

Adam Bartlett put his Bible on the capstan. The negro cook sat aft of him on his hunkers, his sea chest open, disgorging an accordion and a hymn book. The back of the chest served for a music rack. Under the hymn book you could see his dice, his razor, a rabbit's foot, a dead kingfisher.

This last had belonged to the superstitious sailmaker, who had fastened it to the mainmast. It would turn to face a storm, he said. A valuable charm. The negro wanted it and he got it by means of his dice.

There was the circle of men crouching like sick monkeys. Then came Priscilla Bartlett.

She was a golden-haired girl of perhaps nineteen, and the figurehead of the Cape Cod had been fashioned in the old Scudder mill at New Bedford in Priscilla's image. Her long white frock whipping about her slender form in heavy weather made her look as if the figurehead had come to life. But now it hung innocuous, unsuggestive in the topsail breeze. She might have been going down the cobble streets of Johnny-cake Hill to Sunday morning service at Whalemen's Chapel.

It was a wonder how such a ferocious little brute of a man like Adam Bartlett could have such an angel built of his flesh and blood. Then you see her gray eyes, as keen and sharp as the father's.

Born at eight bells, and hence gifted with all the wisdom of the sea through intuition, she embodied a certain good strain in the mallet-fisted old mariner. The latter was a three-god devotee. The true God, and over and above Him the whale—those were two of his passions. And over and above both he worshiped this child.

Her mother had died a year or so before this voyage. Adam Bartlett had sold his house and cabbage patch and furniture, and

invested every penny in this ship. What was to be done with the motherless girl? Could he hire her out to some New Bedford merchant as a servant? Not much!

Adam had a premonition that this was his last cruise. He was getting too old to fight finbacks. He might spend his declining years as other old whalers by humpbacking off the coast of Africa.

Humpbacks were timorous and put up no fight. Plenty of oil too, poor as it was. No, he would end his half century with this cruise, with thousands of dollars for himself and his townsmen and Priscilla. She could sail on this last adventure.

She stood up beside the stocky little sea dog and led the singing of the hymn. Every eye was upon her. For a brief moment the dull frenzy of that crew was calmed.

She was gifted with a voice, a sweet contralto that tugged at the ugly hearts of a crew—a voice that was like the soft call of distant breakers to mariners yearning for land; or like the croon of a topsail breeze to a skipper becalmed. There was not much true worship at those morning prayers, except during this moment when Priscilla sang.

At the end of the hymn Adam Bartlett spat his tobacco cud to leeward, adjusted a ponderous pair of salt-misted spectacles, and began his morning sermon.

"The text for to-day is Genesis 3:15: 'Upon thy belly shalt thou go and dust shalt thou eat.'"

He looked over the rim of his spectacles at each lean, glowering face.

"I am told by Mr. Swope that you men ain't satisfied with the grub that's been rationed out on this ship. In particular as regards onions.

"All as I can say is: you better scratch your hides until we get to some port along the coast of Mexico, 'cause without the intervention of God there ain't going to be no onions sprouting on this deck."

He focused his keen gray eyes on the cooperer.

"I am told that the men who are too lazy to scratch themselves are such of you as didn't ship with any investment in this here bottom.

"Well, let me tell you this, as I've told you before: the whaler who goes on a cruise just on pay is generally always a water-front rat who never had a penny and never will. And he's always the man who grumbles about onions, thinking the same can be growed on an iceberg."

His sermon continued on another tack:

"You men have forgot how we promised to save our town when we first set out on this hunt. There's whales aplenty spoutin' along this coast, and you're goin' to lay me on their humps afore we stand south for home.

"Those who we left behind us won't have to face another winter without new shoes for their babes, and milk for their cats, and wood for their stoves—not if I know it. If we go back with a clean ship, a lot of them will lose their mortgaged farms. That don't concern you lubbers, does it? No!"

"New Bedford! The Horn in August!" the cooperer grumbled through his red whiskers. But he was careful the skipper did not hear him.

"And Mr. Swope tells me you haven't got shoes. All right. Sails will give each man a yard of canvas, and Chips will cut him wooden soles. So that's that. Let us pray."

Adam Bartlett prayed like a skipper giving orders to wear ship in a storm. His deeply lined, windburned face took on a new radiance. The stern scowl of a commander lecturing a grumbling crew gave way to a look of ecstasy as he cast his glance up beyond the topsails.

One eye, however, which because of a wart had a drooping lid, seemed to focus downward in a tiny gleam, so that he could watch his men to see if they all kept their heads bowed.

"Amen and hallelujah! We will close with hymn No. 231. And let those among you who have no ear for song lift your voices all the louder so that the Creator will have mercy on your shortcomings. 'Blest be the tie that binds.'"

The sea cook's accordion began to wheeze. But high up yonder in the crow's nest another song came. It beat "Blest be the tie" by a split second, and thus took

precedence not only in importance, but in time. It was a cracked but lusty bellow from the hoarse throat of the mariner there on watch:

"She blows! She blo-o-ows, b' God! She blo-o-ows! Thar agin!"

Adam Bartlett cast his good eye atop his spectacle rim.

"Where away?" he called.

"Two points off the port bow."

The skipper threw his hymn book among the dice, the rabbit's foot, and the pack of cards in the cook's chest.

"Enough of this lubberly psalm singing!" he shouted. "Avast prayin'. Haul back the mainyards, hoist, and swing! Another forty barrels or I'm the son of a lubberly sea cook!"

CHAPTER II.

OUT FOR BLUBBER.

THE crew leaped for the boats.

"It's a sei!" the mate said.

Bartlett cast a moment's glance through his spyglass, and shook his head. "The puff don't slant. More like a sulphur bottom!"

The mate took the glass. "'Tain't a high enough spout. It's straight like a sperm."

"You're daft. It's a bowhead, and a giant. He'll stow away forty barrels, or I'm a landsman!"

> "Lantern oil for all the churches!
> Corsets for a thousand ladies!"

Thus sang the harpooners.

One old giant was still on his knees.

"Avast prayin'!" the skipper shouted, taking him by the scruff of the neck. "Avast with that guff, and get your harping irons!"

The larboard, waist and bow boats were swung out on their davits on the port side. The starboard or skipper's boat was made ready on the starboard quarter.

The mate took his place as first boat header. A harpooner jumped to each boat. The three biggest men went to the midship oars; the clever men at the tub oar, with whale lines coiled, buckets ready.

"Lower away," the mate ordered in a soft, tremulous voice. "Lay me on that hump! A dead whale, you sea cooks, or a stove boat. Stand by to make way." And then in a still softer voice, scarcely above a whisper: "Make way."

She was an abandoned ship, except for the skipper, the girl, and the sea cook. Three boats shoved off in single file, each one with outfit of irons, drugs, lines of tarred Manila hemp, tub of coils, hatchets, oars muffled with greased mats.

The whale blew.

A puff of cottony white went up.

"Choo-oo-oo! Chooo-chooo!" the big bowhead went; and it was the only sound in the sea.

They bore down on it, every man looking aft, except the steerers—every man tortured with a desire to look over his shoulder at the great beast.

"Any man who turns to look gets three days in the brig!" the mate whispered. "Beat a hand now. Softly. Boat oars and paddle. Damme if it ain't a fifty-barrel bull! Now keep your eyes on me, Crummit, curse you for a lubber!"

"Softly now—"

"In bow!" he whispered. The bow oarsman, boating his paddle, stood by the harpooner.

The harpooner stood up—a silvery-maned viking.

And then the whale turned.

"Starn all!" the mate cried.

The mountain of black bore down on them, piling up a wave of white, like a monster frothing in rage.

As they backed water the harpooner let go.

The bowhead got its dose of steel and soft iron.

It started to breach; a wild convulsion. It lobtailed, standing on its head and churning the sea with its flukes. What was a silence broken only by the whispers of men now became a chaos of thunder, as the tail flapped against the sea—each flap a cannon's roar.

Then came the starboard boat, and the harpooner drove the second iron up to the hitches, leaving only the bark-covered hickory sticking from the beast's liver.

Now it was "White water!" The whale breached, whirled from its tormentors, and bolted.

A spout of blood mast high went up; and the two boats, tailing along like dinghies, showered with clots of blood, followed the nine-knot pace till the terrified victim humped up and sounded.

The lanyards ran out, burning the ballards. The bow oarsman dashed sea water against the smoke. A greenhorn from the Vermont hills got caught in the coils and was flipped overboard like a spinning coin. The third boat, rowing along in a mad race, picked him up.

Meanwhile the two boats in tow were freed as the lanyards were sliced; and then as they cruised along under the momentum the whale came up again for air—like a volcano arising in the sea.

Another iron, sent by the white maned harpooner, struck behind the fin, digging deep into the spot that covered "the life." The mate replaced him, hacking away, and hamstringing the beast by cutting the tendons of his flukes.

The great bowhead rolled out his good fin, shuddered, a tremor going over the mass of shining black.

The seas lapped quietly against the mountainous carcass. The dead whale rolled, belly up.

Then the boats tallied on.

During the hours that it took the carcass to float from the water-line level to the ship's rail the crew made a jury rig over the side for cutting. Mr. Swope then went at him with a knife.

The first cut ripped open the belly. A roaring sound went up. The crew held its nose at the stench.

Then the work began.

All day long, the decks heaving with oil and water, the crew worked, cutting the blubber to blanket strips; hauling the blanket strips aboard, cutting to horse strips; laying the sliced blubber on the whale's tail, which was as hard as a butcher's hacking block.

Next the horse strips were cut to Bible leaves, like sliced bacon on rind. Try-pots were taken out. Then all night long the men, nude to the waist, worked at the try-pots on deck in the light of the burning tar. They started the boiling.

And as they boiled a thick black cloud hung like a pall over the Cape Cod, permeating every part of the ship, choking every man with its thick, fetid smell.

The head was brought aboard. A man went into the "well" and dipped out a bucket of ambergris.

"Praise God!" the skipper cried. "A sick whale! Holystone the decks, sheathe your cuttin' irons, stow the casks. And then lay aft for prayers. Let us praise God, from whom all blessings flow—includin' whalebone and oil and ambergris!"

CHAPTER III.

"SAIL HO!"

"BLOW the man down! Blow the man down!" sang the crew as they holystoned the blood-begrimed deck of the good ship Cape Cod.

"Says she, young man, will you give me a treat?
Wey, hey! Blow the man down!"

The doxology of the whale-hunt ritual was lifted up to the spanking Pacific breeze.

"Delighted, says I, for a charmer so sweet.
Give us some time to blow the man down!"

The cook boiled coffee and served doughnuts which had been dipped in the boiling oil of the night's work.

Mr. Swope, the mate, drank like a cat lapping milk, mewing, smiling. He did not give evidence of his feelings, which were anything but exuberant. He had spent the night on watch, which officers must do when the crew is boiling oil.

Tom Brass was in his bunk cursing the cockroaches that had to be blown from his coffee. And he was cursing the ship and the skipper and the whale. "If we'd had the line coiled right, it wouldn't have happened. Groggins is in for pneumonia."

Priscilla was making bandages, and Adam Bartlett was at his Bible.

He folded his spectacles and looked at his daughter.

"We have been blessed, my child. Our ways have prospered. Eighty barrels of oil and ambergris. I figure six thousand dollars. Praise God, from whom all blessings flow."

The stocky little fellow got down to his knees. His daughter put aside the bandages and got down on the deck beside her skipper.

"God of our fathers—" he began.

A small, distant voice piped from the crow's nest.

The skipper cupped his tattooed hand to his ear and listened.

"Sail ho!"

The skipper returned to his prayers.

"Sail ho!" was not an interruption sufficiently important to stop this communion with the Almighty. A sail could wait. It was probably standing toward the ship anyway. A whale was different; it would stand off in the opposite direction. He went on:

"We thank Thee for these manifold blessings, oh, Jehovah. We thank Thee for this eighty barrels of oil which by Thy grace we stowed down last night. We praise Thy name for the great fish which Thou hast delivered into our hands. Surely goodness and mercy have followed us. Eighty barrels. Six thousand dollars, counting the ambergris. Two thousand to such of the crew as have interest in this Thy ship; two for the city which Thou has blessed; two for my daughter and Thy servant, whose cup runneth over. We will dwell in riches and in the house of the Lord forever. Amen."

He got up from his knees, his joints cracking.

"Where away?" he called, deciding finally to answer the lookout's announcement.

"A mile off the windward beam."

Mr. Swope and all hands on deck were at the windward rail, Swope with his glass.

"What do you make out, Mr. Mate?"

"She's standing due east, sir. We'll cross her bow, holding the course."

"Steady her at this till we get her close on board," said Skipper Bartlett. "I want to hail her."

Swope looked around in surprise.

"Hail her, sir?" he asked. "What for?"

"Onions," Adam Bartlett said.

The men at the rail were obviously excited at this. Their faces were flushed with pleasure. Their old sea dog was thinking of his itching crew, after all.

The skipper got his glass, and thrust out his short, powerful arms, his legs spread apart.

Both officers studied the ship as she stood on, growing to a cloud of canvas.

"British flag," said Mr. Swope.

"Run up the burgee," said Adam, and, considerably later: "Heave to."

Both vessels heaved to at the same time and swung lazily into the long, glassy swell. The skipper was peering sharp at what he saw, his leathery neck taut, his shaggy head thrust forward.

In the circle of his lens there was a picture that puzzled him.

The British vessel seemed to be manned by a crew large enough for a fleet. Many of these, it was to be supposed, were passengers. But in all his half century of sailing the seas Adam Bartlett had never seen such a mob on one vessel. Nor a mob of such a quality.

There were men of every color and estate; men with beaver hats, frock coats, frilled cravats; men in rags, men with the black felt hats of the Australians; Chinese with queues, Hindus with turbans.

And the deck itself was an odd scene. The forecastle was hung with hammocks. This would have been natural farther south if, for example, the ship had hailed directly from Australia. For in that case the crew would have slept on deck.

But she had evidently sailed from Japan, and was on the Great Circle. It was not even probable that she had picked up the Sandwich Islands. The Great Circle from Japan to California was not a tropic cruise.

There were hammocks amidships, hammocks on the poop. There were bundles and bedding in the coiled hawsers; there were chests, trunks, boxes, carpetbags heaped everywhere, piled against the break of the poop, heaped on the hatchways, heaped about the capstans.

What the devil did it all mean?

"Must 've picked up a shipwreck," Mr. Swope remarked.

Indeed, that was the only explanation.

Skipper Bartlett ordered his own boat lowered. This was the starboard boat, which, in the case of whaling barks, was the only boat on the starboard side, and was carried on that quarter. She was swung out on her davits, and Adam himself, with a boat steerer and the five regular oarsmen, put down and away with her.

The slim craft plied over a long green hummock of glassy water, went down beyond, appeared again with a merry twinkle of foam at her oars and wake, and a scudding of flying fish making way.

When close enough aboard to read her name, Bartlett lifted his megaphone and called:

"Ahoy there, Lady Weymouth!"

"Ahoy there!" the master of the strange vessel called back. "What ship, and where bound?"

"The Cape Cod," Bartlett shouted, as his men slid under the lee of the old vessel. "Bound for New Bedford." His bow oarsman picked up a line, the oars were shipped, and the skipper added proudly: "To New Bedford with whale oil."

The Englishman did not ask how big the catch was, but Bartlett could not refrain from making it his first announcement to the world. It is customary—I might say it is an unwritten law—that all whalemen exaggerate their catch by about three whales when hailing passing ships

"Four whales, sir!" he shouted dramatically.

"Oh, indeed!" the Englishman said.

Evidently the glorious news did not seem to impress him in the slightest; nor did it seem to impress a single member of that crew, or a single passenger either. Something had happened on board that ship which overshadowed the extraordinary drama of a whaler coming out of the north water with four counts.

Bartlett tilted his head and peered aloft at the row of faces which extended along the rail from forecastle to poop.

"What's happened on board this ship?" he asked in an entirely changed voice.

"Nothing, sir."

"Then what the devil are all them survivors you picked up?"

"They're not survivors, sir, beggin' your pardon. They're passengers. Two hundred and eighty, and one stowaway."

"In the name of ten thousand tombstones what are two hundred and eighty passengers doin' sailin' to the Californias?"

Adam Bartlett had the uncomfortable impression that every face of that long line knotted up into a grin. Even the confounded Chinks were laughing at him. He recalled the fact that his boat steerer and his five oarsmen were in rags and bound up in wool and twine.

The English skipper did not immediately answer the question. It must have been a very ridiculous one. Instead as if he wanted to make a closer inspection of this queer little bird who had come down out of the North and hailed his ship, he asked:

"Will you come aboard, sir?"

Captain Bartlett ran up the ladder and swung his chunky body over the rail. His boat steerer followed him.

Bartlett was immediately surrounded by the largest and most nondescript crowd he had ever seen standing on a single deck. Wastrels from every port between Sydney and Nagasaki pressed about him, their eyes widened at this strange anomaly of a man who wanted to know why they were going to California.

The skipper of the vessel, a spare man with a florid face and long yellow mustaches, looked down at the keen-eyed, wrinkled old whaler.

"May I ask, sir," he said, "just how long you have been cruising in the north water?"

"Two years."

"And haven't touched at any port along the coast?"

"Yes, Kamchatka and Alaska for water and grub."

"Well, that accounts for your extraordinary question, sir."

"What question?"

"As to where I am bound with this list of passengers."

"Well, where *are* you bound? What in the name of Heaven is so queer about that?"

"We're bound where men are bound from all corners of the globe, sir. I put out from Australia with a full list, and at Manila I discharged my freight and took more passengers on board.

"When at Shanghai and Nagasaki, I was offered such sums for passage that I loaded my hold with these balmy Orientals. We're all going to San Francisco."

"What's at San Francisco aside from a village to get peppers and beans?"

"Nothing is there, sir, beggin' your pardon. But there's a place near there—" The Englishman arched his yellow eyebrows. *"A place called Sutter's Mill."*

"What of it? Men from all quarters of the Pacific sailin' to California to work as mill hands? What's the joke?"

"A very good joke, sir. A joke that has made us laugh in every port of the world. A joke that has enticed every adventurer of the Seven Seas to your Pacific Coast."

The Cape Cod skipper looked over his shoulder to his boat steerer. Were they on another mad ship? What was this rigmarole anyway? A mill—off there in the practically uninhabited wilds of the Pacific Coast.

What were these crazy passengers thinking about anyway? Leaving thriving ports like Sydney and Shanghai and Nagasaki for a little village of Indians on the coast of California. Did they think they could get rich on hides and tallow and Mexican beans and chili peppers?

Why, there was not even a dollar of currency to be found on the whole coast from Lower California to Alaska. A few unfortunate frontiersmen traded in bear meat and hides—that was all.

"I may as well tell you, sir," the Englishman announced. "They made a little discovery some months ago at Sutter's Mill, and the whole bloomin' world is trekking there—coming in covered wagons across your prairies, comin' in every tramp ship that can beat up the coast from the Horn, from Panama, from my side of the Pacific, from every port on your Atlantic Coast.

"Why, damn it all, sir, I don't doubt but that they've put out from your own town, New Bedford—all comin' to the hills about Sutter's Mill."

"What for?"

The Englishman smiled. "For gold!" he said.

Captain Bartlett answered in the same manner with which the Englishman had answered his extraordinary announcement concerning the catch of four whales.

"Oh, indeed!"

And that was about as cutting a comeback as any skipper ever delivered to another on the high seas.

CHAPTER IV.

A MAN AND SIX CRATES OF ONIONS.

GOLD in the California hills? What was there so wonderful about that? Captain Adam Bartlett, of New Bedford, visualized wealth not in gold, but in whale oil. If the Englishman had announced that a right whale had been sighted off the coast of Japan, then he would be saying something. But who wanted to be a landsman and go ashore and dig in a hill?

There was only one way to get rich and that was to go whaling. Every other method was a makeshift land-lubberly Britisher's stupidity—didn't he understand that in a whale the ambergris alone was worth more than its weight in gold!

The English skipper was wasting precious moments. Bartlett had already been on board perhaps two minutes, which was enough for the ship to pay off sufficiently and get another gust of wind.

His own bark, off there across the swells, was filling away, heaving to again, luffing. The sails of the English vessel were banging loudly even in that soft breeze.

"I hailed you to ask concerning onions," Bartlett said snappily.

The Englishman pulled incredulously at his long mustache. He had found one man who had not taken fire at the glorious news—the news that had kindled the whole world.

"My crew is ridden with all manner of skin diseases, after that cruise up there in the north," Bartlett went on. "It's gettin' deeper than their skins now; it's gettin' into their brains. Got to have onions and something green if you can spare it."

"I'm all out of green vegetables," the other answered. "These blasted Chinks have gnawed my hold clean. But I can let you have a crate or two of onions, perhaps."

"What 'll the cost be?" Bartlett asked shrewdly. He reflected that his only specie was blubber, and he did not propose to part with any of that. It would be like cutting down on the glory that was the crown of his declining years.

The Englishman continued pulling at his mustache. "I'll make a dicker with you, sir," he said. "I've got a stowaway on board who fought a duel when we were three days out of Nagasaki. Wounded one of my officers.

"He was in the right so far as I can make out, and I don't like to take him back to the marine superintendent at Sydney. Can't be bothered, you know.

"Besides, he's been gambling and winning money from these balmy Chinks. Jolly well got me into a mutiny. Confounded nuisance. If you'll take him off my hands—"

"Take him off your hands?" Bartlett exclaimed.

"Dump him ashore at your next port of call."

"Why don't you dump him ashore yourself—you'll be in San Francisco Bay before I land anywhere."

"Well, that's just it. San Francisco is the very place he wanted to get to. It's not quite customary to let your stowaways get to their destination."

"It's not quite customary to pass him on to another ship. Take him back to the port he stowed away at."

"Can't be bothered. Why, sir, he got into a fight with some of these Sydney ducks, beat 'em up. Three in the hospital. Caught 'em cheating. A card expert, you know. Put him in irons, but the crew and everybody was on his side. Jolly lucky I was not to have a mutiny on my hands."

"If he killed a man in a duel on board ship, why didn't you try him? Why don't you hang him?"

"He's a countryman of mine."

"H-m, I see!" Bartlett had a touch of mercy in his own sea-dog soul.

"If I took him back to the marine superintendent at Sydney I'm not so sure but *they* might hang him."

Bartlett thought a moment. He had to think quickly because the two vessels, drifting in the long swells, catching a whiff of wind and a bit of headway before luffing, were getting farther and farther apart.

"Let me see this rascal."

A tall, ragged man in irons was brought from the brig. He looked down at the little skipper with a grin. A handsome, black-eyed, lean-faced devil he was, and most skippers would have thought twice before inviting him on board ship.

Now there are certain individuals who are considered evil omens on a whaler—for example, a parson or a flat-footed woman. But never yet have I heard of a skipper refusing to ship a hand because of his looks. They can look like anything a grade higher than an anthropoid ape.

And Captain Bartlett had even stretched a point in allowing one of his men—a certain hooligan—to ship with him as cooperer on this cruise. In other words, the looks of this stowaway did not faze the skipper of the Cape Cod.

He might be in rags, with torn boots and a salt-water-stained frock coat; and he might have the face of a devil, but he was just the man to take the place of one of the five seamen who had been lost on the cruise.

"I seem to have an inkling of what your trouble with this man is, captain," he said to the English master. "Bein' a true born skipper you hate to take a stowaway to the destination he's set out for. And bein' an Englishman you hate to take him back to his own port to be hanged."

"By Jove, you express it exactly, sir! Will you help me out?"

Bartlett ran his gnarled fingers through his beard. "What am I to be paid for his passage to Panama?"

"Six crates of onions, sir."

Bartlett looked at the brawny prisoner. He needed onions and he needed another seaman.

"I'll take him," he said. "And I'll give him a taste of holystonin' the pavements of hell, and then drop him off at Panama.

Looks like he can handle himself in that port as good as any."

"That I can, sir," the man in irons said genially. "I've banged around in every blooming port from Bristol to Bombay."

"Very well, then; cast off his irons."

"We'll consider this little cruise of yours on my ship as wiped off the slate, Dorsey," the English captain said in farewell. "And you can start your life of crime all over again."

"I'm much obliged to you, sir." The two looked at each other, and there seemed to be an inclination on the prisoner's part to shake hands with the master who had put him in irons. And the latter seemed curiously enough inclined in the same way. But this in the presence of the crew and passengers was an obvious breach of etiquette.

The next moment the whaler went down the ladder to his boat. The stowaway, carrying part of the onions, followed, and after him came the boat steerer. Having stowed the six crates of the precious antidote to scurvy on board, the long boat shoved off and made for the Cape Cod.

As I have intimated there were certain superstitious mariners of Bartlett's crew who believed that a woman on board is a Jonah. But the real Jonah of the Cap Cod had not shipped until the incident of which I write. I mean the lean, devil-may-care English renegade with the side chops, the ragged deck of playing cards, and the saturnine smile, whose name was Dorsey.

In a word this man was a Jonah in the truest sense of the word. In fact, as a hoodoo, he made the Jonah of the Old Testament look like a tidewater seacook.

CHAPTER V.

"MY POOR SINNER."

UPON boarding the Cape Cod, Bartlett ordered the stowaway to be brought to his cabin. Mr. Swope followed. Priscilla, whose childlike wonder had been greatly aroused by the appearance of this terrible stranger on board her father's ship, stood at the door safely ensconced behind Mr. Swope's back. And from this point of refuge she looked at the finely chiseled profile of the prisoner.

"Search this man, Mr. Swope," the skipper said.

The mate obeyed. Then:

"No firearms, sir," he reported. "Just a pack of old cards and a flask."

"What's in the flask?" Bartlett asked. "I ain't goin' to have a drunk prisoner on board. If it's rum, we'll drink his health."

Swope removed the cork, smelled of the contents, looked a bit skeptical, then tipped up the nozzle so that a drop or two of the contents might fall into the palm of his hand.

His fishy eyes bulged, his pasty forehead wrinkled.

"B'God, sir, it looks like gold dust to me!"

Bartlett and his daughter looked into the scrawny hand of the mate. A ray of dazzling Pacific sunshine shot through the porthole and seemed to set the palm of that hand on fire. It sent out succinct flashes of yellow rays.

"Give it back to him. If it ain't rum I can't use it," Bartlett said dryly. One might almost have thought that he was disappointed.

"Better keep it, sir, and set it down in your log book as part of the prisoner's effects."

"Give it back to him," Bartlett snapped. "I want no gold in this stateroom. It's a thing of evil. My crew will be clamoring for an advance on their pay."

The mate looked into his hand again, licked his lips hungrily, then poured the stuff into the nozzle again.

Meanwhile the skipper opened his log book and set down certain notes:

"What is your name?"

"Dorsey—Jim Dorsey."

"How old?"

"Born in 1816. Makes me about—let's see—oh, put it as thirty-two."

"Englishman, I understand."

"Yes, sir. Dorset County. Dorchester was the town. Haven't seen it, though, since school days. Ran away to sea."

"To sea? What can you do on board?

No matter, I'll put you holystoning. Can you row?"

He smiled a Mephistophelean smile. "I can, sir." If he had been to an English school he must have been on the crew.

"I don't mean one of your rowing sculls. I mean tub oarsman on a whaler. Never mind. That's where you'll be. The last one got swallowed by a whale. How did you wound that man?"

"We used a brace of pistols, sir. Dueling pistols. The captain took them from me."

"Have you tried swords?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I prefer swords. But they seem to be going out of date. Some years ago I crossed swords with a man who killed my cousin. Quite a braggart he was." He laughed. "And they said he was a good duelist."

"And what other crimes have you stained your soul with?"

"Let me see," the renegade began. He looked over to the girl, which sent the color streaming to her white forehead. "Where shall I begin?"

"At the beginning."

"One duel with swords, which I have mentioned. An affair at Monte Carlo—a waiter was insolent to a lady. I thrashed him and was attacked by the proprietor's henchmen. It was necessary to use a table.

"But there—a miserable footling matter. Then an affair in Bombay—another lady and a maharajah's son. I left for Singapore. Quite a peaceful time there, and luck favored me at cards.

"With the money I outfitted an expedition to the Zulu Sea. A compatriot of mine wanted me to save his son from the sultan's prison. We saved the boy, but unfortunately I used the Union Jack on my brig and got into difficulties with the Marine Board. My crew attacked by the natives, my ship scuttled, my money gone.

"I got to Australia, but found that the sultan had made a sort of international matter of it. The superintendent at Sydney gave me a five-pound note and advised me to get out of the country. Go to California—they've discovered gold. Five pounds would hardly pay the passage; so I stowed away."

"Sin seems to be tattooed on your forehead. What will you do to efface it?"

"Can a tattoo be effaced?"

"Yes, by the mercy of the Lord of Hosts."

"By whose mercy?" the devil asked laconically.

The skipper's visage blackened.

"What's your religion?"

"I have none."

"You do not believe in God Almighty?"

"No, sir. To speak truthfully."

"Well, then, you're on the right ship, my man," the skipper said. "No man will land from this ship without he says first: 'God have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

"If there is no God—"

There was the sucking intake of breath from Mr. Swope. The girl was pale. The skipper held up his mallet fist so that the prisoner could see the tattooed heart and the words: "God is Love."

"Do you see this?"

"You mean the fist or the tattoo?"

"I mean both."

"Yes, sir."

"That is the instrument of God on this ship. With it the fear of God is pounded into a black-hearted sinner like you."

"I take it you're something of a Mohammedan," the other said quietly.

The skipper jumped from his chair, raising his trembling arms high above him. "A Mohammedan you call me! You son of a seacook, you disciple of Beelzebub, you son of two serpents! I'll show you how much of a Mohammedan I am!" For a moment it looked as if the little skipper were going to fly at the man's throat. But as he caught the flame in the black eyes he seemed to think better of it.

"Git down on your knees to deck!" he roared. "And bow your sinful head! And, Swope, you get down—and my daughter, you get down and help me redeem this fiend!"

Priscilla was the first one to the deck. As she knelt there with that same ray of Pacific sunshine from the porthole which now made a golden halo about her she looked like a madonna—a picture that might have softened the heart of the vilest sinner.

Mr. Swope followed suit, removing his hat and bowing his head, his lids closing over the pale eyes, like a lizard winking.

The skipper and his prisoner went down together, facing each other. You might have thought they were two animals crouching to spring at each other's throats.

"One moment, sir," the prisoner said. "It would be most embarrassing for all of us. I am not in the mood. But to avoid any further trouble on this ship, I will make a bargain—"

The others looked at him. The four were on their knees making a square on the little cabin deck. The prisoner took out a pair of dice.

"I will cast to see which one wins my soul—you, as a servant of the Almighty or, let us say if it comes a natural, the devil takes my soul."

Before the skipper recovered from the shock of this ungodly interruption, the dice rolled to the deck, and a natural came.

"Sorry!" the prisoner said as he got to his knees.

The skipper looked up at him flabbergasted. Mr. Swope looked up, quite certain that he was going to see a murder. Priscilla looked up, and in her wide gray eyes there was still a strange radiance—a holy worship. Just what she was worshiping so fervently I cannot tell.

The skipper's breath came in snorts as he lumbered up. His knees creaked. His face was crimson.

"Put this damned hell dog in irons!" he roared. "And starve him!"

Swope was still kneeling on the deck. His fishy eyes were turned upward vacuously so that the veined whites underneath showed an ugly expanse.

"Put him in irons!" Bartlett fairly screamed. "And keep him locked up in the glory hole. No water, no hardtack. Let him fast. That's the one way that 'll make a man righteous. Fast—until he prays! Here's a prayer book. When you recite the Shepherd's psalm like the landsman you are, I'll let you eat. Till then you starve, so help me the Almighty!"

The climax of the scene was not yet reached. It came after Mr. Swope led his prisoner out on deck.

Priscilla stood gazing after them, her hands clasped upon her breast.

"Father—" she said softly. "I think he must be the handsomest sinner in the world!"

I will not set down what the skipper said. He almost swore. But inasmuch as swearing, as every one knows, is merely a sign of a threadbare vocabulary, the skipper did not actually swear. He did not need to.

And what he said to this daughter of Eve for falling in love the first time in her life, and with the vilest sinner this side of hell, showed that he had a vocabulary that must have outshone Webster himself.

The hoodoo had started working on the Cape Cod. And when a ship is hoodooed it is considerably more serious than, for example, a haunted house. All of hell is distilled into a small area surrounded by the limitless brine of the seas, the limitless fury of the winds and storms and rocks.

A real Jonah had shipped aboard the old whaler, and Priscilla, the good spirit who kept all those tattooed apemen down forward in the forecastle in leash, had succumbed to the hoodoo first of all!

Late that night when the mates were in their cabins; when the boat steerers were in their bunks in the steerage, and the crew in the forecastle were groaning with their itching skins; when the helmsman sounded the sailor's rattle for the new relief; when the skipper was in his cabin reading Deuteronomy; Priscilla stole out and went forward as far as the galley.

The giant African was in his hammock outside the glory hole, snoring in throat-tearing bellows like a bull.

At this time of night Priscilla slipped into the galley, heated some coffee, made some hot biscuits, poured treacle into a cup, and went across to the port side to the little cabin known as the glory hole—the private quarters of the cook and the doughboy—and unlocked the door with her father's keys.

The opened door let in the rays of a swinging lamp that made her head a small, shapely fire of gold light.

Purely because of his innate chivalry

and yet without the slightest exaggeration the prisoner murmured: " You are the most beautiful thing the eye of man has ever seen."

She set the food before him on the opposite bunk. And as she went out she whispered:

" So are you." He could still hear her velvet whispers as she vanished: " My poor sinner!"

CHAPTER VI.

" ON TO THE DIGGIN'S."

THE good angel of the Cape Cod, as I have said, had fallen under the hoodoo. That was perhaps the worst thing that could have happened to the old bark. At least, Captain Bartlett took that view of the matter as he was in his cabin reading his Bible.

For one of the very few times in his life he read Deuteronomy without having any idea what he was reading. He might have been reading the log book or the " Navigator." Or he might not have been reading anything.

His thoughts were concerned with what one soul-racking enormity: His angelic child had fallen in love.

What could he do? He could not punish Priscilla. He had never punished her nor denied her. Anything she wanted was hers. He had even granted her that most outlandish wish ever heard of—to be taken to sea in a whaler. But here was something that must be denied her. I say, what could he do?

He had at least done something: he had already ordered the villain in irons. And on top of that he had stretched a captain's prerogative by forbidding the necessities of life, food and water. There was not much left except to hang him onto a studding-sail boom, cover his face with a cap, order all hands to tally on, and heave him to the sea.

No punishment, in short, could be great enough, for no disaster could have been greater than that which he had brought to this ill-fated vessel.

But, unknown to old Adam Bartlett, there was more disaster coming. A hoodoo has the historical attribute of repeating itself.

Below decks disaster was brewing thick and fast.

Mr. Swope, the soft-footed, the whispering, the humble, the fishy-eyed, was approaching the door of the glory hole. He had seen something of the incident I reported above. He did not hear. But to see was sufficient.

The girl left and went above. Mr. Swope came from aft, a slim, quiet shadow out of blacker shadows, rubbing his hands and purring.

" I smell treacle and hot biscuits," he said.

" Have some, Mr. Mate."

" No, thank you. I have no desire to be keelhauled by my master, who is a terrible man in his wrath."

" I bribed the sea cook to bring me this," the prisoner lied.

" I reckon so! Probably with that flask of Frisco gold dust?"

" Do you want a bribe yourself, Mr. Mate?"

" Not me." Mr. Swope let the ray of light through the door fall on the prisoner's handsome black eyes. " All I want is some information about that gold dust."

" What about it?"

" Where did you get it?"

" From a boatswain's mate on the Lady Weymouth. A bit of gambling was going on."

" And where did he get it?"

" From the hills of California."

" You mean, on a previous trip?"

" Precisely."

" The boat steerer who brought you over from the Lady Weymouth told me some sort of a yarn about a place called Sutter's Mill."

" A yarn! Crikey, I dare say it sounded like one!"

" You think there's truth to it?"

The prisoner laughed. " My good fellow, would the world be trekking to this outlandish wilderness of yours if there were no truth in it?"

" The world, you say?"

" You should have seen our ship."

"I saw it through the glass. Chinks, Japs, Filipinos, whites—"

"And I've heard of the rest of the world. You Americans crossing in covered wagons over your extraordinary deserts. Savages shooting their confounded arrows at them; bears attacking them; hordes of Americans sailing around the Horn or crossing the Isthmus of Panama and hoping to get passage in some tramp vessel plying north. Mexicans coming up, dragging their household goods, wives and such—not in carts, but on hides sliding on the ground, so help me! Spanish landowners from the south; farmers and hunters, maybe, with only a horse and a cow and a pickax, crossing your Rocky Mountains. 'On to the diggings'—that's the blasted 'yarn,' as you call it!"

Mr. Swope, quiet as a mouse, was listening to this recital and watching the enthused face by the light of that single ray. His own face was in jet darkness, which was perhaps propitious.

Mr. Swope's countenance was hideous. At times there was a gleam to those pale eyes, like the gleam of a wolf facing a fire. Even in the darkness the prisoner could see two phosphorescent points of light.

"Go on. Tell me the rest. When they get there, what do they find?"

"Nuggets."

"Where?"

"In the streams, the forests—forests which they say are thousands of years old. Trees twice as high as St. Paul's. I rather doubt that. But as to the dust, by Jove, I've seen it and smelled it, and I've run it through my fingers."

His voice vibrated, and Mr. Swope held his breath.

"Why, damme, sir, towns are springing up in those hills everywhere overnight. You find a whole street of pubs, and you hear wild tales over the gin or ale. Thousands of dollars paid for outfits; no wagons to be had for love or money; horses bringing two hundred pounds a pair; eggs at five shillings.

"And the joke of it is, sir, every man can pay the price. Unbelievable. San Francisco is crowded with vessels of every flag. The town—a pueblo I believe you might call it—is now a metropolis, grown up while you were hunting these confounded whales up there in Bering Strait. You don't know what you've missed."

"We ain't missed it yet," Mr. Swope said.

That was all that needed to be said. The soul of Mr. Swope was on fire. He turned to face the lantern, and his features were contorted. He had a lean, yellowish face, with two heavy lines running down from the eyes to the corners of his mouth. A perpetual and vacuous smile seemed to be frozen about his buck teeth.

But now he was not smiling. His lips were tightly pressed over his horselike nippers, as if he were trying to retain his tobacco juice. His eyes were no longer pale—except with the pallid heat of frenzy.

Mr. Swope, the mate, was the second victim of the Cape Cod's evil spirit. He left his prisoner, thanking him humbly. Then his feet went padding softly aft toward the steerage.

The prisoner finished his meal, having an unsavory taste in his mouth and a disagreeable picture of an uncooked halibut staring at him.

Mr. Swope awoke his own boat steerer and told him to go forward and pipe up the cooperer.

"Lay aft in ten minutes. Meet me in my cabin. A jug. We'll get some ballast aboard."

There was nothing particularly unusual even at that late hour of night in seeing a light in Mr. Swope's tiny cabin. The first mate was in the habit of playing solitaire, or studying a book of checkers, or reading old copies of *Blackwood's Magazine*. Articles, puzzles, rebuses appealed to his type of mind.

He also pottered around with some drawings of a new type of harpoon—a harpoon which, he affirmed, could be shot from a small cannon like a mortar. The skipper used to laugh at this little hobby. A "harpoon gun"—what a lunacy!

The three men met there. Mr. Swope was a slim, catlike figure seated at a table which was attached to the bulkhead. A gaunt, ungainly scarecrow with a red stubble on his receding chin—that was the

cooperer. The boat steerer sat on the bunk alongside the latter. He was a hulking brute, with the low forehead and long arms of a gorilla.

Through the port there was the babbling wave of phosphorescence running aft from the bows. You could see a glittering moon-path just behind the harpooner's bullet-shaped head.

"Have you two men figured how much pay you're entitled to—providing we round the Horn?"

"How do you mean 'providing'?" the ape man asked huskily.

"The Horn's a long way south. And we'll be cruising for whales. Some won't be satisfied with the pay that's coming to them."

"Is there a way for us to get more than our percentage of the catch?" the cooperer asked.

"Something much more than a percentage."

The steerer looked up under his overhanging brows. His companion's red-whiskered, receding jaw dropped.

"What do them words signify, Mr. Swope?" the former asked, his little red eyes widening. He seemed frightened.

"How about all three of us taking a shot of rum?" the mate said.

"That's what I came here for?" the ape grinned.

The lanky cooperer watched Swope pouring the liquor as if it might be poison. The cooperer was thoroughly scared. Being superstitious and a coward, the raw-boned giant had an agile imagination.

He was thinking far ahead of the boat steerer. The latter had believed that Swope wanted company and that the meeting was called solely for the sake of getting drunk. The cooperer knew better. Something was wrong. Trouble was coming. The forces of the dark, the sea, of the malignant and smiling mate, were beleaguring him. They wanted to use him. They wanted to put him through dreadful adventure.

He was right.

The ape man gulped down his drink, then licked his pudgy lips. The cooperer smelled his glass. His red, spidery hand almost trembled.

"I like you two men," the mate said. "I'm going to make you rich."

The steerer grunted and cast a queer look up under his shaggy brows. "We like you too, Mr. Mate."

The cooperer stared, his skull-like face lengthening. "What you want us to do, sir?"

"It's a long journey I propose. But, then again, it's a long sail around the Horn. You'll like this better."

"Is there to be bloodshed?"

Swope looked at him, scowling under the fan of the hanging lamp. "I'm not so sure, Brass, that you'll do."

The latter fingered his empty glass nervously. His lips wabbled under the intent gaze of his master. Swope shoved the bottle to him.

"You see this bottle?"

The giant looked at it. "I see it, sir—yes, sir, I see it."

"Well, how'd you like to have that full of gold dust?"

The seaman kept staring at it as if it were a token—the symbol of this dreadful adventure that he saw looming on the horizon. A bottle of gold dust!

"I'd like it, sir."

"I promise you that. It's more than you will get sticking to this hell ship all the way around the Horn."

The giant looked up shyly into the intent stare of those fishy eyes. "You mean, sir you believe that galley yarn about gold in California?"

"Galley yarn, is it? Why, man—did you see the passengers on that British vessel? Did that look like a galley yarn?"

"If you believe it, sir, I believe it."

"They're going to the diggings—that whole shipload of men. They paid double passage. Men are giving their souls to get to San Francisco, and here we are a few leagues west of it—a few hours' sail—and we're standing down for that cursed Horn!"

He raised his low voice to an intense, pleading whine. "Why, damn us for a bunch of lubberly seacooks—what kind of men are we anyway, shipping on a whaler for a measly percentage?

"You remember what they said at New Bedford when we sailed? Bartlett wouldn't

be able to hold us. But he has held us, and what's the reason? His mealy-mouthed prayers? Oh, no—"

"His girl," the cooperer said tersely.

He had hit the nail on the head. Not only that, but he had figuratively hit the mate on the head likewise. The mate fell backward with an oath:

"That grinnin' little wench—that high and mighty little bat! I suppose every lubber of this crew will balk because of *her!* The skipper I can handle—but that skit! Damn me if I won't heave her overboard if she ever so much as stops one of you men from followin' me!"

"She won't stop me," the boat steerer said, his lips parted in adoration of his master, his head lolling forward till the tobacco juice trickled out like saliva from the mouth of an idiot. "A jug of gold dust—that's what I want!"

The mate grinned. He had some hope in the psychology of that crew. Adam Bartlett worshiped God, but there was something that took precedence over God—and that was a whale. The crew worshiped the ship's spirit—Priscilla. But gold was greater than a goddess.

"Look here, Brass," the mate said, "what would you do if you were richer than the skipper—richer than any man in New Bedford?"

"I wouldn't go whalin'," the cooperer answered readily.

"I'd buy rum enough to last the rest of my days," the old boat steerer said. He swigged from the bottle this time. "I'd live on rum, so help me. I'd sleep on it. It 'd be under my pillow at nights. I'd have a bottle at my foot, like these landlubbers have a warmin' pan. I'd be drunk the rest of my days."

"And what else?" the mate whispered.

"I'd have a woman in New Bedford. But I wouldn't be anchored—oh, no. I'd leave the tide take me—anywhere. Another woman in the next port. One in Nantucket—a couple in Boston.

"I'd stay off the Atlantic, though. Just Buzzard's Bay and Nantucket Sound and mebbe Cape Cod Bay, with a skit in every damned harbor and village in Massachusetts.

"That's what I'd have! Here"—he poured a drink for his master—"here, shipmates, drink to my five and twenty wives!"

Swope was not listening to him. He was watching the big cooperer out of the corners of his eyes. The cooperer was staring at the bottle. He did not want a drink. He seemed to be measuring it with his eyes. A lot of gold dust. Too much to lift.

"You think we kin pick the stuff up easy?" he asked. "I mean without a lot of diggin'. We ain't landsmen."

"You can chop it out of a cliff with a fluke spade!" Swope said. "I'll even give you axes—put 'em in your hand. I'm goin' to have the blacksmith make 'em. Are you listenin' to me, Brass?"

The lanky scarecrow seemed to shake itself, as if a breeze had caught it. "I'm with you, but—"

"But what?"

"You said somethin' about bloodshed."

"Oh, no, I didn't. It was you that said it."

"But then you said I 'wouldn't do'—like as if I gave you the idea that I'm afraid of bloodshed."

"Well, you are, ain't you?"

"Oh, no, I ain't. Not if you're backin' me up."

He took another drink. The inebriate steerer had left a swallow. The loose-jointed scarecrow seemed to take on more of a human articulation.

"But if there's fightin'," he went on, "what 'll we fight with? We ain't got firearms. We ain't got knives that amount to anythin' since Chips was ordered by the skipper to break the points of every knife on board ship."

"I'll fight, Mr. Mate," the tipsy steerer said, holding up his long arms that terminated in chunky mallets of bone. "A boarding knife is all I want. No, these fists is all I want."

"Let me shake your fist, Crummit."

The huge gorilla shoved his paw across the table.

"And you, Brass?"

Brass looked at the scrawny yellow hand of the mate. He looked at everything as if it were the symbol of some dreadful and imminent disaster. And that hand supplied

the image of disaster, if any artist wanted to paint it: the color of parchment, with bulging tendons, greenish veins, a tattooed dragon circling the wrist like a live lizard.

Brass took the hand. He acted as if he were drawn to it, fascinated by it. The actual fact was, he was afraid of Mr. Swope. He did not dare to refuse him. Having made this compact, the rest of the confab was quick and decisive.

" Crummit will approach the after guard —the other boat steerers, the doughboy, and the black. Brass, you sound out the forecastle. Take Sails first, then another—let them approach their cronies separately. There'll be plenty of time. It 'll be twenty-four hours before we're in Frisco. Meanwhile I'll sound out Billings." Billings was the other mate.

" I ain't looking for much opposition from a single man of the crew. Don't let them talk about it together. It's to be kept secret. Each man keeps his own counsel.

" And by no means must the skipper think a single man of you wants to go ashore at Frisco. Meanwhile, Crummit, you'll tap the scuttle butts. Let all that stinkin' water out. And do it before the skipper gets his morning coffee."

" What 'll we drink?" the thirsty old steerer asked, somewhat nonplused.

" Rum," the mate answered.

He poured three drinks out of another bottle, and arose so that the tin fan on the swinging lamp cut the light from his chest upward. He seemed to have beheaded himself by magic.

" When any man wants to know who is in on this, let him say: ' What do you reckon we stand on?' If the man answers, ' On to the diggin's,' that means he is to be counted among us." As he corked up his bottle and put it away in the chest he said: " That's all until the morning, gentlemen."

The boat steerer went out, his head lolling, his tobacco juice dripping, his long arms swinging rhythmically as he went forward to the scuttle butts. The cooperer turned as he leaned down to pass through the door.

" I'd feel better if I could get hold of a pistol, Mr. Swope."

" Why?"

" If there's to be violence, I ain't so sure about this game—I ain't exactly a fightin' man."

" You'll fight—if we all do."

" But, Mr. Swope—"

The other crouched so that his face was again in the cone of light, ghastly, malignant.

" If you lose your nerve, Brass—if I see so much as a flicker of indecision after you shook my hand—"

" I won't back out, Mr. Swope—not me. I won't back out. Not after shaking your hand." He concluded weakly as he went out: " I don't dast."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

THE CIRCUS

BAND ablarin', trapeze swing,
Acrobats are on the wing,
Ho'ses canter, crackin' whip,
Men and women backward flip,
Donkey ridin', clowns, they fall,
Giants stridin', eight foot tall.
Tigers, lions jumpin' loop,
Cowboys ridin' with a whoop,
Ho'ses runnin', band plays loud,
At the corner racers crowd,
Venders yellin', Joe, he buys
Peanuts, pop for smilin' eyes.

Harvey Kelly Wilson.

SPRING THOUGHTS

IN the earliest years of my exile,
I have sometimes yearned after spring,
The faint, fresh scent of the lilac,
The timid thrush on the wing,
And nights have I stood on the desert,
Nostalgia choking my heart,
Listening in vain for the surf's soft refrain,
And ambition has murmured, "Depart."

But the mesa is mistress too mystic,
And I've dreamed too long on her breast;
The lotus is sweeter than lilac,
And the desert has taught me to rest.
There's a sadder peace in the valley,
There's a wilder peace on the height,
Than the shaded retreat of the scented street
With its violets that die in the light.

There's an awakening of sorts on the desert,
Though there's never spring in the air,
The cactus blooms ocher or crimson,
But blue skies continue to stare.
Oh, it's always summer—midsummer—
Things have not beginnings but are,
For the desert has been forever
Like the sun and the moon and the star.

And here have I mingled with nature,
Where the moon stoops gold on the range,
Become part of a scheme more eternal,
Only vanity toils after change.
In my youth have I dreamed of the laurel,
But all crowns have seemed tinsel of late;
Ambitions consumed in its ember,
I am purged of desire to be great.

H. A. Woodbury.

Luck of the Border

By CHARLTON L. EDHOLM

Author of "Lookin' for Trouble," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

RATTLESNAKE CAÑON had a bad name, and a man was foolish to go riding there alone unless he had pressing business. In that case he was likely to ride cautiously and keep his hand on the butt of his gun ready for whatever might happen.

The fact was, too many young buckaroos had gone riding up the dim trail of Rattlesnake, and had never come riding back again.

No explanation. They had just failed to come back; that was all.

The cañon was long, steep-walled, gloomy even at midday, and very winding. It had two outlets, one on the Arizona side of the line, the other down in Old Mexico—and a wild section at that.

This made it convenient for smugglers and other shady characters, men who would shoot you in the back for the sake of your boots or just for the fun of seeing you kick in your death agony.

But if "Luck" Larrabee had ever heard of the mean reputation of Rattlesnake, he did not show it as he trotted his buckskin along the trail. Luck, with his gay blue eyes and alert, smiling interest in all he saw, rode as if he had never a care in the world, and in truth he hadn't a care, for he was always broke before pay day, and *that* failed to worry him.

Always he went drifting from one outfit to another. Happy-go-lucky, that's how he got his name.

Not that he was chucked out of a job. Luck was too good a hand with rope, branding iron and six-gun to be fired as long as men were needed.

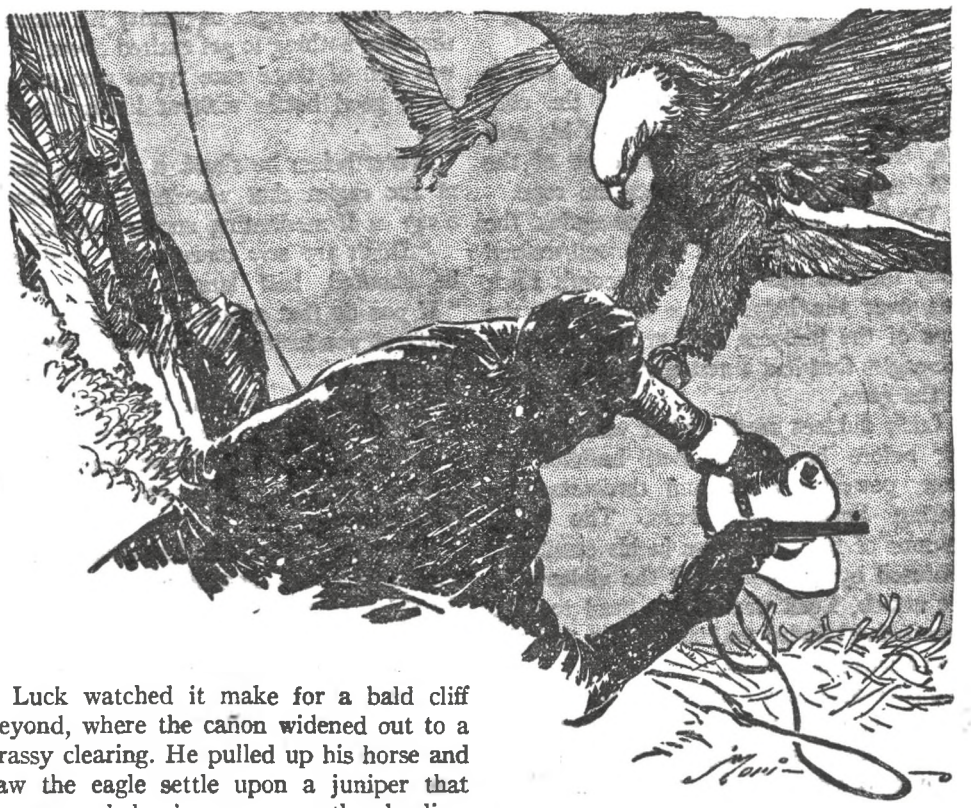
His long, loose-jointed frame was the typical horse tamer's build. But he liked a change; that was Luck Larrabee's disposition. He would never be tied down with a stake anywhere.

As for settling for keeps on a little ranch of his own with a few head of stock and a wife to fry flapjacks and boil coffee, Luck snorted at the idea.

No family life for him! Women were a danged nuisance!

What he wanted was a little excitement while he was young, and the border was the place for it, with "hell popping on both sides of the line," as the old-timers put it.

As Luck cantered along that afternoon he looked up and saw a big black shadow against the sky. An eagle! It looked almost as big as a plane, it was flying so low and carrying something in its claws. A rabbit, most likely.



Luck watched it make for a bald cliff beyond, where the cañon widened out to a grassy clearing. He pulled up his horse and saw the eagle settle upon a juniper that grew on a ledge 'way up near the sky line.

"There's a nest up yonder," said Luck to himself. "Fella, let's go up and take a squint at it."

The bald cliff was a long way from the trail, up a tributary of Rattlesnake, in fact, and when the rider came to its base he looked right straight up to that ledge without seeing a crack or crevice that would give a foothold.

"Suits me," said Luck. "If I can't climb *up*, I'll climb *down* to that nest." And, giving his buckskin the reins, he let the animal find a way up the first brushy slope to the edge of the cañon.

It was a good, stiff pull. Horse and rider were scratched and covered with sweat before Luck found himself on the top of the bald cliff, looking down on the ledge with the junipers.

It was a distance of forty or fifty feet, straight down. Beyond that the cañon walls dropped several hundred feet to the creek bed. The waters could be heard tinkling and murmuring far, far away in the cool shadows.

It was all very peaceful and serene. Then through the still air came the sound of a report, diminished by distance; yet Luck identified it.

"A 30:30 smokeless," he muttered. "Wonder who's shooting deer out of season?"

But as the sound was not repeated, Luck Larrabee began to consider the notion that had brought him there. How was he going to get a good look at that eagle's nest? It was a long drop from the cliff top to that ledge, yet he thought he could make it.

Luck brought the coiled lariat from his saddle and turned the pony loose to graze with trailing bridle. The lariat was long enough to make the distance and then some, but the trouble was that there was nothing on top of the cliff to tie it to; not a tree stout enough to hold his weight; not a projecting rock that would hold the rope.

Then the cowboy had a bright idea. Why not use his horse as an anchor? A pony that could hold a wild steer, with the lariat wound about the saddlehorn,

could certainly sustain the rider's weight as he descended hand over hand.

Without a second thought, Luck ran to bring his horse to the edge of the cliff, slipped the loop over the horn of his saddle, threw the coil over the edge of the cliff, and began sliding down the rope.

The buckskin braced his legs against the weight and stood rigid like the well-trained pony that he was. In a few seconds Luck was over the ledge on a level with the tops of the junipers, and at that moment the eagles that had a nest there took a hand in the game.

Luck did not realize what was happening before he felt himself buffeted by huge, powerful wings and threatened by tearing beaks and claws. The shrill screams of the birds were in his ears, and, confused by the noise and the violence of the attack, Luck ducked his head to keep from being blinded and slid so fast that the rope burned his palms.

Blistered, shaken and breathless, he landed in a heap on the narrow ledge of rock, the two eagles swooping down and attacking him with redoubled fury. To their shrill screams was added the outcries of their fledglings in the nest.

Gasping and furious, Luck picked up a dead limb and swung it at the huge birds, but the blows seemed to bounce harmlessly off their feathery coats of mail. The cowboy felt their talons digging through his shirt and drawing blood, and their hooked bills savagely threatened his eyes.

Swinging the stick with one hand, he drew his gun with the other and fired several shots in quick succession.

Even in his awkward situation, Luck was more anxious to scare off the birds than to kill them, and at the reports he had the satisfaction of seeing them fly heavily away.

It was the thought of the young in the nest that caused Luck to spare the parent birds. After all, he thought, they were putting up a game fight for their brood against an intruder.

The cowboy had too much respect for such plucky fighters to wish to destroy them. He had climbed to that perilous ledge to see the eagles' nest, and if he had been forced to fight to gratify his curiosity that was nothing to get excited about. Luck was one of those rare types who can put up a good battle without losing his temper.

Nevertheless he shook a warning cudgel at the eagles that wheeled some distance away as if meditating another attack.

"Don't try any more funny business!" he shouted, half laughing, half defiant. "If you do that again, I may get mad and shoot *at* you instead of all around you. Get that!"

He turned to look at the young eagles that he had taken such a chance to see, when an unexpected danger drew his attention from the naked and wide-mouthed little creatures.

The rope end that he had dropped in his excitement was beginning to rise. Evidently the horse, on feeling the pressure on the saddlehorn relax, had concluded that he was no longer needed and had started moving back.

With a whoop of dismay, Luck made a flying leap for the end of the lariat. If that rope got away he would certainly be in a jam for fair, with a two-hundred-foot cliff below him and a fifty-foot wall above.

He jumped and missed, just as the rope end rose out of his reach.

II.

"SUFFERIN' bobcats!" muttered Luck. "Now I *am* up against it!"

With one leap he was on the trunk of the juniper, clawing his way upward like a cat in pursuit of the dangling rope. Just before it could be reached, the knot would jerk away in a tantalizing fashion. Evidently the horse was walking off slowly, grazing as it moved.

If only it would stop for just a half a minute, the cowboy might make it, but fast as he climbed, the rope jerked upward just a trifle faster.

Suddenly, realizing that it was his last chance, Luck sprang from a limb and caught the rope in mid air. He hung on for dear life, his boots suspended over thin air; and for a moment the cowboy wondered

whether he was going to be dragged to the top of the cliff in this fashion.

At the tug on the rope, however, the well trained horse stopped short. Luck felt for a foothold with his boots in the branches of the juniper, and, once firmly planted there, he made sure that his horse would not stray farther by knotting the end of the rope about the tree trunk.

That accomplished, he had a chance to draw a long breath and take a look at his surroundings for the first time. He was perched in a tree about twenty feet above the rocky ledge, which was somewhat wider than he had at first supposed.

In fact, the ledge gave the appearance of a platform that had been leveled artificially, and at a second glance Luck gave an exclamation of astonishment.

A low arched cave opened from the face of the cliff, its mouth so regular in form that it was more like a tunnel made by man than a natural hollow in the rock. The hole was completely screened by the junipers and brush, so that from the cañon below it was absolutely hidden. Luck wondered what discovery he would make in that black cave, for at the first sight he was determined to explore it.

Was it the shelter of some ferocious beast?

In that case, there was going to be trouble for the bear or mountain lion, or whatever made its home there.

Luck carefully reloaded his revolver and began climbing down the juniper, trying to peer into the cavern that extended back into the mountain.

Nothing could be seen, just the blackness of a tunnel shaded by the natural growth at its mouth.

Luck reached the ledge, crept to the opening, and peered in. It seemed to be dry and the air was surprisingly fresh. The walls were not smooth, but still the shape of the cave was so regular that it seemed as if men must have hewn it.

Possibly a prehistoric tribe of cliff dwellers had used this cave in ages past, had enlarged it, and given it this symmetrical form.

Luck remembered some Indian traceries on the rocks farther down the creek. This cave might have been the dwelling place of the tribesmen who had scratched the pictures on those bowlders.

Before he entered the cave Luck searched in his pockets for matches. With a few dried twigs he started a tiny blaze, and from that ignited a dry branch of juniper.

Then, with a dim and smoky torch in his left hand, the cowboy advanced cautiously into the tunnel, holding in his right hand the six-shooter, fully cocked and ready for business.

A strange noise in the depths of the cave, something between a sigh and a snore, convinced him that some living creature lurked in the blackness.

"Ugh-hoo!" it went. A sort of whispering gurgle, very faint and mysterious. "Ugh-hoo!"

III.

It was uncanny. It was terrifying, and Luck halted involuntarily, feeling his mouth go dry. The flame of his torch flickered in a draft.

But on reflection Luck decided that nobody had ever been killed by a noise, not that *he* had ever heard of, and resolved not to back out until he came face to face with something too big to fight. Then as the draft died down the flame rose straight up, and the noise seemed to retreat and fade away.

Luck stared at his surroundings, not moving or making a sound. Ahead of him was blackness. The cave was too deep for the torchlight to penetrate to the end. Around him was a high, vaulted chamber in the rock, a wide space almost circular in form, with a little heap of something in the exact center.

The boy approached this and saw gray ashes, bits of charred wood, the remains of a camp fire. But on examining the blackened bits of wood carefully, Luck observed that they were thick with dust.

Touching one with his boot, he noted that insects had built a nest under it. Evidently the fire had burned out long, long ago; possibly many years, even centuries, had elapsed since human beings had entered that cave.

Something on the walls of smoothed rock

caught his eye, and, going closer with his torch, the cowboy saw that they were pictures roughly scratched by savage hands. The inscriptions were not deep, but in this dry mountain air they appeared fresh and distinct: hundreds of little figures representing men, warriors stripped for battle and wearing strange headdresses, others engaged in hunting deer or fighting mountain lions.

Fantastic and crude as they were, the pictures were startlingly realistic. Luck felt as if he had actually witnessed the wars and hunting scenes and ghost dances of that vanished tribe.

For now there was no doubt of it: Larrabee had stumbled upon the fortress home of a race of cliff dwellers. There might be other secrets still deeper in the cave, back there where the ghostly noises had been heard to issue.

Luck hesitated, straining his ears. There were no further sounds, and resolutely he penetrated into the darkness.

The chamber narrowed to another tunnel, and all at once the intruder felt something slide away from under his feet. He judged it must be a snake, probably a large one, but the creature had wriggled into a crevice of the wall before he could see it.

The tunnel was growing narrower and narrower at every step; the roof was lower, too, so that he had to stoop to avoid knocking his head. Then his foot caught in something on the floor that looked like a rotten fabric that had once been dyed.

It powdered to dust at the touch, but Luck felt certain that it might have been a hanging of some sort, a curtain to close the narrowest part of the tunnel, for high on the walls were two little knobs of yellow metal sunk into the rock opposite each other. They might well have been supports for a curtain separating the tunnel from the chamber beyond.

For undoubtedly the cave had been artificially widened at this point. It was a room twenty feet square with a level floor. At the doorway by which he entered Luck saw a number of jars and painted pottery and an equal number of woven baskets shaped like bottles or water jars and sealed with pitch.

He brought his torch close to a basket, and saw that it was full of grains of corn, another contained grain that he did not recognize, while a third was full of acorns. But the jars were heavy and hard to dislodge. When he tipped one over, Luck was astonished to see a stream of yellow, heavy dust flow out like water.

"Gold!" he gasped, running his fingers through the heavy metal that had spilled on the floor. "What time do I wake up?" he muttered. "Can't fool me! This here is just a dream."

He rose suddenly to his feet, for at the opposite corner of the room he made out a shadowy object and tightened his hand on his gun.

A seated figure crouched there, and Luck felt it was boring him with threatening eyes. It seemed unspeakably menacing, and he cried out:

"Who's there? Speak up, or I'll shoot."

There was no reply. The echoes of his own voice startled him, and in a hasty moment of madness Luck flipped his gun to the level and fired.

The shadowy figure toppled to the floor, and all the artillery in the world seemed to be echoing from the rocky walls of the chamber.

IV.

Luck ran forward, horrified at what he had done. What madness, to shoot down a person who might be unarmed and peaceful!

The figure lay stiff and rigid in an awkward position, and did not stir as he approached. To his dismay, Larrabee saw long black hair streaming over the floor from its lifeless head.

"A woman! God in heaven, I've shot a woman!" whispered Luck, trembling at his own words.

Then with a profound sigh of relief, he realized that the woman had been dead for ages. It was a dried-up, blackened figure that lay at his feet, a shrunken body that undoubtedly had been the princess of the tribe, for only her exalted rank could explain the elaborate tomb and the treasure that surrounded the mummy.

A second glance verified his guess. Or-

naments of gold and silver studded with turquoise were on the shriveled limbs, a gleaming band of precious metal was about the head, and as final proof there lay a second mummy back of the stone block on which the princess had sat.

This one was a man. A guard, no doubt, for a crude knife of bronze was in his dried fingers and a thin spear lay beside him.

Luck felt the thrill of ghostly adventure as he gazed on these two bodies entombed so long ago, members of a race that had never seen a white man, perhaps, or even dreamed of their existence.

With a feeling of awe the young stranger walked around the mummies, not wishing to touch them, yet fascinated by the pictures of the past they summoned up.

Time passed—an hour, perhaps—while he explored the chamber, studying the inscriptions on the walls and examining the contents of the pottery jars. One had contained a liquid, long since evaporated, for only a gummy residue was in the bottom. The others contained nuggets of gold and ornaments of beaten silver set with turquoise, opal, and other semiprecious stones.

Luck began to indulge in pleasing fancies about the use of this treasure. He would be a rich man now. Once turned into hard cash, these jars of gold dust, nuggets and silver would buy him every luxury. He could travel all over the world; live like a prince; own a yacht; buy a large ranch and stock it with the finest cattle and horses.

He was richer than he ever dreamed of being in all his life. All he had to do was to get this treasure above ground into a place of safety.

As he crouched there, fingering the valuable stuff, something made the chills creep up and down his spine.

Low-pitched voices were talking somewhere, but not in the room. They seemed to come from a great distance, for they were thin and fine, like voices heard on a badly connected telephone.

At first the words were meaningless. They were a mere jargon of unintelligible sounds. Then, as if something had clicked in his brain, Luck got the clew.

These ghostly voices were not from the supernatural visitors to the tomb, though they sounded uncanny enough.

What he heard was Spanish, the language of the dark-skinned men south of the border, and Luck knew enough of the Mexican lingo to catch certain phrases, sinister and menacing.

The unseen men were boasting of slaughter. "I shot down six men—one was a gringo."

"Only six? *Dio mio*, I slaughtered seventeen and I do not count the women and children. Seventeen, and all men! Therefore my share of the gold is greater than yours."

There was a clamor of protest at this. Then another harsh voice snarled: "Be still. Pigs, dogs, and liars! I, your chief, will divide the spoil as I see fit. And now—bring in that girl!"

There was a hush after this command, then, still faint and strained as if by great distance, came a shrill, anguished cry:

"Oh, God! Not that! Not that!"

It was the voice of a woman shrieking in mortal terror.

With his nerves tense and his finger on the trigger of his six-shooter, Luck stared about wildly. Where could she be, this woman who screamed for help?

The voice seemed to come from under his feet.

V.

ABRUPTLY the mystery was solved.

Luck ran to the mummy of the woman lying before the rude throne and thrust the body to one side. Instantly the sound of voices was clearer.

Where the body had fallen was a rough grating of bronze set into the floor and below it was a dark, narrow shaft like a chimney going down into the mountain.

Without hesitation Luck tugged and wrenched at the grating. A fastening snapped and the whole thing came loose, disclosing a hole large enough to admit his body.

A thin trickle of smoke stung his eyes as he bent over the hole, and Luck realized that the ruffians down there had built a fire.

It was taking a desperate chance with his life, but there was nothing else for it: Larrabee let himself down the narrow vent, holding with both hands to the edge while blindly seeking a foothold on the walls.

Fortunately these were rough and irregular and the chimney was so narrow that he could brace himself on the sides as he eased himself downward.

Nevertheless, he felt like a rat in a trap as he wriggled and slid, his eyes smarting and his throat burning from the smoke.

From his unseen enemies came no further sounds and the woman's voice was stilled.

Had she been killed? Had that last despairing cry been stilled by a knife to her throat?

Grimly resolute, the boy worked his way downward, praying that he might not be too late.

With a grunt of relief, he felt his soles touch a slanting surface at last. The straight shaft had entered an inclined tunnel, steep and winding, a natural fissure in the rock.

Here he was able to move more freely, feeling his way with outstretched hands and holding his head low to avoid hitting it on the roof of the burrow.

There was no glimmer of light from any direction, nothing to guide him but the walls of solid rock. He was buried in the heart of a mountain of stone.

Only one thing encouraged the venturesome youth: the sound of voices had begun afresh, and now he was drawing nearer. There was no doubt of it, this passage was leading to the retreat of the ruffians, and Luck decided that he would presently find himself in some cave far below; a cave with an entrance from the cañon.

What chance he would have gun-fighting a gang of unknown strength was another matter. The fortunes of war would decide that issue. What was needed now was to reach the bandits' cave.

Suddenly Luck felt his hand come squarely against a massive, rounded bowlder. To the right and left were the rough walls of the passage with no outlet to either side. And the great, smooth stone closed the passage like a gate.

It looked as if he were at the end of his quest, for a steam derrick could not lift that obstruction from its resting place.

He sank to the floor of the tunnel exhausted and dripping with perspiration; at least, the air was fresher there, evidently the smoke was finding its outlet above the bowlder. At this thought, Luck began cautiously exploring once more, feeling along the top of the rounded stone until a faint current of air touched his fingers.

Crumbled rock and earth was heaped on the bowlder and as the boy swept it away the air current grew stronger; evidently the bowlder, in falling from the roof of the tunnel, had brought down débris that could be cleared away.

Without hesitation, Luck drew his knife and began loosening the rock fragments and the sandy soil, sweeping them aside as he did so. Then abruptly as a blow between the eyes he saw a streak of light: it was reddish and flickering; the blaze of a wood fire.

Raising himself for a view over the top of the obstruction, Luck was able to see right into the fire, for a few feet beyond the bowlder the passage widened to a dry and roomy cave.

Beside the fire crouched a ruffian so burned by the sun and browned by smoke that he might have been an Indian. His feautres were coarse and heavy.

He was dressed in dirty cotton trousers and the fragments of a shirt, open at the chest, seemed to be held together by the cartridge belts that hung from his shoulders, crossing over his breast bone.

In one lean hand the bandit held a rifle, polished till it shone in the firelight. In the other he had a long stick which he shoved into the coals with a purposeful air.

His intention could not be mistaken. The expression of his face was that of a torturer gloating over his task as he removed the stick from the fire and examined the glowing end.

From where he stood behind the bowlder, Luck could not see the intended victim, but as the Mexican rose to his feet, waving the brand menacingly, a sobbing voice cried: "No, no, no! Have mercy!"

The words were Spanish; the voice was that of a woman.

With a triumphant grin the ruffian made a gesture of command with his glowing stick.

"Come here," he croaked. "If you expect mercy, kneel at my feet."

VI.

LUCK watched a strange drama with his eyes at the small opening above the bowlder.

From the other side of the fire a figure dragged slowly forward, the woman's limbs being bound so that she could hardly walk.

Whether she was young or old, rich or poor, ugly or beautiful, Luck could not see, for her body was cramped by the cords and her clothing was shredded to rags as if she had been dragged through the thorny brush. Her face was turned away from the cowboy as she confronted her tormentor, but the droop of her slender shoulders was expressive of despair.

The bandit motioned sharply with his firebrand and said in a horse whisper:

"You will kneel to me, Doña Rosita. You will lay your head in the dust and beg for mercy. That will be the happiest hour of my life when a daughter of the Cordobas kneels to me."

"Why will that make you happy, Pedro?" the woman asked in a weary, plaintive voice.

But the man snarled with an oath.

"Not Pedro! I am no longer your father's servant. I am your master now. Call me Don Pedro."

She obeyed mechanically. "Señor Don Pedro."

The ruffian chuckled. His vanity was gratified. "Say it again. Call me 'Excellency.' Kneel as you say it."

At that the girl cried out angrily: "When did I ever harm you? It's true that you were my father's peon. It's true that he was harsh at times, but what have *I* done?"

"It's enough that you are his daughter. It will pay off old scores to humble you. For every blow that your father gave me with his riding whip, you shall kiss my feet with your head in the dust. You are my prisoner: I am an officer."

She answered scornfully: "That is a slave's revenge. No matter what you call yourself, captain or colonel or what not, you are still a slave in spirit."

To this the ruffian replied grandly: "I am a general. That is my title in my own army."

In spite of her misery, the girl laughed.

"General! How wonderful! That is my father's rank, too. He is General Benito de Cordoba, of the Federal army, and you are General Pedro of the gutter rats."

"Silence!" roared the bandit furiously.

"I salute you, general!" she continued mockingly. "When my father catches you, he will tie you up and whip you to ribbons, Señor Don Pedro! Excellency! General of Ragamuffins!"

The former peon was beside himself with fury. "Another word, and I'll shoot," he cried.

At this threat, Luck understood the meaning of the girl's taunts. Despairing of ever regaining her freedom, it was her purpose to enrage the bandit so that he would inflict swift and merciful death instead of torture.

The cowboy with his hand on his trigger, and the gun at the peephole was ready to shoot: meanwhile he admired Doña Rosita's courage and quick wit.

"Do your worst, Señor Don Gutter Rat," continued the girl cuttingly. "But be quick, for my father may be here with troops at any minute."

"That's a lie. Your father was not on the train we wrecked. He is hundreds of miles away. He will never find you."

"Ah, but my father has mysterious ways of finding out things. He knows black magic. My father talks with witches and ghosts and they obey him. Perhaps even now, the specters that haunt the caves are leading him to me. Watch out or they will cast a spell on you."

At the girl's words the superstitious peon dropped the firebrand and crossed himself hastily.

"Don't talk of such things," he mumbled sullenly, ashamed of his own fears. "It brings evil to talk of black magic."

"Are you afraid?" she jeered. "*I* have no fear of witchcraft."

"Curse you! I believe you *are* a witch," snarled Pedro, beside himself with fury and terror, and suddenly he fired his rifle from the hip, but with such a jerking, nervous twitch that the bullet went wide.

At the same instant Luck pulled the trigger of his revolver, but only a click answered. The cartridge failed to explode.

Before Luck could fire again, Pedro had dropped his rifle with a crash and fled. As he ran toward the mouth of the cave he was shouting: "She is a witch! A witch! A witch!"

The bandits outside answered with a chorus of yells; some derisive, some terrified. No one ventured to go back for Pedro's rifle.

He had shot at a woman only six feet away—and missed. The woman they were holding for ransom *must* be a witch!

VII.

THERE was not a second to lose if Luck would save the girl. He worked at top speed and with his knife cleared away the débris from the top of the bowlder. As more and more caved in from above, he disposed of it until there was an opening large enough to crawl through.

Doña Rosita did not see or hear him. At Pedro's unexpected flight she had fallen to the ground, completely unnerved by the conflict with the bandit.

If she had not fainted, her senses were benumbed by the strain and not until the cowboy touched her on the shoulder did she realize that a rescuer had appeared, from nowhere apparently.

She gazed at him with wide, questioning gaze; she was too frightened to say a word, but her eyes were eloquent of gratitude and trust.

Luck slashed the cords that bound her, and raised her to her feet.

"Back there!" he whispered. "Hide in there, quick!" and he helped her into the dark passage and over the top of the bowlder.

He was about to follow her, but on second thought turned back into the cave. The danger was not past: the hiding place was no better than a trap.

He knew that one of the bandits, less superstitious than the others, would venture into the presence of the "witch." It would be safer for Rosita if that venturesome bandit should fail to return.

Luck scattered the fire so that only a dim glow remained from the coals, then settled to wait near the passage that led out from the cave to the cañon beyond.

As he squatted there, the cowboy could hear the sound of wrangling, cursing and boasting. One of Pedro's lieutenants was proving his courage by offering to stand guard over the prisoner.

"Viva Miguel!" cried the others as the volunteer prepared to enter Rosita's dreaded presence, and the boastful Miguel shouted back jovially "I'll cut off the witch's ears. Send them to her father and he will hurry to pay the ransom."

As Miguel stumbled along the passage, carrying a revolver in one hand and a knife in the other, his pace slackened a little.

Brave in a crowd, the Mexican was more cautious when alone and when he realized that the fire was almost extinguished and the cave in semidarkness, he proceeded slowly. The others heard his footsteps falter.

"What are you waiting for, Miguel?" cried his comrades, safe in the outer passage. "Don't let the witchwoman put a spell on you!"

For answer the Mexican ripped out an oath. "*Carramba!*" he shouted over his shoulder. "Wait for me. I'll bring you out her pretty little ears."

His sentence ended in a dull groan. Luck sprang out of the darkness, felled him with his revolver butt, and as the bandit dropped, the cowboy leaped on him and wrenched away his gun.

To his astonishment Luck felt his hand drenched with blood. There was no struggle from Miguel, only a convulsive gasp and silence.

Luck passed his hand over the bandit's body and touched the hilt of a knife. In falling Miguel had driven his own blade deep into his vitals. The man was dead without the shadow of a doubt.

Luck crouched there, trying to decide what would be the next move. He was

certain it would be an attack by the whole gang.

A brilliant stratagem occurred to him. Dragging the unfortunate Miguel into the shadows and covering the body with old sacks that lay there, he hurried back to where the girl crouched behind the bowlder.

"Stay here," he whispered. "I am going to leave you for a few minutes. Use this if you are discovered."

He pressed the dead bandit's revolver into Rosita's cold hand, then, brushing past her, the cowboy found his way through the passage that led to the upper chamber.

It was a stiff climb up that chimney-like shaft, but in a few minutes he was again in the tomb of the Indian princess.

There was no delay in carrying out his plan. The mummy of the guard who had watched over the princess was light and small. Luck straightened it as well as he could and dropped it down the shaft.

He listened, heard it brush the sides of the hole as it descended, then with a final jolt it landed in the passage far below.

Then perspiring in his haste, he hurried after the body, and once on his feet in the passage he dragged the mummy to the bowlder, where Rosita was waiting.

"Work fast," he directed. "I am going back into the cave. When I am in there, I want you to hand this—this object to me over the top of the bowlder."

"*Si*, señor," whispered Rosita. "I understand. I will do everything you tell me."

"Good girl!" Luck surprised the daughter of General de Cordoba by a comradely pat on the cheek. She was not used to such familiarities from young men, but certainly she did not resent it.

The next moment Luck was inside the cave and Rosita passed him the shriveled, dried-up remains of the Indian warrior.

VIII.

Luck cautioned Rosita in a hurried whisper. "Keep watch on the entrance from the cañon. If you see any bandits trying to sneak in, shoot."

"*Si*, señor," the girl answered proudly. "I will shoot and shoot straight."

Already she had recovered from the terror of her adventure. Now that she was hoping to escape, she would prove herself worthy of her fighting ancestry, the Cordobas of old Spain.

"*Bueno*. We will outwit that gang—and maybe capture them, too!" answered Luck, and a moment later he was beside the camp fire embers with the mummy.

Hastily removing the old sacks from the body of the slain bandit, the cowboy stripped off its scanty garments, cotton shirt and trousers.

These he drew on the mummy's limbs and in the shriveled fingers he placed the bandit's knife, still red with its owner's blood.

The cartridge belts, he hung over his own shoulders, for there was no telling how much ammunition might be needed.

Replacing the sacks over Miguel, he shoved the body further back in the recesses of the cave where it would be hidden, then started toward the bowlder where Rosita was waiting for him.

So far there had been no interruption from the bandits. Evidently they were too fearful to venture in without a reassuring shout from Miguel.

Now, however, there was a grumbling and growling chorus from without. "Miguel," they called. "*Hola, amigo!* Are you hurt? Did the witch claw out your eyes?"

There was laughter, too, but it was forced laughter. The gang was uneasy.

The voice of Pedro was heard above the rest: "Hola Miguel. Don't stay any longer in that accursed hole. Shoot the witch and bring out the bags of loot."

Luck heard the voices echoing through the rocky corridor. For answer he let out a long wail like the howl of a coyote.

It sounded ghastly enough in that hollow stone vault and a dead silence followed as the gang heard it.

"Guess that 'll hold you for awhile," chuckled the cowboy, and he began feeling around the vicinity of the fire for the bandits' loot.

He was rewarded by coming upon two grain sacks, with wallets, jewelry and watches in the bottom of each. Hastily

snatching them up he ran to the passage, climbed over the bowlder and dropped the bags at Rosita's feet.

"Now, ma'am," he whispered, "we are going to stage the grand surprise." Then at the top of his voice he cried out in Spanish: "I've killed the witch. Come in and see for yourselves, *camarades!*"

Crouching in the dark tunnel some distance back of the bowlder, Luck and Rosita could see above it into the cave.

They waited a few minutes in silence. The bandits were answering with loud shouts of "Viva Miguel!" and curses on the witch who had been vanquished by that brave hombre.

Now the glow of their torches could be seen as they hastened along the outer passage and a moment later the whole band was swarming into the cave.

Instantly there was an uproar of angry and dismayed voices.

"Where are you, Miguel? Where is that accursed witch? Ha, *amigos,* the treasure is gone. The bags have been taken. Miguel has tricked us, the traitor!"

But shrill above the clamor of the other arose the piercing cry of Pedro, who had stumbled on the mummy clad in Miguel's garments: "*Dio mio!*" he screamed. "A spell has been laid on Miguel! The witch has blasted him! He is black as coal!"

With protruding eyes, he stared at the discolored, shriveled body that still clasped Miguel's knife.

"See, *amigos,* the brave fellow stabbed that witch and she blasted him with a spell." The bandit's lips were dripping with foam, he trembled with excitement and seized a comrade to keep from falling.

The other shook him off and bolted for safety, shouting: "Don't touch me. You will be the next to die!"

In a scrambling, sweating mass, the bandits made for the cañon. They had no more thoughts of the treasure or of ransom for the daughter of General Cordoba.

IX.

THE cowboy gave a chuckle of satisfaction as the gang fled from the cave, like rats from a terrier.

"I reckon they won't trouble us no more, ma'am," he remarked in a drawling voice. "Now we can just take it easy till they've gone clean away from the cañon."

Luck climbed over the bowlder without haste and, going to the trampled fire, began gathering the embers and started a fresh blaze.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Doña Rosita, following him uneasily into the cave.

"I want to see what sort of a place this is. Looks to me like a regular hangout of the gang. Maybe we can find something in cans and bottles to make a meal."

Luck picked up a burning stick, which he used as a torch, exploring every corner of the irregular, rock-hewn chamber. It bore evidence of long usage.

There was a store of firewood in one recess and a heap of blackened pots and fry pans beside it. Elsewhere were blankets and quilts for bandits who liked to lie soft.

Broken bottles and empty tins showed that the raiders had secured delicate fare on their expeditions. Strings of red peppers and a sack of brown beans were their staple diet.

But the only food that Luck could prepare in a hurry was a side of bacon, hung by a string to be safe from the rats, and a bag of cornmeal.

A large pottery jar containing water was in one corner.

"Reckon as how bacon and corn cakes is good enough when you're hungry," remarked Luck as he brought his find to the blaze.

He began cooking with the skill of a camp-fire chef, and the girl, entering into the spirit of the occasion, rummaged about among the scattered loot until she unearthed a coarse bag with some coffee beans, roasted, but not ground.

"Now we're all set!" remarked Luck cheerfully. "Corn cakes, fried bacon and coffee—and I don't know what makes better chow onless you throw in a nice can of peaches."

Rosita busied herself pounding the coffee beans between two flat stones. In twenty minutes the pair were resting on saddle blankets beside the fire and enjoying the

rough fare. To her own surprise the girl ate ravenously. Then calm and rested at last, she spoke.

"I hope you don't think I'm ungrateful," she said as Luck rolled a cigarette and settled back in comfort after the meal.

"Ungrateful! How come?" he asked in astonishment.

"Because I didn't thank you and kiss your hands for saving my life. I *am* grateful. I expect to reward you liberally for all you have done for me. But I was so bewildered by all that happened that I was like a person in a nightmare."

"In the first place, ma'am," replied the cowboy, "I don't expect no thanks. What I done was fun. I liked it. As for a reward, I don't want you to make any mistake, so I'll tell you now: I'm a rich man. Worth about a million dollars, I guess."

"You are? I thought you were just a cowboy."

"No, lady. I'm a hard-ridin', quick-shootin' capitalist. I'm lookin' for a likely investment for a million right now. But let's not talk about that. What I want to know is, how did you get into this jam? I gathered that the bandits held up a train and you were on it."

The girl buried her face in her hands as if to shut out the sight of indescribable horrors.

"Oh, please don't ask me to tell you about it," she murmured. "It was too horrible! The burning cars: the passengers shot down as they tried to escape. Even women and little children were slaughtered by those fiends. It is ghastly. I can see the blood and hear the shrieks and groans every time I think of it."

She looked at the cowboy with eyes full of horror at the gruesome memory.

"How come it you were not killed with the rest?" asked Luck.

"It was Pedro who made them take me prisoner. Pedro was once a field worker on my father's plantation and he had seen me riding about the estate. He struck up a gun that was aimed at me and in that way saved my life."

"Now I'm glad, just for that, that I didn't plug him when I had a chance," exclaimed Luck.

"But his motive was vile!" cried Rosita. "He wanted to hold me for a hundred thousand dollars' ransom. He sent a messenger to my father with a death threat against me if the money was not paid or the messenger imprisoned."

"I guess I ought to have plugged that coyote, after all," said Luck. "When he was wavin' that red-hot stick in your face he was nigher to sudden death than he will ever be again. It was just one chance in a million that the shell missed fire."

"Maybe it was lucky for both of us that it did. The gang would have rushed in and slaughtered us. And now that you have got rid of the bandits what are you going to do with me?"

"Well, ma'am, as soon as I'm sure that the gang is out of the cañon, I'll take you out of here. Then I'll turn you over to your pa."

"That's good!" exclaimed Rosita impulsively. "I'd rather *you* would get the hundred thousand dollars than anybody else."

X.

Luck's jaw dropped and he let fall his cigarette in astonishment. The girl was looking at him calmly as she smoothed her tattered skirts.

"What's the idea, ma'am?" asked Luck. "Do you reckon that I'm holdin' you for any hundred thousand dollars?"

"Why, of course! Isn't that enough?"

"Sufferin' sidewinders!" Luck jumped to his feet and confronted her angrily. "What do you think I am? A bandit?"

"Why, I thought so. Certainly. You are dressed like a cowboy, yet you talk about owning a million dollars. Besides, my father says that *all* Americans are bandits."

"Good night!" groaned Luck. "No wonder we're always having trouble on the border! So you think all Americans are bandits eh?"

The girl did not answer, but gazed at him with wondering eyes. For the first time Luck realized that she was the loveliest girl he had ever seen, dainty of form, delicate of feature and with eyes and lips that were miracles of enticement.

But he was too angry to be softened by her appealing charm. He shouted at her, red-faced and indignant: "Listen, Doña Rosita. This Pedro is a Mexican, isn't he?"

"*Sí*, señor."

"And he calls himself a general?"

"*Sí*."

"And your father is also a Mexican and a general, so, according to your reasoning, your father must be just like Pedro. How about it?"

The girl flushed, looked embarrassed, then glanced up at him with a sparkling smile.

"You must excuse me," she laughed and in halting English added: "I was one big damn fool."

Doña Rosita extended her slim hand and Luck seized it, giving it a vigorous shake. Then he drew her to her feet.

"I'm goin' to take a look outside," he told her. "Keep your gun handy in case of surprise. If the cañon is clear of them varmints, we'll get out of here pronto."

Luck proceeded cautiously along the passage to the cañon. He took no chances on some sentinel lurking outside, at the cave's mouth, fringed with brush, he kneeled and looked in both directions.

It was late in the afternoon and already the light was fading. The cliffs were unfamiliar. This was not Rattlesnake Cañon, but must be one of its little-traveled tributaries. Luck knew that there were plenty of hidden ravines that made ideal lurking places for border ruffians.

Leaving the cave at last, the cowboy scrambled down to the creek only a few yards below. He wanted to get his bearings so that he could recover his horse from the bald cliff, but, try as he would, the landmarks told him nothing.

Luck whistled softly as he walked down the creek, trying to decide what to do. He could not go about looking for his horse and leave Rosita alone in the cave.

To bring the girl along would be a hardship for her, for the country was too rugged and brush-covered for a woman to scramble about afoot.

There was one other alternative. He could get her out of the cave the way he had entered, over the ledge of the eagle's nest; either that or stay in the cave till daylight.

As Luck pondered the question, the light faded rapidly. It was twilight; already the cañon was beginning to grow dark.

The cowboy ran up the trail to the cave and hurried through the passage to where he had left Rosita. Approaching the vaulted chamber, he whistled cheerily, and the echoes answered with equal gayety. But when he called her name, only the echoes replied.

The fire was still burning as he had left it; the remains of their supper were beside it; but Rosita? Rosita was gone!

XI.

With a sudden sinking of the heart, Luck hurried to the big bowlder, hoping that the girl might have concealed herself there.

Nothing.

The space where they had sheltered themselves was empty except for the two sacks containing the bandits' loot. Could Rosita have gone still farther into the tunnel? Had some noise frightened her so that she had fled up that narrow passage, pitch dark and winding?

The cowboy called her name again and again as he stumbled along, almost fearing to trip over her body. Unreasoning worry tormented him. It was crazy to imagine that Rosita had come to harm in the short time he had been away, nevertheless the boy turned cold at the thought of any mischance happening to her.

Desperately he turned to retrace his steps at last, and, entering the cave, he seized a firebrand and searched in every corner of the place.

Everything was as before. Only Rosita was not there.

"Rosita gone!"

As the words were uttered in a half groan, Luck realized what they meant to him. Only that morning he had been ignorant of the girl's existence. If she had perished then, he would never have been aware of a loss.

Now it seemed to him that if anything happened to that lovely Spanish maiden

he would grieve for her to the day of his death.

She meant a great deal to him—a very great deal. It came to him with an overpowering shock that he was in love. Luck, who had never wasted two thoughts on any girl before, was now hard hit.

"Rosita,!" he cried frantically. "Rosita! Where are you?"

Only the mocking echoes answered him, and, still carrying the brand, he ran through the passage toward the cave's mouth.

Outside it was dark by now, the sudden darkness of the southern border, and he could no longer see the trail. There was no sound but the wind swaying the cottonwood trees and the murmuring of the stream.

"Rosita!" he called in the blackness; and her name resounded from the cañon walls.

He listened, and far up the stream he thought he heard a faint call. Luck's heart leaped. Again he shouted and ran toward the sound, holding his torch above his head.

He was reckless now. If bandits were lurking about, they would find him an easy target with his noise and his firebrand. But such dangers were forgotten.

With a great sob of relief he saw a pale figure advancing toward him through the underbrush. A second later and he was seizing the girl's hand with a grip of steel.

"Hush! Hush! Do not shout. Put out that light," she whispered; and, without waiting for him to obey, she snatched the torch and buried it in the loose soil.

"Back to the cave!" she urged feverishly. "We are not alone in the cañon. After you left I followed you, and I saw a light up the creek. It was just a flash; somebody striking a match."

Already they were in the corridor, and she was urging him along.

"Don't wait outside! It is Pedro's gang. I am sure of it."

"Then they must have seen us. That torch gave away everything." Luck cursed his own blunder, then added: "I was wild about you, Rosita. I was scared to death for fear you were hurt."

"You care so much?" Her voice expressed more than surprise. There was an answering thrill, and Luck pressed her hand convulsively.

"Do I *care?* Why, girl I'd die if anything happened to you."

They were in the cave, making straight for their old retreat when the first sound of pursuit reached their ears. It was the sharp crack of a rifle, then another and another.

Still more rifle shots were heard in the distance, or perhaps it was the echo. The two in the cave could not tell which.

"You've got the gun I gave you?" asked Luck.

"*Sí, sí.* Here it is."

"Good. I've got mine, and there is plenty of ammunition. Get back of that bowlder. We can stand off the gang from that shelter."

Here they rested, watching for what might happen next.

To their surprise, the firing had ceased; the bandits were not rushing the cave. Outside as well as within there was only ominous silence.

"What are they waiting for?" whispered Luck.

"I think they are afraid of black magic," the girl answered. "You know the peons are terribly superstitious. Maybe they thought your torch was a ghost light or some sort of witchcraft."

"Maybe so. But I don't want to sit here waiting for the gang to get up courage. Let's leave by the back door."

"How so?"

In a few words he explained the way he had entered, then, taking the girl's hand, he led her up the narrow passage.

There was dead silence behind them, pitch blackness and silence before. The girl shuddered, but kept bravely on.

Finally they reached the chimney that led up to the tomb, and Luck directed her how to brace herself with hands and feet as she ascended.

"Can you climb?"

"Like a squirrel," she answered. "I'll go first."

"All right, Rosita. I'll stay below to catch you if you fall."

He helped her get her first footing, then stood in the blackness listening as she worked her way upward.

Presently he heard her give a little sigh of distress.

"*Madre de Dio!* But this chimney is a mile high, my friend."

"Don't lose your nerve," he encouraged her. "Keep going. You must be near the top."

Anxiously he strained his ears until a subdued cry of joy floated down to him.

"I'm all right, but aching all over."

"Good kid. I'll be with you in a minute."

Before long the cowboy had scrambled up and the couple were in the tomb of the Indian princess.

Luck struck a match, and, emptying a basket of its century-old grain, he ignited the pitch that had sealed it. In a few moments the basket was burning brightly, and by its dancing light the girl stared at her strange surroundings.

"It's like something I have dreamed of!" she cried. Then, at sight of the mummified princess with gold and silver ornaments, she exclaimed: "Why, it's like the prehistoric tombs in my own country. Tribes that fought my ancestors must have lived here."

She saw the heaps of gold and turquoise poured out of the jars, and her eyes brightened.

"It was treasure like this that brought the Cordobas from Spain hundreds of years ago," she cried. "And you, Señor Americano, are taking the role of an ancient *conquistadore.*"

"I told you I was a rich man," answered Luck simply. "All I want to say is that I'd like nothin' better than to give it all to you."

Rosita blushed and looked away.

XII.

Luck was too embarrassed at his own temerity to add anything to his fervid utterance. To cover his agitation he stooped and began shoveling the treasure back into the jars, handfuls of gold and gems scooped up like so much gravel. In one pocket he dropped a handful of coarse nuggets.

"We can't take more than this with us," he explained. "Not just now, at least. Here, lady, won't you take this bracelet and wear it to remember me?"

It was a band of massive gold rudely beaten out of soft metal and studded with large greenish blue stones of irregular shape. Rosita took it gravely and placed it on her dainty wrist.

"It's barbaric!" she exclaimed. "But it's rich and beautiful. Señor Americano, it's a gift worthy of a prince."

Shyly she pressed the bracelet to her lips, and as she betrayed her emotion a crimson flush extended from her slender throat to her brow.

She murmured: "*Mucha gracias.* I shall never forget you, Señor Americano."

"Fer the love of—Say, ma'am, would you do me one favor?"

"Yes. Perhaps. What is it?"

"Please cut out that 'Señor Americano' stuff. You make me feel like a foreigner. My friends call me Luck."

"Luck? That's a nice name. It means good fortune."

"Good or bad, just as it happens. Just now it's the best ever. If you call me Luck, it's bound to be good."

"Very well. From now on I shall call you Luck, and you shall call me Rosita. Do you like Rosita for a name?"

"Don't ask me. I'm sure to say something foolish."

His hands shaking with emotion, Luck turned again to the treasure, and when it was all stowed away he hid it carefully back of the stone chair where the princess had sat. Then he lifted the fallen mummy and replaced her on her throne.

"Aren't you going to take her bracelets and necklaces?" asked Rosita.

"I should say not!" retorted Luck hotly. "The princess is going to stay just as she is till the Day of Judgment."

He replaced the bronze grating at the foot of the throne that covered the chimney and wedged it firmly into place.

"Luck, you are a real caballero," said Rosita gently. "A bandit or a boor would have stripped the princess without thinking twice."

The boy did not reply. Instead, he

showed her the passage leading to the ledge on the cliff, and they entered it hand in hand.

At the mouth of the passage they halted suddenly, their blood chilled by a wailing, lugubrious sound.

"Ugh-hoo! Ugh-hoo!"

Rosita tightened her hand on his. "Holy saints! What is that?"

Luck reassured her. "It's the same noise that scared me when I first came in here. I thought sure it was ghosts, but now I know better. When that grating is over the hole it makes a whistling noise when the draft goes through it. Listen. There it goes again."

Rosita was calmed by the explanation.

"Those Indians were clever," she said. "I am sure that grating was made with hollow bars to whistle like that. The tribesmen knew it would scare off would-be grave robbers."

A moment later the boy and girl stood on the ledge. The moonlight was shining on the opposite bluffs and throwing a faint light into the cañon. Their own side was in deep shadow.

Grasping a juniper trunk, the cowboy leaned far out and saw a flickering camp fire at the base of the cliff. Dark shadows of men were squatting around the blaze and on the grassy patches could be seen horses grazing.

"This must be the camp where the bandits are waiting for daylight," whispered Luck "Why do you think they are waiting there?"

"They are afraid to enter the cave," answered the girl; "but they suspect that the witchcraft may be a hoax. I am sure that they have sentinels posted in every direction."

"I reckon that's the answer. Maybe if they drink a lot of mescal they will get up enough courage to rush the cave by daylight. That's another reason they hang around here."

"There is a better reason than that!" exclaimed Rosita. "They are expecting the messenger with the ransom. As long as they expect that hundred thousand dollars they will stay in the neighborhood."

"In that case, we'll trap 'em sure as shooting!" exclaimed Luck. "I'll go up to where my horse is; then I'll get you, and we'll ride over the ridge to my outfit. I'll bring over the Bar Circle Bar boys, and we'll clean up the whole gang.

In a moment he was on his feet and scrambling up the juniper trunk. He found the knotted rope to which his horse was tethered by the saddlehorn.

Luck gave it a gentle tug, then a stout pull. The rope gave a little, then pulled back as if the horse on the summit had braced against the familiar strain.

"It's all right, Rosita," he sent his voice to the girl in a loud whisper. "I'll go up the rope, then lower it for you."

"Be careful, Luck."

"Don't you worry none," he answered, and, untying the lariat from the tree, began to ascend hand over hand.

As he climbed he wondered why the eagles that had nested there were not flying about his head. Had he scared them away for keeps?

When the cowboy reached the top of the cliff and swung a leg over he received a shock that almost made him lose his grip on the rope. Now he *was* up against it, for a pair of brawny Mexican ruffians were squatting in the moonlight holding their guns on him.

XIII.

It was too late to retreat. Evidently the cowboy had climbed into a trap. The Mexicans must have been patiently awaiting their victim for some little time, as a scattering of playing cards showed that they had been indulging in a little game.

The two swarthy strangers did not deign to speak. They simply held their six-shooters leveled at Luck's head and grinned in malicious satisfaction.

Luck Larrabee required both hands to hang on at the edge of the cliff. There was no chance to reach for his gun. He was neatly cornered.

"All right, hombres," he said cheerfully. "You've got me all right." He scrambled to his feet and at a grunted command elevated his hands.

While one of the Mexicans kept him covered, the other secured the cowboy's

gun and cartridge belts, then one of them asked:

"What were you doing down there?"

"Looking for an eagle's nest," answered Luck.

"That's a likely story," sneered the second Mexican. "Put a bullet in him, Juan, and send him to hell with a black lie on his lips."

"Be still, Manuel!" retorted the other. "I am in command here. I am a sergeant, and you are only a corporal."

Manuel grumbled and subsided, while Juan continued:

"It will do you no good to lie to me, Señor Gringo. I am an intelligent man; that is why I was made sergeant. I am clever; I can see through all your lies."

The vanity of his captor was so apparent that Luck resolved quickly to play on it.

"You are right, sergeant," he said. "It would be foolish to attempt to deceive you. I went down there for another purpose."

"To spy on our camp in the cañon?"

"Your camp? No, that is the first I've heard of that. I was hunting treasure—gold. What do you think of that, *amigo?*"

Juan was interested at once.

"Gold?" he echoed. "Did you find gold?"

"I sure did. There's a cache down below in a cave. Feel in my pocket if you don't believe me?"

With a jerk of his head, Juan motioned to Manuel to search Luck's pocket. The brown hand came out clutching wealth in the shape of shining nuggets, and Manuel showed them to his sergeant, crying: "Enough! Shoot the gringo dog, then we'll empty his cache."

"You'll never find it," said Luck clearly. "Where that's hid you will not locate it in a thousand years."

"Pay no attention to that idiot," cried the sergeant. "Manuel has only one idea in his thick skull—to kill people. He is a brute."

"While you are a caballero," answered Luck diplomatically. "I can tell that you are smart as a whip."

"*Bueno.* We understand each other. Now, Señor Americano, tell me, as one gentleman to another, how much gold is in that cache?"

"A fortune," answered Luck. "Enough to make us both rich."

"And me, too?" shouted Manuel.

"Silence, dog!" answered the sergeant. "When the masters have fed, the curs receive the bones. You shall have your pickings later. This gentleman and I understand each other."

Luck had no illusions regarding Sergeant Juan's good intentions. Greed was written all over the man's features. His plan was to cajole Luck into showing him the treasure, then cut his throat. Manuel would be spared until he could help transport the loot to safety; then he, too, would be disposed of.

As for the gang, the bandit had no reason to share his wealth with the others, and he would simply desert without a scruple.

Such, at least, was Luck's reading of the sergeant's mind. The fellow was simple as a child, in spite of his pretense of cleverness.

Luck appeared to be in accord with the Mexican's proposal.

"There is gold enough in that cave to make us all millionaires," he declared. "Why should I want it all? As a matter of fact, señor, I am glad you are here, for I need help to carry the treasure away. You have two horses; I have one. The three will be loaded so that their legs will double up if we try to carry it all."

The sergeant's eyes glistened with avarice. Manuel looked greedily on like a hungry dog. If there had been a load for twenty horses, it would not have been too much for those land pirates.

Juan licked his lips and said: "You are a brave man and a good comrade. Lower your hands. Sit down and let us decide how to bring up the treasure."

"Nothing easier," answered Luck. "I'll go down and tie a basketful on the rope. You drag it up, and Manuel will tie it on the horse. When all the gold is here, you can haul me up, and we'll ride away together."

The plan sounded good, but Juan an-

swered thoughtfully: "Your plan is excellent, señor. Only suppose you forget to send up *all* the gold?"

"Then we could come back for a second haul," the cowboy answered.

"But if we became separated," insisted Juan, "and if I came back alone, could I find the cache?"

"Maybe not. It's hidden pretty deep."

"Then the best way would be for me to go down with you. You show me the hiding place. In that way, all the gold can be secured."

Luck chuckled inwardly. The greedy sergeant was falling into the trap.

"Suits me," he answered.

"But what about me?" asked Manuel. "Am I to be the only one who will be ignorant of the hiding place?"

"Will you be still, you dog? Your betters are conversing," cried the sergeant.

"You can both come down, as far as I am concerned," answered Luck. "We're all equal partners, as far as I can see."

Sergeant Juan sulkily pretended to agree.

"All right, Manuel," he said. "You can come down later and see the gold for yourself. But first the caballero and I will go down."

He motioned to Luck in grandiose fashion. "You first, señor."

The cowboy walked over to his horse, still patiently waiting near the edge of the cliff, and gave it a pat. Then with a wave of the hand he seized the rope and descended to the ledge.

Rosita was waiting in the shadows of the cave mouth. Her eyes were wide and anxious, for she had heard the low voices of the men, and though she could not make out the words she anticipated trouble. In her hand she held the revolver that Luck had given her.

Without a word he gently pushed her inside the cave and took her weapon; then he gave vent to a low whistle as a signal for Juan to descend into the cave.

XIV.

Luck had not long to wait.

The sergeant, impatient for the sight of all that treasure, grasped the rope and slid down the moment he heard Luck's whistle. Before his feet had touched the ledge, however, the cowboy's fist took him on the jaw, and he dropped in a heap with only a faint groan.

In a second Luck whipped off the bandit's neck-cloth of gay silk and gagged the unconscious man. With the sergeant's belt he secured his hands.

Looking up to the top of the cliff, he saw Manuel peering over, trying to pierce the shadows under the junipers. Once more Luck gave a low whistle.

"Is everything all right?" asked Manuel eagerly.

"Sure. Fine as silk."

"Where's the sergeant?"

"Already in the cave," answered Luck.

"Can't I come down, too?" came the plaintive and sulky whisper from the second bandit.

"You take your orders from Juan. Better wait till he gives you permission."

"If you say so, it will be all right," coaxed the Mexican. "I beg you, Señor Americano, tell me to come down. I want to see the cache where the gold is hidden."

"Come at your own risk," answered Luck. "But don't blame me if the sergeant kicks you into the cañon."

Cautiously Manuel gripped the rope and prepared to swing down. He was not so expert as the others, though, and the rope slid through his hands, burning the palms. He sprawled in a heap, landing on top of the prostrate sergeant, and uttered a shrill scream of terror.

Instantly Luck was on top of him, seizing him by the throat to cut off that warning outcry; but he was too late, for at the Mexican's yell a shot rang out from the cañon below, and the whole gang sent up a shout of apprehension.

Striking in the dark, the cowboy missed his opponent's jaw. His blow only enraged the brawny ruffian, who screamed louder than ever and struck out with hands and feet, while Luck gritted his teeth and tried to subdue him.

But Manuel was as strong as an ox and fought desperately for his life.

Luck's blows fell on his thick skin without disabling the Mexican, who got a grip on the cowboy's neck with his left hand, hard and unyielding as a vise, while with his right he felt for his revolver.

To make the cowboy's situation more perilous, the other bandit began to regain his senses. Gagged as he was and with both hands tied, Juan could only strike out with his feet, but he delivered his kicks with the blind fury of a mule, groaning and writhing about on the narrow ledge.

Luck saw the end of the struggle, with himself as the first victim and Rosita as the second.

The thought of the girl's terrible fate spurred him to superhuman exertions. He wriggled loose from the clutch of Manuel, feeling for the gun he had taken from Rosita, which had been lost in the scuffle.

That movement almost cost him his life: Manuel had taken advantage of a momentary freedom to bring his own revolver into action.

Luck seized the wrist that held it, and with both hands tried to wrench it away. Now Manuel's face was very close to his own, and the Mexican's hot breath was on the boy's face.

Desperately Luck tried to twist the muzzle of the revolver away from him; steadily the bandit worked the weapon toward his enemy. And underneath the struggling foes the half-dazed Juan twisted and groaned, lashing out with his heels.

Suddenly Manuel's white teeth flashed in a grin. He felt the muzzle of his gun press into yielding flesh. With a hoarse cry of triumph he pulled the trigger.

Luck felt the report close to his head and the ringing in his ears was stunning.

"I guess I've got it this time," he thought. I'm drilled by a greaser. God what a finish!"

XV.

But a violent upheaval threw the cowboy to one side. The bullet intended for Luck had pierced the shoulder of Juan, and, stung to madness by the pain, the sergeant flung himself about like a wounded buffalo.

With a mighty wrench he tore loose the belt that bound his wrists and grappled with the bulky Manuel, who was bewildered by the sudden attack.

"Keep off!" he bellowed. "It is Manuel, your friend."

Shoved to one side by the struggling men, Luck dimly realized that the two were fighting each other instead of uniting against him.

He pulled himself together and began searching frantically for the revolver that would make him master of the situation. He felt sure that the Mexicans would fall away from each other when their frenzy had passed, and then they would turn on him.

But what Luck did not count on was the smoldering grudge between the bandits, which this chance encounter had inflamed. For a long time the sergeant had taunted Manuel and insulted him. Now the latter had an excuse to strike back, and in his bitter hatred of Juan he welcomed the opportunity.

With one arm about the sergeant's back, he battered his enemy furiously, using his six-shooter as a club. Juan tried to protect his head from the savage blows, wrestling desperately and trying to throw his opponent. The pair of madmen fought with only one compelling passion—to utterly destroy the other.

Luck shifted his position to avoid them, for the ledge was a perilous stage for such a primitive battle. Watching his chance, he slipped by the pair and dodged into the entrance of the cave.

Rosita was crouching inside, looking on in terror. Even in the deep shadow one could see the pallor of her face.

"Have you found the gun, Rosita? It fell when I was mixed up with that brute."

"No, no, I did not see it. I was so frightened that I ran back into the tunnel. Oh, Luck, we will be killed—both of us!"

Her excitement was followed by a scattering fire from the bandits below in the cañon. The noise of the fighters had alarmed them and bullets went whistling past the ledge. Some struck the cliff and sent little fragments of rock spattering down.

"If I could only find that gun," growled

Luck, "I could get both these greasers. Then we could be over the top and away before the gang gets here."

He cried out in sudden alarm: "Stop! Rosita! What crazy trick are you up to?"

But the girl had slipped away from his side, and on her hands and knees was almost under the fighters.

"I see the gun. I'm going to get it!" she gasped, then gave a shrill scream as one of the fighters trampled on her hand.

Luck sprang to Rosita's aid and pulled her back to safety just as she seized the fallen gun.

At the same instant the battle between Juan and Manuel reached its climax. The sergeant freed one hand and struck his enemy a terrific, crashing blow between the eyes.

The other swayed backward, stepped blindly to keep his balance, and found only thin air under his foot. With one arm still about Juan's throat he strove to regain his foothold, and the pair swayed horribly on the edge of the chasm like a tree that is about to fall.

Then with a groan of horror they toppled and their bodies, still locked in a death grapple, went hurtling down the precipice.

Luck ran to the edge, clinging to a juniper trunk and watched the black, writhing shadow whirl across the firelight and crash to the ground.

There was a second of profound silence, then a chorus of yells. Maddened by what they saw, the bandits delivered volley after volley at the cliff, and in reply received chunks of rocks torn loose by the bullets.

The cowboy dodged back to the shelter of the ledge.

"This is sure a warm roost!" he remarked. "Looks like it's going to be hotter still when the gang gets above us and starts smoking us out."

Already galloping hoofs were heard in the cañon. The bandits were sending a detachment up the trail to the cliff.

XVI.

"We've got to work fast!" exclaimed Luck. "Rosita, are you game to take the chance of being hit by a stray bullet?"

"Anything to get out of here!" the girl cried.

"Here goes, then!"

Luck swarmed up the rope once more and paid no attention to the slugs that sang about his ears. It would be a bad break if one got him; not marksmanship, for the men in the cañon could not pick him out in the shadow.

Once at the top, he whispered loudly enough to carry: "Tie the rope under your arms, Rosita. Whistle when it's time to haul you up."

In less than a minute he heard her signal and pulled away on the rope with all his strength. The girl was a light weight, she was coming along easily.

But halfway to the top she gave a gasp of dismay. The whole cañon seemed to flame in sudden light. The bandits below must have poured kerosene on the fire, for a fierce blaze leaped up that showed every object on both walls of the cañon with sharp outline.

Immediately the shooting began again, this time with a clear target to aim at.

Hauling frantically at the rope, Luck heard his voice praying: "Oh, Lord, don't let a bullet get her! Oh, Lord, make 'em shoot wild!"

No sound came from the girl's lips. After the first gasp she hung there passive and silent.

A moment later she was at the top of the cliff. Luck dragged her back to safety, passed his hands over her to feel for wounds or blood and was wild with delight to find her unhurt.

But she was weak and dizzy from the ascent and half stunned by the volleys aimed at her. Luck seized the canteen from his saddle-horn, dashed the contents over her head and swiftly coiled his lariat for a throw.

The Mexicans' horses were grazing near by. The cowboy roped one and swung into the saddle. To his great joy he found a rifle in a holster attached under the stirrup leather.

"Climb on my buckskin, Rosita," he commanded. "We are going to do some fancy riding before this night is over."

He felt sure that his own mount would

not pitch and throw the girl. Of the Mexican's horse he knew nothing except that it seemed to be strong and fresh. The third horse, he started on a gallop ahead, for there was no sense in leaving a fresh mount for their pursuers.

The moonlight was bright enough to see their way on the top of the cliff; too bright, Luck thought, for it would make it easy for the gang to sight them. He urged his horse away from the cañon, closely followed by Rosita, who seemed at home in the saddle.

While the cowboy was not familiar with the mountains above Rattlesnake, he had a good sense of direction, and pushed on.

The Bar Circle Bar ranch was about twenty miles to the northeast. If he and Rosita had the right breaks, they might find their course over the ridges and pick up cattle trails that would enable them to cross the intervening cañons.

He headed his borrowed mount for a low growth of scrubby oaks and pines a half mile back from the cañon. What he wanted first of all was cover; he was going to need it badly.

Rosita, on her buckskin, kept at his heels without difficulty and did not speak. It looked like a clean getaway as they neared the sheltering woods.

Then a yell of malediction broke out behind them. The boy glanced over his shoulder and saw a string of horsemen advancing up the ravine from the cañon.

"Here they come!" he cried to the girl. "Lie low on the saddle and ride like hell. In a second they'll begin shootin'."

Luck was right. Shots crackled and the ominous zingg of bullets was heard, menacing as angry hornets about their ears. But the fugitives were nearing cover.

"Burn the wind, girl. Lie flat and give him his head!" shouted Luck.

The exclamation ended with an oath of dismay. Luck's mount took a bullet back of the shoulder and pitched forward heavily, the cowboy going over the animal's head.

Rosita drew rein so hastily that she was almost thrown, but the cowboy, scrambling to his feet, jerked out the rifle from the saddle holster.

"Don't stop," he cried. "Keep goin'. I'll fight 'em off."

He knelt behind the fallen horse and took careful aim at the first of his pursuers.

"Crack!" A saddle was empty.

Instantly with a chorus of yells the bandits spread out and galloped in a wide arc to cut off the fugitive's retreat.

Luck, with a hasty glance over his shoulder, saw that Rosita had gained the shelter of the woods. He pulled his trigger once more, a horse went sprawling and the rider crawled feebly away.

"If I can keep 'em busy for half an hour," the boy muttered, "it will give the kid a fighting chance for her life."

"Ping!" A bullet struck the saddle of the dead horse and glancing, tore through the shoulder of Luck's shirt.

"Thud!" Another slug landed in the animal's carcass.

"Those boys can sure shoot some!" thought Luck. "I'll be drilled in five minutes at this rate."

But unshaken by the menace of swift death, the cowboy aimed and fired with cool precision.

"I'll have lots of company on my way to hell," he commented grimly. "It will be a procession."

XVII.

Luck felt that the chances of saving his own life were slim, but that was all the more reason for doing his utmost to protect Rosita as long as possible.

Without his guidance and help, it was going to be no easy task for her to ride across the hills to safety. He resolved to fight off her pursuers to his last cartridge and his last breath.

The place where he had made his desperate stand was situated so that the cowboy could cover the girl's retreat. The plateau was narrow enough at that point so that his rifle could command both sides that extended without cover to deep chasms on the east and west.

In order to reach the sheltering woods to the north where the girl had disappeared, it would be necessary for the assailants to pass within gunshot. Luck kept a wary guard to right and left and picked off a couple of venturesome bandits who tried to dash by.

Though it was too great range for Luck to be sure that he had killed them, there was no doubt that they had been unhorsed and disabled. At least they would offer no further menace to the fleeing girl. Also the gang was short two more fighting men and that helped some.

As the minutes passed by, Luck began to feel more hopeful of Rosita's escape. In case the woods led to a cañon beyond, the cowboy was sure that his intelligent buckskin would find a down trail, if there was one.

Once free of the bandits, the girl had a fair chance to reach the Bar Circle Bar outfit or some other friendly rescuers.

For every bullet that whistled above him and failed to put him out, the boy breathed a prayer for the girl's safety. Every rod, every mile she could put between herself and those blood-thirsty ruffians, would double her hope of escape. By that time she might be a mile away, he thought.

It did not occur to the cowboy that she would refuse to desert him and when a sudden brisk outburst of firing indicated that the bandits had located a new target, he glanced toward the woods and was staggered to see the dim shape of a light-colored horse.

"Buckskin!" What in the everlasting blazes was his horse doing there? Had the frightened girl lost her way? Had she gone crazy?

At the rattle of rifle shots, the horse disappeared in the shadows and Luck hastily filled the magazine of his rifle from the belt buckled to the saddle, preparing for the grand rush that he guessed might be coming.

On second thoughts he slipped the belt of ammunition around his waist, with vague thoughts of making a running fight for the woods.

That foolhardy notion was abandoned at once. He would be picked off easily, once out of shelter of the dead horse. A man on foot could not possibly run fast enough to escape those keen-eyed marksmen. It would be plain suicide.

Moreover it was already too late, for while he was thinking it over a gang was dashing straight toward him in single file, lying close to their horses' necks for shelter and shooting as they galloped.

They were taking a big chance. Some were sure to fall; but the rest must be on top of the cowboy, who could not shoot fast enough to get them all. Two smaller groups swung to right and left to ride past during the attack.

Luck saw the stratagem and wasted no time. Long before he had any right to expect a hit, he let drive at the first of the onrushing bandits.

To his surprise the man threw both arms aloft and fell from the saddle, while his horse came galloping on full tilt.

Luck took careful aim and brought down the horse just behind and its fall threw the whole line into confusion as there was a brief tangle of riders and horses over the fallen animal.

Meanwhile the riderless horse was plunging straight at Luck. The cowboy saw his opportunity and jumped up to be ready for it.

Still holding the rifle, he ran alongside the frightened animal, gripped the saddle horn with one hand and at the same instant made a clever leap that brought one foot in the stirrup.

It was a trick that he had accomplished more than once at rodeos, but this time he was doing it for a bigger stake, for his life and Rosita's.

Hanging close to the horse's body as it galloped on, the cowboy was a difficult mark for the pursuers, especially as the terrified animal ran in a wild, zigzag course.

Luck let it travel its own way until he saw the woods close ahead. Then with an easy swing he gained the saddle and half turned to fire at the gang. He was surprised to see how much he had gained on them, and hope sprang up in his breast.

The pale shape of the buckskin was visible in the brush near by. Luck cried out: "Rosita. Here we are. Keep close after me."

With another leap his horse was crashing through the undergrowth and Luck could hear the girl urging her own mount to follow.

The bandits had not given up the chase; they proved their determination by the bul-

lets that slashed off twigs and leaves in the path of the fugitives, but now Luck felt that there was a fighting chance to win through.

In the woods they were not a target; furthermore the Mexican horde had received a lesson. It was bad news for the gang every time Luck's rifle barked.

Their eagerness to catch the girl and the straight-shooting buckaroo was tempered with caution.

Gradually Luck heard the noise of the galloping hoofs diminish as he tore through the brush. Rosita followed close, gamely enduring the scratching of the small branches that whipped back and struck at her face and her arms.

As the immediate danger lessened she even felt a pleasurable thrill in the excitement. This was life. To come so close to sudden death and cheat it by courage and skill. It was life to tear madly through the forest in the protection of the man she was learning to love.

XVIII.

To the cowboy's great relief, the underbrush thinned out after half a mile or so, and the horses dashed into a flat covered with grass and clumps of low-growing mesquite.

Across the level ground ran a dim irregular trail made by cattle on their way to water.

"Keep on going, Rosita. Here's where we split the breeze!" cried Luck and gave his horse the spurs.

The girl stayed close behind on the narrow trail. As it dived into a heavier growth of trees, she did not falter, and when the edge of the plateau was reached and the path began to zigzag dangerously to the creek far below, she showed no signs of fear, although in some parts it was like riding down a roof.

The ponies braced their forelegs stiffly and leaned back on their haunches, sliding over rotten, treacherous rock, and once the stream bed was reached, their hoofs slipped on the water-polished stones. But Rosita was game.

The hard riding had no terrors for her and she kept the buckskin traveling at the reckless pace set by her friend.

There was no doubt that Rosita was at home in the saddle.

At a grass flat where the cañon widened somewhat, the fugitives drew rein to listen for sounds of pursuit. Nothing broke the stillness of the night but the distant baying of a coyote. Overhead the moon pierced the foliage of the big cottonwood where they had come to a halt and a warm breeze stirred the branches.

It seemed incredible, in this peaceful hour, that only a short time before the uproar of gunfighting and the shouts of murderous outlaws had made the night hideous.

The cowboy was not optimistic enough to believe that the bandits had given up the chase. It was probable that they had missed the trail into the cañon and had wasted a lot of time riding along the bluffs and searching for a way down from the plateau.

When the two rested in their saddles, a shot was heard far away in the direction they had come.

"Hear that? Those greasers are 'way back yonder," remarked Luck. "Reckon one of 'em fired at a shadow expectin' it was us."

He slipped off his horse, carefully examined the latigos to make sure that the cinches had not loosened in that scramble down the trail and allowed the ponies to munch the grass.

"Guess we'll jest mosey along," he remarked nonchalantly.

Now that the pursuers were no longer at their heels, he took the situation quite calmly.

"Do you know this trail?" asked the girl, surprised at his coolness.

"Not this one. Lots of this country ain't rode over much, and I've no more idee than a rabbit just where we're at. But don't worry none, sister. We'll follow the creek till we find a way up the other side, then we'll work north and east. Before long I'll be in a range that I know, and then it will be no trick at all to find a cow camp."

Though he spoke with assurance, Luck was a bit puzzled. The winding of this un-

known cañon was carrying them away from the northeast. Of course it was impossible to turn back, for that would bring them face to face with the outlaws, who must be in the cañon by this time.

As Luck swung into the saddle and sent his horse forward at an easy trot, he strained his eyes for a trail up the opposite wall, or even a break in the rocks where they might force a passage.

But there was no outlet. Nothing remained but to follow the water course that flowed between ever narrowing cliffs.

The ponies trotted side by side over a wash of dry sand. Luck saw they were leaving plain tracks in the moonlight and slowed his pony while he uncoiled his lariat. Then he roped a bush and gave his horse the spurs tearing out the brush by the roots.

Riding back to the beginning of the sand wash, he dragged the mass of leaves and twigs along the tracks in the sand, blurring them effectually.

Not until the horses came to hard rock again did he throw away the brush, then as he drew in his rope, coiling it to attach to the saddle, a sudden scream from Rosita sent the chills up and down his back.

Just a few yards beyond the girl, where a ledge projected over the trail, a tawny, flattened body was crouching in the moonlight, its long tail nervously lashing in preparation for a leap.

"A cougar!" cried Luck. "Give him room!"

The animal must have been famished to venture an attack on a human being, its most dangerous enemy, but even as Luck shouted the creature sprang. A huge, sinewy body with flattened ears, snarling jaws and claws as hard and sharp as razor steel, leaped at Rosita as her terrified horse bolted under the ledge.

The cowboy had not time to figure out what to do: he acted on instinct. The rifle was in the holster, the rope in his hand.

A second before the cougar leaped the loop was shooting straight at the beast. The ferocious mountain lion, flying through the air, shot into the loop and the same instant Luck gave his horse the spurs.

With a half hitch around his saddle horn and the loop strangling the cougar, Luck spurted madly along the creek bed.

Behind him trailed a spitting, clawing giant cat, thumping against bowlders, torn by stumps and half drowned by dragging through water holes.

The horses needed no urging. Frightened by the odor of their deadly foe into a race for life, they tore through the cañon, and only their animal instinct helped them find a foothold in the shadows.

They traveled more than a mile in this fashion, Rosita in the lead, bending low in the saddle to protect her face from the branches and twigs; Luck close at her heels, holding his horse to keep it from crowding the pony ahead, and thirty feet behind at the end of a stout rope, the torn and bleeding mountain lion, scuffling and clawing more and more feebly as it took the terrific punishment. For all the deer and cattle it had gashed with its cruel claws, it was receiving the retribution of a violent end.

"You pore, ornery cuss!" exclaimed Luck as he finally halted to make certain it was dead. "You are sure the kin of Pedro and his bloody-fisted gang. The only difference I can see is that *you* didn't know better than to go around slashin', stabbin' and murderin'."

There was no sign of life at the other end of the rope. Luck twitched the lariat sharply, but the huge paws only jerked and fell limp.

Dismounting cautiously, rifle in hand, the cowboy drew nearer, taking no chances on the powerful brute coming to life.

He held the gun to it for a second, then reflecting that it would be madness to betray their whereabouts to the gang by a shot, he contented himself with prodding the flat, cruel looking head with his rifle barrel.

It rolled helplessly to one side. The eyes were wide open, green and glaring in the moonlight.

Luck unsnared the carcass from the rope and left the beast in the trail. Rosita was waiting for him at some little distance, and as he rode toward her, she gazed at him with eyes full of hero worship.

She was bubbling with excitement and

in her own flowery, eloquent language, she relieved her feelings.

Luck pretended not to understand at first. But when she insisted on telling him again and again how wonderful he was, the cowboy showed signs of embarrassment and distress. It was one thing to face an enraged cougar, quite another to meet the outspoken admiration of a beautiful girl.

"We've got to get out of here," he urged. "Let's go."

He tried to cover his confusion by rolling a cigarette while riding, but his hands shook, spilling the flakes of tobacco.

"Don't know what's got into me!" he exclaimed irritably. "I'm as trembly as an old granny."

Rosita laughed inaudibly. She was well pleased that the man whose nerves were steel when roping a panther was absurdly timid in the face of her praise.

"Why, he's only a boy!" she thought. "Not a bit spoiled. Just a boy—but *how* he can fight!"

XIX.

THE fight with the mountain lion had carried them a mile or more farther along the winding cañon.

Now when he came to take his bearings by the stars, Luck found that he was being forced to travel away from his course.

The Bar Circle outfit was northward. The bog cañon was heading them due south. That was an unpleasant prospect.

The nearer they got to the border, the more chance there was of encountering Mexican desperadoes; either another "army" similar to Pedro's, or a gang that had strayed from the main band.

Still there was nothing to do but ride on. While there was no further shooting heard, it was quite likely that Pedro and his crew were tracking them.

Luck was quite certain that the hope of a hundred thousand dollars would keep those bandits keen on their trail. The more miles he could put between them, the better.

For some distance he urged his horse along, taking the lead and only glancing back occasionally to see how Rosita was standing it. As for himself, when he at last got a cigarette going, he felt quite cheerful. An all night ride after an active day was nothing new in his life.

They traveled this way for hours: Rosita too wearied to say a word; Luck busied with his own thoughts.

These were of a hopeful turn: the immediate danger was over: by daylight, he would get Rosita to safety; before long she would be restored to her father. After that—well, after that, it would be up to Luck to get that Indian gold from the cave and safely in the bank.

With all that fortune, he could go into the cattle business for himself, and then he would ask Rosita to be queen of the ranch.

Her father would object. Of course! Luck knew enough about blue-blooded grandees to be certain that General de Cordoba would be wild. Those pure Spanish families thought that everybody else was dirt under their feet. Gringos especially.

The general had told his daughter that all Americanos were bandits.

Rosita had told him so herself: what's more, she had believed her father, had expected Luck to hold her for a ransom.

The cowboy chuckled as he thought over their conversation in the cave.

How long ago that had seemed. Ages ago. That was when they were just getting acquainted. Before he was ever in love with her.

In love! Not only in love, but crazy to marry her. Yes, he, Luck Larrabee, was ready to face the parson at last; roped, thrown and hogtied like a kinky longhorn.

It was a terrifying sensation in a way. Funny, too!

Luck was roused from his musing by a groan of distress. He looked back hastily at Rosita and in the faint light of the earliest dawn he saw that she had gone deadly pale and was reeling in the saddle.

Her eyes were closed. She was done up. Exhausted till she groaned for rest.

"Hold tight, Rosita!" cried the cowboy. "Hang on to the saddle!"

But as he pulled his horse to get alongside and support her, the girl suddenly went limp and slumped heavily to the ground.

In a split second Luck was off his mount and kneeling beside her. She lay there so white and ghastly that he thought the fall had killed her.

He raised her head on his bent knee, searched for sign of a bruise on her head, then as she did not stir, felt her body for broken bones.

Apparently there was no fracture, but the fall, added to her complete exhaustion, had stunned her. She breathed weakly, as if she might die at any moment, and beside himself with anxiety, Luck settled her on a level place in the soft grass and brought water from the creek to bathe her face and wrists.

The shock of the cold water did not restore her: the breath seemed to come fainter and fainter: Luck placed his ear to her breast and was horrified at the feebleness of her heartbeat.

He set about chafing her wrists and bathing her temples with water, trying to think of all the things one could do to revive a person who has fainted.

If he only had brandy or some other restorative!

The horses, left to themselves, had already begun to graze, moving about and nibbling in the cool gray light. Luck ran to the horse he had taken from the slain Mexican and opened the saddlebag to see whether it might contain a flask of spirits.

Nothing!

Suddenly he whirled at the sound of horses coming up the trail, and at the same instant he received a stunning blow on the head, followed by a shattering explosion that roared in his ears.

His eyes seemed to be filled with blood, his eyeballs bursting. Then a black flood appeared to be rising swiftly over his head, blotting out the daylight; the prostrate form of Rosita: the horsemen running to pick her up.

Everything was obliterated in that splintered second when Luck threw up both hands and dropped.

He didn't know what hit him. Not until some time later when he opened his eyes feebly; suffering from the sensation of a branding iron laid sizzling on his scalp.

Of course there was no branding iron there. Luck reasoned this out with a brain that worked slowly and stupidly. It was not a hot iron, he told himelf, but the trail of a bullet that had creased his scalp. Good thing he was not a quarter of an inch taller or he'd be cold by now.

Luck felt blood, hot and smarting in his eyes.

He tried to wipe it away feebly, but could not.

Tied like a steer at the branding pen, he lay there in the sandy creek bed with a dozen turns of the rawhide about his body.

The blood still trickled in his eyes. He blinked to clear them and found himself staring straight into the sky.

The sun was just showing over behind the cañon rim; not the disk, but just the glow that foretells its rising.

"Shot at sunrise," the phrase seemed to echo in the cowboy's dizzy brain. "I reckon that's my finish. Shot at sunrise by a gang of greaser outlaws. I only hope Rosita was dead before the coyotes got to her. The poor kid. It will save her a lot of misery."

Stung by anxiety for the girl, Luck twisted his neck, but could see no trace of her body. Tied with unyielding rawhide, he could not see more than a small part of the cañon bed, and the part that was in his range of vision was absolutely deserted.

It occurred to Luck that he had been tied there and left to die. Pedro would be capable of that or any other cruelty.

The disk of the rising sun was just tipping the cañon wall. The boy blinked his eyes shut to avoid the blinding glare.

"Shot at sunrise," he thought. "That would be too good luck!"

Exhausted, he fell into a stupor that was more like death than a sleep.

XX.

Luck opened his eyes and came to full consciousness with the jolt of a brutal kick in the ribs.

There had been no warning; the assailant had walked quietly to the prostrate cowboy and booted him like a mangy cur. Luck could not even see who had dealt him that injury for immediately he was

seized by the neck and hips, rolled over like a log with his face in the sand and a quirt descended on his back, cutting the shirt and raising red welts.

A sharp command in Spanish and Luck was jerked to his feet. Somebody supported him by the elbows, another twisted him around like a dummy, and the cowboy was staring, half blinded, into a blue-shaven face, adorned with a tiny black mustache.

This was another type of Mexican from Pedro, Manuel or Juan; not a hairy ruffian, but a scented dandy. Yet he was no less cruel than the other.

"Dog!" he snarled, bringing his flashing white teeth close to Luck's eyes. "Dog! If I had the time I would stand by and see you whipped to death. Hanging is too good for the likes of you."

He called out sharply. "Hola, Ramon. Diego. Throw the rope end over that tree. Clumsy brutes. Make haste."

"*Si, si,* Señor Capitan!"

As the men ran before the cowboy's range of vision, he saw that they saluted in military fashion, also that they wore a uniform—not much to look at, to be sure, but still a uniform. As for the captain, he was smartly attired, though hard riding through brush had disheveled the correct garb.

"Jumpin' horntoads!" shouted Luck. "You hombres are not bandits. You're soldiers or *rurales!*"

"We'll show you what we are, quick enough," came the captain's answer in a voice like a rasp of biting steel. "Vile brigand! Hold your insolent tongue before I cut it out."

"Wait a minute, captain!" cried the cowboy. "Are you a soldier?"

"Certainly."

"And you are hunting bandits?"

"We are running down the rest of your gang. We'll hang them all before breakfast."

"Well, just kindly count me out on that deal, captain. I'm not a bandit. I'm an American."

"What difference? You are not the first American outlaw to join the border brigands. You American gunmen are the worst of the lot."

He shouted fiercely to his corporal: "Luis. Hang this fellow at once. We are wasting time."

Luck was hustled toward the big cottonwood, where a rope already dangled. Half a dozen soldiers trotted up and rested indolently in their saddles, rolling cigarettes and waiting for the spectacle to begin.

"You're making a mistake," shouted Luck. "I'm no bandit. Where's Doña Rosita? She'll tell you I helped her get away from the gang."

At the mention of Rosita's name the captain flushed and, hurrying over to Luck, struck him a furious blow.

"Brazen liar!" he screamed. "We find you in the mountains with that unfortunate dying lady. You have almost murdered her. You are holding her for a reward. Yet you have the insolence to beg for mercy and insult us with lies."

Luck was perfectly cool by now, in spite of the blows, insults and threats of the hangman's rope that dangled over his head.

"Captain," he said in measured tones, "if you want to stay in the army, don't make the bonehead play of hanging the wrong man. General de Cordoba will certainly boot you out head first if you hang the man that saved his daughter's life."

The captain lifted his hand in a rage; thought better of it and twisted his little mustache instead.

"*Madre de Dio,* but you are a cool-headed little bandit!" he exclaimed. "Why do you think I'll believe your cock and bull story?"

"Because it's true. I saved her and she thinks a lot of me, a powerful lot! One word from Doña Rosita will prove it. That is if the poor girl is still alive." His voice broke as he thought of a dreadful alternative. "God in Heaven!" he groaned. "Was she still alive when you picked her up?"

"Alive, yes. But barely breathing."

"Where is she?"

"Down the cañon. There is a cabin a quarter of a mile from here where a surgeon is taking care of her."

"Thank God she is safe!" Luck was not ashamed of the tears that stood in his eyes.

The captain stared at the cowboy incredulously, coldly.

"You are crying?" he sneered. "By all the saints, you are the first condemned bandit I ever saw in tears."

Luck was stung at the taunt.

"If you mean that I'm soft," he shouted, "I dare you to turn me loose. I'll take on the whole crew of you, one at a time or altogether. I'll gun fight you to a stand still, or handle you with anything from fists to knives. Just give me one chance at you, and it will take your whole danged army a week to collect your remainders."

The captain shrugged.

"You talk loud, little bandit," he answered softly. "Yet I am not annoyed, for I have been thinking of something else while you bragged and vapored. I can use you in another way than decorating a tree."

He barked a command and the executioners jerked the rope away from the branch. The onlookers sighed regretfully. Evidently the hanging was postponed.

"Bring me the bandit's horse," directed the captain, and added as Buckskin was led forward: "Luis, untie the gringo's legs so he can ride. Keep his hands tied and put your lariat about his lying throat so that he can't make a dash for it."

The officer watched Luck get into the saddle, then remarked silkily: "You shall ride up the cañon, little bandit, and lead us to your comrades. Take us to where Pedro hides out in the mountain with his gang. If you give them a warning signal, Luis will put a bullet in your back; if you try to make a dash for it, he will drag you to death at the end of his rope."

"You are giving me all the good breaks," answered Luck sarcastically. "If we do find the gang, Pedro will take a shot at me."

"And if we do *not* find them, I'll shoot you myself," retorted the captain suavely. "Señor Americano, I do not think that in this way I can be blamed if you are unfortunately shot. If it's true that you so bravely saved Rosita's life—why, then she can have the sad pleasure of putting flowers on the grave of her hero!"

The last words were uttered with such venomous hatred that Luck started as if a rattler had fanged him.

He smiled at the captain with comprehension. His retort caused the officer to turn pale with anger.

"Reckon I see why you're so keen to have somebody drill me," the cowboy remarked with studied coolness. "Looks like we both want to marry the same girl!"

XXI.

Luck had required no miraculous insight to read the captain's mind. Only a rival could have expressed such bitterness at the cowboy's assertion that he had been of service to Rosita, and that she was grateful for it.

Only a rival who felt his position in the girl's heart to be insecure would have hated the man who had innocently come between.

After Luck's plain statement, the officer rode by his side in silence. Apparently his rage had simmered down to a calculating hostility, more dangerous even than fury.

The squad was traveling slowly up the creek, with scouts well in advance to give warning of the bandits; neither the captain nor Luck had to be on the alert, for they were surrounded by horsemen armed with short, light rifles.

Presently the officer broke the silence, and this time his voice was not harsh with anger, but soft and caressing. Though he knew nothing of life outside his own backwoods province, he wished to be regarded as a polished man, a citizen of the world, and he addressed Luck for the first time like an equal.

"My young friend," he said, "I suppose you were only making a bad joke when you said we wanted to marry the same girl."

"No," answered Luck. "This would be a hell of a time for me to make jokes. Wouldn't it now?"

"Are you serious? Or maybe you are not quite right here?" He touched his forehead meaningly.

"I was never dropped on my head as a baby, if that's what you mean. Is it so crazy for me to guess that you want to marry Rosita?"

"For me. No. For you. Yes. Listen, Señor Americano, it is excusable for you

to admire Doña Rosita—even a dog in the gutter can lift up its eyes to a princess—but to hope to win her. That is absurd."

"Yeah?"

"You know that she is the daughter of General de Cordoba? One of the wealthiest men in Mexico."

"I don't crave his money. I'm a rich man myself," answered Luck simply. "I guess I'm worth a million dollars easy—and I don't mean Mex."

The officer glanced at Luck sharply, wondering whether this was another empty boast. Then he added:

"Her father is not only very wealthy, but extremely proud. The de Cordobas are pure-blooded Castilian and have never married plebeians, no matter how rich those suitors might be. Confidentially, there are only a dozen eligible young men in all Mexico. According to General de Cordoba's idea, I am the most favored suitor. You will not wonder at it when I tell you my name. I am Captain Xavier Ybarra y Figueroa. He wants me in the family. He admires me."

"Well, Captain Figueroa, I see you've got two strong admirers; yourself and the old general. Tell you what, cap, I'll marry Rosita and you marry General Cordoba. Then everybody will be happy."

The cowboy smiled so innocently that Captain Figueroa could only stare at him with amazement. Such insolence was beyond belief in an ordinary vaquero.

Perhaps this incredible young daredevil was not lying when he proclaimed himself a millionaire.

Such things had been read in the newspapers: the sons of great men, oil barons, coal kings, Presidents even, going out to work and play with cowboys.

He felt no less hatred for Luck, but somewhat more respect in view of his possible importance. Also he felt that the youth was a more dangerous rival than he had thought. Possibly even the haughty General de Cordoba might consider the claims of a great American family.

"What is your name?" he demanded.

"Luck."

"Luck?" Captain Figueroa echoed the name with knitted brows. "That seems familiar," he said. "I speak only a very little English. I do not mix with Americans, but when I am forced to hear them talk in clubs or cafés, I always hear them speak that name."

"No wonder, cap. Believe me the great American nation is kept goin' mostly by luck. It's a name that's popular from Sandy Hook to San Diego; it's respected in Washington and worshiped in Wall Street."

At the magic names, Washington and Wall Street, the captain felt uneasy. In old Mexico, those words were the symbols of America's power. This Señor Luck, whose name was on every Yankee's lips *must* be a person of consequence.

Decidedly if the young man must be shot, it would be far safer to let that brigand Pedro do it.

The captain fell back a few paces and whispered to his corporal. A few minutes later the cowboy was freed of his neck ornament and his hands were untied. Luis handed him a canteen and a chunk of beef, which Luck devoured ravenously.

XXII.

As the cowboy's hands were freed, Captain Figueroa hastily drew his revolver and held it ready for emergency. Though Luck had been deprived of his weapons the captain did not believe in taking chances, not with his own life at least.

He remarked with studied politeness: "Señor Luck, I regret that I made a mistake when I struck you awhile back."

"I'll say so!" answered Luck grimly.

"It was an error that you can pardon without any stain on your honor. You may consider that an apology, if you like."

"Don't say much more or I'll bust out cryin'," remarked the cowboy sardonically. "I can't bear to see you humble yourself thataway."

"Of course, if you demand satisfaction, I am at your service." The captain tapped his chest and expanded it. "At the proper time and place, I will meet you on the field of honor."

"I don't savvy much about fields of honor, but I do know all about time and

place," retorted Luck, "and before long I'm goin' to naturally take you apart. I'm goin' to learn you some etiquette like you won't find it in any book. Then the next time you want to sock a pore cowboy that's hog-tied, you'll take a long thought and change your mind."

As Luck's remarks were in English, which the captain knew very imperfectly, the conversation rested there. With the officer armed and surrounded by his troopers, it seemed wiser to wait awhile, especially as the soldiers might stir up Pedro and his bandits at any moment.

As they rode along, one of the scouts suddenly gave a cry of astonishment and pointed out the dead cougar lying stiff and stark in the trail. He was a big, ugly brute, and even in death made a terrifying appearance with his glassy eyes, his powerful jaws showing the foam-flecked teeth and his extended claws capable of ripping a man wide open with one sweep.

Captain Figueroa quieted his horse that was prancing in terror of the mountain lion, and sniffing the air. He surveyed the beast with respect, then, glancing at Luck, knew who had killed it.

"You shot this cougar?" he asked. "Congratulations!"

"Shot it? Well, I reckon not. I'm too good a sport to use a gun on a critter that don't carry none."

A soldier who was examining the beast exclaimed: "There is not a bullet hole in his hide! *Dio mio!* A miracle!"

"How did you kill it, Señor Luck?" asked Figueroa curiously.

"Like I always do, cap. Jest rastled him, catch-as-catch-can and no holds barred."

The officer rode a little farther away from his prisoner as the party proceeded. These Americans were awful liars, there was no doubt of that. Yet there was the dead cougar, without a bullet hole, and there was Luck, whose shirt was badly torn and showing blood from crashing through the brush.

He began to wish he had never laid hands on this savage: this drinker of blood.

Suppose that in the duel which was impending, the wild gringo should throw away his gun and attack *him* bare-handed. What a horrible death for a gentleman!

He addressed Luck after a long silence: "I have heard of your American prize fights. When two men go after each other with their fists and fight—how do you say it?—to a finish."

"Yeah?"

"What happens after such a fist battle? Is one of the fighters left like the cougar?"

"Sometimes one; sometimes t'other," answered Luck carelessly. "'Most always, the both of 'em are clawed to pieces and the remains are picked up and gathered in one basket. That's what makes it so interesting."

The captain shuddered.

"You know, I believe that our Mexican bandits are as peaceful and mild-mannered as lambs, compared to you northern barbarians."

Luck gave vent to a low, grating laugh.

"That's what Pedro is going to think when I meet up with him. After what he done to Doña Rosita, I'm going to make him think that the cougar got off easy."

He put his horse to a lope with a touch of the spur. From up the cañon came a warning cry from the scouts, then a crackle of shots.

"Gents, the dance is beginning," Luck laughed. "Choose your partners, step high and do your fanciest!"

Overtaking a trooper, he deftly lifted the Mexican's rifle and charged ahead, leading the band that had been ready to hang him an hour ago.

XXIII.

WHEN it came to fighting bandits or anything else that he was familiar with, Captain Xavier Ybarra y Figueroa was no coward.

He kept close behind Luck, encouraging his men to come on and popping away at anything that looked like a human target.

Pedro and his gang were clever at fighting from ambush, however, and seldom showed themselves, crouching behind bowlders and logs, and picking off their enemies. Gradually they retreated along the cañon, one detachment taking up the fight as the other fled back to new positions.

The result was that Captain Figueroa's

command was losing heavily, while the bandits suffered very little.

Luck decided that it was time for a change of tactics and riding up to the captain he remarked: "There's a cow trail right along here that leads to the top of the bluff. Suppose we all get above the varmints and shoot down on them. This way we won't last long."

The officer consented ungraciously and the troopers followed the cowboy up the steep trail, leaving a small detachment in the cañon to keep the bandits from escaping that way.

Arriving at the top, the soldiers separated and found vantage points on the cliffs where they could shoot down into the tree tops. Whenever a bandit betrayed his hiding place by a rifle shot or a change of position, the sharpshooters blazed away and before long the outlaws were working up creek to get out of range.

"I've got a hunch that those coyotes are on their way back to the cave," said Luck and he told the captain of the hang-out on the tributary of Rattlesnake.

The two men rode along the heights to get the lay of the land and decided that the upper end of the cañon wound its way back to the neighborhood of the cave.

"This will be a chance to smoke 'em out," declared Luck. "What reinforcements have you got back where you found me?"

"About fifty soldiers and the two lieutenants," answered Figueroa. "The surgeon is with them, the one who is looking after Doña Rosita."

"Where's General de Cordoba all this time?" asked Luck. "Ain't the old man coming out to get his daughter?"

"He set out by another route," the captain explained. "He has the hundred thousand dollars for Rosita's ransom and a small escort. Not more than six men."

"Where was he aimin' to meet Pedro?"

"Halfway up the Rattlesnake Cañon."

"Was it his idea to buy off Pedro and get Rosita?"

"Yes. My command came by a different trail, intending to capture the bandits and destroy them after Doña Rosita was rescued."

"I see," answered Luck. "Now it looks to me like the girl is safe enough, but the old general is in for a peck of trouble. When the bandits meet him in Rattlesnake, after having this run-in with us, they will naturally shoot the general and his escort, grab the money and beat it to old Mexico."

"That's unfortunate. I'm afraid you are right, Señor Luck. General de Cordoba is sure to be shot on sight."

"And I reckon that would jest about break Rosita's heart."

"She is devoted to her father. Yes, it would nearly kill the poor girl."

"That wouldn't suit me a-tall!" cried Luck. "I'm going to get a warning to Rosita's pa."

The cowboy hastily outlined his plan, also Captain Figueroa's part in it. The reenforcements were to be brought slowly up the cañon to the bandits' cave.

"Don't drive them varmints too far along Rattlesnake," warned Luck, "or they would pile onto the old general's party and cut them to pieces. Jest keep the bandits interested in the fighting."

The captain agreed.

"Meanwhile," continued Luck, "I'll get into Rattlesnake somehow and get word to the general to be on his guard. Six men and an able bodied cowboy can take care of a whole lot of bandits if they are prepared."

"But how are you going to get down to the cañon?"

"Through the big cave," answered Luck. "Just lend me your corporal, Luis, the one that was going to hang me."

The men separated. They did not shake hands, for though they were fighting a common enemy, there was a score to settle between them, later. They could not forget that they were rivals for Doña Rosita's hand.

Luck gave his horse the spur. Then sending Corporal Luis across the plateau toward the bald cliff, he turned back and hailed the captain.

The latter rode out a little way to meet him. The cowboy drew up beside the officer and remarked, "I want to explain that this here pasear I'm takin' into Rattlesnake is mighty risky."

"*Si, señor.*"

"I may not get back alive," went on Luck mournfully. "I may get plugged by a greaser."

The captain shrugged his shoulders and remarked: "*Quien sabe?* The fortunes of war!"

"So in case I *don't* come back," said the cowboy with deep feeling, "I'm going to hand you something on account: a good sock on the beezer!"

"Pop!" went Luck's hard fist at the last word.

He galloped away and left the gallant captain rubbing a badly swollen nose and uttering frightful maledictions.

Luck was grinning happily as he rejoined Corporal Luis.

"I sure feel a heap easier in my mind," he chuckled. "Now if the bandits drill me, I won't have no call to come back and haunt that there Captain Figueroa."

XXIV.

Luis made no reply. He had seen the blow and it had shocked his servile soul that a ragged vaquero should strike a gentleman.

But not for worlds would he have interfered in the captain's behalf. This wild man who killed cougars barehanded was not to be trifled with. More especially now that he carried a rifle.

Before the riders reached the bald cliff, their horses shied at the body of one of the slain bandits.

Luck dismounted, stripped off the frayed cotton shirt and trousers and picked up the sombrero, a huge, heavy affair with a brim that concealed the features in shadow. He also secured a belt full of cartridges that fitted his rifle.

Rolling up the garments, he remounted and joined Luis at the edge of the cliff.

His plan of entering Rattlesnake Cañon was clear in his mind and he briefly instructed the corporal: "There's no use tryin' to get down that trail; the bandits are certain to have sentinels there. So I'm going down a rope to that ledge, and all you've got to do is to hang onto the rope and pull it up when I get there."

"Afterward you can wait around up here with the horses; only keep back from the cliff so you won't be spotted from below."

Five minutes later Luck was on the ledge with the bundle of clothes and the rifle. He had slid down the rope in a hurry, hoping that no spying eyes would see him against the cliff.

Not hearing a warning shot, he judged that he was safe and ducked into the cave where he pulled on the Mexican bandit's shirt over his own and shedding his chaps, he drew on the cotton trousers of the outlaw.

Going to the ashes of the fire, he rubbed burned wood on his face, neck and hands until he was as black as any half-breed, then pulling the sombrero over his eyes, he felt certain that he could mix with Pedro's gang unchallenged.

The next minute he had removed the grating in the inner chamber and started cautiously down the narrow shaft, adding more stains of smoke and soot to his soiled garments. The rifle jammed in his belt made it awkward climbing, but to go without it would be fatal.

Luck found his way down the long, tortuous passage to the bowlder where he and Rosita had hidden. Here he felt for the bags of loot; they were still safely concealed at the foot of the rock, a sure indication that the gang had not discovered the secret entrance.

Over the top of the bowlder glimmered a feeble light: the fire was burning in the cave. Some of the bandits had overcome their superstitious fears and returned.

Luck peered at the fire-lit area, but saw no figures and, though he listened intently, he heard no sound.

So much the better. If the cave were deserted, it would make his escape all the easier.

Cautiously he crawled over the top of the stone and entered the main cave. Then he gasped with surprise. No less than a dozen outlaws were asleep there, sprawled over the floor of the cave, and a scattering of bottles told how they had found sleep in that "haunted" cavern.

Luck tiptoed past them in the semi-darkness, but in his excitement failed to see an

outstretched hand. The next instant he had trod on a finger and the vault re-echoed with the terrified yells of the rudely awakened sleeper.

Luck dropped to the floor. The gang was astir instantly, brandishing guns and knives and venting the most lurid curses. Then, scared at their own uproar, they moved in a compact mass to the exit, the injured man yelling at the top of his voice that a ghost had tried to bite off his finger.

The cowboy was in the thick of the crowd as it surged toward the cañon. No one picked out the figure from the rest as the bandits came into the daylight under the trees, and took shelter in a clump of brush.

Luck lay there for awhile with his eyes half shut, pretending to be in a doze, while around him buzzed the low murmur of conversation: ruffians gambling, others gorging themselves.

A scout rode in with one arm in a wet bandage.

"What's happened, Francisco?" cried a man not far from Luck's resting place.

"Nothing. A scratch. But it keeps bleeding."

"Anything happened over there?"

"Child's play! A handful of cowardly soldiers. Our brave boys are picking them off one by one. Where's the general?"

"Down in Rattlesnake Cañon. He will cut the throat of that viper, Cordoba, and bring back the hundred thousand dollars."

Luck had heard all he wanted to know. Rolling down an incline, away from the group, he lazily got to his feet and loafed along through the brush. Men glanced at his dirty cotton costume and huge sombrero and looked away again.

Just before the cañon opened on Rattlesnake, Luck found what he had hoped for, a saddle pony grazing with no owner in sight. The cowboy searched every nook where a man might be taking a siesta, then quietly approaching the horse he tightened the cinch, mounted and rode away at an easy lope.

Not until he was around the corner of a big rock did he give his borrowed mount the spurs and go galloping along the trail toward the Mexican line.

He prayed that old General de Cordoba might be as unpunctual as most Mexicans and thus late for his appointment. For if Pedro saw the general first, Rosita would lose a beloved parent and Luck would never meet his prospective father-in-law.

XXV.

CLATTERING along the trail with his rifle across his saddle-horn, Luck made a convincing bandit. The sombrero cast a deep shadow over his blackened face; the light, ragged garments fluttered in the wind and even the small, hammer-headed pony, a mean-looking black and white pinto, looked like an outlaw's horse.

Suddenly encountering a rider coming in the opposite direction, the cowboy reined in to let the other pass, then observing that the real outlaw wanted to stop and make conversation, Luck shook out his reins and went by him like a wild steer.

"*Carramba!*" shouted the brigand. "Where are your manners? Son of a mangy cur! I only wanted to borrow a cigarette."

But already Luck was out of earshot along the rocky gorge. Soon, however, he reined in and traveled with more care.

He might run into "General" Pedro and his choice gang of assassins at any minute. Better be careful to avoid another encounter.

Luck was doubtful that his Mexican speech would be as convincing as his make-up. He knew that discovery would mean a slug of lead in his vitals without any argument, so presently he brought his mustang to a walk and watched the trail ahead with anxious eyes.

Before long he caught sight of General Pedro's escort under a bush playing cards, while others were lazily smoking and staring into space.

Luck concluded that similar groups were scattered along the cañon, waiting for the first shot that would be the signal for attack.

He dismounted and tethered the pony to a branch so that it would not betray him, walked a short distance in the direction from which he had come, searching

till he found a ravine that would lead him out of the cañon.

It required active and skillful climbing to get him to the top, but once on the rocks he prowled along the rim, keeping well hidden. After he had gone half a mile, he ventured to the edge and looked over.

From this vantage point he could see up and down the cañon for more than a mile and it was easy to pick out the spot where Pedro was waiting; about twenty horses were nibbling the grass and the bandits were loafing in the shade of a natural pillar of stone that stood in the center of a verdant flat.

This was the landmark that Pedro must have named as the place where he would receive the ransom and deliver the girl to her father.

Luck breathed more freely as he realized that he had safely passed the lurking outlaws.

All that remained was to warn General de Cordoba that he was riding into a trap.

It was impossible to get down into the cañon at that point; the walls were as steep as the side of a house, and the cowboy hastened along the rim, hoping to find a place to descend before Rosita's father appeared.

That was not so easy. The precipice continued unbroken for some distance and suddenly Luck heard the sharp clatter of trotting horses and directly thereafter saw the old general and his escort.

There could be no mistake. At the head of the little cavalcade rode a smartly uniformed officer carrying a white flag.

Behind him on superb horses came half a dozen officers and soldiers, all wearing the showy insignia of a crack regiment.

Luck had no difficulty in identifying General de Cordoba. He rode as if on parade and his erect bearing, his air of command, his soldierly face, showed plainly that he was an officer of high rank.

Behind him rode a soldier with a heavy canvas bag slung over the saddle-horn.

All the horsemen carried short rifles, but being under a flag of truce, they did not expect to use them, and only the soldier with the sack of coin carried his weapon ready for instant use.

Luck watched them approach, but knew they would not understand him, shouting down from the high cliffs. What he wanted was to deliver a warning, not to engage in an argument. Lying flat on the cliff he drew a careful bead with his rifle and fired a single shot.

One bullet was enough.

The white flag fell to the ground, its staff cut and splintered by the leaden messenger.

XXVI.

THE firing on the flag of truce threw the cavalcade into angry commotion; it looked like treachery. In a flash the escort reached for their rifles and came to an abrupt halt, searching in every direction for an ambush.

There was no return fire; not a trace of the assailant was to be seen and Luck took care not to show himself at that moment. He did not crave to stop a bullet.

Instead, he worked back from the edge of the cliff and hurried along the cañon wall, searching for a slope that would bring him to the trail. He found a ravine some distance back of the general's party and clambered down through the brush that choked it, making as little noise as possible, for it would be an awkward finish to be picked off by the men he had come to warn.

Once in the trail he ran toward the little troop, the rifle stuck in his belt and his hands above his head in token of surrender.

"*Amigos!*" he shouted. "Don't shoot. I am a friend!"

General de Cordoba struck up the rifle barrel of his orderly as the man prepared to fire on the "bandit." In a steady voice he commanded: "Don't shoot. Keep him covered, but let's hear what the peon has to say."

The general was the coolest member of the party; the rest were nervous and infuriated at this apparently treacherous firing on a white flag.

"Come closer, hombre," cried the general in a voice like steel. "Lieutenant Fernandez, take away the rascal's gun. Now speak up, wretch. What did you mean by firing on us from ambush? Tell

the truth or you'll get a bullet through your head."

"For the love of Mike!" blurted out Luck. "Is that the way to treat a friend?"

In his excitement, he spoke in English, and the general answered him in the same tongue.

"Aha! You are one of these renegade Americans! Of all the scum on the border, you fellows are the worst. No wonder you shoot on a flag of truce!"

"Forget it, general! You've got me all wrong. I'm not a bandit; I'm here to save your life."

"What do you mean?"

"Pedro's gang is laying for you a little way from here. Most likely they heard the shot and are heading this way now, hell-bent for election. They don't aim to hand over Rosita; they expect to make chicken wire of you and grab the money."

"Why won't they give up my daughter?"

"Because they can't. I helped her get clean away from the gang."

"Where is she? Is she safe?" The old man grasped his saddle-horn to steady himself in his agitation. His face was pale, his whole body trembling.

"She's safe, all right. It's you that's in danger. Work fast and get under cover, for the bandits are going to rush you. Hear that?"

Already along the trail came the sound of galloping riders, a large band. Pedro must have ordered the advance on hearing the cowboy's shot.

The old general stared hard into Luck's blue eyes, and was convinced that the fellow was honest. His voice rang out in command: "Dismount. Find cover. Fire when I give the word."

To Lieutenant Fernandez he cried: "Give the American his rifle. He is one of us."

Before the horde of outlaws came in sight, the general's little troop was scattered behind bowlders and tree trunks and the horses had been driven back the way they came.

"Keep near me," said Rosita's father to Luck, and the two took shelter behind the same rock.

They had no more time than they needed; hardly had the defenders found cover before Pedro's gang was tearing through the gorge, reins flying and rifles ready for business.

Ahead of the rest galloped General Pedro himself, the sombrero sweeping back from his saddle-colored face, his black eyes glittering with excitement, his white teeth flashing as he yelled: "*Muerte!* Kill them all!"

"Fire!" shouted old De Cordoba in a voice like a whip-lash, and a volley swept the foremost bandits from their saddles.

The repeating rifles cracked in sharp staccato like machine gun fire, and after the first surprise that threw the whole gang into confusion, the bandits answered, blazing away wildly at the rocks and trees wherever they saw a puff of smoke.

Surprise attacks were nothing new to that desperate crew, but as a rule *they* were the ones to fire on unsuspecting foes. This sharp taste of their own medicine was not to their liking.

Yet they had plenty of brute courage and were willing to follow a reckless chief to the death. Unluckily for them, the glittering eyes and shrill, blood-thirsty yells of Pedro were not there to urge them on.

The bandit general had dropped at the first volley and his body was trampled under the hoofs of his own cavalry.

The withering fire made a hot little corner of hell there in the peaceful cañon. The walls echoed thunderously to the fusillade so that the outlaws imagined that a whole regiment was attacking them.

Firing as they fled, the desperadoes wheeled and galloped back along the trail, while bullets sang after them to keep them from changing their minds.

General de Cordoba and Luck fought shoulder to shoulder; there could be no further doubt in the old grandee's mind. This American was no bandit, but a straight-shooting, trustworthy friend from across the border.

He seized the cowboy's hand and shook it vigorously.

"You are true *caballero!*" he exclaimed. "I wish you had a commission in my forces. How can I ever repay you?"

"Don't mention it, general," answered

Luck with a grin. "I'm enjoying every minute of your little party."

The horses were brought up, and one of the riderless ponies was roped for Luck's use. The general took counsel with his aids: "Shall we follow up this skirmish, now that the gang is on the run? What is your opinion, gentlemen?"

The officers looked doubtful. They would be going against an unknown foe; possibly ten to one, and the advantage of ambush would be with their enemies now.

But the cowboy spoke up: "General, we've got these varmints buffaloed. They don't know how many we are and when they get back to the rest, they are going to tell how they were chased by the whole Mexican army."

"That's right. They would say that to save their faces," answered the general.

"Now if we give 'em time to think it over, they will get good and scared. What's more, the reënforcements from Captain Figueroa's troopers will be at their rear before long. Let's not crowd 'em, but work along slowly till we hear shooting up yonder; then we'll know that the fighting has begun and we'll chip in from this end."

"That sounds all right. But what about Rosita?" interrupted her father.

"She's out of range. Don't worry none," and Luck explained how Rosita had fainted and was now in the care of the surgeon with Figueroa's troop.

The father demanded more and more details of Rosita's escape, but Luck found it hard to relate his part in the adventure.

"She'll tell you all about it," he said, flushing with embarrassment. "I'm no good at conversation, but you'll be seeing her before long and she'll tell you plenty."

He turned toward the creek.

"That reminds me," he remarked. "I don't want that young lady to see me looking like a dirty ragamuffin."

Luck tore off the bandit's outfit and threw it away, stripped off his own clothing and took a good wash in the stream, scrubbing his face and hands with fine sand.

"I always doll up when I'm going to meet a gal," he chuckled. "Not being handsome, I've got to make the best of what looks I've got."

He gingerly touched the raw line where the bullet had grazed his scalp.

"Now I'll know where to part my hair!" he remarked cheerfully.

XXVII.

When Luck had made himself presentable and was dressed in his own outfit—minus the chaps—he swung aboard the commandeered broncho, handled it with careless ease as it tried to buck its new master into the bushes, and thereby won the approval of some of the best horsemen in the Mexican army.

In his pleasure at gentling the mustang, Luck almost forgot the business ahead, until General de Cordoba said: "Gentlemen, we have waited long enough. We will ride carefully along the trail, well strung out so as not to make a target, and every man will keep a sharp lookout for snipers."

With the pride of an old campaigner, he insisted on taking the place of danger in the lead, and Luck followed a few paces behind him, the others stringing along at intervals.

The party reached the pillar where Pedro had arranged to receive the ransom, pushed on past it without hindrance and so on toward the bandits' cave.

No sounds indicated that a fight was impending. The stream rippled along the trail, the wind murmured in the cottonwoods, and the walls echoed the slight noise of horses moving at a walk.

General de Cordoba beckoned to Luck. "What do you think, my boy? Have the bandits taken some trail out of the cañon and made their escape?"

"'Tain't likely, sir, but you can't tell. When we get to the cave we'll be apt to find a few."

They entered the tributary in which the cave was situated, leaving one man at the fork to signal in case of attack from that point. The shadows grew denser as they proceeded; the underbrush was heavier and the cliffs steeper.

Abruptly the sound of firing sounded far ahead, at first a few single shots, then the fierce outburst that told of an attack in force.

"There they go," shouted Luck. "The gang has met up with Figueroa's troopers."

The general called out a command to his following and waved his arm urgently. As he did so, a bullet from an unseen sniper caught him near the elbow and his arm dropped limp.

Luck's rifle spat fire and from the bush where he had hidden, the sentinel broke and ran. Lieutenant Fernandez fired at the running figure and smiled as he saw it collapse and roll down into the creek.

Spurring their mounts the escort reached their wounded leader and urged him to stay behind, but the general insisted on advancing. Luck tied up the bullet hole with the old gentleman's handkerchief and the band plunged ahead toward the sound of firing.

It was a brisk skirmish, there could be no doubt of it. Probably the whole bandit "army" was trying to break through and had encountered Figueroa's troopers.

At a bend in the creek the battle-field was right before them. It was a wide, grassy, flat with a narrow exit like the neck of a bottle.

A few bowlders had been reinforced with smaller stones and logs to form a breastwork behind which the little troop was sheltered, while the bandits were massed for a charge that would crash over the low obstacle and overwhelm the defenders.

"Give 'em hell, boys!" shouted Luck and set the example by spurring his pony on the bandit horde, firing as he galloped.

General de Cordoba at his side, disregarded his wound and letting his reins fly loose, tore into the outlaws, emptying his revolver. Lieutenant Fernandez and the rest of his band were bunched close to his heels, charging with as much fury as if a whole squadron were behind them.

The little knot of riders hit the bandit "army" like a shell and smashed through it. The charge against the breastworks resolved into a milling turmoil of horses and men, fighting hand to hand, with clubbed rifles, revolvers and knives. Over the breastworks swarmed Figueroa's soldiers and the bandit attack turned into a disorganized scramble for safety.

Luck, in the thick of the scrimmage, saw the outlaws making for the trails out of the cañon, some on foot, others dismounted and clinging, terrified, to a comrade's stirrup.

As Luck emptied his rifle and drove the butt of it into a desperado's snarling face, a forty-five slug with his name on it, took him in the shoulder.

It was like the blow of a sledge hammer. The cowboy dropped from the saddle, with a blurred nightmare impression of a troop of wild horses sweeping over his head, and something clawing at his collar.

Darkness and roaring thunder!

For Luck the fight was over.

XXVIII.

As the cowboy, stunned and bleeding, dropped among the wildly plunging horses, a horrified scream sounded from behind the breastworks.

The next moment a powerful horse had leaped the barricade, carrying a slender, black-eyed girl, who drove straight into the thick of the combat. Behind her rode a wiry little man with gray side whiskers, whose insignia proclaimed his rank as military surgeon.

"Stop, for the love of all the saints! Stop, I say!" Dr. Cristobal was sputtering. "You are mad, Doña Rosita. Come back!"

But the girl did not even hear him. She had no thoughts but one: to save the cowboy from death under the trampling hoofs.

As they reached the scrimmage where soldiers and bandits were grappling, stabbing and cursing, the girl's momentum carried her into the worst of it, where her father was bending low in his saddle.

With his uninjured arm he was supporting the limp form of the cowboy, holding him in a grip of desperation, while Luck's heels dragged on the ground.

Rosita forced her way to the other side, heedless of the combat that jostled her this way and that: with all the strength in her young body she tugged to raise the cowboy, gripping him under the armpits, while her father aided as best he could.

Between them, Luck was tumbled across her saddle-horn: the general helped her force her way out of the mass of fighting

men, and the surgeon joined the party, giving Luck first aid treatment as soon as they found a sheltered spot.

The girl bent over the wounded man, helping Dr. Christobal adjust the bandages. She disregarded her father's anxious questions, only crying impatiently: "Later! Later! I'll tell you all about it afterward."

Then she relented long enough to give the agitated old man a kiss and a hurried embrace, before turning her attention once more to the unconscious American.

"Will he live, doctor?" she asked anxiously. "Do you think he will recover?"

Dr. Cristobal answered her patiently at first, but finally with some irritation.

"By all the saints, Doña Rosita! Can't you see that the boy is tough as rawhide? These gringo cow-punchers are as hard to kill as a bobcat."

"Then you *will* save his life? Oh, thank God! Doctor, I will make you rich for life if you restore him."

The surgeon knew that the young heiress was able to fulfill her promise. He answered more gently: "Of course, I'll pull him through. Though I must say you place more value on this young vaquero than I do on all the Americans between here and Hades. Why this sudden attachment?"

The girl flushed and lowered her eyes.

"Only gratitude," she answered. "I *should* be grateful, for this American caballero saved me from torture and death."

While the cowboy was receiving first aid, the general had been surveying the end of the fight. The bandits had been routed and the field was dotted with dead and wounded.

"There are some of our brave fellows out there that need your attention, doctor," he said. "Command a dozen soldiers to help you and do your best for them."

The surgeon sprang to his feet and saluted.

"I advise you to take the American away from here," he remarked in a low voice. "The sights after a battle are not fit for a young girl to see and your daughter insists on staying beside this American."

"She insists?"

"Yes, sir. Out of pure gratitude." The surgeon saluted and hurried away with his bag of instruments.

His motive was humane, for he knew that the captured bandits would go before a firing squad, and he had the wish to spare Rosita any further horrors.

General de Cordoba directed two soldiers to carry Luck on a stretcher improvised from a blanket and the bandaged youth was picked up and brought to the cave.

Rosita followed, leading her horse. She could not bear to leave the boy out of her sight for an instant.

XXIX.

WHEN Luck came out of his stupor some time later, he had the odd feeling of something soft, warm and fragrant resting on his lips. But as he gave a little shudder and blinked his eyes open, he saw Rosita sitting demurely beside him.

Her face was rosy. Perhaps from the reflection of the firelight.

The cowboy stared blindly at the rock vault overhead, then struggled to sit up.

"How come we're back in the cave?" he asked in bewilderment. "Last I remember was a hot mix-up in the cañon. And how in heck did you get here, Rosita? Come here quick and let's see if you're all right."

She edged closer, and he touched her as if to reassure himself that she was real flesh and blood and not a vision. The movement made him gasp and he clutched his shoulder.

"Sufferin' centipedes! What a jab! Say, is that where the cougar clawed me?"

Gently the girl explained what had happened and the cowboy's memory cleared. He passed a hand over his forehead and sank back on the blankets.

"It was a bang-up party while it lasted," he grinned.

For a few moments he lay there with his eyes shut, while the girl's hand stole into his. Abruptly she jerked it away as spurs jingled in the passage and General de Cordoba strode in, followed by his officers.

"This brave Americano has won the battle for us," said the general. "Without his warning I should have been slaughtered

with all my escort. And if we had been killed, the bandits would have swept over Captain Figueroa's troop like a tidal wave."

"I'm not so sure of that," grunted the captain.

"Maybe not." General de Cordoba patted the young officer on the shoulder. "But you were in a tight place. The least you can do is to acknowledge your obligation to the caballero from the north."

Stiffly enough, Captain Figueroa shook hands with the cowboy and offered congratulations. No reference was made to their previous quarrel. Both men felt they could settle that little score in private.

Luck was introduced with Spanish formality to all the officers. He shook hands, grinning cheerfully, and said he was pleased and proud to know them.

But when General de Cordoba stated that the reward of ten thousand dollars for the killing of Pedro should rightfully go to Luck, the latter protested loudly.

"I don't need the money," he cried. "Why, dog-gone it all, I'm a rich man!"

The officers stared incredulously. Luck appeared to be an ordinary cow-puncher, whose pay would not have kept one of those aristocrats in cigarettes.

"That's straight!" Luck insisted. "Ask Rosita. She knows I'm worth a million."

Captain Figueroa scowled at the girl's name, then shrugged and tapped his forehead meaningly.

Luck saw the gesture.

"Give the reward to the captain, here," he remarked and added significantly: "I've got what the captain wants, so let him have the money for a consolation prize."

XXX.

Nobody except Figueroa and the girl knew what Luck was driving at. To these haughty cavaliers of ancient Spanish blood, it was unthinkable that a daughter of the De Cordobas might marry a Yankee cowboy.

Even the old general did not understand, but he did appreciate the boy's generous spirit and stooped to pat his shoulder.

"Jumpin' horntoads!" gasped Luck. "Not that shoulder! The other one!

"If you ask me," he added, "I'll advise you to turn over the reward to the poor widows whose men folk were killed by the bandits. And, by the way, if you will look back of yonder bowlder, you'll find the loot from their last raid. That can be turned over to the widows and orphans of them that owned it."

"The boy is right," said the general, "but I still feel that we owe him more than thanks. What do you think, Rosita?"

The girl flushed and her gaze was downcast as all the officers turned to her expectantly. Captain Figueroa's glittering eyes looked savage, though he tried to force a smile.

The girl replied hesitatingly: "Why not offer Señor Luck a good position on your estate, father? He could learn the business and become the manager later on. Meanwhile we could all get better acquainted with the young man and find other ways to show our gratitude."

"That's a capital idea," cried General de Cordoba. "You can come with us now as foreman on my hacienda. What do you say, Señor Luck?"

The boy glanced at Rosita. Her eyes seemed to promise more than her word as they shot him a quick, tender look.

"No cowboy ever argues with a lady," answered Luck. "I never expected to punch them longhorns south of the line, but if Doña Rosita asked me to ride the ranges of hell and rope and hog-tie the devil, I'd take a chance."

The two men shook hands on the agreement.

Captain Figueroa strode indignantly away with clattering spurs. As for Rosita, that dark-eyed beauty only smiled demurely, for she was used to having her own way.

Luck staggered to his feet and found that he was able to walk, though the slug in his shoulder gave him intense pain.

"I won't be any good on your ranch for quite a spell," he remarked cheerfully, "but as soon as I'm able to throw a rope I'll report for the job. Meanwhile I've got a little business to attend to. By the way, did Corporal Luis ever show up with my buckskin?"

"Yes, your horse is outside the cave,"

answered the general. "But can't you ride along with us and return to attend to your business later? Is it very important business?"

"Only the matter of banking a million dollars—more or less." Luck was stubbornly secretive about the treasure.

The general smiled; he though Luck was joking. But Rosita understood.

"I advise you to come with us," she said quietly. "Delay may cost you more than money."

Luck guessed what she meant: that his rival might take advantage of the interval to force his betrothal and that the girl was not certain whether she could stand out against her father's wishes.

"All right!" he answered with apparent carelessness. "I'll travel right along with you-all. What's a million dollars more or less? Easy come, easy go!"

All the company laughed. This wild American was certainly a joker!

But Rosita understood, and Luck knew that he would never regret taking a chance on the treasure.

Early the next morning, the party was trotting across the line into old Mexico, with Luck in the place of honor between Rosita and her father.

THE END

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THE BORE

I MEET him everywhere I go,
The club, the train, or at the shore;
In every place where I may show
My face, I meet that pest—the bore.

He tells me all about his car—
The Hooey, that he bought last year—
The latest news, from near and far,
He pours in my unwilling ear.

He seems to think I cannot read,
Or if I do, can't understand,
So he feels certain that I need
Elucidation—secondhand.

He tells me why the cosmic plot
Of Mr. Einstein will not do,
And why the Volstead Act is not
Successful—which I fear is true.

He's not a scientist, but still
He won't let science themes alone,
But in each branch of science will
Expound a theory of his own.

His education is not much,
But that's offset by gorgeous gall;
And there's no subject one may touch
Upon, but what *he knows it all!*

The only reason I forbear
When I encounter him, to *shoot,*
Is that the law does not declare
An open season on the brute!

Will Thomas Withrow.

The Rhinestone Helmet

By REBECCA N. PORTER

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

ARNOLD TRENT is working in a secondhand furniture store in San Francisco, when he discovers five thousand dollars in a mattress. He pockets the money, and works his way to Los Angeles. In a cafeteria there, he pays the supper check of a strange young woman. She is the wife of Alexis-of-the-Nile, a famous magician, who is insanely perturbed over a love intrigue his wife has been carrying on in his absence. Assuming Arnie to be his wife's lover, the magician tries to kill Trent; but in the struggle Arnie kills him. Arnie is jailed, and a lawyer named Barton Parrish is appointed to defend him. Unfortunately, Elaine, the wife of Alexis, who would have been their star witness, is found dead of poison.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE MURDERER'S DOCK.

ON the day before Arnie's trial Mom and his sister Gertrude left for Los Angeles. Never in all their lives had they known such excitement as that day ushered in. It made an adequate climax for the eventful weeks which had preceded it; for ever since that dreadful night when Arnie's picture had appeared with its lurid story in the papers, life had been totally transformed for the Trents.

Neighbors called in droves, and friends whom they hadn't seen for years came in to see "how the family was takin' it." Some of these arrived empty-handed, frankly avid for news; others concealed

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their curiosity ineffectually with gifts of meat loaves and cup cakes.

"I just thought your mother's appetite might need a bit of coaxin', with all this load on her mind," Mrs. Delaney told Gertrude as she proffered a soup plate covered with a clean dish towel. "Ain't it awful about Arnie!

"I've often said to Al that there wasn't a more upstandin' young man in Oakland than him. I don't know anybody we was both fonder of.

"It's pineapple snow made with a dash of coconut. I know how your mother relishes coconut."

Mom, whose appetite had never been of the least concern to anybody before, pastured now upon all the dainties of the market. Gertrude did scarcely any cooking, and Mom's patrons increased two hundred per cent.

It seemed that everybody in Oakland needed new clothes and scorned to buy them readymade. The telephone was kept busy with their requests for appointments. And Mom rose dramatically to the situation.

From her Arnie had inherited his craving for the adventurous life, but she had given him none of her quick adaptability in meeting it. Mom possessed both imagination and a keen recognition of the dramatic. With very little technical training she would have made a good actress.

Her ravenous reading of the newspapers was not merely a desire for news, but for food upon which something that was starving within her might be fed.

She had married a conscientious, plodding carpenter who had given her nothing except single-hearted affection and two children, for whom she had always felt an aggrieved contempt.

She couldn't see why life should have handed her offspring so inadequate to her emotional needs. She had made the best of them; had even succeeded by tireless effort in convincing certain of her friends that they were possessed of mysterious latent talents.

But the maternal instinct was not her ruling passion, and there were many times when she would gladly have repudiated the relationship. Now, for the first time in her life she was getting some recompense from the son who had, through all his uneventful days, bored her almost to extinction.

It was not that she admitted this even to herself. The news of Arnie's exploit had shocked her momentarily into an almost paralyzed terror. But the letters from his lawyer had relieved this strain, and day by day she had become more convinced that the whole thing was a terrible mistake and that Arnie had only to present his side of the case to win release.

As this conviction grew she settled with subdued delight into the new rôle which life had suddenly thrust upon her.

At first she theatrically rejected all offers of material consolation. She said little in response to the eagerly expressed sympathy of callers and patrons, but that little was subtly provocative. Then, gradually, she yielded to the enticements offered at her shrine, and permitted the community to cater to her erratic appetite.

But Mom was no short sport. For what she finally deigned to receive, she gave generously in payment, and she had a nice sense of the varying degrees of bargaining involved. As the weeks before the trial passed, she evolved a system that was both just and astute.

To those who brought gifts of genuine value, such as out-of-season fruits and vegetables, she showed Barton Parrish's letters; letters actually written by the lawyer of a man awaiting trial for murder. In them Arnie sent messages to her; messages of robust reassurance, curiously unlike anything that the neighbors would have expected of him.

She had been right, after all, the Delaneys decided in solemn family conclave. Mom had always said that Arnie was much deeper and more subtle than he appeared. Al Delaney went even farther than this and asserted that he'd always known Arnie was more of a devil at heart than other people suspected.

But these belated tributes lacked the ring of sturdy conviction. At any rate the letters from Arnie's lawyer were considered a fair compensation for extravagant expressions of sympathy.

To those who came with humbler gifts of sago pudding and baked apples, Mom offered merely an intimate rehash of the news stories blended with appropriate reminiscences of the alleged criminal's youth. As God had prospered them the neighbors gave, and Mom was the beneficent and gracious collector of revenue.

And now the time had come for her to go down to the trial with Gertrude. It was a colossal effort, physically as well as financially. But a friend brought around his automobile, and two husky men helped Mom up the steps of the train.

The neighbors who saw them off at First and Broadway were immensely concerned as to how she would stand the trip, but Mom herself met these expressions of anxiety with a martyrlike philosophy. What would they expect? she gently chided them. Would they expect a mother to let her son go through such trouble without her to back him up?

Was any amount of physical discomfort on her part to be considered when her boy needed her? Abashed by these rhetorical questions, they fell back upon murmured expressions of approval.

Dressed in a new black-and-white silk that she had contrived for herself out of material purchased by Gertrude at a basement sale, Mom presented an imposing figure as she bade good-by to the throng gathered to see her off.

It was amazing how these work-ridden mothers, and factory-driven fathers had been able to get here to speed her on her way, amazing to every one but Mom herself. To her it seemed but the proper tribute of the humbly obscure to the justly famous.

Here and there among the crowd at the depot she caught the lowered voices of strangers explaining: "That's Mrs. Trent; you know, Arnold Trent's mother. She must be going down to the trial. You know, it's set for to-morrow." And "Is *that* his mother? Well, move along so I can see. Terrible thing, isn't it? And she's quite nice-looking. How well she's bearing up."

At the depot in Los Angeles she was pointed out, too. For Barton Parrish came to meet her, and the progress to his waiting machine was more like the triumphal entry of a celebrity than the arrival of the mother of an alleged criminal.

One reporter snapped her picture and another dated her for an immediate interview. Gertrude, helplessly unable to play up to the occasion, followed dumbly with the suitcase, her face more than ever like a fully blossomed cauliflower.

The trial itself was a tedious and solemn affair which stretched on for days. Gertrude grew frankly tired of it. But Mom drank in the drama like a thirsty desert plant soaking up rainwater.

In the front row of spectators, with her lame leg stretched out before her on a stool, she was the most conspicuous figure in the court room. She knew this and reveled in it, but her keen mind was equally interested in the legal entertainment enacted before her.

She had had one brief interview with Arnie in which she admonished him: "For pity's sake, buck up and show some backbone. They ain't goin' to send you up. Anybody could tell just by glancin' at you, that you wouldn't ever kill anybody except it was by accident. You ain't got the guts."

The acid of this accusation bit deep into Arnie's soul. Perhaps it was this maternal characterization of himself that brought into being that new personality who was to be the hero of his subsequent adventures. For the second time, Mom had given birth to a son.

And her prophecy as to the outcome of the trial proved accurate. After days of backbiting among the lawyers and fragmentary testimony from the witnesses, Arnold Trent was acquitted.

His story, substantiated by Carl Hess, the truck driver, the clerk in the lodging house, and the Japanese butler, was examined under the microscope and pronounced "insufficient evidence to convict for murder."

The testimony of Mr. Kleinschmidt as to his character and the testimony of some other witnesses as to the character of his victim strengthened the theory that he had killed the magician in self-defense, after

being lured to his home on a false assumption of guilty love.

Alexis, it was pointed out, had killed a man in the East over this same woman, and the law had acquitted him on *jus non scripto*. The scandal had boomed him professionally. Viewed now in retrospect, it aided the cause of Arnold Trent.

The Japanese butler proved an interesting but wary witness. He testified that his employer spoke seven languages fluently, as if this linguistic accomplishment ought to have some weight against the obvious inability of the accused to speak even his own correctly.

He had heard nothing of the fight, he reported, for his master had said that he would ring when he wanted him. Knowing that it was time for Alexis to leave for the theater, he had returned to the library *et cetera*.

He had to admit that he had never seen the accused until that evening, certainly never seen the wife of the magician in his company. He admitted also that his master had ordered liquor for his guest and had, in his presence, forced it upon him.

Altogether the case seemed clear to the jury. Arnold Trent had been taken by force to the home of the noted conjurer who had mistaken him for the lover of his wife, had been made drunk in an effort to get him to confess to an illicit love affair, and then attacked.

That the said Arnold Trent had succeeded in wresting the weapon, a stiletto, away from his assailant, and utilizing it to his own advantage, and that in so doing fortune had favored him to a degree that few men of his equipment had any right to expect.

And so he was acquitted and found himself at once the center of a vociferously congratulatory crowd. One little flapper in the throng offered him a spray of roses; several of the older women cried over him, dividing their tremulous congratulations about equally between him and his heroic mother.

Mom had been thus referred to in the news stories, and her lameness had been played up by a woman reporter who had won the sympathy of her readers by depicting the "courage and self-control of Arnold Trent's splendid mother, during these terrible days when tragedy had shadowed the life of her only son."

Mom had cut out this story with a collection of others which she intended to incorporate into a scrap book.

The "only son" was a bit awkward at first in adapting himself to the new rôle of conquering hero, but a covert understudying of Mom gave him hints and self-confidence.

By the time he reached the hotel, where a new group of interested spectators awaited a glimpse of him, he was settling into his new character like jelly into a mold.

Practically all the employees of the second-class hostelry were in the lobby to catch sight of the nation's newest idol, and so obsessed was Arnie with the conscientious desire to live up to what was expected of him, that he forgot to assist Mom from the automobile until sternly reminded by that lady herself.

In a harsh whisper she summoned him back. "Take my arm, Arnie. You on one side and Gertrude on the other. They'll want your pitcher doin' it."

"They" did, and got it. And then the reunited Trent family, conducted by half the assembled throng, swept with the benevolent majesty of royalty up to their apartments.

But Arnie had only been restored to the bosom of his family ten minutes before he was summoned by a messenger downstairs. "Somebody to see you in the lobby, Mr. Trent," the boy reported deferentially.

"Who is it?" Arnie demanded harshly.

"Name of Kleinschmidt. Says it's important."

"I'll see him," Arnie condescended after a pause. The great of the magazine adventure world always spoke thus in deciding to humor the demands of a clamorous public.

He did "see him" quite easily, for Mr. Kleinschmidt's rotund figure seemed to fill the small lobby. He rose from his shabby leather chair and waddled to meet his former employee with genially outstretched hand. "First I vant to congratulate you, Arnie. First to congratulate you, my boy."

"Thanks," Arnie murmured, taking the outstretched hand with abstracted cordiality. "Nice of you to come around."

Mr. Kleinschmidt regarded him for a minute in reverent silence. Then he spoke: "Ve vant you to come back, Arnie. Ve vant you to come back to the store." He held up a protesting hand as Arnie started to speak. "Under a different arrangement, Arnie, it is. Under completely different arrangement."

"Nothin' doin'," Arnie told him curtly. "I'm done with the second-hand furniture business. Finished."

"But, Arnie," Mr. Kleinschmidt remonstrated, "you will have it pretty good if you came back; no more work out back. Ve have anodder man for the repair work. Vat you do is to vait on the customers, Arnie. You vait on them; they come now just to *see* you, Arnie."

"Yeah, I know," Arnie retorted sagely. "You bet. But I don't feature myself in the second-hand furniture business any more. I don't like it."

Mr. Kleinschmidt's kindly face was full of concern. "But you got it to do something, Arnie, and vhat odder business do you *know?*"

With his newly acquired wisdom, Arnie smiled. "That's all right," he reassured him. "I can get plenty of jobs now."

He had never heard the truism that great issues of life often hang upon trivial incidents. But in the moment of his turning down Mr. Kleinschmidt's munificent offer, he demonstrated this axiom.

Never would he have had the courage and the recklessness to speak thus to his former employer had he not been conscious just at this moment that a pretty waitress was standing in the open dining room door, greedily drinking in his every word.

It was a wild thing that he was doing, a mad thing, but the beguiling odor of fame was in his nostrils. He was breathing in its poisonous sweetness as he had breathed in the deadly odor of wistaria in the garden of the conjurer, and it drugged all his senses save the sense of self-importance.

Having flicked aside Mr. Kleinschmidt's offer of promotion, he had the same feeling of exhilaration that had warmed him after the second glass of the magician's liquor.

His brain seemed clear and wonderfully sagacious. Let them come on with their offer of jobs. He'd show them that he could pick and choose now.

The welcome home accorded him by the neighbors the next day added another drop to his brimming glass. Al Delaney had brought his Ford to the station, and he drove the Trent family to their flat.

There was more posing for the newspapers here, one arm protectingly around Mom, and this picture worked up well. No suggestion of a darky here. These people knew their business.

When at last the throng of welcomers had gone, Mom showed him the clipping book. In it was every story of Arnie that had appeared since the beginning of the crime adventure. It took the place in the Trent home of the family album of a less advanced age.

And it had the same social function. It entertained waiting guests and clients. Arnie, turning its pregnant pages was enraptured. He read it hour by hour while Mom's sewing maching ran its frenzied seams and Gertrude moved heavily about the housework.

He had never suspected before that he had any real friends in the bay region, except the neighbors on the block and a few associates at the store. Now, all at once, he found himself possessed of a wide and varied circle of intimate pals.

Some of them had "talked" for the papers; others talked now, volubly and vividly of occasions on which they had met Arnie, experiences they had shared. As a climax to this new social vogue now accorded him, Al Delaney proposed his name to the "Redskin" lodge.

It was accepted with enthusiasm, and Arnie was invited to attend his first dance there, as the guest of honor.

He had always danced fairly, but had he been unable to dance at all, partners would still have fought for him. His dancing ability scarcely figured at all in the enthusiasm with which they sought him out. For they didn't want to dance; they wanted to "hear all about it."

Arnie began to grow used to the low-toned and confidential: "Now tell me all about it. I've been just crazy to hear. How did it *feel* to be in that man's house? Wasn't you awful scairt?"

He grew used also to his own replies: "Scairt? Well, I guess not. Not so's you'd notice it. You see, I got his number right at the start. I says to myself as soon as we began to talk: 'I'll have to kill him. Ain't any way out of it but that.'"

At this point the greenish brown eyes grew somber with memory. "It's a awful thing to know that you gotter kill a man. But you gotter do it. If it's a case of him killin' you first, you gotter beat him to it."

But the women wouldn't let him stop here. "And that woman Elaine, Arnie." They were thirsty for the "low-down" on her. "It wasn't true that you didn't really never know her, was it?"

On this point Arnie was cautious. He said little, but his looks implied much. And this combination gave exactly the desired result. The girls decided that in his court story he had magnanimously shielded the dead woman. "'I ain't happy with my husband,' she says to me. 'And when I meet a man like you, that understands—'" His voice trailed off here in painful reminiscence. "'I ain't any home-buster,' I tells her. 'You got to leave me out of it.'"

The men's whole interest centered in the details of the fight, and Arnie's adroit use of his fencing experience. They would review the experience with him, squaring off for an imaginary fight.

"Now you was standin' there and he come at you like this with a left uppercut. You grabbed the knife off'n the table with your right hand and—"

"No, with my left hand," Arnie corrected.

They gazed at him, awed and baffled. "Beats me how you could send him a drive like that with your left."

It was a curious and significant thing that during those first days after his return, scarcely any of them questioned him about what kind of work he expected to take up now.

Work-driven, job-hounded themselves, they seemed to accept by tacit agreement the fact that Arnold Trent was now removed from the necessity of job-hunting. That Arnie himself never seemed aware of an economic problem, intensified this feeling.

They accepted without comment Mom's explanation. "Arnie needs a rest." It seemed only just that during this rest period, he should be supported by the mother whose name he had glorified. And she had never been so happy in her life.

She was clever enough to realize that Arnie's popularity could not last forever. Other criminals just as picturesque would inevitably come along and usurp his place in the heart of a fickle public. But while fame lasted she would enjoy it to the full.

Any other criminal would have to "go some," she assured herself, in order to beat the drama of Arnie's case, but you never could tell when his record would be shattered.

Once, in a moment of depression, she confided this fear to Arnie himself. But like most of the other famous figures of history, he refused to heed her warning. It was quite impossible for him to believe that the world, once having discovered his genius, could ever fail in its interest.

His position seemed invulnerable, absolutely secure. And at the end of his second week at home, something happened to strengthen this conviction past all power of doubt.

It was Gertrude who brought the message, voicing it through his closed bedroom door as he stood before the wavy mirror trying to decide which tie to put on before going to the "Redskin" initiation. She knocked first, a significant ritual in itself and indicative of their altered relations. "What the hell do you want?" Arnie demanded.

"A gentleman is here to see you, in the front room."

"Well, who the hell is he?" with the justifiable irritation of those eternally hounded by the public.

"Says his name is McKnight. You don't know 'um, but he wants to see you on important business, Mom's gone to bed; so you'll have to find out what he wants."

"Tell him I'll be there—when I get

there," Arnie commanded, and returned to the problem of ties. It was a good thing, he reflected, that he was dressed to go out. His clothes would justify the brusque: "I can give you a few minutes" with which he meant to greet his caller.

He snapped out the light and sauntered with careful leisureliness along the narrow passage and out upon the threshold of the astounding adventure that awaited him.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONWARD AND UPWARD.

AT first the proposition put to him by the businesslike young man whom he found waiting in the parlor stunned Arnie. Even in his glittering new rôle of celebrity he found it difficult to picture himself doing the thing that his caller glibly suggested.

He stood by the cluttered sewing machine turning in his fingers the card which the visitor had thrust into his hand. "J. B. McKnight," he repeated, as though there were something in the sound of the unfamiliar name that might clear his brain.

The visitor allowed a full moment for his plan as outlined to sink in; then he spoke again with cheerful heartiness: "We're sure you can do it, Mr. Trent, and we're sure it will be a big thing for all of us. I don't quite see how you can afford to turn it down, do you?"

Arnie removed a pair of pink silk step-ins and several yards of filet lace from a chair and sat down. He still turned the card nervously in his hands and kept his eyes averted from the face of the caller so that the businesslike young man would not see the apprehension which he knew they held.

For the first time since fame had enveloped him in her shining mantle he felt absolutely helpless in adjusting the garment about him. It had been easy enough, though a bit breath-taking, to reject old man Kleinschmidt's ridiculous offer of a raise, but this man inhabited another world, a world in which Arnie had never dreamed of being a citizen.

This business of being a celebrity was getting beyond him, 'way beyond him. But he must say something, something that would explain, but not betray his hesitation.

The young man was waiting and the upturned note of his last question hung in the air. Arnie began to speak rapidly, mumbling his words and folding the pasteboard card into rectangles:

"I never had much education. My old man was a carpenter and they didn't pay so good in those days. He was outer work a lot, and I had to help out off an' on. I wasn't quite through grammar school when he died and I just took up any work I could to help out.

"Sort of drifted into secondhand furniture repairin'. It was a good as anything as I always had a knack for it. We lived in Milpitas then and I fixed up a shop in the front room of the house; built out a big window and set some of the things in it as I finished 'em.

"I met Mr. Kleinschmidt through his seein' some of 'em as he was drivin' through town. He offered me a job in San Francisco in his place.

"My mother had always wanted to come to the city. She thought it would be better for her sewin' business, and my sister was crazy to live in a city. She'd never been out of Milpitas.

"So we came up here, and I went to work for Kleinschmidt & Straus. That was fifteen years ago; a little more than fifteen years ago—and I've been there ever since up to until—all this happened to me."

The dapper young man listened to this vivid recital with flattering interest and slapped his knee. "Great stuff!" he ejaculated. "Why, man, it's big! It's just the kind of thing the public wants. Everything you have told me confirms my opinion that you are big stuff."

He half closed his eyes and appeared to focus his attention upon the pink silk step-ins which Arnie had flung across a corner of the sewing machine. His next words, uttered in an ecstatic trance, did not entirely exonerate him from this risqué interest.

"I can see them," he murmured, "as plainly as though I were inside them myself." He paused a moment and then continued: "Those bare little rooms in the

house at Milpitas; the parlor, with its big window made over for a shop; the serious freckled-faced boy suddenly saddled with the responsibilities of a family.

"I can see that early start, that boy, longing for a chance at education, yet struggling bravely on; burning with—"

He wasn't quite certain how to describe Arnie's fuel problem, and halted. When he spoke again he had closed the door upon the colorful past and was back in the present. "There are plenty of stories being written to-day by college graduates, Mr. Trent."

He dismissed this literature with a wave of his hand. "The bookstores are full of the writings of highbrows who know nothing of life, and who have no story to tell. The public is sick of them. What it wants now is human documents; stories written by the heart instead of by the brain.

"That's what you can give them; the story of a plain American coming from the rank and file of the people and revolting from the harsh conditions of our industrial life."

He leaned forward. "Now, look here. You write the serial just as it come to you and I'll lick it into shape for the magazine. Collaboration, that is called. Some of the finest stuff is written that way.

"We'll advertise that Arnold Trent, slayer of the greatest magician of his day, is to tell the story of his life exclusively for *True Orgies*. You know our magizine, don't you?"

Arnie was able to reply with truthful fervor that it was his favorite periodical.

J. B. McKnight studied him speculatively. "The first part of the story may drag a little, but I'll dope it up. Of course it's a pity for our purpose that they didn't send you up. The story would go over much better if you wrote it in the pen, but we'll have to make the best of things as they are. Have you ever had any illicit love affairs with women?"

Arnie nodded cryptically.

"Well, put all that in, just changing the names. We'll hurry over the first part of your life and crash down at the end of the first intallment with a big heart interest. Then, in the second we get to the Elaine woman. Go strong on her. You're out of court now and can say anything you like. You really loved that girl, didn't you?"

Arnie gulped, but words were miraculously handed to him out of the lurid past. "Better than my life," he breathed.

"Fine! Now, tell *all* about it. How you arranged your meetings; what happened when you did meet; how it feels to—"

"Don't you think that's rather dangerous?" Arnie demurred."

"I'll attend to that and fix over anything that might get you into trouble. I don't intend to put in everything you write, but I have to have all the stuff. It won't hurt you any with the public to seem reluctant about soiling a woman's reputation. In fact, it's your strongest card. But there'll be enough to hold 'em. Plenty."

And so it came about that Arnold Trent, quondam repair man, found himself established in a rear room of a real estate office which was for rent and which J. B. McKnight referred to as "a studio." Here he was introduced to the mysteries and difficulties of authorship.

McKnight had assured him that this would be the biggest enterprise that had ever struck across his life. It was; so big, in fact, that it engulfed the entire Trent family and every one who had ever been connected with it.

For news of Arnie's entry into the literary world got out through the excited volubility of Mom, and people who had neither seen nor thought of the Trents for years left Milpitas and came up to Oakland to seek them out and contribute reminiscences for his memoirs.

At the back of their voluntary helpfulnes was the desperate hope that their names might appear in the forthcoming work and thus assure to them a place among the immortals.

There was, for instance, old Mrs. Biddow, who came up to Oakland on the bus and arrived at the Trent flat unheralded to remind Arnie of that time when he had delivered some milk for her and she had shown him the refrigerator that she had contrived out of an old piano box.

She was certain that his passionate in-

terest in secondhand furniture had started on that day. That piano box refrigerator had been famous throughout Milpitas. He wouldn't forget to explain just how she had made it, would he?

And whatever the acquaintances of his youth and the friends of his present failed to supply of color and human interest, Mom drew from her own fecund memory. It seemed to Arnie now that there was nothing connected with his past that that remarkable parent had forgotten.

But even with all this assistance, authorship was sometimes rough sledding. There was more *to* the business, Arnie complained, than mere laymen ever suspected. He did not use the term "laymen," for he hadn't discovered it yet. When he did discover it later—at an authors' banquet—he fell upon it with loud cries of joy.

He was hampered, too, by the intermittent presence of a typist whom McKnight sent in to the studio. He much preferred to write his stuff in longhand and then fling it grandly to this person to decipher as best she could.

But Mom's efficiency compensated in large measure for other annoyances. She had abandoned the Clipping Book now and become a research worker. But she made her notes with careful legibility.

Beside her as she sewed was a small yellow pad with pencil attached. If these were mislaid or buried under a mass of dry goods, her voice would ring imperiously through the flat: "Gertrude, come and find the pad. I've thought of somethin' else."

Sometimes she slipped these autobiographical notes under his door at night. But usually she handed them to the author when he came in for meals. He rarely made any comment upon them and never expressed gratitude.

Toward his family he maintained now an attitude of abstracted tolerance. Conversations with Gertrude were confined to criticisms of the daily menu, and suggestions for its improvement.

"Scramble 'em!" he would yell through his closed bedroom door while he dressed in the morning. And after dinner, while he looked over the showings at the movies for the evening, he would push his empty dessert dish halfway across the table while he growled "Don't dish up any more of this glue for me. Gelatine messes never made any hit with my appetite, and you know it. Why don't you come through with a lemon pie once in a blue moon?"

Temperament. That's what Arnold Trent was developing now, and its eccentricities left his family puzzled and anxious. Mom enlarged upon its vagaries to sympathetic clients.

"He hasn't et a square meal since he began his writin'," she informed them. "Seems like nothin' that he used to like tastes good to him now. And then sometimes he gets so hungry that he has to get up in the night and cook himself somethin'. It's awful fussy work, this writin', and Arnie never has been what you'd call strong."

But when "The Story of My Life" began to appear every week upon the newsstands Arnie grew even more erratic in his habits. Sometimes he didn't come home to dinner at all nor send word that he was not coming, but took his dinner on the boat, riding back and forth with successive groups of commuters to take toll of how many of them were reading *True Orgies,* and to try to discover from their expressions whether they were appreciative of his work.

It was a great life, but nerve-racking. Sometimes he grew depressed by contemplation of the number of persons who read his story with no change of expression at all. Dumb-bells, he contemptuously labeled them. What did they expect for their money?

Fortunately his own money did not depend upon the moods of his readers. He began to get it, a stupendous amount of it, when the first installment of his story was completed. So much a word, McKnight had explained to him.

He couldn't believe it; that you got paid for every word you wrote, even *ands* and *thes*. No wonder some of those birds stretched out their yarns as they did. Paid by the word!

Often McKnight cut out whole reams that he had written and this was disconcerting. But only from the financial viewpoint. He had none of the creator's sense of outraged art.

It was on the day that the second installment of the serial appeared on the news-stands that he got The Letter. It deserves to be capitalized for the same reason that the White House deserves capitalization; it was forever consecrated and set apart from other letters.

And of these other letters Arnie was now receiving a surprising quantity. This, he discovered, was one of the rewards of successful authorship. "Fan letters," McKnight called them and was somewhat contemptuous of such correspondence.

But it became to Arnie as the very breath of his existence. Some of the writers criticized his story, others congratulated him on it; some writers begged for his picture, others for his autograph.

When he discovered that this latter simply meant signing his name he was intensely relieved. That didn't cost anything. He began to practice making a fancy signature. When he had succeeded in making it both fancy and illegible he was satisfied and sent it out generally on post cards.

But The Letter contained, not a request for his autograph or his picture, but for his presence. It bore at the top the crest of an author's club, and it invited him to be a guest at the club's monthly banquet at a big hotel in San Francisco.

In it the writer—the club's secretary—mentioned "The Story of My Life" and suggested that "our members would very much appreciate it if you would say a few words, telling us how you write and anything may be of interest."

The letter plunged Arnie into a fever of excitement. He even deigned to impart its contents to Mom, for he needed her help and her support. "I'd like to go all right," he confessed to her, "but I can't make a speech. I wouldn't know what to say."

Mom rose buoyantly to the emergency. "You haven't got too much nerve in your make-up, Arnie," she told him, "but that's all you do lack. All the rest you can get outer books. I was readin' an ad in the papers just the other day of a place right here in town that makes a speci*al*ity of writin' speeches for people. They'll write one on any subject, give 'em enough notice."

Arnie listened gloomily. "Yeah, and charge plenty for it, too," he predicted. Since money had begun to come in to him, he found it more and more difficult to spend money. He clung to it with a miserly tenacity that he had never known in the old days of the regular and meager pay check. "Besides, they couldn't help me any. They want me to tell 'em how I work. Ain't nobody else knows how I work but me—and I don't know."

Mom tore out a mouthful of bastings and regarded the litterateur intently. "Tell 'em just that," she instructed. "Tell 'em it just comes to you. That's the way all writin' is done."

He considered this advice dubiously. "That story 'came' to me, all right," he conceded. "It came on the bus from Milpitas and on street cars and trains and on that yellow pad of yours."

This was his first acknowledgment of her assistance and Mom was deeply touched, but not to the point of losing her sense of effects. "*Don't* tell 'em that," she commanded.

In the end he decided to follow the advice of J. B. McKnight and tell them scarcely anything. "Keep your mouth shut," that fountain of wisdom admonished, "and they'll think you know something.

"Tell them you're delighted to be there, but that you seldom go out to club affairs as you haven't time for it. Tell them you never consent to make a public speech. That will set you apart from practically everybody else in the world who isn't deaf and dumb.

"And in the end, crash down with the news that two movie companies are fighting over the rights to your story."

"Are they?" Arnie asked dazedly.

"Sure. Had a letter to-day from one of them. You let me manage that part of it, and just throw out a hint that you're considering their offers."

Arnie followed this advice to the letter. His speech consisted of seven carefully memorized and grammatically perfect sentences. Seated at the right hand of the president of the club and dressed in the gray business suit which McKnight had instructed him to wear in artistic defiance

of rules of formal costuming, he repeated the speech over and over to himself while eager ladies and deferential men asked his opinion on the trend of the sex novel and the Little Theater movement.

He hadn't known that "The Little Theater" was thinking of moving, but he maintained an expression of noncommittal neutrality. Certain stock phrases, he found, worked in well anywhere, and he had a few of them in hand.

"I haven't gone in for that very much." "Well, in a way that's true and then again in a way it isn't." And, best of all, "Oh, I don't know. I've been too busy livin' to think much about stuff like that."

It came at last; that sound that has struck terror to more hearts than any other auditory experience of human life; the tapping of a toastmaster's knife against his water glass. "We have with us tonight—"

Arnie found himself on his feet and was not nearly so terrified as he had expected. After all, it was easy; he knew as much as any of these birds and he probably had as much money.

"I got the money, all right," were the words, uttered subconsciously that swept him on to victory. And the closing sentence came very quickly: "That's been my job; not writin', but livin'."

This made the hit that McKnight had predicted. It was repeated up one side of the table and down the other. And it finally lodged in the mind of a reporter who used it on the following morning for his "lead:"

> In a brief and modest address last night at the Authors' Club, Arnold Trent, who has sprung into fame overnight with his startling "Story of My Life," adjured writers to live vividly before attempting to write. He stressed that often forgotten fact that laymen—"

It was thus that Arnie made connections with the word that served to shut him off completely from his past and initiate him into a new realm. He was no longer a layman. He could tell the world a few things.

And the very next evening, while he was making his second trip with the commuters he had an opportunity to tell some of these things to a person to whom they were of flattering interest.

The boat had started and he was taking his customary survey of the reading matter which occupied the passengers when suddenly his eye fell upon a small, red hat by the window. He recognized, not the hat, but its wearer immediately.

And as he edged nearer, with an aggressiveness unknown to his own commuting days, he saw that she was reading *True Orgies*.

From Mom or from life he was learning something of the value of dramatic effects, and so he stood for a moment beside her, waiting patiently for her to glance up and see him. She felt his presence at last and glanced up. Then a little cry escaped her. "Why, Arnie!"

He stood gazing at her with the benevolent kindliness of royalty who allows itself to be seen at close range by the favored few. "I been watchin' you for some time," he told her at last. And then, unable longer to keep back the question: "I see you're readin' my stuff. How does it go down?"

She stared at him with a light in her black eyes that he had never seen there before. "Oh, Arnie!" she breathed again. "It's—it's simply priceless! How did you—how do you—do it?"

"Oh, it's not so hard," he told her casually. "I just toss it off. When a man has really lived—"

But she didn't wait for him to finish the quotation. "I didn't hardly think you'd even remember me," she said, "now that you've got so famous. I was afraid you'd forgotten all about me."

"Forgotten you!" His words rang out indignantly. And Arnie was indignant; indignant and astounded to discover that he had forgotten her. Not for months had he thought of Doria Blake. The name recalled him to a sudden question: "You're married by this time, I suppose?"

She denied it with a shake of her head. "Jim has had a run of bad luck. You knew the While-You-Wait Garage had burned down, didn't you?"

He acknowledged the catastrophe with a

nod. The tragedies of the working classes seemed almost pitiful in their triviality.

"And he's had a hard time gettin' started with another one," Doria went on. "He's in with another feller at a fillin' station now, but they're not sure whether they'll keep on with it. There is more competition than there used to be, and—"

Arnie cut short this industrial recital with an abrupt change of subject. "And what you been doin'?"

"I got another stenog' job, with a automobile house over in the city. It pays better than my other one, and the hours are better, too. I don't know but what I'll go right on with it even after I'm married. I don't see not havin' my own money."

"Sure," Arnie agreed with more heartiness than he had shown in any part of the dialogue before. "You bet. No use givin' up good money when you got your hands on it."

She gazed at him with rapt admiration. "You must have pulled down a wad of it yourself, Arnie, since—all this." She raised the magazine in her lap.

He glanced at it with his carefully cultivated abstraction. "Yeah, I've made quite a bunch of kale," he admitted.

Doria edged closer to him. "Do they pay good for stories, like this?" she entreated.

He gave her the terms per word and even he was satisfied with the result. Doria's mouth literally fell open. "Gosh!" she ejaculated, and the word sounded like the essence of a prayer.

"It's not as much as I'd ought to have got," Arnie confided. "I was at an authors' banquet last night and one of the writers there told me that some of the other magazines pay more. I'll know better next time."

"Next time!" she echoed. "Are you goin' on writin' more stories, Arnie?"

"Well, why not? I guess I got as good a right as anybody." A plan, bold and breath-taking, was forming in his mind. Jim Sullivan's girl. Well, what of it? He had more money than Jim Sullivan would probably ever see, and he wasn't afraid of anybody. He'd tell the world he wasn't.

He spoke abruptly: "Say, Doria, what's the matter with you and me havin' a little supper some place down town when the boat gets in?"

She closed *True Orgies* with a little click. "Any place you say," she answered, and followed him out to the crowded front of the boat.

CHAPTER IX.

FAME, MONEY AND LOVE.

THEY went to a little Sea Grotto on upper Broadway where, as Arnie tactfully explained, there wouldn't be so many other people around. If Doria was surprised at this choice of a dining place, she concealed it admirably. "Writers," Arnie explained as they drew out their chairs, "always eat in cafés like this; you get a lot of material here."

This estimate of the Sea Grotto's fertility proved correct. Doria did get a lot of material, and she began the harvest as soon as the order was given.

Leaning halfway across the shiny bare table she fixed her companion with eager, greedy eyes. How could he have forgotten, he wondered himself, the luster of those eyes? And now their shining was all for him. "Arnie," she pleaded, "tell me all about it."

He recognized the familiar crack of the ringmaster's whip, but he had never thrilled to it in quite this way before. It was difficult to adjust his tone to the usual pitch of unconcern as he countered: "Tell you all about what?"

"Why, about Alexis-of-the-Nile and how you did him in. Was it like you said in court, or like—"

She had followed his whole court experience then. Of course, she would. He smiled across at her with a genial tolerance. "Now you don't expect me to go into all that again, do you?" he parried. "If you're readin' the story in—"

She waved this implication aside. "Oh, well, of course, you never can put in everything just as it was," she told him sagely. "It would be too dangerous. You know, I've been outer town ever since you got

back up until a week ago when I took this new job. That's why I haven't rung you up or been around to see you.

"But I do want to know all about it, Arnie. I've just been crazy to know—about the Elaine woman. It wasn't—just like you told in court, was it?"

Arnie's voice as he replied held the patient note of the author trying to make clear to the lay mind the subtleties of his art. "You can see, I should think, Doria, that I couldn't come out with that thing *exactly* like it was. In law and in writin' you got to fix things up a little to have 'em go over."

She nodded, her lips moving wordlessly as though she were repeating this ritual for future reflection. Arnie leaned back in his chair and surveyed the steaming oyster stew that had just been set before him. "And, of course," he said, "so far as the money is concerned, you make a lot more outer the movies rights than—"

Her black eyes dilated. "What!" she cried. "You goin' to sell it to the movies?"

It was the sweetest moment of Arnold Trent's life, and with his newly acquired abilities, he made the most of it. Drawing out a cigarette, he lighted it and then passed the package to Doria.

It was not until she had taken one and he struck the second match that he answered her startled query: "Got two companies fightin' over it now. Don't know which one of 'em will finally land it, but they got to pay me for it whoever gets it; you bet they gotter pay!"

For a moment Doria was speechless. And in that moment each of them definitely decided upon a goal and a campaign policy. As Doria's purpose became clearer and clearer to him, Arnie found himself playing the most difficult and intricate and absorbing game of the whole adventure.

There was more exhilaration in it than in any other that he had so far attempted, and, unlike the others, he entered this game voluntarily, lured rather than forced to take a hand.

It was Doria's next play, and she spoke with an almost breathless earnestness: "I always knew you had it in you, Arnie. Why, don't you remember, 'way back, I was always tellin' you that you'd ought to get out of second-hand furniture; that it wasn't any place for a man with the brains you got?"

The interrogative note in her voice forced him to respond to the don't-you-remember challenge. He did it by a nod.

"What I always say," she hurried on, "is that you never can tell about a person. You can't know what's in a person until they come up against something."

Arnie acknowledged the profundity of this with more than a nod. "Well, I come up against somethin' all right. I'll tell the world I did."

She fed him lavishly with her eyes and with the reverential note of her voice: "You sure did, Arnie. The way you knocked out that man; *that* man, of all people! It was by some fencin' trick, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. A trick I learned off that old French dancin' teacher. You remember the one that used to give—"

"Oh, yes, I remember him. René something-or-other. The boys used to laugh at you for takin' lessons. They thought it was a dude kind of sport. But, gee! I haven't ever seen anybody fence. It must take lots of nerve, don't it?"

"A man has got to have nerve," he explained, "when he's up against savin' his life and defendin' the name of a woman."

Doria's dark eyes seemed to grow a shade darker. "Then there *was* somethin' between you and her, Arnie?"

His face was somber. "I can't go into all that," he said. "A man could be such a hound, such a cur as to put the blame on a woman, and especially now that she's dead. It wouldn't be right."

"But she *is* dead now, Arnie. That's just it; so you hadn't oughter think any more about her."

There was reproach in Arnie's greenish brown eyes. "It's not so easy," he said, "to forget a woman like *that*."

"But we got to live in the present," Doria reminded him gently. "The past *is* the past and it's over and done with. A person oughtn't to throw away their whole lives tryin' to dig up things that is over. Anybody'd say, Arnie—" She pushed

aside the empty soup plate and spoke with gentle assurance. "Anybody'd say that a man like you, young and—and famous and with everything before him ought to take hold of—what life offers in the present."

"It don't offer me anything," Arnie murmured with the implacable depression of the temperamental, "nothing that I really want, Doria." He lighted another cigarette and stared at her through its curling smoke.

"Why, it offers you everything, Arnie. I can't think of a thing that you couldn't have—if you really wanted it. And you'd ought to make use of your advantages. You owe it to yourself."

His own philosophy. The words struck with familiar pleasantness against his ears.

But it was impossible for any mere words to reach clear through to his brain, for intoxication was upon him now. Did she really mean it? he kept asking himself.

In order to convince himself that she did, he nodded his head up and down like a mechanical doll. The motion had the desired effect. She did mean it. But caution had not entirely deserted him. He put out a feeler. "Well," he said, "we all have to choose our fates. You, for instance, have chosen Jim Sullivan."

He didn't remember exactly how the conversation went after that, but when he and Doria parted that night, they were engaged.

Reviewing the scene in his own bedroom, Arnie was far too excited to get a clear vision of either himself or Doria. But he recalled vividly the feel of her lips on his and the pressure of her arms about his neck.

And she had always loved him. He couldn't get over this confession. Always had loved him; even that night on the boat when she had told him she was to marry Big Jim Sullivan. She had expected him to protest then. What a nut he had been! And now she was his. He, Arnie Trent, had cut out another man almost on the steps of the church.

As he undressed, he turned mechanically in his fingers, the queer little green stone that had once ornamented the helmet of Alexis-of-the-Nile, and which had been restored to him along with other possessions when he left the jail.

He had had it made into a charm and wore it dangling from a button of his vest. A charm was right, he told himself. Good luck seemed to follow him wherever he went. He snapped off the light and got into bed. It was very late, but sleep was impossible.

Recalling chaotically the events of the evening, he was pleased to remember that he had not surrendered too easily to Doria's courtship. He had made her suffer, as he himself had once suffered.

Through all their ecstasy in having found each other, she must never be allowed to forget that he was a famous and soon to become a wealthy man. You couldn't hand out all that to a girl unless you knew she appreciated what she was getting. Even at that, she was getting a pretty big thing.

They planned to be married on the day that the negotiations for his movie rights were completed. And this day came, with genial promptitude, two weeks hence.

During these brief days of their engagement, the course of true love did not run with entire smoothness. There were two "conscientious objectors" to the plan.

One of these, and perhaps the more formidable, was Mom. Arnie had expected some resistance here, for Mom had never approved of Doria. But he was completely unprepared for the violence of her attack.

They were in the sewing room when he announced the engagemnt, and it had the effect upon Mom almost of a stroke of apoplexy. For a moment she struggled helplessly with her indignation. Then it burst forth like suddenly released flame.

"Well, I vow! You let her do that! You let that woman *get* you! After all I've done for you. After all I—"

"After all *you've* done for me?" he echoed brutally. "Well, what have you ever done for me? It's me that's done everything that's been done in this family, I guess. I guess there wouldn't anybody know who the Trent family was even if it wasn't for me. And besides, I can't marry you, can I?"

The conversation raged for half an hour at the end of which time Mom was reduced, for the first time since Arnie had known her, to helpless tears. "You mark

my words, Arnie," she predicted darkly, "you just mark what I say. That woman's not ever goin' to do you any good. On the day you marry her, you'll sign your own death warrant. I'm here to tell you that."

Big Jim Sullivan was "there" to tell him other things, but Arnie succeeded in evading an interview with him and leaving the management of his rival to Doria. She reported later that he had said some harsh things about Arnie, but on the whole had taken the affair more quietly than she had hoped.

"You never can tell about Jim," she said in recalling the interview. "He goes to pieces over things that you don't expect him to, and is quiet over things that you expect him to kick up a row about. When he's quiet he's worse to manage. You never know what he's thinkin' about."

"We should worry about what he's thinkin' about," Arnie told her soothingly. "If he thinks he can break up our plans, I'll break his neck."

They were married in a down town church and had their pictures snapped afterward for one of the newspapers. The evening paper informed an interested public that:

> The newly married couple left on the night train for Los Angeles, where Mr. Trent goes to superintend the filming of his famous serial, "The Rhinestone Helmet."

The idea of "superintending" his film production was Mom's. Mom had risen nobly to the occasion, once she had resigned herself to its inevitability, and it was she who gave the reporters their story.

The title of his film had surprised and excited its author. He had wondered what they would call it, but had been unable himself to imagine a name so apt and enticing. Now he could shut his eyes and see it in electrics on Market Street.

But he and Doria were not permitted to do much superintending of the forthcoming production. This was not a great disappointment. For Arnie's chief desire in choosing southern California for the honeymoon was to retrace with his bride every step of the drama that had made him famous.

He was like a murderer lured back to the scene of his crime; he was, in fact, a murderer, but lured back for reasons differing somewhat from those actually connected with such crime.

As they walked down Spring Street on the evening of their arrival, Arnie pointed out the cafeteria where he had met Elaine. He actually took her into the place where th fatal trap had been sprung, and would have led her even to the fatal table had not fate, blind to the drama of the situation, decreed that it should be taken by other diners. After dinner, he hired a taxi, in a spirit of reckless abandon, and had them driven past the home of Alexis-of-the-Nile.

And Doria was all that the most exacting guide-to-the-city's-most-historic-spots could have desired. She drank in the trip, alert to all its drama, greedy for all its details. Decidedly the honeymoon was a brilliant success.

But she was docilely content, at the end of a week, to return to Oakland where they had taken an apartment.

The apartment itself was Arnie's initial triumph on the battle-field of matrimony. Doria had wanted to take one much farther uptown where the neighborhood was more select. But Arnie had pointed out the difference in expense with a gentle reproof.

They had agreed that a move to San Francisco was inadvisable just yet. It would seem as if they were deserting their old friends. But Doria had hoped for a swell apartment near the lake. "You got the money, Arnie," she had pointed out. "You're goin' to have all that money from the movies."

"But we got to be careful of it," he had protested. And with a wisdom that she did not then understand, "You never can tell what 'll happen to money. You've got it one day and it's gone the next."

And so they took possession of the cheap but comfortable little apartment over a hardware store on Broadway. "It's so convenient to everything," Doria explained to their friends. "And you know, Arnie's got to be where he can study people. He's goin' on with his writin' and he's just got to live with people all around. That's how he gets his plots."

The exact amount which he was to receive for his movie rights was, by Mom's sagacious suggestion, never revealed to greedily inquiring friends. "When people once *know* a thing," she explained to Arnie, "no matter how big a thing it is, they lose interest in it. But as long as you keep 'em guessing, no matter how small the thing is, you've got 'em goin'."

This philosophy proved its soundness as the days went by. With the sale of his story to the movies, Arnie became a glorious figure; with his carefully veiled implications as to the money part of the transaction, he added to that glory the seductiveness of mystery.

Speculations ran rife among his friends and Doria's as to how much he had received for "The Rhinestone Helmet." But nobody could speak with authority.

Perhaps it was a part of the desperate desire to discover the answer to this relentless question that prompted the Redskin lodge to give a party in honor of the newlyweds a week after their return from their honeymoon.

At any rate Doria found the formal invitation in their mail box one morning, and passed it triumphantly across the table to Arnie when he came in for lunch. He read it with careful indifference which he never dropped now, even with her. "Well, so far so good," he commented. "I guess we had that comin' to us all right."

"They want to find out how much you got for 'The Rhinestone Helmet,'" she explained.

"Yeah, I'll bet," he conceded. "Well, let 'em try." He had never found anything in his new life so difficult as the hoarding of this secret. It was more like punishment for a crime than the reward of success.

There were times when he felt that he would simply have to let out the exact figures of his fortune, but he could not deny that Mom's terms, hard as they were, had brought in, were still bringing in, abundant and satisfying harvest.

No telling what Al Delaney and the rest of the Redskins had decided upon in their minds as the amount of payment. It was quite conceivable that they had set the figure too high, and it was perilous to run the risk of disappointing them.

No, quite obviously it was better to suffer than to expose himself to that possible look of disappointment and contempt in their faces. Doria's voice broke across his thoughts. "You got another letter there too, Arnie. Who's that from?"

He hadn't noticed the other letter lying there, unopened, upon the lunch table. He picked it up now and studied its exterior with that childlike interest of one to whom the receiving of letters is still a pleasant novelty.

The address was typewritten. It had been sent to the flat and forwarded by Gertrude. The postmark was indistinguishable as it always is when the identity of the sender is unknown.

Under Doria's curious gaze, he tore open the envelope and reached inside. What he drew out was not a letter at all, but a twenty-dollar bill.

CHAPTER X.

A PRELIMINARY SHOWDOWN.

ARNIE admitted to himself later that it was a mistake to have taken the attitude that he did take about the anonymous twenty dollars. It was difficult too for him to explain to himself just why he had taken it.

Certainly there was nothing to be gained by assuming in that mysterious way that he knew who had sent the money. And his nonchalant, "Oh, it's just a bill that a feller owed me," had not entirely convinced Doria nor satisfied her inordinate curiosity.

"Well, it's a mighty funny way to fling money around," she commented and examined the blurred postmark with a quite unjustifiable interest. "Where does it come from?"

Arnie wished he knew. There was something rather creepy about having money steal into the house in this way. His one ghastly experience with unearned increment had made him shy of such gifts.

Yet it was plainly intended for him. It was his name and his address on the envelope. Doubtless the sender had forgotten

to enclose the letter of explanation. It would follow perhaps by the next mail. In the meantime it irritated him that Doria should be insistent in her curiosity.

Once a man was married it seemed that there was to be no more privacy about anything. It was really no business of Doria's if admirers of his wanted to send him offerings through the mail. But she made it so much her business that at last, when the explanatory letter was not forthcoming, he had to give her the anonymous twenty dollars in order to quiet her.

Afterward it occurred to him that this was all she had wanted anyway, for she made no more remarks upon its origin, except to say with a little gleam of amusement in her black eyes, "If you're gamblin', Arnie, I won't never razz you about it so long as you win."

He felt quite certain of that, for already he had found the key to Doria's character. The possession of that key was in itself a disturbing thing. For he found himself quite unable to use it in any effectual way.

If the only method of satisfying Doria's craving for money was to keep on giving it to her, it was evident that even the fortune from "The Rhinestone Helmet" wouldn't last long.

She had hardly taken off her wraps on the return from the honeymoon before she had precipitated them into a hot argument over a car. Apparently she had decided to have one at once.

"My Lord!" he cried, sinking down weakly upon the couch. "What do you think I am? You'll be askin' for a mulberry-colored limousine next." He had won out about the car, as he had won out about the apartment, but he knew that the victory was only a truce.

The prospect of being guests of honor at the Redskin lodge pushed all problems into the background of their minds.

This event brought problems of its own, the weightiest of which was what he should wear. Doria had insisted that he rent a dress suit, and he had rebelled: "They'll think I'm stuck on myself. Nobody will have on a dress suit. They've never wore 'em; they haven't got 'em."

"That's all the more reason to show 'em that you have. It don't make any difference what anybody else wears. It's up to you to set the style and drag that old lodge up to doin' the swell thing."

Arnie had never visioned himself as an arbiter of fashion, and as he stood before the apartment mirror now arrayed for the first time in his life in evening clothes, he felt wretchedly ill at ease.

Life and Mom had always dominated him. Now it was Doria who assumed charge. The marriage ceremony had been to him like the rite of naturalization; it had merely provided him was a different sovereign.

And he would finally lose out about the car, he reflected gloomily as he surveyed himself with somber eyes. In order to have peace he would have to give in, just as he had about these fool clothes.

Arnie was no exception to the rule that most married men are pacifiists at heart. They would rather insure domestic tranquillity than provide for the common defense. So he prayed for peace, expected war, and watched the used car market in hope of effecting a compromise.

"You gotter watch your step, Arnie," Doria warned as they started for Redskin Hall. "You gotter be easy and nice to everybody or they'll think you're gettin' the swell head."

Arnie nodded, still gloomily. His first few months of association with fame had already revealed to him some interesting things about human nature.

He saw, among these, the fact that once you begin to climb the ladder of success everybody you knew immediately signs up on a hastily organized committee to note whether or not fame is going to your head and to report all such evidence to other members of the organization.

Other celebrities before him have discovered that no Senatorial investigating committee ever toiled with such efficient and incessant zeal as do these self-appointed lackeys in the Hall of Fame.

And so Arnie watched his step. His manner of greeting his congratulatory friends struggled for just the right blending of reticence and cordiality. But even so, the tuxedo cramped his style during the first part of the evening.

It cramped it permanently with some of his hosts, but the ladies were universally approving. He sat between Al Delaney's sister and the pretty girl who still worked in the delicatessen. Conversation with them was not all difficult.

They plied him with eager questions about Hollywood. The delicatessen girl asked him in low-toned entreaty, whether he thought there was any chance of her being able to make the movies, and if he would " use his influence" for her.

Arnie promised, but held out scant hope. " It's not so easy," he told her brutally. " There's hundreds of girls tryin' to get in, and most of 'em are turned away."

" But if you *know* somebody," she implored, "like you, for instance, that's already in and goin' strong, wouldn't that help a lot?"

He considered the point speculatively. " Well, in one way it might and then again it might not. You see, you gotter be awful good to get into the movies. It ain't—it's not, like it used to be. A person to get in now has got to crash down with real talent."

She gazed at him worshipfully and, exhilarated by the adoration in his eyes, he turned rudely from her and plunged into excited conversation with Mary Delaney.

She wanted to know how he had ever thought up such a wonderful name as "The Rhinestone Helmet." " Oh, it's not hard to name shows," he told her. "That one just came to me. I don't ever have any trouble that way."

Halfway down the table he caught Doria's eye. Al Delaney, the president of the club, was next to her, and she was obviously having the time of her life. He could easily catch some of her words.

She was describing in glowing terms their visit to the studio. He felt a warm glow suffuse him, that glow known only to married couples who in the midst of an absorbing and difficult game get a signal that conveys the assurance of perfect team work. After all, being married was a wonderful thing.

Arnie did his best to bring to the Redskin banquet the spirit and atmosphere of Hollywood. It was not a brilliant best, for even the sudden acquisition of wealth and fame cannot recreate the fiber of the human mind. But to his auditors he was amply satisfying.

Through his descriptions of studio life he scattered lavishly his own opinions upon the movie business and its participants. " And I says to her, ' What do you think you are anyway? It's your business to act what I've wrote, not to suggest changes.' " And later, " All directors is about alike; pigheaded and set on havin' their own way. You got to tell 'em where to head in or they'll get so they think they wrote the play themselves. That scene f'rinstance, where I was in the magician's house. Well, they got that all balled up."

He was scarcely conscious now of what he ate. The conversational ball seemed to roll of its own accord; all he had to do was to follow it. " And I says to him, ' I don't care who's directin' it; I wrote it and what's more, I *lived* it.' "

One of the Redskins across the table cut in eagerly: " That's right. You lived it all right. They can't git around that." And then, before he knew it, Arnie was plunged again into a description of the technique of the famous fight.

There were a few guests present who hadn't heard it narrated by the hero himself. And now, while Arnie gave them the details, the entire table fell silent before him. He pushed aside his salad plate and took center stage.

The Redskins listened, breathless, and the waitresses came and went with the empty plates. They were bringing in the last course, ice-cream and cake. Always the lodge served four courses at their dinners. But this was in every way the biggest banquet they had ever staged.

Ice-cream and cake was the fifth course, and with it came the conventional black coffee and glass dishes of bonbons.

It was while these last were being set at regularly spaced intervals down the long table that a disturbance outside arrested the attention of the diners and diverted attention from Arnie's monologue. One of the men helpers was in a violent argument with some one at the top of the long flight of steps that led from the street.

For a moment the words of the debate were indistinguishable. Then, as the clatter of dishes ceased, they came clearly to the group about the banquet board.

"No, you don't come in. You got no right in here, and besides you're stewed."

"*I* got no right in here! Say, tell me another. I belong to this lodge. I'm a member'n in good 'n' regular standin'. Jus' been outer town lately. That's why you don't know me. But now I'm back, get me? An' there's a feller here that I wanter see. I'm goin' to see him, too, so git outer the way of traffic."

The voice was thick and full of menace. It was familiar, too, but most of the diners did not recognize it. Al Delaney pushed back his chair and stamped over to the end of the hall. His voice, as he remonstrated with the intruder, held that mixture of firmness and soothing with which the wary negotiate with those under the influence of liquor.

Nobody could make out what he said, but in a few minutes he came back to the table. "It's Big Jim Sullivan," he reported. "He's not full exactly, but he's got a pretty good load aboard. And he says he won't leave, Arnie, until he's spoke to you."

The world seemed suddenly to recede from the guest of honor. He stared speechlessly at his informant. "To me?" he echoed weakly.

The diners were at once a-thrill with interest. In the moment's pause that followed Al Delaney's dramatic announcement, some of the girls giggled, and all of them glanced significantly at Doria.

How would she take it, this fight of the rivals over her? For not one of them doubted that there would be a fight. Big Jim Sullivan, just back in town had heard that the bride and groom were here, and he had come around to challenge Arnie. Nothing so spectacular had ever happened in Redskin Hall.

Again the placating voice of the head waiter floated to them, and in reply a furious rejoinder. "So's your old man. Either he comes out here and stands up to me, or I go in there. He can take his choice."

Arnie was infinitely grateful to him for giving him this alternative. If he had to fight with Big Jim Sullivan, at least let the combat be as private as possible. That the thing should be staged here, in this banquet room, before a crowd who represented the social triumph of his life. The idea was too bitter to be borne.

He rose slowly from his chair, and his wild eyes sought and found those of Doria. There was no assurance of teamwork in those black eyes now. They held instead a curious, unreadable expression that left him bleak and defenseless before his world.

The Redskins were pushing back their chairs, joyous anticipation of a fight in every face. Low-voiced injunctions smote against his ears. They were like little hammers striking upon his brain.

"Go to it, Arnie! Show 'um the tricks of a fencer. He can't knock you out. He's bigger, but he ain't got any science. Go right after 'um. Give 'um his. Remember Alexis-of-the-Nile."

Remember Alexis! As if he could forget him. Arnie passed his tongue over dry lips. This was worse than the encounter with the magician, much worse. For that affair had been fought out in private, and now he had been challenged in full view of crowded bleachers.

Al Delaney was speaking. "Naw, don't you fellers all come out," he entreated. "It's between him and Jim. We ain't goin' to have this banquet turned into any free-for-all. What's eatin' you, anyway?"

But he might as well have talked to the wind. As Arnie started on his interminable walk across the slippery floor, every Redskin fell into place behind him. There arose from them an inarticulate murmuring. But above it, Big Jim Sullivan's voice rang out with the passion which had suggested it. "Come on, you shrimp!" he bellowed. "Nobody 'll ever take a girl away from Jim Sullivan and get out with a whole skin.

"Try your dude fencin' tricks on me. I'm ready for 'em. If you win, I'll git to hell outer here and leave you have 'er. But you got to show me. I'm from Missouri, see, and you got to show me that the best man has won!"

Arnie scarcely heard the words, yet they

had a vaguely familiar ring. He had fixed his eyes upon the man toward whom he was advancing with the unconscious intentness of a hypnotist. It was almost as if he were trying to stare the furious Irishman out of the idea of a fight.

Al Delaney started to speak to him, then glanced at the set, staring eyes, and fell silent. There was something uncanny about the silence in which Arnold Trent advanced to meet his adversary. There was in his face neither anxiety nor anticipation; neither exultation nor fear. Only that blank, set stare.

Some of the others noted it, too, and were vaguely uneasy. He came at last to within a few feet of where Big Jim Sullivan's menacing figure waited. Then he stopped and, without speaking, continued to stare at him while his brain struggled to free itself from the terror which held it.

After all, there was no use in trying to speak, was there? He would have to fight this man. Before them all he would have to stand up to him and take the beating of his life.

And yet, through the blackness of this realization, a faint spark of hope gleamed. After all, he was a child of luck. Alexis had had both cunning and strength. And with all that in his favor, he had proved to that fiend that he was the better man.

This big bully had only strength. In some way, he might win out. In some way—Lord! Fighting about a woman again! The thing was getting to be a habit. These were the thoughts that were surging through his head as he fixed his eyes with desperate intentness upon his foe.

And then, as if in answer to his inarticulate prayer, the thing happened. The big Irishman, catching his first full view of the man advancing to meet him, with set face, crossed himself and took a step backward.

Under his breath he muttered something that nobody could translate.

It was Al Delaney who spoke as if performing an introduction. "Well, here's your man. Now what's the big idea with you, Jim?"

Arnie spoke for the first time, in a smothered voice. "We'll fight right here. No use goin' any place else, is there?"

"No, you don't," the presiding officer of the Redskins objected. "There ain't ever any rough stuff pulled on this dance floor and there ain't goin' to be now. You'll both come into the coat room. That's where these things are settled."

He led the way, but was surprised when he reached the door to find that nobody was following him. When he returned to the group gathered at the head of the steps, he was just in time to catch Big Jim Sullivan's last words: "—and you know why. We'll settle this—some other time."

Neither the words nor the slow retreat of Big Jim down the long stairway were so astounding to his audience as his sudden sobering. For there was no doubt that in that brief moment of their inexplicable passage of arms, Big Jim had sobered.

His eyes still held the hot flame of jealousy, but they held something else, too—something that nobody present had ever seen in those eyes before, something incredibly like fear.

And the man who had put that look into Big Jim Sullivan's eyes stood gazing after him in the same inscrutable silence as he backed down the steps as though making an exit from the presence of royalty.

There had been some among the guests at the banquet board who had cherished secret doubts about Arnold Trent's magnificent exploit. One or two had even expressed open doubt of his claims to celebrity. Now their doubts were permanently silenced.

As they looked at him standing there at the head of the steps, while his enemy backed away from him, a shudder passed over the group. He had won out, temporarily at least, without lifting his hand. "Gosh!" somebody muttered. "Alexis himself couldn't have put it over better!"

CHAPTER XI.

PHILANTHROPY.

THE story of the arrested fight between Arnold Trent and Big Jim Sullivan swept the neighborhood of Myrtle Street like a fire. By the next morning everybody seemed to know about it. Arnie

himself had left Redskin Hall in a blaze of glory.

To the group who accompanied him and Doria home, like a military escort, he made only the cryptic comment: "Well, I backed him down on it. Any time he wants to fight me, I'm ready for him."

"But how did you do it, Arnie?" the awed public, broadcasting through Al Delaney, entreated. "You just come walkin' across the floor to 'um like this and—"

Arnie nodded sagely. "Yeah, I just come, I just came, walkin'—and that was enough. Any time he wants—"

But the rest of it was lost. The public had its answer. Arnold Trent had hypnotized him, that's what he had done, by some trick learned from the celebrated conjurer.

"Didn't you notice the way he held 'um with his eyes while he was walkin' to meet 'um?" Many of them had noticed; the others, resentful of their own lost opportunity, averred that they had. And so the drama was pictured to the world.

Nothing that Arnie could have done would have established him more firmly upon his throne of honor. Backing down Big Jim Sullivan, just by lookin' at 'um! You might expect anything of a man who could do that.

They did expect one particular thing of him, a thing for which they clamored ceaselessly. "How do you do it, Arnie? How do you work that subtle stuff? Can you teach a person to do it? Is they a special trick about it?"

"I'll say there is," the man of mystery responded. And then, tolerantly: "If you knew anything about things like that, you wouldn't ever ask such a question. It's like writing or anything like that. You got to have it in you. It's a science."

They listened in reverent silence. Here was a genius of which they had had no inkling before. Arnie had possessed this wonderful talent for months at least, and made a secret of it all the time. There were even some in the neighborhood who hinted that perhaps he had won Doria Blake by the spell which he cast over her.

Although no rumor of this theory reached Arnie himself, he became aware during the next few days that Doria was under a spell. If not a spell, some unexplainable inner force was holding her quiet and inscrutable. He probed eagerly for the praise which he felt was his due, but failed to extract anything more satisfying than an acquiescent, "Yeah, I know you got the upper hand on him all right."

But there was neither enthusiasm nor reverence in her tone. She might have been commenting on a bargain that he had brought home to her from a department store. And her black eyes rested on him with a disconcerting gaze that held a mixture of bewilderment and doubt.

You never could satisfy women, he reflected indignantly. A man could turn himself inside out for them and get not even a word of praise in return.

At dinner, one night, two months after the Redskin drama, Doria intensified his resentment by asking suddenly: "You don't think you got him backed down that easy? Him, an Irishman?"

Her tone and the abruptness of the challenge stung him to caustic retort. "I don't care whether he's through with me or not. If he wants to come on, let him. I guess I can handle him."

Doria leaned her head on her elbow, pushing aside the teapot in order to make room for it on the cluttered table. "*Can* you?" she persisted. The question was not a taunt, not a goad. It was merely speculative, and she continued to gaze at him with that calculating expression in her eyes.

He considered the question beneath his dignity and made no effort at reply. But the shrewdness of Mom's comments upon mystery had proved their soundness again in this crisis. She had been right.

He even admitted to her, in a guarded interview, that she was "pretty damn right about sizin' up people." And he proceeded, with irritating consistency, to continue with her the policy of reticence.

Her entreaties: "But, Arnie, how did you learn that hypnotism?" failed to elicit anything but a noncommittal smile.

To this he added, in their last conversation on the subject, a brutal: "You told me once, when I wanted to go to see Alexis up here, that all those conjurers was fakes. Well, if that's the way you feel about it,

what's the use me tryin' to explain their tricks to you?"

"You might spill it to me, Arnie," she implored. "Your own mother. And you ain't speakin' over any broadcastin' station. You know I won't say anything about—"

"How can you say anything?" he retorted, picking up his hat. "You don't know anything."

In reporting the conversation later to Doria, he didn't meet the expected response. Always any policy for keeping Mom in her place had provoked Doria's enthusiastic cooperation. Now she merely said, while she buried herself in the evening paper: "Got the old lady goin', too, did you?" and lapsed into silence.

He felt hotly resentful of this ambiguous dismissal of his adventure. In order to hide his outraged pride, he reached for a loose sheet of the paper and immersed himself in it. And in the ensuing moments he read a story that became instantly a significant and absorbing factor of his life, submerging temporarily even the glory of his affair with Big Jim Sullivan.

It was the kind of "heart interest" item that writers in quest of plots often cut from the daily press and furbish up for the fiction market.

The first part of the story was commonplace enough. It narrated the odd situation of a baby abandoned by its girl mother on the steps of a local millionaire's home.

What contributed a unique touch to this circumstance were two facts dug up by the enterprising reporter who visited the young mother in the charity ward of a hospital.

He concluded his story:

> The mother was discovered by the police to be Miss Arline Grantly, and her case is made more pitiable by the fact that she is in a dying condition and that she is the daughter of Edward Grantly, pioneer lumberman of this State.
>
> Old man Grantly was an erratic character of miserly tendencies, who was supposed to have possessed a small fortune when he died, and who passed away two years ago while a free guest in an unpaid-for room of the old Broadway House, without revealing to any one where he had hidden his small hoard.

As Arnie read, his throat contracted. The story seemed like the slap of a wet towel across his face. He read it again. "The old Broadway House—"

Careful to keep the paper between his face and Doria's alert eyes, he continued to turn the words over and over in his mind. Well, what of it? There was nobody to prove that *that* money hidden in the mattress at the Broadway House had belonged to old man Grantly. Lots of people with money must have died there. Lots of them must have sewed up their money in the mattress.

His mind rejected this last assumption and he was furious to find it unconvinced. But it would take a lot of legal procedure and a pretty clever lawyer to prove that that girl with the baby had any title to the money he had found in the old Broadway House mattress.

And even if this Arline person *was* Grantly's daughter, it was evident that he didn't want her to have his money. If he had, he would have turned it over to her.

As this thought struck Arnie, he experienced a sensation of intense relief. It would be sentimental foolishness to think about it any more. Having assured himself of this, he proceeded, with a determined leisureliness, to a further reading of the paper.

But nothing else in it seemed to register. He and Doria went out to a show later, but even here Arnie's thoughts wandered back to the girl dying in the charity ward of the new Mercy Hospital while the city cared for her baby.

The Oakland capitalist had been stubbornly unwilling to assume its charge, and Arnie felt a furious resentment against him. If he had only done the thing that a man with plenty of money ought to do, nobody else need to have worried about it.

But as the days passed he found himself quite unable to stop worrying about it. Conscience, his one vital asset and liability, stirred in its sleep, then woke to militant life. Far from slumbering any more, it seemed threatened with chronic insomnia.

Five thousand dollars! Suppose the Arline girl was entitled to it. Suppose he had turned it over to the police when he had first found it, and they had discovered its rightful owner? Would it have prevented her from doing—the thing that she had done?

Who could answer such questions? And what was the use of thinking about the thing at all, since he no longer had the five thousand to pass over to her?

Opposing itself to this philosophy was the drearily reiterated argument that although he no longer had the original roll of greenbacks, he possessed a good deal of money of his own, money which he had acquired as result of having had the hotel treasure.

But you couldn't expect a man to turn over his entire fortune to a girl he'd never seen before just because her old man had been too stingy to provide for her? The thing was too absurd to consider. And yet he could not stop considering it. A week went by while he considered it.

He was still turning it feverishly in his mind when an event happened which decided him instantly upon a plan of action. Coming home to dinner at the apartment, he found a letter lying on the table addressed to him. Doria was out, but she had evidently brought in the mail before leaving.

The address on the envelope was typewritten, and the postmark was from a place he had never heard of in Nevada. He slit it open and then stood regarding intently the thing which he had withdrawn from it. No written word it was that he held in his hand, but a worn and shabby twenty-dollar bill.

While he stood at the window regarding it, steps sounded outside the door. Doria was coming home. He slipped the money hastily into his pocket just as she entered with a girl friend she had brought home to dinner.

They attended a show again that evening, and this time Arnie was able to enjoy it. For he had worked out a plan whereby he might free himself from bondage and yet leave his fortune intact.

The plan was so simple that he almost wished he might impart it to Doria. But in the two months that had passed since the spectacular evening at Redskin Hall, Doria had withdrawn herself beyond the range of intimate confidence. Besides, he argued hotly, it was none of her business.

There were some minor problems to consider, but the main plan was clear and easy. The sender of the anonymous money suggested both the substance and technique of the solution.

As he pounded out the address of the New Mercy Hospital the next morning on Doria's typewriter, he felt that warm glow of self-satisfaction which always accompanies voluntary helpfulness. It was a pretty decent thing of him to send twenty dollars to a dying girl just on the chance that she might have been entitled to some money which he had once found. Not many men—

He spoiled one envelope, visioning those other men, and had to insert a new one. Typewriting was a thing he had never tried before, and he must finish before Doria came back.

While he was taking the precious gift to the mail box, he wondered again if the hospital authorities would really turn it over to Arline. You never could tell about these nurses. But it wouldn't be his fault if she didn't get it. You couldn't be responsible for it if other people were sharks.

He had thought at first of typing on a slip of paper the words, "From a friend." But when he had tried the effect of this, the slip had displayed to his startled eyes, the caption:

From a fiend.

and he had torn the paper to bits and thrown it out the window.

No, it was hard not to get any credit at all for his generosity, but life fixed things that way sometimes, and there was nothing that could be done about it. He tried to imagine the girl's radiant gratitude as a nurse slit open the inscrutable envelope for her and held out to her wondering eyes, his gift.

Since that day when he had discovered his own fortune in the Broadway House mattress, he had traveled a long road, and he was faintly able to vision this scene. It was rather fun, after all, this business of being an anonymous philanthropist, once you got over the terrible wrench of having to part with money for which you got no return.

Enveloped in this glow of righteous enthusiasm, he returned to the apartment that

evening to find Doria also in high spirits. To Arnie's intense relief, she did not insist that they go out somewhere for dinner.

He hated spending the extra money for such excursions, and now that he had given away twenty dollars they would certainly have to economize for awhile. His anonymous friend couldn't be relied upon to keep sending him mysterious gifts forever.

So it was a satisfaction to discover that Doria had got up one of her savory little dinners. Maddening thing, he had often reflected bitterly, for a man to have married a good cook and then have to pay somebody else to get his meals for him.

"Sit right down, Arnie," her voice commanded from the kitchenette, "I got it all ready and I want to serve it hot."

Arnie sank into his accustomed place with a sigh of deep content. This was the reward of right doing. Gravely he buttered a slice of bread while his eye roved appreciatively over the table.

There was escalloped fish, in the individual shells that he loved, with a dusting of breadcrumbs and orange-colored cheese on top; stuffed potatoes, oozing out of their skins with creamy opulence, and his favorite salad of pineapple and nuts.

Yes, it was a good dinner; and when at the end, Doria served coconut pudding and angel food, he felt at peace with the universe. While he and Doria did the dishes, he computed the cost of the meal with satisfaction.

The fish was a left-over from lunch, and the pineapple he himself had found at a canned goods sale a few days before. The nuts had been a gift from a friend who ever since his rise to fame had supplied them from his ranch, and the cake— Well, of course, Doria hadn't made the cake—

Suddenly her voice broke across his calculations, putting them forever to rout. "I found a wonderful bargain down town today, Arnie."

He felt himself stiffen. He raised a glass from its place and thrust a clenched fist inside it while he applied the dish towel. "Yeah?" he inquired cautiously. "A bargain in what?"

The explanation came with a rush. "That girl who was here to dinner the other night— You remember Rose Evans? Well, her brother has got a used car place, you know, on Broadway, and she told me about a sedan that had just come in that's only gone five thousand miles and has—"

Arnie's back was rigid as a ramrod now. "Used car place!" he ejaculated hotly. "I'll say he has. And you know how good and well his partner is! You know—"

She spoke with gentle soothing. "Well, what's that got to do with it, Arnie? We're buyin' a car, not a partner."

"We're not buyin' a car so that I ever noticed it. And even if we was, I'd never get it off that yellow-livered Irishman! What do you think I am, lettin' Jim Sullivan sell me a car! Lettin' Jim Sullivan sell me anything!"

It was evident that Doria was taken off her guard. She had not expected him to know anything about the new business firm of which she spoke. It was only by the merest accident that he had learned of the silent partner.

Had he taken his advantage, the debate might have ended differently. But he deserted high ground for the swamp of familiar topography.

"How do you get that way?" he demanded. "Think I got money to throw around on somebody else's bunch of trouble? Think that movie money is goin' to last forever and me not workin'!"

She dashed the dishmop against the sink with a splash that ruined the newly polished glasses. "Well, why don't you work?" she flung at him suddenly. "We been married almost three months and you've never turned over your hand. I told you about that place that was open in Allen's Furniture store! I told you—"

"Furniture store!" he echoed shrilly. "Do you expect *me* to work in a furniture store?"

"I don't care where you work so long as you get busy and bring in some kale so that I can live as I gotter right to live."

"As you gotter right to live!" he repeated contemptuously. "What right you got to live any better than we do live? And would you ever have married me if I'd stuck with second-hand furniture?"

"I wish to God I never had married you

anyway," she flung back. " You belong in second-hand furniture. That's the class you ought ter run in."

Arnie gazed at her, stupefied. For the first time it occurred to him that she might have married him for some other reason than desperate infatuation.

But anger was his dominant emotion as he retorted, " Go as far as you like, but while you're talkin' about the class I run in, don't forget that whatever that class is, it's got the power to knock that used car Johnny into a weak-kneed sky-terrier."

The look she gave him stirred a faint uneasiness in his heart. He watched her, like a violator of traffic laws watching the arresting officer write down his number.

Her voice when she spoke again was restrained and cold. " I don't see that that's got anything to do with us gettin' a car. If you don't like the one I picked out, get another one at another place. But you got to show me why I can't have one."

" I oughtn't to have to show you," he taunted. " You was a bookkeeper before you married me."

" Yes, I was a bookkeeper," she acquiesced, " and I'd be a bookkeeper again rather than—"

" Well, go to it," he suggested. " You can't hurt my feelin's by doin' a little honest work. When you was engaged to that big stiff you expected to go right on workin'. If you could work as his wife, you can work as mine. I guess I'm in a position to demand a few of the things that—"

" Position is right," she cut in. " You're in the position that you were born in, Arnie Trent, and nothing can get you out of it."

" Crash down with it," he suggested amiably. " What position do you mean?"

" I mean," she said steadily, " the position of bein' a damned fake."

He laid down the dish towel as though her words had been the mechanical device by which his muscles worked. " If you feel that way," he muttered at last, " why did you ever marry me?"

" When I married you, I didn't know it."

He was no match for her in verbal combat and he knew it. All that he could manage now was, " Well, keep on studyin' and maybe you'll learn some more."

She did learn some more the very next day, and she met him at the door with it when he returned from uptown late in the afternoon. He had spent the day in a fruitless attempt to find work that would combine a proper income with the dignity appropriate to his status. But his dramatic " I'm Arnold Trent," had failed somehow to impress the writers of " Help Wanted " ads.

The public, or at least the employing part of the public had apparently forgotten that in a few weeks the owner of that name would have a movie running on Market Street.

But if the public had forgotten him, the goddess of adventure had not. In Doria's face as she confronted him, he read the warning of impending calamity. But there was no clew to help him brace himself for it. " Well, you came home," she said darkly and in a voice thick with suppressed passion.

"Sure, I came home," he retorted weakly. " Where did you expect me to go? It's my house, ain't it?"

They stood on the threshold of the front room in the little patch of carpeted space that they liked to call " the front hall." Doria had on a bougainvillea-colored kimona that Arnie hated.

He noted this subconsciously as his eye shot a swift glance at the room beyond. No preparations for a cozy dinner to-night. Then her words, uttered with restrained fury jolted him back to realities. " *Your* house," she repeated, "*your* wife, *your* child!"

He felt suddenly weak. What was she trying to spring on him now? He couldn't help it if they were going to have a child. It wasn't *all* his fault. If there had been the slightest softening in her manner as she made her announcement, he would have put his arm around her as husbands in the movies did under such circumstances.

All he could manage as he gazed at her implacable face was, " Oh, well, we'll have to make the best of it. It's not so bad once you get used to it, and—"

Then Doria's coldness changed to flame. " Get used to it!" she cried. " Get used to the idea of you havin' a baby!"

He swallowed. "*Me* havin' it!" he repeated.

"Don't you dare to lie to me!" she warned. "It's no use. I *know* you. I can see right through you like—"

"Like hell you can, if you can see that," he answered. She had taken a few steps into the front room and now he saw that she held the evening paper in her hand. It crackled in her fingers with a harsh, brittle sound. "In all the papers," she told him. "The whole story that all this time you was tryin' to keep from me. I suppose you haven't seen it yet?"

He made no attempt to answer, for he had scarcely heard the question. Even when she thrust the sheet toward him, it was a full minute before his dazed and nearsighted eyes focused upon the headline that her accusing finger pointed out.

Then he didn't really read it. He didn't need to, for the words leaped out and fastened themselves upon his consciousness like some poisonous insect which had been concealed in ambush, waiting its chance!

FATHER OF CHILD SENDS HELP TO ARLINE GRANTLY

CHAPTER XII.

FACING THE FUTURE.

THE stormy scene with Doria always remained one of Arnie's clearest memories. Every word of it seemed etched forever upon his brain.

And in the moment that she supplied the missing link in the chain of evidence, he felt that fate had entered the game and taken a hand against him. He fought persistently, violently, but he knew it to be a losing battle for him.

Arline Grantly's story was deftly and sympathetically done. The public, who had shown so much interest in the case of Arline Grantly, daughter of one of the pioneer families of California, and her outcast baby, would rejoice to learn that the father of the child had been aroused to a belated sense of his responsibility.

She had received an anonymous letter from him on the day after the first news story had appeared in which he offered to send financial aid. And he had kept his word; for yesterday there had been received a remittance of twenty dollars.

He had indicated in his message that from time to time he would send what he could as he now had found work. No effort was being made to identify the father, and the wronged girl still refused to divulge his name.

Arnie, gaining by gradual degrees the ability to read, glanced up from the last sentence with a sense of mist dissolving before his eyes. He let the paper fall from fingers that were no longer capable of holding it, and his voice rasped as he turned on Doria. "I'd be glad to have you tell me," he invited, "how you line me up with this messy thing."

His wish was granted with a promptness that stunned him. From a pocket of the hateful dressing gown his wife drew two bits of untidy-looking paper. Even before she began to speak Arnie recognized them, and a sense of sick futility swept over him.

"I found these in the waste basket when I went to empty it this morning," Doria was saying, and she held them steadily out to him. "I remembered readin' that first story about the girl and it stuck in my mind longer than such a story usually would because Arline happens to be my favorite name.

"As soon as I saw it again I connected it up with the original sob stuff. This envelope was addressed on my typewritter by a person who don't know much about usin' a machine. Is there any reason that you can point out why that person shouldn't have been you?"

Arnie made, at this juncture, the fatal mistake of trying to laugh it off. "Great detective work," he scoffed. "Say, you could get a job down at—"

The torrent of words that drowned his had the effect of a fire faucet suddenly released in competition with a garden hose. "Now I see it all, Arnie Trent. I see why you've been so tight with money; why you wouldn't get even a used car; why I had to give up the kind of apartment that I picked out; why everybody we know won-

ders what on earth you do with all your coin.

"I see what all this means about people sendin' you unsigned letters with money in 'em through the mail. You offered to help that girl before and she threw the money back in your face.

"A *debt* some *feller* was payin' you! Gosh! What a poor liar you are! But you never put that over on me! And I see it all now as clear as day. I see—"

"You're lucky," he broke in. "Go a step further then and make it clear to me."

"*You* askin' *me* to clear this thing. You spill an explanation, Arnie Trent, if you can, that'll show me why you should be sendin' the money that you won't give to your own wife, to this Arline person. Spill it and step on the gas."

But Arnie couldn't. The more he tried, the more hopeless seemed the effort of clarifying to this enraged woman his motive in making an anonymous donation of money to an unmarried mother in a charity hospital.

Of course he could tell Doria the whole story of his finding the fortune in the mattress, but he shrank from the ordeal, and since his disastrous experience with belated confession in the affair with Alexis, he had lost his guileless confidence in the potency of truth.

He felt like a hunted animal driven to bay. From never having had any affairs with women to boast of before other men, he found his life suddenly overwhelmed with them.

"You've been leadin' a double life," Doria hurled at him. "You've been—"

"*Double!*" he muttered desperately. "Gosh! That would be easy. I been leadin' about five different lives and—"

His words were drowned again in shrill-voiced command. "You get outer here. You get out and don't you come back till you can give me a explanation about that woman."

"I can give you that now," he told her with weary patience. "I never saw that girl in my life and never heard of her till I read that writeup in the paper. I sent her that money, yes. And I did it because I was sorry for her. I've always been sorry for girls that's treated that way. You can take that or leave it, but it's the truth."

"Well, I leave it. And I leave you unless you can put up a better one than that. Sorry for her! Why should you, that never spent a cent in your life that you didn't have to spend, all of a sudden get so soft-hearted over a girl that some other man has got into trouble and that you never saw in your life or even heard of?

"And even if it was true that you just wanted out of the kindness of your generous heart to help her, why didn't you let her know who sent the money? Why should you be such a modest violet all of a sudden about havin' your name in the papers, and for doin' a *kind* deed this time?"

"I know it sounds fishy," he muttered miserably. "But—"

"You've said a mouthful. It sounds fishy and it is fishy. You didn't tell her who sent it because you didn't have to. She knew."

Arnie saw a gleam of hope. "All right," he conceded. "If you think she knew who sent that money, who *ought* to have sent it, why not go out to the hospital and get the low-down on this thing from her? If she says I'm the father of that child—"

"Arnold Trent!" The name sounded like two bullets fired at him. "What do you think I am? Do you think I'm goin' to demean myself by goin' out to a charity hospital and beggin' a girl like that to clear my husband's name for him?

"Do you think that before all those nurses I'm going to make a scene and get *my* name in the papers for bein' a fool of a wife that— Don't you say another word to me about—"

"But you just told me to explain."

"You can't explain. If what you've been handin' me is an explanation, save it for the magazines. You may be able to *write* lies and put 'em over. But they don't go here. I ain't the editor of *True Orgies*."

He turned on her, in a sullen and hopeless rage. "You believe this thing," he told her hotly, "because you want to believe it. You're sore at me for not throwin' all the money away that I worked so hard to get, on things we don't need.

" This fool thing happened to come up just at the right time for you to use. That's all it is; all that this whole damn row amounts to. You wanted to find somethin' against me, and when a person wants that, it ain't ever hard to do it. You're tryin' to make a fool of me."

She laughed harshly. " Oh, I wouldn't, Arnie. I never butt in on a job that God's already done. And as for workin' so hard for that money, you're springin' that on the wrong radio fan. You can't put it over on me that you're a writer. McKnight did the writin' for that coin. You just handed him the stuff—some of it."

She had touched him now where he lived. The story about Arline Grantly's baby was too fantastic to worry him long. But to attack his reputation as an artist! He had become so used now to the glorious garment of fame that he would have fought any one to the death who had tried to rob him of it.

To maintain his position as a celebrity had grown to be the ruling passion of his life. Wife, money, all other things might go if they must, but not his hold upon notoriety. The hand that he suddenly raised clenched above his head seemed about to strike the woman who accused him.

" You lie!" he cried. " What do *you* know about my writin'? And even if I was helped some, it's my stuff. I *lived* it, didn't I?"

Doria backed away from him, but he pursued her with the question. With the table between them she answered it insolently. " There's some say you did and some say you didn't. We'll never know now, I guess. But no woman could live with you a week and not find out without bein' told, that you're a four-flusher. I think I mentioned that before."

" You bet you mentioned it before, and it's the last time you'll have a chance to mention it." He seized his hat and jammed it on his head. "When you get ready to talk sense and let me tell a straight story, and believe it when I've got it told—"

" Boulevard stop," she cut in. " You're crossin' a thoroughfare when you ask me to do all that, Arnie."

" Yeah, I guess it's too much all right. But remember that I've done all *I* can. I offered to go out to that place and put it up to the girl herself. I offered to leave—"

"Well, that's the best thing you have offered, Arnie. Don't let me keep you. And as for that Arline woman, you're runnin' a safety campaign when you try to put that idea over. You know perfectly well that she'll shield you. That kind of girl always does.

" It would be a mighty good idea for you to go back to her. When you find any woman that can care for *you* like that, you're a fool to leave her."

He seized upon the word. " Care for me is right. And that's what you've never done. You never cared anything about me until you knew I had money."

"But you have to hand it to me, Arnie, for bein' able to locate that truth. It would take an X-ray to find money on you and a stick of dynamite to blast it out."

He was no verbal match for her and he knew it. All he could manage now as he wrenched open the door was, " Well, any time you're ready to do any more blastin' let me know. And by the way, the rent for this dump will be due again to-morrow. If you want to see me, you can come to see me. I guess you know my address."

He jerked the door shut, but her voice came through it as he started down the hall. "Give my love to Mom."

The words rang in his ears as he started on his walk toward the flat. It was a long walk, but he was glad. Only walking could still the hot rage that surged in his veins. After all that he had done for that woman!

Why had he ever married her? Why had he had to meet her on that fatal night? He had forgotten his silly love for her, completely forgotten it, and then she had caught him, trapped him to get his money.

There was no balm in the conviction that Mom would say: " I told you so." Well, let her try it. It would be the last thing she ever would say to him. He'd go away, forever this time, and just let them wonder where he was.

Then he remembered " The Rhinestone Helmet." It would be released in San Francisco next week. He couldn't go away

before he had witnessed the furor that it was certain to create. This picture almost completely restored his poise.

No danger of Doria not coming to terms with him when that picture began its run. She'd forgotten about that, but she'd climb down the tree fast enough when she saw that he was the most famous person in the city.

Lord! What a fool he'd been to send that money to the Arline girl! That's what a man got for being generous, for having a conscience.

Self-pity came to warm and soothe him then, and he nestled into her all-enveloping cloak like a shivering street waif finding shelter. A halo of martyrdom was about his head as he stalked up the long flight of steps and stood for a moment on the threshold of Mom's workroom.

There were two women there trying on smocks, and Arnie, without even a nod of greeting to his mother, passed on into the dining room. But through the portières he heard her response to their excited question: "Yes, that's him—I s'pose you knew his play, 'The Rhinestone Helmet,' was comin' out in the city next week?" The words were like balm to his wounded spirit. So also were Gertrude's solicitous inquiries as to what he'd like for dinner.

"We was goin' to have just meat loaf for dinner," she confessed anxiously as she followed him to his room, "and I know you don't like that very much. If I'd only known you was comin', Arnie—"

"Well, you know it now," he retorted, but his tone held none of the curtness to which she had now become accustomed. There was in it a martyrlike resignation to meat loaf and to life in general, that made Gertrude vaguely uneasy.

"Has anything happened?" she asked, with characteristic lack of finesse.

"Plenty has happened," he answered, but he made her wait for further news of the event until the trio were assembled at dinner. Then, pushing aside with a weary gesture, the cold sliced ham that Gertrude had hastily purchased for him at the delicatessen, he surveyed a spot on the wall just over Mom's head, and said abruptly: "Well, I've decided to get quit of Doria."

Little by little they mined the story out of him. Their almost breathless reaction to the drama was all that he could have hoped for. Gertrude even forgot to eat as she gathered in the details of the quarrel.

And she was the first to pass opinion on the affair. "But it *was* awful queer, Arnie, you sendin' all that money to a girl you'd never heard of before. What made you do it?"

"I did it because I wanted to do it," he told her loftily. "When you're famous you got to do some things like that. Everybody does. It's—it's good advertisin'."

"But you didn't sign any name to it."

Mom, who had listened abstractedly to this dialogue, broke across it with a comment quite irrelevant to the point under discussion. "Well, she's turned out just as I thought; a low, schemin' gold-digger."

Arnie raised a protesting hand with the gesture that he had so often admired upon the stage. "Don't be too hard on Doria," he entreated. "Remember that she is still my wife." He would like to have added: "And the mother of my child," but this seemed scarcely justifiable.

Mom obeyed the injunction with a promptness that was disconcerting. "That's right. And she'd better keep on bein' your wife. You see to it that she does, Arnie. Don't you go separatin' from that woman."

Her lack of ardent partisanship struck Arnie momentarily dumb. "*You've* never liked Doria," he flung at her at last. "You know you haven't."

"No, I never liked her. And I never married her either."

"You didn't want me to marry her, Mom. You did everything you could to keep us from marryin'."

"But I didn't keep you from it. You did marry her. And havin' married her—" She broke off and stared at him with an expression that he could not read, but which made him hotly resentful.

"Listen here," she went on. "Doria's been your wife for three months. In that time any woman learns a lot about a man. Doria's no fool. And a man—a man—in your position had better keep the wife that he's been livin' with for three months than put her back in general circulation.

"Take it from me, you're makin' a big mistake, Arnie, if you turn Doria loose and let her go away from you feelin' like she does feel right now."

"Well, what about my feelin's?" he demanded. "I guess I got a right to some consideration, ain't I, after the way I been treated?"

"You go back and make it up with Doria —if you can," Mom advised.

"If I can!" he scoffed. Her tone goaded him to fury. The rôle of the injured and magnanimous husband had slipped from him. It could not survive this unexpected assault. "I guess I could make it up all right if I wanted to. I'm worth a lot more to Doria than she's ever been worth to me."

"That's as it may be," Mom returned, "but what I'm sayin' is that Doria is worth a lot more to you, tied to you as your wife, than she will be worth turned out to pasture. That big Irishman is still in love with her and he's the kind that sticks. I've had it from two reliable customers that live near his auto place that he and Doria's been out drivin' together several times these past weeks."

"You knew that," Arnie cried. "And you never told me!"

Mom's placidity did not desert her. "There's lots of things I know that I've never told you, Arnie. And I'm not tellin' you that they've done anything wrong now. But what I do say is this: that man still wants her.

"He wants her because he's crazy about her, and he wants her because he's got it in for you. That's two pretty strong reasons for his tryin' to make a fool outer you. And with Doria to back him up—"

Her eyes held a gleam of compassion as they rested upon him. "You're no match for 'em, Arnie. You go back to your wife. Tell her anything you like about this Arline woman. But go back to her and make her think you can't get along without her.

"You talk about puttin' over good advertisin'. Well, that's the best advertisin' you can do for yourself right now. Make that woman work for you, not against you."

A rocky look came into the greenish brown eyes. "Like hell I will!" he cried. "If there's any makin' up to be done, she's got to start it. And believe me, she will start it. She knows better than to chuck a gold mine like me for a roamin' Irishman that hasn't got a cent to bless himself with. What would she get outer him?"

Mom continued to stare at him with that maddening compassion. But all she said now was: "Wait and see."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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GUESS I HAVEN'T "IT."

"ALL the world loves a lover,"
May be true, no doubt,
But as for me, love is a thing
I don't know much about,
And from experience I've had,
I'll have to do without.

For every girl I meet,
Without exception, don't you see,
For some good reason of her own
Has just high-hatted me,
And so I've just been forced into
Lovelorn philosophy.

If the world loves a lover,
I most certainly am out—
It's not my fault though love's a thing
I don't know much about!

Peter A. Lea.

Rootin' Tootin' Rufe

By JAMES W. EGAN

HOOCH was flowing freely in the Spot Cash Bar. Flowing, not down eager, arid gullets, but in all directions across a long wooden counter. It ran in little rivulets around the shattered pieces of what had been a large china pitcher of alcoholic refreshment. To the agonized eyes of Scotty Hutchins, proprietor, it was liquid gold going to sinful waste.

Scotty was making no audible protest, tried as was his canny soul. Smoke still curled from the gun which so lately had sped the missile of destruction. And a black-muzzled companion to the same pointed threateningly toward his own person.

Swaying ever so slightly on his booted feet, the holder of the two guns stood in the center of the Spot Cash. He was a lean sixfooter dressed in the garb of a cowman, although possibly a bit more ornately than is the usual custom.

His shirt was of orange silk, his boots fancifully etched and decorated with gilt spurs, his gun belt embossed here and there with silver. His age might have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty.

At the present moment his hard-lined, sun-darkened features were wreathed in an unpleasant smile. His eyes—pale, icy gray—glittered.

"I'm Rufe Rickert, a rootin', tootin' bad man from Utah," he pronounced somewhat thickly. "So Pete Crosby is dead—damn him! Well, if I can't get even with him I'll get even with the town he put on the map!"

The small gathering of patrons of the Spot Cash, who had scrambled as far out of range as possible when the shooting began, trembled uneasily. As did Scotty.

The man with the guns fixed his glittering eyes upon the proprietor.

"Get out some licker!" he commanded harshly. "I don't want no rotgut like that I just spilled, neither! The best they is in this town ain't good enough for me!"

"They ain't no better hooch in the State uh Wyomin' than was in that pitcher," Scotty said aggrievedly. "Besides, that was the last drop I had in the place. I'd have tuh send out for more."

"Send for it then, damn yuh!" barked Rufe Rickert, flourishing his weapons ominously. "I'm goin' out tuh get me a bite tuh eat, and if the licker ain't here when I get back—God help yuh!"

Twirling the two guns in his hands the lean sixfooter started toward the street.

Sorrowfully Scotty Hutchins began mopping up the bar. The thought of losing precious stuff without getting a cent in return was maddening. The injustice of it overcame his sense of discretion.

"Who—who's goin' tuh pay for the drinks yuh had—yuh had afore this?" he stammered weakly.

Rufe Rickert halted. He grinned maliciously as he turned and faced the bar again.

"Why, I figured them was on the house," he said. "I don't aim tuh spend much money in Pete Crosby's town. But so long as yuh want somethin' for that rotgut I'll fix yuh up. What's more, I'll just do the ringin' up m'self!"

The man threw up his right arm. Taking deliberate aim at the cash register, he pressed trigger. Smoke and flame belched forth. A bullet crashed into the old style machine.

"Never mind the change, hombre!" Rickert remarked mockingly. "And have that licker ready for me when I come back!"

Scotty Hutchins had ducked hastily behind the bar. There he remained until the gunman had swaggered out of the place.

It was a few moments before the badly shaken bystanders abandoned their position of refuge and approached the bar. Among them was a short, chubby individual in checked suit and Panama hat.

"Boy, what a half hour this last has been!" he exclaimed. "Ever since that rootin', tootin' bad man, as he calls himself, walked in here I've been wondering if I'd ever see the wife and kids again. Boy, if all this territory is this wild I think I'll quit!"

Ed Bradbury was a salesman, representing the Dunham Tobacco Company. He was making his first call on Scotty Hutchins.

"Pay Off was a plum' peaceful town till that felluh blew in," declared Scotty. "He was always a mean 'un, and tuh make it worse, he's got a terrible grudge—or thinks he has."

"I guess it's a good thing for this Pete Crosby, whoever he may be, that he's dead," ventured Bradbury. "He certainly seems to hate the poor guy!"

"Yuh bet it's a good thing Pete's dead—a good thing for this Rootin' Tootin' Rufe!" said the proprietor of the Spot Cash. "Pete Crosby—ole Pay Off Pete—drove Rickert outa this country ten years ago. I know all about it."

"Who was Crosby, anyway?" queried the tobacco salesman.

"I'll tell yuh in a jiffy, but first I better get some hooch down here tuh keep my place from bein' wrecked any more. Joe, yuh hunt up Jake Cutter and tell him I want a gallon uh the best stuff he's got and damn quick!"

The man designated having departed on the errand, Scotty turned his attention to his small audience.

"I wonder if the shootin' woke up the marshal?" he said. "Not that ole Bill Glendon can do anythin'. He never was a gunfighter, and Rufe, with all his boastin', is quick on the draw.

"Pete Crosby was quicker, though. Most uh these boys know who Pay Off Pete was, Mr. Bradbury, but I'll explain for your benefit. He came tuh this State forty years back. It was long afore my time. Long afore we had a town.

"Crosby went tuh ranchin' and did right well. His Diamond PC become one uh the biggest cattle outfits in Wyomin'. Crosby was a hot-tempered hombre, but square and honest. He always paid his debts—money or otherwise—mighty prompt, and this earned him the nickname uh 'Pay Off Pete.'

"Around about fifteen years ago Crosby

founded this town. Folks called it Pay Off in his honor. I come here and opened the Spot Cash a few months later. In them days yuh didn't have tuh take your drinks outa pitchers, neither!"

"Was Rickert here then?" inquired Bradbury.

"No. I reckon it's about ten years ago he first drifted intuh Pay Off from Utah. He got a job on the Diamond PC hazin' beef. He was plum' ornery in them days, too, and got in a lotta jams around town. Ole Pete finally got tired uh it, and he raked Rufe down tuh beat hell, I understand. Rufe talked back sassy and got fired. So he come intuh Pay Off and made some remarks about gettin' Crosby.

"Pete got wind uh it. The hotheaded ole rancher strapped on his gun and jumped intuh the saddle. Him and Rufe met in front uh the Spot Cash. Pete beat him tuh the draw and shot him through the leg. When Rufe was able tuh ride Crosby ordered him outa Pay Off and threatened tuh bore him plum' full uh holes if he ever returned. Ole Pete would, too. He was like that!"

"About how long has Crosby been dead now, Scotty?" one of the listeners inquired.

"About three-four years. Rufe's waited too long tuh get even with him. I kinda wish ole Pete was still alive. I reckon he'd put this rootin', tootin' pilgrim in his place. As it is, I figure we're in for consid'able hell. Pay Off ain't had no gunfighters since Crosby passed in his chips."

"Who runs the Crosby ranch at present?" Bradbury wanted to know. "Did he leave any family?"

"The ranch ain't in operation now. Pete sold all his beef afore he died. They's just a caretaker out at the Diamond PC—Sam Hudlin, one uh the ole hands. He's lookin' after it for the heir tuh the estate, who's in the East. Yuh see, years ago, Pete and his wife—"

Scotty did not finish. A red-faced, corpulent man of fifty had waddled through the swinging doors of the Spot Cash Bar. A star was pinned to his vest.

"Just met Joe Sikes—he told me they'd been some gun play in here," puffed the newcomer. "I thought I heard shootin' awhile back!"

"Yuh sure did, Bill!" Scotty Hutchins said grimly. "A bad man's come tuh town. Remember Rufe Rickert?"

Marshal Bill Glendon frowned uneasily.

"Yuh mean that gunfannin' galoot Pay Off Pete druv out years back? He's a bad 'un!"

"Well, he showed up tuh-day, ugly's sin, lookin' for ole Pete. When he found Crosby was dead, he said he'd get even with the town anyhow. He shot lead intuh my cash register when I asked for money tuh pay for his drinks, besides bustin' a pitcher uh the best stuff I had in the house!"

"The hell yuh say!" indignantly exclaimed Bill Glendon. The marshal of Pay Off never had taken very seriously the amendment passed to make the United States safe for soda fountains. "Where's he now?"

"I reckon he's across the street in the Chuck Wagon. He headed outa here, half drunk, huntin' for somethin' tuh eat."

Scarcely were the words out of Scotty's mouth than the report of a revolver came to those gathered in the Spot Cash. An instant later came another shot.

"He's at it again!" voiced the man behind the bar. "They must 'a' turned his eggs over instead uh leavin' 'em sunny side up or somethin'. Better go over afore he wrecks the joint, Bill."

"I s'pose so!" sighed the marshal.

Far from blithely, the stout, red-faced Glendon left the Spot Cash.

"Lucky Bill don't leave no relatives," some one commented.

"They's no tellin' how far Rufe 'll go" Scotty said seriously. "I wish Joe'd get back here with the hooch!"

Ed Bradbury nervously put a match to a cigar.

"You was saying something about Crosby and his wife," he reminded the other.

"So I was. Pay Off Pete married a rancher's daughter on a trip tuh Texas more'n thirty years ago. She was high-spirited, I hear, and Pete, uh course, was hotheaded. They split up twenty years ago and Mrs. Crosby went back tuh Texas, takin' the youngest son with her.

"The Crosbys had two boys. Ed, the oldest, stayed with Pete. He was a chip off the ole block, too. If he'd lived, this Rootin' Tootin' Rufe prob'ly would get all the trouble he wants."

"What happened to him?"

"Ed Crosby went tuh war and was killed in France. I reckon that broke the ole man all up. He never got over the loss of Ed. He didn't care much about the other boy—the one with the mother.

"This son Hubert—ole Pete hated the name!—fell heir tuh the Diamond PC. The Crosbys separated but were never divorced. I reckon Hubert Crosby don't care nothin' about the ranch or ranchin'. He's rich, anyhow. His mother died recent and left him a wad uh money. A lotta oil was found on her father's Texas ranch.

"Hubert Crosby must be about twenty-five now. I hear he's quite a dude, livin' high in the East. His mother sent him tuh college back there, and I reckon he ain't worth a damn. I'm tole he idles around with other rich dudes and spends a lotta time playin' some game called polo. Kinda shinny on horseback, ain't it, Mr. Bradbury?"

"I guess you might call it that. The players ride about hitting at a ball with long sticks."

"Well, I reckon Hubert Crosby is safer playin' his polo game back East than he would be near Rootin' Tootin' Rufe. Thank God, here's Joe with some hooch!"

Joe Sikes, returned from his mission, set two bottles on the bar.

"Jake oney had a coupla quarts. He says they'll be more in tuh-night, though."

As Scotty Hutchins was putting away the liquor the fleshy form of Marshal Bill Glendon reappeared at the entrance to the Spot Cash. He was mopping his face, now redder than ever.

"I couldn't catch up with this here Rufe Rickert," he panted. "He tore outa the Chuck Wagon hellbent!"

"When he seen yuh comin', Bill?" Scotty showed surprise.

"He never seen me at all! He was after Fred Martin's chink cook! Seems like his steak he ordered come in a bit burned, and Rufe hiked for the kitchen, guns out. The chink lit out the back door and this Rickert after him. I lost 'em in a cloud uh dust. I hope they both keep on runnin' till they reach the Canadian line! Whew!"

"Have a snort, Bill. Make yuh feel better." Scotty poured.

"Thanks, Scotty." Gratefully the marshal placed himself outside the potion. "Too damn bad Pete Crosby didn't rid us uh that galoot when he had the chance!"

"It sure is! I been just tellin' the boys it's a good thing for Hubert Crosby he's thousands uh miles away, playin' shinny on horseback!"

"But he ain't, Scotty!" Glendon declared. "I seen Sam Hudlin yesterday and he tole me young Crosby and his vallay was comin' tuh the Diamond PC this week or next. Yuh know they's still a few horses left on the ranch, and it seems ole Pete's dude son wants tuh look 'em over and mebbe ship a couple back East tuh play this here polo with."

"Hubert Crosby comin' tuh Pay Off? Good Lord!"

"Sam tole me he had his orders tuh get rooms ready for him and his man, as he calls him. The pair uh them is drivin' here in young Crosby's automobile."

"Let's hope it's next week they get here. If Rufe Rickert should run across that dude—poor Hubert!" Scotty shook his head.

"Look out! Rickert's back!" suddenly warned Joe Sikes, edging away from the bar.

His hands on his guns, Rootin' Tootin' Rufe stepped quickly inside the Spot Cash.

"Gimme a drink," he snarled. "And leave the bottle on the bar! I'll help m'self if I want more!"

Rickert gulped a stiff glassful. Marshal Bill Glendon screwed up his courage. He cleared his throat, tried to speak with stern authority.

"See here, hombre! This here's a law-abidin' town, and yuh been disturbin' the peace ever since yuh landed in Pay Off. Yuh been shootin' right promiskus, damagin' prope'ty and scarin' a poor heathen cook tuh death. I, Marshal Glendon, represent the law, and I ain't goin' tuh stand for such conduck!"

Two guns appeared to jump into Rootin' Tootin' Rufe's hands as he confronted Glendon.

"You ain't, huh?" he grated. "Yuh keep on spoutin' like that and I'll run yuh farther than I did that yelluh-bellied chink I got a damn good notion tuh take that badge off yuh and throw it away!"

"Don't yuh talk that way tuh me!" spluttered the marshal.

Rickert shoved one of his guns hard into the paunchy midriff of Bill Glendon.

"Didn't I tell yuh tuh shut yuhr face? In about a minute somebody will be ready tuh colleck yuhr insurance, sure's hell!"

The marshal subsided. He was licked, and every one knew it. With one hand Rufe Rickert removed Bill Glendon's six-shooter and thrust it in his own belt. He faced the onlookers.

"I ain't takin' orders in this town—I'm givin' 'em!" announced Rootin' Tootin' Rufe. "Any one what intuhferes is liable tuh stop breathin' damn sudden!"

The bad man had another generous measure of alcohol. Then, very coolly and watchfully, he made his exit from the Spot Cash.

Ed Bradbury did not gather in the group around the downcast marshal. The tobacco salesman was rather anxious to return to the refuge of Pay Off's solitary hotel. It was necessary for him to stay overnight in the town, and he had engaged a room in the Prairie House.

Just outside the entrance to the Spot Cash was a small bootblack stand. As Bradbury emerged he caught sight of Rufe Rickert perched here. A trembling colored man was polishing the fancy boots worn by the self-styled rootin' tootin' bad man.

The salesman hurried by, not breathing easily until he had gained the shelter of the hostelry.

Bradbury remained at the Prairie House the rest of the afternoon and evening. He wrote a long letter home to his wife, describing his new and exciting experiences in the West.

An hour or two after dark Bradbury heard muffled shots. He decided Rootin' Tootin' Rufe was cutting loose somewhere again, and went to bed feeling glad he had only a single night to spend in Pay Off.

II.

SHORTLY before noon the following day the tobacco salesman entered the Spot Cash. He already had Scotty Hutchins's order, but desired some information in regard to the near-by territory.

With a good deal of relief he observed Rufe Rickert and his guns were not present. In addition to the proprietor, Joe Sikes and a middle-aged Jew were in the place.

"Where's the rootin' tootin' tough guy to-day?" Bradbury smiled feebly. "I hope he didn't damage any one last night."

"Reckon Rufe's sleepin' late this mornin'," said Scotty. "Last night he amused hisself shootin' up Abe's movie show."

"Oy!" wailed Abe Jessel. "Dot low-life bum ruined it, a fine, expensive screen!"

"Abe had a Western drama on last night," Scotty explained. "Rufe dropped in and evidently didn't like the hombres he seen in the picture. So he started throwin' lead intuh the screen and broke up the show."

"He drove it out all my business!" mourned Jessel.

"Isn't the marshal able to do something?" Bradbury demanded.

"Not personally. But Bill's gone for help," Scotty said. "He's on his way tuh Wiregrass, the county seat, now, tuh see if he can get any from Sheriff Shumaker. I sure hope he does. Rickert's raisin' too much hell here. He's half wrecked my place, cost Fred Martin uh the Chuck Wagon the services uh his chink cook—I reckon the heathen ain't stopped runnin' yet—shot up our picture house and ain't paid a dime for anythin' he's et or drunk. Furthermore, they ain't no tellin' what'll happen if young Crosby arrives in town. We just gotta get shut uh this gunman in a hurry!"

"Careful!" whispered Joe Sikes, whose eyes and ears seemed unusually acute. "They's some one comin' down the sidewalk and it's apt tuh be him."

It *was* Rootin' Tootin' Rufe. The bad man strode menacingly into the Spot Cash, his eyes bloodshot, his manner ugly.

"Where's yuhr damn rotgut?" he growled. "I want a drink, and I want it quick!"

Rickert was raising the glass to his lips when the purr of a high-powered automobile engine was wafted through the swinging doors. Occupants of the Spot Cash heard a machine come up the street, rumble to a stop. A horn honked sharply.

Scotty Hutchins, filled with foreboding, glanced at Bradbury, Sikes and Jessel. He saw they had reached the same conclusion.

"Better see what's wanted, I reckon," he mumbled, and went nervously toward the entrance.

Ed Bradbury was at his heels when the proprietor stepped into the noonday sunshine. And Joe Sikes and Abe Jessel were close behind. Rufe Rickert was left alone with the liquor bottle.

In front of the Spot Cash softly droned a large roadster, its cream and nickel finish somewhat begrimed and dusty. A young man hopped out from under the wheel.

He was tall, well-built, tanned of countenance. He wore golf knickers and hose, a bright sweater and a checked cap.

Remaining seated in the car, stiffly erect, was an older individual. The latter was clad in decorous black and his severe, smooth-shaven visage indicated that his immediate surroundings gave him something akin to a pain.

"Pardon me," smiled the younger man, "but I am Hubert Crosby, and I am bound for my father's ranch, the Diamond PC. Could you direct me how to get there?"

"It's ole Pete's dude son and his vallay!" Joe Sikes breathed hoarsely to Jessel.

"What did yuh say yuhr name was?"

Abruptly Rufe Rickert had pushed through the swinging doors. Roughly shoving the others out of his way, he faced the motorist. His hands were on the butts of his guns.

"I said my name was Crosby—Hubert Crosby." The smile died away.

"Not son uh ole Pete? Well, I'll be damned!" Rickert broke into a malicious chuckle. "I reckon, young felluh, yuh never heard uh Rufe Rickert, did yuh? Don't know me, do yuh?"

"I'm afraid I do not," quietly.

"Don't worry!" came with sudden ferocity. "Yuh'll know a lot afore I'm done with yuh! I reckon I'm in luck. Just as I'm wonderin' how tuh square accounts with the damn Crosby family, along comes a son uh ole Pete. A rich young dude with a vallay!"

Grinning wickedly now, the bad man drew his guns. The older man in the car gasped and turned pale. Hubert Crosby appeared bewildered, and perhaps a little frightened.

"Gentlemen," he appealed to the bystanders, "I have no idea what this is all about. I'm not seeking trouble. Can't you persuade this man here to desist?"

"Desist, huh?" sneered Rickert. "They know damn well they better not try no desistin' on me. I waited ten years tuh get even with Pete Crosby for runnin' me outa Pay Off. Yuh're a Crosby, and yuh're goin' tuh settle up for yuhr ole man!"

"You have no right to hold me at the point of a gun!" Hubert Crosby showed a flash of spirit. "Surely there is law in this State and this town. Unless you cease threatening me—"

"I'm makin' the law in Pay Off!" Rickert cut in savagely. "Me, Rufe Rickert! I'm a rootin' tootin' bad man from Utah and when I toot it goes just as tooted!"

The young man gestured helplessly.

"You seem to have everything your own way. What do you intend to do now?"

Scotty Hutchins spoke timidly:

"Don't forget he ain't armed, Rufe. We ain't—"

"Shut up! I'm runnin' this affair!" snarled Rickert.

The bad man's eye, roving about, alighted on the bootblack stand. The negro who conducted it was a cowering onlooker.

"A dude with a vallay, huh?" Rickert chuckled evilly. "Well, Crosby, I reckon we'll let yuh do a little vallayin'. Tell yuhr man tuh get outa that car and sit up in that shine stand—pronto!"

The visibly scared occupant of the

roadster threw Hubert Crosby a look of anguish.

"You better do as he says, Jelkins," advised the young man.

The white-faced Jelkins left the car and climbed gingerly into one of the colored man's two chairs.

"Now, yuh damn dude, take the brush and blackin' and shine up his shoes!" commanded Rickert. "And yuh'll catch hell if it ain't a good job!"

Ed Bradbury saw Hubert Crosby's tanned face flush. Yet the young man started to pick up paste and cloth from the negro's stock.

"Oh, no, Mr. Crosby!" broke out the horrified Jelkins. "I cawn't let you do this!"

The muzzle of a gun swung his way.

"Yuh just sit still there while he works!" barked Rootin' Tootin' Rufe.

"It's all right, Jelkins," hastily added Crosby. "I probably owe you a lot of good shines, anyway."

While his man sat above him in silent agony, the son of Pay Off Pete performed the menial task. He rubbed and brushed vigorously until at length the job was completed.

All during the performance Rufe Rickert grinned and gibed. A number of curious citizens attracted to the spot snickered with him.

"I reckon yuh're the best vallay uh the two, Crosby," said the bad man. "I'm goin' tuh let yuh polish my boots next, seein' as how yuh're so good at it!"

For an instant after Rickert had vaulted into the other chair it seemed as if Hubert Crosby intended rebellion. Rootin' Tootin' Rufe frowned and fingered the trigger of one gun.

"Get busy, dude!" he rasped.

Reluctantly the young man bent his back again.

When the humiliating labor was finished Hubert Crosby's hands were black and filthy. He had a dark smear on one cheek and a streak across the left arm of his bright sweater.

"I reckon it's high time yuh got them hands uh yuhrs dirty," declared Rufe Rickert. "They'll be soiled worse'n that afore I'm done with yuh. Now the both uh yuh hop intuh that machine. I want yuh tuh drive out tuh the Diamond PC, Crosby, and get everythin' all fixed up nice for me. I'm goin' tuh be payin' yuh a visit a bit later on and yuh better be damn sure yuh're ready tuh give me purtic'lar attention! I kinda hanker for a vallay m'self and ole Pete's son'll just fill the bill."

The lean bad man's guns waved young Crosby and Jelkins into the roadster.

"Tuh reach the Diamond PC yuh keep right on down this street till yuh get tuh the edge uh town," he directed. "Then yuh take the road goin' West. It's about ten miles tuh the ranch. Mind yuh, I'll be out there some time this afternoon and don't think they's any law in Pay Off stronger than what's laid down by Rufe Rickert!"

A long moment Hubert Crosby stared into the malicious visage of Rootin' Tootin' Rufe. But he uttered no word. With blackened hands grasping the steering wheel he guided the big car away from the Spot Cash.

Rickert, weapons in hand, stood watching the progress of the machine until it was out of sight. Then he turned to the small crowd about him. His hard features were almost good-humored.

"He'll do just as he's told, the yelluh dude!" he said. "They ain't nothin' uh ole Pete about him! I reckon I ain't enjoyed m'self so much for ten years. Come on in, everybody, and have a drink. We'll charge it up tuh the Crosby family!"

Ed Bradbury was not one of the crowd which followed Rootin' Tootin' Rufe into Spot Cash. He seized the opportunity to slip quietly away. He had no craving to be in the society of the bad man; besides, he had several calls to make.

The tobacco salesman felt more pity than contempt for Hubert Crosby. The young man had cut an ignoble figure in front of Rickert, but he had been at a terrible disadvantage. Eastern-bred himself, Bradbury thought he could thoroughly understand the helplessness of a person unaccustomed to gun play.

It was late afternoon before Bradbury appeared at the Spot Cash again. His busi-

ness over, curiosity drew him to the place. He found Rootin' Tootin' Rufe; nevertheless, there was a decidedly warlike air about the refreshment parlor.

Scotty Hutchins was oiling a repeating rifle. Joe Sikes was going over a shotgun. Several others were examining firearms of various types. Even Abe Jessel, the movie owner, was present with a large and ancient pistol.

"What's all this?" Bradbury demanded.

"The worms are turnin'," grimly answered Scotty. "We're organizin' a posse, or whatever yuh want tuh call it. Bill Glendon oughta be back here from Wiregrass any minute now. We'll wait a little longer for him, but if he don't show up pronto we'll start out by ourselves. Rootin' Tootin' Rufe's goin' tuh learn they is law in Pay Off!"

"Where is he now?"

"Headin' for the Diamond PC, I reckon. He left here a short while ago, full uh licker and ugliness. Rufe is half crazy with hooch. He's been that way ever since comin' here. Figures he can outbluff or outshoot the world—do any damn thing he pleases. We gotta go tuh the rescue uh that dude son for the sake uh ole Pay Off Pete."

"I'll join you if I can borrow a gun," said Bradbury.

"Every man'll help, Mr. Bradbury. I reckon yuh can be fixed up. I wish Bill Glendon would get here, or Rufe would fall off his horse and bust a leg!"

III.

But Rickert, swiftly nearing the Crosby ranch on his fast roan stallion at that moment, appeared to be in no imminent danger of falling from his mount. Despite all the alcohol he had consumed, he rode easily. The lean six-footer had drunk enough to be reckless of consequences, yet retained control of most of his faculties.

Confident braggart though he was, Rootin' Tootin' Rufe realized he could not hope to pursue his high-handed, destructive course in Pay Off without meeting disaster. He did not intend to return to the town.

He was resolved to settle scores with Pete Crosby's son—in a way not yet determined—and ride on. Quite possibly with a stake taken from the rich young dude.

The buildings of the Diamond PC came in sight. Rickert spurred his horse, dropped his right hand upon a gun butt. Presently he was galloping up to the old, rock-pillared ranch house.

On the veranda, occuping a rocking chair, sat the English man-servant. Between the corral and the main buildings, in a long, level stretch, a single horseman was going through some strange maneuvers. This rider, garbed in ranch overalls, a dark shirt and an old black hat, was urging his mount in pursuit of a white sphere, striking at the globule with what seemed to be a very long croquet mallet.

The odd spectacle intrigued Rufe Rickert but briefly. The gun in his right hand covered Jelkins, who had jumped to his feet in dismay.

"Call yuhr dude boss!" he commanded harshly. "And don't try nothin' funny, Mister Vallay!"

There was no necessity of calling, however. The rider in overalls headed toward them—to be revealed as Hubert Crosby.

He reined in his fine Arabian a couple of yards from the muzzle of Rootin' Tootin' Rufe's pistol.

His long polo mallet resting upon the ground, Pay Off Pete's son faced the gunman. In the rough range outfit Hubert Crosby somehow appeared more self-possessed. He met the icy, glittering eyes of Rickert steadily enough.

"Where's yuhr caretaker?" snapped Rootin' Tootin' Rufe.

"I have no idea where Sam is," replied the young man. His tone displayed a shade of annoyance.

"Send yuhr vallay after him damn quick—I want tuh have yuh all tuhgether afore I start in!"

"Rickert," Hubert Crosby said coolly, "you had your fun back in Pay Off, but you aren't going to get away with anything more. You took advantage of me there and I could not resist. I've learned from Hudlin your history and I refuse to let you bully me further. Certainly not on Crosby property!"

"No?" with a sneer. "Well, I still got the advantage uh yuh, Crosby! Yuh're goin' tuh do every damn thing I tell yuh!"

"You are mistaken, Rickert. Get off this ranch!"

"What?" Rootin' Tootin' Rufe scowled.

"I'll say it again—in language you will understand. Get to hell off this ranch!"

"Yuh damn dude!" Rickert exclaimed furiously. "I'll learn yuh tuh talk nice and polite tuh me!"

Hubert Crosby gazed at him with remarkable composure. All at once he broke into a smile.

"Better late than never, Sam; I was wondering what had become of you." The young man spoke easily. "Give this ruffian both barrels of your shotgun if he—"

With a savage curse, Rufe Rickert swung around in the saddle. There was nobody behind him.

At the instant the lean gunman turned away Hubert Crosby acted with amazing quickness and daring. The mallet in his hand came up. His horse sprang forward.

Skillfully directed and handled, the polo stick came down hard on the wrist of the hand holding the revolver. The gun went flying to earth. Pay Off Pete's son had taken a desperate chance and got away with it.

Rickert, disarmed and with his right arm numbed and practically useless, nevertheless managed to keep his head. His left hand jerked the roan out of the way of a second swing. He attempted desperately to spur the beast out of range.

Hubert Crosby pursued on the Arabian, flailing at the bad man with his unique weapon. Rufe Rickert was a mighty busy person for a few seconds. He was endeavoring to dodge the polo mallet, get his remaining gun into his left hand and still retain his seat on the horse.

The Arabian was speedier than the roan. Closing in on the quarry, Hubert Crosby tried to dispose of Rickert with one terrific thump. Unfortunately, he overshot the mark.

The thin handle of the mallet struck Rufe's shoulder. It snapped off like a reed. Suddenly weaponless, the young man flashed past a dozen yards or more.

Rickert reeled in the saddle, but held on. He managed to get the reins in the crook of his right elbow. With his left hand he drew and fired his other gun. The bullet sped wide.

Hubert Crosby now became the pursued. He raced his swift mount in the direction of the ranch house. To the terrified Jelkins he shouted imperatively:

"Pick up his gun and I'll grab it as I go past!"

Frightened as he was, Jelkins managed to do as he was told. He picked up Rickert's revolver and held it out.

A second and third bullet from the bad man's gun came perilously close to Hubert Crosby as he swung out and snatched the firearm.

In another moment two guns were blazing. There was nothing of the novice in the manner Hubert Crosby shot. His handling of the six-shooter as he galloped his Arabian in a zigzag course would have aroused the admiration of old-timers in Pay Off.

The first two lead salutations from the "dude" whistled by Rootin' Tootin' Rufe's ears. A third missile hit the roan. A lightning fourth shot smashed the lean six-footer's shoulder. Horse and rider came tumbling to earth.

With a profound sigh, Jelkins, his features ghastly white, staggered to the veranda steps and sank down in a heap.

IV.

FIVE or six miles out of Pay Off Scotty Hutchins's citizens posse, augmented by Marshal Bill Glendon and two stern-visaged deputy sheriffs from Wiregrass, abruptly halted. A cream and nickel roadster was approaching rapidly.

In a moment or two it was seen that Hubert Crosby, dressed as a cowman, piloted the machine.

Trussed up in the seat beside him, a red bandage bound about one shoulder, was Rufe Rickert.

"By gun! He's got Rickert a prisoner!" burst from the marshal.

"It's Rootin' Tootin' Rufe, all right!" added the dazed Scotty. "And he seems

tuh be doin' no rootin' and even less tootin'!"

To his would-be rescuers Pay Off Pete's son recounted the bad man's downfall briefly and modestly. Nevertheless, it aroused cries of admiration and even laughter.

"Of course, I hadn't planned to play polo with Rickert if he visited the Diamond PC," Hubert Crosby said in conclusion. "I did expect some trouble after what happened this morning. I knew Rufe had marked me for a soft victim and I didn't mind having him in such a frame of mind. I intended to welcome his warmly if he showed up at the ranch.

"While I was trying out a likely-looking polo mount, Sam Hudlin was supposed to be on guard. He was posted far enough away to warn Jelkins and myself and allow us to arm. But Sam is old and subject to heart attacks. I didn't know it until after my clash with Rickert. He saw Rufe coming from his hiding place, but was overcome by one of his spells before he could give warning. Jelkins and I discovered this later. So I was forced to face Rickert without a gun and use my wits."

"Yuh're a plum' nervy young galoot!" declared Marshal Bill Glendon. "What gets me is how yuh managed tuh beat an expert like Rufe Rickert when it came tuh shootin' it out. Mebbe Rufe's aim was off on account uh hooch, but still yuh must be able tuh handle a gun better'n any dude I ever seen."

Hubert Crosby smiled.

"Don't forget I was raised on my mother's ranch in Texas. That's where I learned to ride and to shoot. My grandfather taught me the use of a gun. He was one of the best marksmen in the country, perhaps the equal of my father. I'm a dude only in the East, gentlemen. I assure you I'm perfectly at home in a cow outfit like this.

"I brought Jelkins, my man, along with me just to give him a taste of rough life—which by the way, has been almost too much for him, I fear. I've been spending a lot of my time in the East for several years, but I was born and bred in the West. Rootin' Tootin' Rufe evidently failed to remember that important item."

"I'll say he did!" Scotty Hutchins gleefully punched Ed Bradbury, who had been listening open-mouthed. "Three cheers for Pay Off Pete's son, boys! He's a real chip off a damn good ole block!"

THE END

SPRING SONG

HERE'S the springtime
Come again!
Nest and sing time,
Here's the springtime,
Birds a-wing time—
Robin, wren!
Here's the springtime
Come again!

Now for living
Out of doors!
Vigor giving;
Now for living,
Golfing, flivving,
Tennis, oars!
Now for living
Out of doors!

Edward W. Barnard.

The Coast of Blue

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "Desperate Chances," "The Pancake Princess," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II

PETER HARGREAVES, former New York reporter, and H. Vennington Buttman, a playwright, known to his friends as Butsy, visit Nice, where Butsy falls in love with Artemis, stepdaughter of the ugly but enormously rich Duchess of Mosmorshire. At a masked ball they see her double steal some jewelry and privately accuse her of the thefts, but discover their mistake when the duchess finds her two hundred and fifty thousand dollar diamond pendant has been stolen. Later, at their hotel, Buttman finds the stolen jewelry in his overcoat pocket and they hide it until morning. During the night it is stolen. Already under suspicion by the police and afraid they will be arrested if they tell their story, the Americans determine to hunt down and recover the jewels themselves. They meet an American crook, Dobey Dill, who later in a tobacco shop picks the pocket of Larue, a Frenchman, thus accidentally obtaining the stolen jewelry. Dill, afraid to carry the loot, gives it for safe keeping to Hargreaves, who is ignorant of the contents of the package and places it in the hotel safe. While Butsy and Artemis are preparing to join a parade of carnival maskers, Larue reports his loss to the man who planned the jewel robberies, Philip Gwendon, an unscrupulous English nobleman of great daring who has turned crook, and who was once a suitor of Artemis. Confident the Americans are crooks in league with Dobey Dill and have the loot, he orders Larue to find Dill and bring him in.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. DILL BLOSSOMS OUT.

TO H. Vennington Buttman, who considered the Lady Artemis the world's most exquisite creature, Miss Beryl Murther might have appeared as a trifle blowzy. But to Dobey Dill the Lady Artemis would have made little appeal, because he liked the girls big and substantial. It seemed to him that Beryl was of a refinement beyond any lady who had ever noticed him before and he was so flattered by her willingness to have him stand treat that he lost, in her presence, the sensation of a fox who expects to hear the baying of hounds at any minute.

When you consider that Beryl was born

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and brought up in Whitechapel, and both her father and mother had been inordinately fond of gin and bitters, it was rather astonishing how much of a lady she had made of herself.

At the age of fourteen she had run away from home and taken a position as scullery maid and boots in a lodging house in Bloomsbury—a house which happened to be patronized by ladies and gents of the theatrical profession who sounded all their "s's" and used the long "a" instead of the cockney "y."

As the girl was a natural mimic it was not long before she could say "Lord bless me" instead of "Lor' blyme me"—which caused her mistress to discharge her for putting on airs.

Beryl was ambitious and hard working and her rise in her chosen profession was rapid, her goal being to work in the houses of the highest aristocracy. Thus by keeping her eyes open, her mouth shut, being an excellent needlewoman and an ardent copy-cat she passed through various grades of domestic service in various types of British households, until at the age of twenty-five she had attained the eminence of personal maid to a duchess with the privilege of wearing a large black ribbon in her hair and a blue cape on her shoulders.

There were reasons why she was in a dangerous mood to-day, ready to pick up a strange and curious looking young man in a public park and go with him to a bar to drink gin and bitters.

An aristocrat of domestic service she had been forced to submit to the indignity of being struck in the forehead by a hairbrush hurled by the Duchess of Mosmorshire, who was in a vile temper because of the loss of her pendant. She would have given notice immediately except that duchesses were scarce and she might have to step down a peg and work for a marchioness or a baroness if she threw up this job.

After hitting her with a hairbrush, the duchess had told her to get out of her sight and not come back for the rest of the day. So Beryl had sallied forth alone in a foreign city where she had no masculine acquaintances.

Dobey Dill had a low opinion of gin because he was familiar only with the recent American variety, which is nine parts water and will not intoxicate unless you drink a barrel of it. Therefore, he tossed off three or four "gins and bitters" in rapid succession with no expectation of results, choosing the beverage because he considered it low powered and he needed his wits about him.

Beryl was astonished at the rapidity with which the American gentleman bought drinks. The butlers and footmen with whom she associated during her off hours in London usually required a hint to replenish the glasses. But she did her duty and began to find the young man very amusing with his quaint American expressions.

However, with each drink she sorrowed more over his taste in clothing. The impression that it was shocking grew upon her, so she told him about it in her frank, honest manner and her big gray eyes filled with tears at the thought of his barbarous costume.

At first he was unmoved, but when she began to cry on his shoulders and told him he was the only man she ever loved, but she could not possibly be seen with him unless he reformed, he grew sad also and determined to make a sacrifice. Patting her consolingly upon the shoulder, he said:

"Don't cry, lil girl. There ain't nothin' the matter with my clothes. But if you don't like 'em neither do I. Tell you what, we'll go out and buy a whole new rig and you pick 'em out. How's that?"

"Oh, Mr. Dill, you're wonderful!" exclaimed Beryl. "You've made me so happy."

Dobey paid his bill, and the pair, none too steady upon their pins, went forth in search of a clothing store. The barman put them in a cab and informed the coachman of their mission and the search began.

For a long time it was attended by ill-fortune because most of the shops had closed to enable their employees to enter the Cortege of Masques. Well out of the shopping district, however, they finally came upon an English tailor who was so unresponsive to the carnival spirit that

he had not shut up his store, and who welcomed cordially the large blond English girl and the small, dark American—both obviously "under the influence."

Unfortunately the tailor had no ready to wear suits in the shop and, despite Beryl's plea, he could promise nothing under three days until he suddenly remembered a suit he had made for a French gentleman's wedding a few weeks before. The outfit was upon his hands because the intended bride had died the day before the wedding, and the groom had been so overcome by grief that he had refused to pay for the now useless costume.

"Splendid," exclaimed Beryl when this had been explained to her.

Poor Dobey made no protest when the joyous tailor whisked him into a back room, tore off his offensive garments and poured him into the wedding outfit, which consisted of a black frock coat, a white waistcoat, a gray Ascot tie and a pair of gray trousers with a tiny white stripe in them.

A pair of yellow spats were fitted over Dobey's black shoes and the metamorphosis was complete save for one thing. A shiny top hat, just a trifle too small, was jammed on his head and he was led out for inspection by the woman in the case.

"Why, Mr. Dill," she hiccoughed, "you look like a member of Parliament."

If he did, the British Parliament is overestimated as a concourse of well dressed men. Dobey looked more like a dressed-up Houston Street fruit merchant, as both coat and trousers were a size or two beyond him.

The tailor, who had no conscience, took thirty-five dollars for the regalia and saw them to their carriage, promising to send the cast-off clothing to Dobey's hotel, despite Beryl's suggestion to throw it into the Mediterranean. Dobey ordered a return to the bar to christen the glad rags and the carriage rolled rapidly back to where it had started.

As they descended Dobey brushed against a French gentleman, who lifted shocked eyebrows at the dreadful spectacle and passed on his way, never dreaming that he had just bumped into the man who picked his pocket in the tobacco shop.

Nor did Dobey recognize his victim. He had completely forgotten the incident and saw only a large, pink face, crowned by yellow hair, which smiled when he called it Beryl.

They entered the bar, found their corner unoccupied and in a moment were again sipping nectar. Dobey received the congratulations of the barman upon his glorified appearance with becoming modesty, and began to tell Beryl how big a man he was in New York.

In the meantime, the underworld of Nice was slinking about the city seeking a certain Bowery combination of coat, pants, and vest without having any luck in the world. And to the whim of the personal maid of the Duchess of Mosmorshire and the mellowing effect of gin and bitters the safety of Dobey Dill for the present was entirely due.

CHAPTER XVII.

'MAD MEG" LEADS THE MOB.

AS that part of the procession in which Artemis and Butsy were features drew near the corner of the Place Massena, where the Hotel Ruhl is located and where the Promenade des Anglais begins, the adventurers saw, massed upon the sidewalk and upon the terrace of the hotel a multitude of superior individuals who were gazing stonily at the masks about the way people look at fishes in an aquarium.

There were large quantities of dumpy and angular women arrayed in expensive but unbecoming dresses, and men of all sizes and shapes representing various branches of the Anglo-Saxon wet blanket factory. Some wore bone spectacles, some had single eyeglasses. Some were from Leeds and Oxford, and some from New York and Indianapolis. In the entire array there was not a single smile.

If London icicle didn't care much for the Boston glacier who rubbed shoulders with him, they were both in perfect agreement that the idiotic French were making a spectacle of themselves and it was really a waste of time to look at them.

Lady Artemis, during all her pampered

existence, had been a contemptuous onlooker at life. But now that she was one of the fish in the aquarium she was filled with a sudden indignation at the waxen images on the other side of the glass case.

" Look at those idiots," she exclaimed to Butsy. " I'd like to do something to upset them. Who do they think they are to stand there, sneering at us?"

Butsy measured the distance regretfully, for he saw that none of the throng on the terrace wore the wire masks.

" They're out of range," he said. " I'd like to show them good and plenty."

The procession passed down the Park road. There was the width of a street between its edge and the terrace, and the maskers were contenting themselves with pelting the townsfolk who stood on the sidewalk close by.

"Here," cried Artemis. "Give me that sack, you."

She called to a vender of plaster who immediately hung a sack of the stuff around her neck, while Butsy gave him five francs.

" Come on," she cried to her companion. " Let's rush the terrace."

The captain of the company of foot masques in which they were marching interposed when the pair rushed to the sidelines.

" No, no," he exclaimed. " Forbidden to leave the road."

" Is that so?" cried Artemis.

Turning to the company she exclaimed shrilly in her fluent if very English French, French,

" Come on, friends. Let's rush the English on the terrace."

The suggestion was received with howls of approbation and at least fifty weird creatures swung out of the line. Headed by Artemis, followed by poor Butsy, they toppled over the protesting captain, smothered a couple of policemen with plaster, pushed the people on the sidewalk beside the park road out of the way, darted across the street and were upon the steps of the hotel terrace before the " haut monde " realized it was in danger.

Underneath the veneer of courtesy of the French townsfolk there is a deep rooted dislike of the foreigners who visit their city and flaunt their wealth in the faces of working folks. Recognizing that these visitors are good for business they usually repress their feelings, but this was Carnival.

They were disguised by masks, they had in their possession annoying if not dangerous missiles, and it was with a right good will that they opened fire upon the unprotected throng of superior beings.

The plaster balls fell like hail upon the victims who could not flee because they were wedged like sardines on the terrace. Seeing the assault, shouting with laughter, hundreds of other maskers joined the shock troops led by the slender girl in the black and red tights.

And now it was a snowstorm, a blizzard upon unguarded faces. Women shrieked, men bellowed, and ready Anglo-Saxon fists were raised.

A tall, thin man with a long, lean chin struck out at the harlequin, perhaps not realizing that it was a girl, but Butsy caught the blow with his left arm and met the fellow's chin with a hammer blow from his right fist which caused the Hon. Philip Gwendon to stagger backward, and would have floored him had he any place to fall.

" Bully boy," cried Artemis who wiggled her way through the crowd the better to shower the front ranks.

For two or three minutes the rain of plaster was continuous. A number of people with their eyes full of the stuff were yelling in pain and the maskers were shrieking with enjoyment. But the stony faced British and American males saw no humor in this unprovoked assault and their flail-like fists were now battering the masques who were not very good at *"le boxe"* and were defending themselves by resorting to *"savate"* a system of kicking out with the feet which is very painful to the recipient.

Meanwhile the authorities saw with horror this unprovoked assault upon the golden geese of Nice, and a score of gendarmes with drawn clubs were rushing to the rescue while pandemonium reigned.

Having exhausted their ammunition and having no desire to come into conflict with the police, and not liking the feel of fists which flattened false noses and caused the

blood to flow from real ones, the masques began to retreat. Butsy grasped the arm of Artemis to draw her to safety.

Philip Gwendon came into action at this minute by seizing the other arm of the girl and shouting in French to the captain of police who had driven his wedge within a dozen feet or so.

"Arrest this one," he shouted. "This harlequin and the jester were the ring leaders."

The temper of the maskers which had been frolicsome changed like a flash to fury. Many understood that the pig of an Englishman wished the audacious damsel put in durance. At once she became their Joan of Arc, and with howls of rage they rushed the police and surged around Gwendon, the harlequin and the jester.

Butsy, realizing that Lady Artemis must not be captured and disgraced, dropped her arm and laid violent hands upon the Englishman who struck at him with his left hand while he held tight to the girl with his right.

"Philip, you fool, let me go at once," she hissed.

Her ancient suitor, stricken with amazement at the voice and recognizing, without difficulty the features of Artemis despite the mask, released his grip. Artemis wriggled away. Butsy, losing interest, turned to follow through the squirming mob, too late to see the Englishman slump forward and utter a sharp cry of pain.

Just ahead of Buttman, Artemis was stabbing her way with sharp elbows through the mass. He was separated from her by three or four persons when suddenly the mob began to disintegrate and their path ahead was clear.

They reached the edge of the procession which was still moving slowly along, unmindful of shouts behind of a different character—shouts in which alarm and horror were mingled with bellows of rage. A person who had been wearing an eight foot doll mask lifted it from his shoulders and disclosed a keen, alert face with black eyes from the neck of the masque.

"Quick, mademoiselle, they search for you," he said, and he placed over her head the grotesque pasteboard figure.

"Conceal monsieur also," cried Artemis from the neck of the masque.

A second masque was commandeered by the rescuer of Artemis and the costume of the jester was hidden beneath it in a moment.

"Now, march quickly," commanded the good Samaritan. "When you get beyond the big municipal Casino, turn to the right, leave the procession, go to the Cafe des Griffon and say, 'Ventimiglia.'

"Go into the back room. The proprietor will tell you what to do."

The two masques now carried by Artemis and Butsy were part of a company all exactly alike.

The harlequin and the jester had completely vanished from sight, and the pair moved along with the procession like the other fifty or sixty in the array as one pea is to another.

"That was kind of him," said Butsy to the girl. "These French stick together all right. They knew the police were after us for the raid on the terrace, and they jumped in to our rescue."

"I know that man who tried to turn us over to the gendarmes," replied Artemis. "He almost perished of astonishment when I called him by name and told him to let me go."

"He certainly had a nasty disposition. I wish I had taken another poke at him," declared the American. "Really, Meg, that was a crazy stunt you pulled. You nearly started a riot."

"Pooh," she retorted. "I woke things up a bit."

Just above them in the rear end of a float a small brass band was making a fearful noise, and drowned the shouts behind them.

But they observed policemen rushing along the line peering about eagerly and Butsy chuckled, for he knew they were the object of the search.

"We'd better call it a day," he said a minute later. "These Nice cops probably haven't got a sense of humor and they are likely to lock us up if they catch us. I think we had better take that fellow's advice and find that little cafe. He wants us to leave these big dolls there and then

we can pick up a closed car, go to the costumers, get our own clothes and slip into the hotel."

"I suppose so," she agreed regretfully. "It's been a topping day. I never had so much fun in all my life."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE KNIFE IN THE BACK.

BEHIND them something had occurred which would have disturbed the equanimity of the well self-satisfied pair who moved so evenly along beneath the giant masques and still chuckled now and then at the disturbance their irruption upon the terrace had created among the distinguished spectators.

For a minute after their escape Philip Gwendon stood silently in the mob. Then, as it became less dense, he slowly slipped downward and lay upon his face upon the ground while a woman's scream of terror notified those around that all was not well.

The police captain shoved his way through the throng which no longer opposed him and bent over the recumbent figure.

He laid his hand upon the handle of a knife which was protruding from between the shoulder blades of the Englishman, snatched it away quickly and shouted at the top of his voice.

"There has been a man killed. Capture that jester and the harlequin."

At once everything was in confusion. Women wailed, men bellowed, the mingled mob of maskers and visitors pushed forward to see for themselves.

Then, those who had been in the procession and taken part in the assault upon the terrace began to slip away unostentatiously, while the policemen spread out in obedience to the captain's instructions.

Several officers lifted the man who had been stabbed and carried him into the hotel, where a room was immediately provided and a doctor summoned. The chief of police was notified of the tragedy at once by telephone.

A small man with a black mustache and jet black eyes, who wore the costume of a navvy, met the first rush of inquiring policemen and pointed down the Promenade des Anglais.

"I saw the harlequin and the jester," he said. "They slipped through the crowd and went that way."

The transfer of the doll masques had taken but a moment. Those moving in the procession had no reason for noticing especially a harlequin and a jester, and as all eyes of spectators in the vicinity had been turned upon the riot near the terrace of the hotel, there was nobody to inform the police that those they sought were in the cortege a few hundred yards ahead, two among a hundred of eight foot grinning doll masks, bowing and shaking as they moved over the route.

The disappearance was complete and quite mystifying.

Philip Gwendon died without regaining consciousness within ten minutes after his removal to the hotel. The physician gave as cause of death a blow from a knife with a six inch blade which had entered between the shoulder blades and penetrated downwards to the heart, a powerful stroke by a weapon in an experienced hand.

It was evident to the police that the murder of the Englishman had been premeditated by enemies who planned to take advantage of the Cortege of the Masques, that the murderer had been one of the maskers who had struck during the confusion and escaped among the multitude of masqueraders.

They had something to go upon, however.

The attack upon the crowd assembeld on the terrace had been led by a blond young woman with a black mask and wearing the costume of a black and red harlequin. She had been accompanied by a man dressed in the red costume of a jester, and this pair had been in personal conflict with the murdered man.

The entire unprovoked assault upon innocent spectators—an unheard of thing during the carnival—seemed to the police to have been framed to afford an opportunity for the crime.

Gwendon had evidently recognized the

pair as enemies. For just before the fatal blow was struck, he had called to the police captain to arrest the jester and the harlequin.

It seemed quite certain that either the man or the woman in costume had stabbed Gwendon, and it didn't matter which had actually struck the blow. Both were guilty and would pay the penalty.

Although a brutal murder had been committed in the center of a crowd, in broad daylight, comparatively few persons besides the police were aware of it. Some thought a man had fainted or fallen and been trampled upon.

The suggestion that something serious had occurred had been sufficient to cause the unruly multitude of maskers to melt away lest they be concerned in the affair.

Most of the English and Americans had taken the first opportunity to escape the shower of plaster and seek the interior of the hotel.

So, when Pete Hargreaves strolled upon the scene about two minutes after Philip Gwendon had been carried into the Ruhl, he neither saw nor heard anything out of the ordinary.

Pete, in a cursory fashion, was hunting for Butsy, who had completely vanished without leaving for his friend a word of explanation. Mildly vexed at having been left to his own resources, he was rather curious as to where the playwright might have taken himself.

The terrace, lately so crowded, was almost empty, and porters were already busy with brooms upon the stone floor, which looked as though a good many bags of flour had been emptied upon it.

He stood there watching the procession for four or five minutes. The Cortege of Masques, while containing many amazing floats and a multitude of droll costumes, was not well stage-managed and rather straggled than marched along.

Not being in the spirit of the affair and a participant like Artemis and Butsy, he didn't see that it was anything to be excited about, and the tossing of the plaster was, in his opinion, a nuisance that really ought to be prohibited.

"Here's the funniest costume I have seen yet," said an American voice near him, but not addressing him.

Hargreaves turned to look as anybody else would have been done. The stranger was pointing, not across to the procession but upon the sidewalk, where a curious pair held the eye.

They consisted of a small man with a weazened, leatherlike countenance who was attired in a frock coat several sizes too big for him.

A high hat, too small, was cocked on the side of his head and he wore a pair of striped trousers, much too long, beneath which peeked coyly forth a couple of bright yellow spats.

From the left corner of the mouth of this festively attired individual protruded a long cigar at an acute angle, and he walked with a heavy list to port.

On his port side, leaning to starboard, was a young woman at least five inches taller, whose yellow hair was considerably disarranged, whose long blue cape was awry, and whose ordinarily pink cheeks were scarlet. She held the arm of the little man and they mutually gave support.

The strange American near Butsy laughed.

"United we stand, divided we fall," he declared.

"Drunk as a couple of boiled owls," was the comment of this person's companion.

The team was approaching slowly and with dignity. Pete, who had sensed something familiar about the man, suddenly recognized him and guffawed loudly and rudely. It was, of course, Mr. Dobey Dill, the East Side specimen who had been seeking pancakes in Nice a few hours before.

He had not found the griddles, perhaps, but he had found much liquor, a lady friend and a suit of clothes more appalling even than that which had shocked the sensitive Butsy Buttman.

"What yer laffin' at?" demanded Dobey truculently, for Pete had practically laughed in his face. "If I thought you were givin' me and my fr'en' the razz— Oh, hello, feller."

He thrust out a friendly hand. Pete, red to the ears because of the presence of the strange Americans who had first discerned the preposterous pair, was compelled to accept it.

" 'S a fr'en' o' mine," Dobey explained to Beryl. " Good guy. Regular feller, New Yawker like m'self. Forget yer name, fr'en', but I wan' yer to meet Beryl. She's English, but she can't help it, and she's the best looking girl in Nice, or England. Pretty near the best lookin' girl in America and I can lick the man that says she ain't."

" Don't be an ass, Dobey," reproved Beryl. " Any fr'en' of Mr. Dill must be a bit of all right," she assured Hargreaves. " Mr. Dill is a diamond in the rough, don't you think so, sir?"

" Great feller, Dill," Pete assured her, being very uncomfortable and eager to make his escape. " Have you known him long?"

" Since this morning," she admitted, rolling her eyes at Peter. " I am afrad he is a little under the weather, and I am so glad to turn him over to a friend because I must go now.

" Be good until we meet again, Dobey, darling."

With this she released her hold on Dill, causing him to very narrowly escape capsizing, and darted into the hotel with great speed for one of her bulk while Dobey emitted a wail.

" Aw, say, where you goin'?" he demanded.

Then, seeing she had departed for good, he fastened a claw upon the sleeve of Hargreaves like the death grip of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner upon the Wedding Guest.

" Where did you get that hat and that frock coat?" demanded Pete, whose sense of humor had overcome his embarrassment.

" Bought it," said Dobey. " Beryl didn't like my reg'lar clothes, so she fixed me up like the King of England. What's going on over there? Am I seeing things?"

He pointed to the procession and a float which happened to be the one depicting a crazy traffic policeman and the ensuing crash of vehicles.

" It's just the carnival procession. If you should join it I think you would get the prize—just as you are."

" 'S that so?" demanded Dobey. " Just for that I ain't going to let you mind that package for me any more."

" Suit yourself," Pete said indifferently. " Come in with me, and I'll get it for you."

" Very valuable package. Can't take any chances on it," insisted Dobey who had got himself into a state of intoxication rare with him. " If you knew what was in that package, why it would knock you for a goal."

" Really? What's in it."

" Pearls and diamonds and rubies an'—an' what other kinds of jewels are there?"

" I'm not very well acquainted with gems," laughed Hargreaves. " However, if it's valuable, don't you think you ought to let it remain in the safe until you sober up?"

" It's mine, ain't it?" demanded the little man angrily. " I want it, see?"

" Confounded little nuisance. It's what a fellow gets for being obliging," Pete said to himself.

Aloud he remarked, shortly:

" All right. It's your funeral. Come on."

He walked directly to the desk, produced his key and handed it to the clerk.

" Let me have my deposit box," he said.

When the box was placed in his hands he reached in, drew out Dobey's package, and was about to turn to give it to him when a hand thrust itself around his shoulder and lifted the parcel out of his palm.

" If you don't mind, Mr. Hargreaves, I'll take charge of that," said a cold authoritative voice. " You seem to have made a recent deposit."

Pete faced the chief of police with indignant mien.

" Look here," he said. " This is pretty high handed."

" Not at all," said the French official. " I shall give you a receipt for it, or, if you like, open and inspect it in your presence."

" Why, it—" began Hargreaves.

He was about to say that it was not his property when he felt his coat tweaked from behind, and saw the face of Dobey, maudlin no longer, warning him.

" Very well," he said. " Though I protest."

" Just step with me into the director's

office," said the Frenchman who placed the package in his side coat pocket. After you, please, Mr. Hargreaves."

Shrugging his shoulders, Pete walked ahead of the chief and for a second time entered the office of the director of the hotel. He took a chair without an invitation and watched the police official seat himself opposite him.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VANISHING PACKET.

"IN the first place, accept my apologies," began M. Lejeune. "I may assure you now that I have no expectation that this package contains anything that will interest me, nor have you been the subject of personal espionage by me, although I admit it looks like it.

"It happens that I was summoned to the hotel a few minutes ago in connection with a tragic and curious affair which is no concern of yours, and, happened to be passing when I saw you removing a package from your deposit box which was not there when I investigated it early this morning. I just followed a hunch, as your American detectives say."

"Don't mention it," Pete said politely.

M. Lejeune placed his hand in his right hand coat pocket. The self-satisfied smirk he wore suddenly changed to astonishment. He thrust his left hand into his left hand coat pocket and astonishment gave place to consternation. Then both hands tapped his breast and trousers pockets. His dismay was so comic that Hargreaves laughed—he could not restrain himself.

"*Sacre nom de chien!*" observed M. Lejeune.

"You seem surprised. I hope you haven't lost it," Pete remarked.

"But I seem to; it's gone. It's absolutely disappeared."

He gazed sternly and suspiciously at the American. Pete read his thought.

"No, I didn't take it," he said. "How could I? You sent me in here ahead of you."

"*C'est vrai,*" muttered the chief. "But where did it go to?"

"You're a detective. Find out," replied Pete rudely. "Perhaps it fell out of your pocket."

"Remain here, Mr. Director; keep your eye upon this gentleman," snapped Lejeune and hastened from the room.

While he waited Hargreaves tried to understand what had happened. He was nearly as astonished as the French policeman. He knew something that Lejeune did not know, however, that Dobey Dill was interested in that package.

Dobey was drunk, at least he had been intoxicated, but he had sobered like a flash when he saw his property in danger. He had warned Pete not to betray his ownership and Hargreaves had suspected him of being a crook all along.

Most likely he was a pickpocket and as soon as Lejeune had placed the package in his pocket Dobey had lifted it out. As Lejeune did not know the man he might not have observed him if he crowded against him, and a few seconds of contact would be sufficient for an experienced dip.

In five minutes Lejeune was back wearing an expression that boded ill for Hargreaves.

"Although it does not seem possible you could have removed that package," he said curtly, "I cannot think of any other possibility."

"You would like to search me? You have my permission."

"I am obliged," replied the policeman who immediately ran his hands expertly over the person of the American, then stepped back with an expression of bewilderment.

"What now?" asked Hargreaves who was amused by the discomfiture of the official.

"In all my experience I have never encountered such a mystery," sighed Lejeune. "Have you any notion what became of that package?"

"The last I saw of it, you were thrusting it in your coat pocket and telling me to march ahead of you. As I have not got eyes in the back of my head—"

"No sarcasm, please. You cannot trifle with the chief of police of Nice."

Pete bowed extravagantly.

"I have no such intention. Do you suppose anybody would dare pick the pocket of the chief of police of Nice?"

"Somebody has undoubtedly done so," growled the Frenchman, adding vindictively: "I have a mind to put you under arrest."

"On what charge? Because you took without authority a package from my hand and while I was forced to submit to this outrage and preceded you to this office you managed to lose it? Can you arrest a man on such a charge?"

"I might arrest you upon suspicion."

"Of what?"

Lejeune laughed rather nastily.

"Well," he said, "for the present, I make no charge. Would you mind telling me what was in the package?"

"I would be glad to tell you, but it happens that I don't know."

Lejeune leaped from his chair like a jack-in-the-box suddenly released and his black eyes blazed.

"This is too much," he exclaimed. "I'll show you that you cannot make fun of a man in my position."

"I am telling you the truth," Pete said seriously, for he realized that Lejeune could make things very unpleasant for him.

"It was in your safe deposit box, you removed it, yet you do not know what it was."

"Correct. You see, it did not belong to me."

"Ah, why did you not say so before?"

"Because you didn't ask me."

"Very well. It was the property of Mr. Buttman. Yes?"

"No. It was given to me for safe keeping by an acquaintance, a chance acquaintance. A few minutes before you turned up he came to me and asked me to return it.

"I was just about to do so when you snatched it from me. Most likely he will sue you for its value," he added maliciously.

"I'll chance that. You have no idea what was in the package? Didn't he tell you?"

Now Pete remembered that Dobey had told him it contained diamonds, rubies, emeralds and so forth. But Dobey was drunk and talking through that funny high hat of his. It would not be fair to repeat such a ridiculous statement.

"I didn't ask him what was in the package," he answered.

"And what is your friend's name?"

All of a sudden Pete was stumped. He had heard the name of the little crook, had known it a few seconds before, yet now it was gone completely out of his mind.

He grew red with embarrassment which Lejeune interpreted as a sign of guilt.

"I don't remember his name," Pete said lamely.

"*Poisson,*" snapped the chief. "Fishes. Many fishes, my friend. You have a very intimate friend, but you don't know his name."

"He's not a friend at all, just an acquaintance. I only met him by chance, this morning."

"Yet, this unknown person intrusts to you a package of great value. I do not believe it."

"Really, Mr. Lejeune, you jump to conclusions. I didn't say it was of great value. How do I know what it was worth?

"But, as you say, no comparative stranger would do such a thing. Therefore, the contents of the package must have been of no importance."

"Important enough for somebody to pick my pocket," was the reply.

"When did you last see this man?"

"He was waiting in the lobby for me to get him his package."

"Ah, he was there in the lobby. Then it was he who put his hand into my pocket!" cried Lejeune.

"As I observed before I haven't got eyes in the back of my head."

"And what does he look like?"

"He was attired in a high silk hat, a frock coat, striped trousers and yellow spats. Maybe he carried a cane. If not, he should have done so."

"But I saw the miscreant. He was standing close by us at the desk."

"That's what I thought."

Lejeune smiled.

"There are not many such costumes this afternoon in Nice with the battle of plaster going on. We shall find him. Perhaps I have been unfair to you, Mr. Hargreaves,

But after all, should you do favors of this sort for comparative strangers?"

"It's just my darn American good nature."

"I shall locate this person, but at the moment there are graver matters. You are still under surveillance, Mr. Hargreaves, and I suggest you observe your actions most carefully."

"I certainly shall, sir."

The interview then terminated. Pete walked out into the lobby to tip Dobey off that he was wanted if he happened to see him. But that person had vanished.

The chief, after setting a few minions upon the trail of the high hat and frock coat, ascended to the chamber where captain of gendarmes was awaiting him beside the dead body of Philip Gwendon.

Already Hargreaves had remembered the name of Dobey Dill, but he saw no reason for supplying the chief with further information. He had too much admiration for the cleverness of the little man who had been grossly intoxicated, but at the hint of danger had snapped out of it so effectively and performed a daring and ingenious operation with neatness and dispatch.

Being a law abiding citizen, he could not condone Dobey's conduct and he was resolved to have nothing further to do with the little thief. Yet, they were both strangers in a strange land and he was highly amused at the achievement of the East Side pickpocket who had operated so successfully upon the pompous and important chief of police of the French city.

He hoped that Dobey would make his escape, just the way you hope the fox escapes the hounds.

CHAPTER XX.

ADVENTURES OF A FROCK SUIT.

AT home, on the job, Dobey Dill rarely drank. For the first time in his life he had allowed himself to become intoxicated because he had been thrown off his axis, one might say, by the charms of Beryl Murther and because he didn't understand what a kick was concealed in the colorless fluid which is European gin. For several hours he had completely lost his head, had forgotten he was the possessor of a great fortune in stolen jewels while he looked into the faultless gems that were Beryl's eyes.

The sight of Hargreaves recalled to him that he had intrusted something of great importance to this comparative stranger and it seemed desirable to have it again in his possession. His tongue was loose and he had babbled of diamonds and rubies. But fortunately for him, Pete paid no attention to his ravings.

He had followed Hargreaves up to the hotel desk in no condition to take charge of anything of value. The sight of the hand which was thrust forward to grasp his property performed the miracle of clearing his brain with the speed of a flash of lightning and the old master was himself again.

Realizing what would happen to him if Hargreaves pointed him out as the owner, and the package was then opened, he had twitched his coat and signaled the reporter to let things take their course, then had seized his opportunity when the chief dropped the package carelessly into his outside coat pocket.

Though a score of persons were standing around, the transfer was accomplished quicker than the eye could see, and Dobey was out of the hotel before Lejeune had reached the door of the director's room.

He thrust the packet inside his shirt, rebuttoned his vest and walked across the street. Although his subconscious mind had accomplished a miracle for him, now he was drunk again, and he blundered through the crowd into the path of the procession which happened to be a throng of young men dressed as girls.

To these joyous youths the sudden appearance in their midst of a person in a tall silk hat and frock coat was a source of infinite delight. A man trundling a baby carriage filled with plaster pellets, thrust in a trowel, drew it forth, lifted his arm and half a pound of plaster struck the silk hat, sending it flying.

With a howl Dobey started to run after his hat, his coat tails flying in the wind.

"Get the coat," cried one of the maskers.

Immediately half a dozen grasped the coat tails while others pulled at the sleeves. In a few seconds Dobey continued his run, but the coat was being torn apart by a sportive mob, while those who had not participated until now filled the air with suggestions to get the voluminous trousers.

Dobey was running blindly, pursued by the mob while the hilarious spectators egged them on. Suddenly he was tripped and went sprawling on his face while hands grasped his legs.

When next Mr. Dill arose he was attired only in shirt, vest and B.V.D. pants, traveling fast.

There being little left to remove, his persecutors had a new idea and, capturing him, they bore him to a fountain in the park which happened to be close at hand and tossed him over the little iron fence into the middle of the pool, after which they bothered about him no more.

Whining with fright, shivering with cold, tears of anger and drops of water running down his cheeks, Dobey crawled out of the water amid the laughter of small boys and headed across the park away from the brutal masques. One of his spats had come off in the fountain and he kicked off the other which was hanging over his shoe.

Clutching at his breast he was relieved to find the package still there. The wind was cold around his bare legs and his linen was sopping wet, but Dobey was sober now.

There had been five or six hundred francs in his trousers pocket, undoubtedly it now reposed in the pocket of one of his persecutors. He had plenty more locked in his bag in his hotel, however, and the jewels were safe.

A wretched, shivering, miserable figure he crept across the park, attracting no attention whatever on a day when any sort of weird attire was permissible, slipped down a side street and entered the little hotel where he had parked his baggage.

There was nobody in the tiny lobby. He lifted his key from the nail and ascended two flights to his room where he stripped, put on his pyjamas and crawled under the blankets of his bed to get warm.

For the second time that day fate had been kind to Dobey. Thanks to the prejudices of Beryl, he had doffed his ordinary costume for a wedding outfit and thus escaped recognition by the French thieves searching for the American pickpocket.

By the loving kindness of the masques he had now been freed from the regalia for which the French police were upon the lookout. The gods were certainly good to Dobey Dill.

CHAPTER XXI.

WANTED BY THE POLICE.

THE chief of police, Monsieur Lejeune, still puzzled and distressed over the disappearance from his pocket of a packet the contents of which he was eager to ascertain, went directly to the chamber where the Honorable Philip Gwendon lay dead. The knowledge that a murder had been committed in the town which he considered the safest in France drove from his mind, for the moment the mystery of the disappearing package.

Had Monsieur Lejeune been aware that he had held in his hands the gems which had been stolen at the Veglione and had permitted them to be purloined from his person, his grief and rage would have been too great to permit him to devote himself to the details of the assassination.

But, as yet he did not know how immense was the loss he had sustained. Therefore he was able to compose himself and hear the story of the police captain.

"It was undoubtedly a plot," he agreed. "And the criminals beyond question are the jester and the harlequin. You say the harlequin was a beautiful blond woman?"

"Monsieur Lejeune, though her face was masked, she had a figure that was perfection," declared the captain enthusiastically.

"Good. Find the perfect figure. Her blond hair might have been a wig."

"Witnesses say that she spoke French with a pronounced English accent," continued the officer.

"Ha, that is a point. An English woman. And the murdered man is an Englishman, a well known milord, a great spender. We make progress. Was the jester also an Englishman?"

"Alas, we have not heard him speak."

"I shall make him speak when I catch him.

"Now, the plan of the cortege was a parade of toys, and it's curious that these assassins were not in appropriate costumes. One would suppose, if they planned this crime they would wear attire less conspicuous. That brings up the question whether it was not an impulse.

"You have already ordered the arrest of this pair, have you not."

"The search began at once," declared the captain.

"They should not be difficult to find, particularly if the woman is so beautiful. Let us first make inquiries regarding the women friends of this Englishman. With whom did he associate? Who is likely to have wished to slay him? Undoubtedly the assassin was a discarded mistress; a crime passional."

"*Oui, cherchez la femme,*" said the captain sententiously.

"*Mon Dieu,*" sighed the chief. "Everything comes at once. With all the details of the carnival upon my hands there occurs the theft of a fortune in jewels at the Veglione, and the assassination of a distinguished Englishman at the Cortege des Masques.

"Undoubtedly the English authorities will demand immediate results and the Government at Paris will be impatient, also. There is also the matter of an American in a silk hat and frock coat whom I wish to interview personally."

"I have never seen an American in such attire," said the captain. "What had he done?"

Monsieur Lejune grew suddenly red.

"Never mind what he had done," he protested. "I want him very badly and I shall interrogate him myself."

"He had no desire to admit that the frock coated American had picked the pocket of the chief of police.

Having made arrangements for notifying the relatives in England through Scotland Yard of the death of Philip Gwendon, and asked for instructions regarding disposition of the body, poor Monsieur Lejeune left the hotel and returned to police headquarters, trying to arrive at some conclusions regarding the events of the day.

So far as he could see he had on his hands two great crimes. But as yet he saw no connection between them. The readers of this story, however, must have surmised already that there was a connection, and that the murder was a direct result of the robbery at the Veglione.

Philip Gwendon had engineered the theft of the jewels at the ball with the aid of Larue, leader of a band of French criminals and he had threatened Larue with death if that worthy did not produce the jewels which he had lost in the tobacco shop.

Larue originally had planned to play fair with Gwendon. But he had become much alarmed at the man's attitude and resolved to put him out of the way at the first opportunity. We know how the opportunity had arisen and now we understand the appearance of a friend in need to the harlequin and the jester.

Meanwhile the two eight foot dolls continued to move around the Place Massena until they arrived opposite the imposing façade of the Casino Municipal, and saw opening out upon the right the narrow street suggested to them by the man with the black mustache.

The Cortege of the Masques was a merry-go-round which kept circling the great park as long as its participants could make their feet hold out, but no attention was paid when tired maskers dropped from the procession and went their several ways. Thus Artemis and Butsy attracted no attention when they left the parade and moved down the indicated street until they came to a small and dingy cafe staggering under a huge sign which read "Cafe des Griffons."

Unable to get through the door, they lifted the dolls from their shoulders and dragged them in with them. They were met by a small *garcon de cafe* with a very dirty napkin over his arm.

"'*Monsieur desire?*" he inquired.

"Ventimiglia," said Butsy remembering the password.

"By this way, if you please, monsieur and madame," said the waiter who pushed open a narrow door and showed them a den in the rear which was empty.

Artemis dropped into a seat and regarded the place distastefully.

"What a vile hole," she observed. "Let's get out of this."

"I suppose it was only fair to return the dolls," Butsy stated, "but we might as well be on our way."

The waiter, who had departed, now entered carrying on his arm two soiled dominoes.

"Put these on over your costumes," he said. "Then get to your homes as quickly as possible."

"Wear that filthy thing?" exclaimed Artemis. "I should say not."

"Wait a minute. They are looking for the harlequin and the jester. Better throw these on, get a carriage and go at once to the costumers," Butsy suggested. "I don't know why they are so nice to us, but we might as well avoid arrest if we can."

"I don't think they could do anything to us, but it would be a nuisance to be taken to jail," Artemis agreed. "Very well. I'll put the thing on."

In a moment, covered by the new disguises they regarded each other and laughed. But the waiter had opened a rear door into an alleyway and was motioning to them to depart. Butsy gave him ten francs, which he accepted with effusive gratitude and some surprise, and they emerged into the open air.

At the end of the alley they hailed a cab and gave the address of the costumers, where they arrived in ten minutes. Again attired like modern human beings, they emerged a quarter of an hour later and strolled leisurely to the Hotel Ruhl.

At the elevator Artemis extended her hand.

"I want to thank you for a delightful afternoon;" she said. "It was a brilliant idea. I haven't laughed so much for ages, and I'll meet you in the winter garden for tea in half an hour. I want to fix my hair and put on a different gown."

Butsy held her hand and regarded her earnestly.

"You are positively the best sport I ever met in my life," he declared. "After what we've been through, it will be strange to be formal again at tea."

Artemis smiled and released her hand.

"Not a word about our escapade. Mother would be shocked," she warned. "*Au revoir.*"

He saw her shoot upward in the elevator with a sigh. She had escaped him, and he knew everything would be different when she changed her gown. What a girl. What a pal. What a revel they had had together.

He turned and confronted Pete Hargreaves, who addressed him angrily.

"Where the devil have you been all the afternoon?" Pete demanded. "I've been looking for you everywhere, and there's a sort of mess I want to tell you about."

"Wait till I tell you about Artemis and me," insisted Butsy.

"That will keep. This is serious."

"And don't you think this isn't. Boy, I got a start with that girl—"

"Which will do you no good if we go to jail. Come into the bar while I explain what has happened to us."

Making the best of his friend's lack of consideration, Butsy sighed and followed him. When they were settled in a snug location Hargreaves prepared to tell his tale.

For those Americans who have never been to Europe and who may be offended by the frequency with which our heroes visit bars, perhaps I had better explain that the bar of a European hotel, which is always referred to as the American bar, resembles no saloon which ever bloomed in America. It is a large, comfortable room, furnished with overstuffed chairs, divans, and other luxuries, and resembles most the smoking room of an ocean liner.

While alcoholic drinks are served, if demanded, a very large percentage of the business of the American bar is the sale of black coffee. In a far corner of the room is a small counter, but nobody ever thinks of standing there to consume a beverage, and, alas, the thing usually has no footrail.

Anyway our boys were there, and Butsy heard, with growing indignation, Pete's tale of Dobey Dill and the vanishing package.

"Serve you right for being so darned good-natured," was his comment. "It was obvious that the fellow was an ill-bred crook.

"I sized him up the moment I set eyes on him, warned you to let him alone, and as soon as my back is turned you proceed to get chummy with him. Why the deuce didn't you tell him to go somewhere else when he asked you to mind his bundle for him?"

"I admit I should have done so, but he was a comical and rather pathetic little cuss and, after all, a countryman. How did I know he would do a thing like this?

"Of course the chief of police had no business grabbing the package. It was a high-handed piece of business which proves we are still under suspicion, but Dobey has made it much worse for us by picking the man's pocket."

"I'll say so. In all probability you were kindly protecting stolen goods for him, and he would have gone to jail if the chief had opened the package. As a result we are in wrong just as I had made a wonderful impression on Artemis.

"Boy, I've got the inside track with that girl, and let me tell you she is the snappiest, liveliest, best goldarned little sport that ever a fellow met. Do you know what we did?"

"Went in swimming, I suppose, in which case one or both of you will have pneumonia."

"No, sir. We got a couple of costumes and we went into the plaster procession. Pete, we raised Cain. I'll bet that we put a pep in the proceedings that they never had before.

"Artemis got a harlequin costume, and I was a king's jester. Of course the harlequin was a pretty daring costume for a girl, but you ought to have seen—"

While he chattered, Pete was growing pale. Now he grasped his friend by the arm.

"She wore a red and black harlequin and you were a red jester. Is that right?"

"How did you know?" asked Butsy. "Did you see us?"

"I heard about you," said his friend grimly. "You were the merry wights who started the riot outside the hotel, right?"

The recollection caused Butsy to roar with laughter.

"It was Artemis," he said. "That girl is certainly a rip snorter."

"You poor fool," exclaimed Hargreaves. "You poor miserable fool! Don't you breathe to another soul what you have done, and warn your charming companion to keep her mouth shut. I'm serious."

"Oh, I know they were trying to nab us for starting the disturbance, but that doesn't amount to anything. The worst they could do would be to pin a small fine on us if they caught us, and they won't catch us. Whatever it costs, it was worth it, for I never had so much fun in my life."

"I don't know how to tell you this, and I'm absolutely terrified at the situation," Pete said. "You're a good sort, Butsy, and, of course, the girl is a trump.

"Old man, you are wanted by the police—"

"I know that."

"No you don't. You are wanted upon a charge of murder."

CHAPTER XXII.

BUTSY BEGINS TO UNDERSTAND.

"YOU must be crazy," Buttman wailed, though he knew that Pete would not make a wild charge. "Why—why—how could it? Oh, Pete, for God's sake tell me. What happened? How did you know? Why do they think we—who was murdered?"

"All I know is hotel gossip. But as well as I can make out, an Englishman named Gwendon was standing in the crowd when you and Artemis led a mob of maskers against it and began to smother it with plaster balls. You and the girl struggled with the Englishman and laid hands on him just as the police charged the rioters.

"They claim one of you drove a knife into the fellow's heart. The body is in a room in the hotel, and the authorities are trying to catch you. I am afraid your chance of escape is slight.

"It's just fool luck you are at large as long as this. Didn't you know anything about the murder?"

"Pete, as God is my judge," began Butsy.

"I know, old man. Of course you didn't do it, nor Artemis, either. But how

did you get away? They were right on your heels."

"How *did* we get away?" thought Butsy.

For the first time, he considered the manner in which their escape had been so kindly arranged for them, as though it had been prepared in advance. There was the fellow with the black mustache, who most obligingly had concealed them beneath the gigantic dolls, and who had directed them to the Café of the Griffon and given them a password.

He had supposed that was French good nature, a desire to save them from annoyance because they had heckled the Anglo-Saxons. But now he realized that the explanation must be very different.

And there was the waiter at the Griffon who was awaiting the password, who had supplied them with dominoes to change their appearance and led them, without their suggesting it, out through a back door.

The password was Ventimiglia which, he remembered now, was a town just across the Italian frontier. That indicated they were supposed to go immediately to Italy, instead of which they had gone to the costumers, left the betraying costumes and returned innocently to the hotel.

Although he had acted like one, under the influence of the madcap Artemis, Butsy was not a fool, and he saw clearly enough that he and the girl had been a pair of cat's-paws for persons unknown.

There had been a plot to murder this strange man at the place and time that Artemis had been inspired to assail the crowd on the terrace.

Arrangements had been made for the escape of the assassins. Thanks to the assistance of Artemis, the deed had been neatly done. The confederates, unaware of the identity of the murderer, had supposed they were aiding him or her when they came to the rescue of the harlequin and the jester.

They had been fooled, as the police had been fooled into overlooking the real criminal and pursuing the two innocents.

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Hargreaves. "I don't have to tell you that your trouble will involve me. If we were in bad with the police upon the Veglione robbery, deeper by the mixup with that confounded pickpocket, why, imagine us, now that a first class murder is about to be laid at our door."

"I know," said Butsy weakly. "But nobody knew who we were, and we got rid of our costumes and back to the hotel without attracting attention."

"Where are the costumes? You've got to burn them or throw them into the sea."

"But we can't do that. We returned them to the costumer," said Buttman.

"Good God, you're doomed! One of the first things the police will do will be to visit the costumers and find out who rented a harlequin and a jester's outfit. Did you give them your names?"

"I gave mine. I paid for both the costumes. Thank God, Artemis won't appear."

"Humph!" growled Pete. "I suppose you are idiot enough to go to the guillotine for the woman you love. How do you know she didn't stab the fellow?"

"Don't you dare—"

"Oh, all right. But somebody stuck a knife in him. Who else was round there? Did you notice anybody in particular?"

"No-o," said Butsy slowly.

He had remembered now that Artemis knew this man who appeared to have been slain and had said something to him which caused him to release his hold of her. But, with Pete so suspicious, he could not tell him that.

Anyway, Artemis was away before he was, and the fellow was certainly alive when Butsy turned his back on him.

"What a fix, what a fix," groaned Hargreaves. "Robbery, murder—and we as innocent as a pair of babes. Yet I wouldn't blame the chief of police for grabbing us on the evidence.

"What on earth caused you to do that insane stunt? Why did you ever dream of going into the Cortege, and if you did, what possessed you to attack the spectators? You must have been out of your minds."

Buttman nodded sadly.

"I can't exactly explain. I was wondering where you were when Artemis came along, and there is something about the

sight of her that makes me goofy. Somehow we got talking about the carnival spirit, and I said I'd like to put on a costume and get into the game.

"When she said she might try it, too—well, I was foolish with joy, and I was just the same as drunk all the afternoon, though I had nothing but a few drops of wine for lunch. And Artemis was such a good sport.

"All her life she has been restrained, I guess, living up to the fact her mother is a duchess. But when she got on a costume and a mask it must have intoxicated her, too. Anyway, we saw that collection of fish on the terrace and we couldn't resist throwing a scare into them. The French mob was ripe for anything and—well, that's the story."

Pete shook his head.

"The worst of it is that nobody will believe you. In view of what happened they will read the worst motive into your actions, for there was a plot to kill this man beyond question.

"The only thing in your favor is that you, neither of you, even saw the fellow before in your lives, so you could have no motive for killing him."

"Oh," exclaimed Butsy.

"What?" asked Pete sharply.

"I might as well admit that Artemis knew him, very well, I believe."

"Oh, my God! There goes your only chance. Butsy, we've got to escape from Nice at once before they discover you were the jester."

"You don't suppose I could leave Artemis under the circumstances."

"What good will it do Artemis to have you put in jail? If you disappear they can't force you to tell who was your companion."

"They couldn't, anyway."

"You don't know anything about their third degree methods."

"We are innocent and we can prove it."

"Your conduct is suspicious. You led a mob to attack a crowd of innocent bystanders and, during the riot, a man was slain.

"Your explanation of why you started that riot won't wash. The fact that an American and English girl put on masks and entered a procession of French common people is enough to convict you in the eyes of the police.

"Lady Artemis is so well connected that she can get out of any scrape. Besides, the French are very soft-hearted when it comes to a beautiful woman. But you and I are a couple of nobodies with no influence whatever, and they'll give us the works.

"The chief doesn't like us now. Think what will happen when he learns about this."

"Your skirts are clear anyway."

"I shall be considered an accomplice, don't worry about that," Pete grimly informed him.

Butsy groaned.

"Old man, you don't know how sorry I am to have let you in for this. Just the same I must have a talk with Artemis and tell her everything. Then, if she advises me to make a run for it, perhaps I'll go."

"Every second makes our chance of escape slimmer. We'll have to leave all our belongings in the hotel. Maybe we can get our money out of the safe without attracting suspicion, but I'm reasonably certain we are shadowed."

"I'll telephone to Artemis, ask her to see us both. Maybe you can make things clearer to her than I."

"Do it now," advised Pete.

"Darn it, it's tea time! She'll be with her mother in the tearoom."

"Those about to die will now take tea."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DUCHESS TAKES THE HELM.

ON the way up in the elevator the frolicsome "Meg" of the Cortege of Masques faded into the proud and dignified Lady Artemis of the Promenade des Anglais. The smile upon her lips twisted into a scornful curl, the laugh in her eye gave place to a hard glitter, her chin lifted and her shoulders squared. The hoyden was again a great lady.

Two or three years in aristocratic London society may be guaranteed to boil out of the most charming and ingenuous young

woman most of her sweetness and simplicity, and it happened that Artemis had been out four years.

Compared to this girl, when she was functioning normally, Mr. H. Vennington Buttman, the ex-cynic of Greenwich Village, was a delicious little Mayflower, and even the sophisticated police reporter and editor of *Ginger Stories* was an innocent lambkin.

Artemis was named after the goddess of the hunt, called Diana by the Romans, a cold, unimpressionable lady who got her fun out of life shooting arrows through unsuspecting harts and gazelles, and had a mean way of disposing of admiring Greek and Roman shepherds who pursued her And our heroine, in London society, was considered aptly named.

Certain of her girl friends had declared that she was hard as nails and cold as ice and supremely selfish. Even the duchess had sighed that Artemis was very difficult. None of them, however, had ever seen her in the sort of mood in which she had indulged herself this afternoon.

It was expected that Artemis would make a great match. In a circle where great beauty and distinguished family are not often coupled, there was no reason to suppose that she could not pick and choose.

It was generally believed that Artemis was reserving herself for a husband of great wealth and political influence, perhaps in her secret heart considering that she would make a wonderful Vicereine of India. Since she was dependent upon the bounty of the duchess it was absolutely necessary for her to marry large quantities of money.

But money alone would not tempt her. It must be coupled with high rank, or great power, or both.

There were quite a few Continental princesses who would have been more accessible to the suit of H. Vennington Buttman than this proud young girl, had he only known it. And had it not been for the adventure of the afternoon his chances of being noticed by Artemis would have been less than zero.

As it was, she was dismissing him from her mind as a nice boy, but not one to be taken seriously.

She entered her mother's suite to find the duchess making repairs to her face before the mirror.

"I think it was very unkind of you to absent yourself this afternoon when you knew my heart was breaking," said the peeress. "Where have you been and what man have you been with?"

"Oh, I've been around," she evaded, "and I spoke to several men, nobody particular."

"Hum! Artemis, how much did you care for Philip Gwendon?"

The girl lifted surprised eyebrows.

"That's all over long ago," she replied. "He was a brute, but I liked him a little. Not enough to marry him, though, even if he remained the heir."

"You didn't love him at all."

"I don't do anything so stupid," Artemis replied.

The duchess sighed with relief.

"Have you heard the news, dear?"

"What news in particular?" she asked indifferently.

Her mother rose from the table, crossed to the girl and threw a huge arm over her shoulder.

"Darling," she said. "Philip is dead."

"Impossible," cried Artemis. "Why, I was talking with him less than an hour ago, not much more, anyway."

"Nevertheless, he is dead," said the duchess impressively. "And, furthermore, he was murdered. What do you think of that?"

Her daughter grew very white, her composure left her.

"When? How? Who killed him?"

"It's frightful scandal," the older woman declared, enjoying the sensation she was creating. "They are trying to keep it quiet, but it's all over the hotel.

"He was standing on the terrace looking at the masks when a masked woman rushed at him and stabbed him to the heart. She was dressed like a harlequin and is supposed to have been a discarded mistress.

"She wore a mask, but she had blond hair and a stunning figure. Hundreds of people saw her, and the police expect to get her at any minute.

"What's the matter—Artemis?"

The last was a shriek, for Artemis had slipped out of her arms and fallen upon the floor in a dead faint.

The cry which the duchess emitted then shook the hotel, and drew into the room Miss Beryl Murther, her maid, who picked up the girl and carried her to a bed.

Beryl had returned in the state in which we have previously described her. But she had taken a cold bath, arranged her hair and, while not entirely her ordinary self, escaped scrutiny because of the circumstances.

Artemis, being young and strong, recovered in two or three minutes, but the look of terror in her eyes alarmed her mother, who ordered Murther from the room and waited grimly for an explanation.

A young woman with the purpose in life of Lady Artemis lives in daily fear of only one thing—the breath of scandal. And what had caused the girl to faint was not the news of the death of Gwendon, but alarm lest the police should bring notoriety upon her by dragging her name into a murder case.

As innocent an escapade as ever a young girl had indulged in was suddenly become a dreadful thing. For, the publication of the story that Lady Artemis had been masquerading in the vulgar carnival procession in Nice, had been in low company and was accused by the authorities of knowing something of the murder of a man who had at one time been a suitor would ruin her prospects, even though she were proved innocent of the crime, as, of course, she would be without difficulty.

No cabinet minister or rising young politician, or rich city man, eager to marry into society, could afford to take a wife, no matter how beautiful, who was mixed up in such a scandal. Even the influence of the duchess could hardly prevent her from being cut off the most desirable social lists. And that was what caused the young girl to swoon in the old-fashioned way.

"Now," commanded the duchess, "you are all right again. Have you been carrying on with Philip, and does anybody know about it?"

"No, mother," she said faintly.

"You are in love with him, then?"

Artemis shook her head.

"It's worse than that," she said. "I'm in a ghastly muddle, mother, and you've got to get me out of it."

The duchess clamped her great jaw, but her eyes were kind.

"I'll stand by you, of course," she said. "Now suppose you confess everything."

Her cheeks flushing with shame, Artemis told her story, interrupted now and then by bellows of indignation.

"You fool! You blithering idiot," cried the old lady. "You take up with this unspeakable American, let him lure you into a dreadful net, and now you are in his power. Of course he'll betray you."

"No," said Artemis. "He won't."

Of a sudden it occurred to her that of all the men she ever knew, Butsy was least likely to abandon a lady in distress.

"He is a gentleman, mother, an awfully decent sort, and he will lie himself black in the face for me."

"Perhaps," the duchess granted. "The other one has good blood in him. It's too bad it wasn't that one. However, they are going to trace those costumes. They'll locate him—you say he gave his name to the costumer. And then he'll be forced to tell who was with him."

"I think he would go to jail," said Artemis. Before her eyes floated the honest, sincere, determined face of Butsy. "I know I can depend upon him."

"We'll have to leave Nice," said the duchess. "At once. Even if the fellow does not betray you, they will find persons who saw you together.

"We've got to get out of France, and before we reach Paris you may be identified. What on earth can we do? And this person must leave also."

Artemis half smiled.

"Shall we take him with us?" she demanded.

"If the fool is caught you will be connected with him. Oh, Artemis, how could you do such a thing?"

"I was mad, I think," the girl said bitterly. "Yet, after all, it was such an innocent escapade. And it was a lark. Why did Philip have to be murdered just at that moment?"

"Murther," called the duchess, whereupon Beryl came running, her eyes full of curiosity only half satisfied, because she had been listening behind a closed door, a very unsatisfactory proceeding.

"Try to get Sir Charles Hartmann upon the phone at the Negresco. If he is not there, leave word for him to call me immediately."

"Why Sir Charles?" asked Artemis, who had got off the bed and dropped weakly into a chair.

"Because there is only one way to escape all customs and frontier formalities. Sir Charles's yacht is in the harbor.

"We'll go on board at once and sail immediately for England. They have to identify you as the woman in the harlequin costume, and to identify you they must find you. If we have a sudden whim for a yachting cruise, who is to question it?

"And I think we had better take those young men with us. Not that I want the creatures around, but if we leave them behind in Nice they may be induced to say something they shouldn't."

Artemis suddenly smiled. For some reason she was not displeased at the prospect of a yachting cruise in the company of Butsy Buttman and his friend. He was a nice boy and congenial, though not to be considered seriously.

Besides, if the police were searching for her, they must also be seeking him, and it would be pretty rotten to escape herself and abandon her companion.

"Sir Charles Hartmann on the phone," said Beryl, entering suddenly.

"Very well. I'll talk to him on the extension here, and you mind you don't listen, Murther."

"Why, of course not, your grace," replied the shocked Beryl, who retreated with her head high. As soon as she was in the salon with the door shut, however, she immediately lifted the receiver softly from the hook.

"Sir Charles," said the duchess, "how soon could your yacht sail? Yes, I thought I would like a little cruise. Of course Artemis is coming. Right away.

"We'll pack and get out in an hour. You'll call for us? That will be splendid. And you don't mind if we take with us a guest or two? I knew you wouldn't, you old dear."

"Now," cried the duchess triumphantly. "That's arranged. Murther!"

When Beryl entered she exclaimed:

"Pack everything at once. Register the big trunks to England, but put plenty of things into the small trunks and the hand bags. We are going on a yachting trip."

"Indeed, marm!" said Beryl, trying to look surprised.

"Next," said the duchess briskly, "is to get hold of these men—what's their names—and persuade them to accompany us."

"I do not think they will need much persuasion," said Artemis confidently. "We have a tea engagement with them, and it's tea time."

"Are you crazy?" cried her grace. "You must not be seen in their company. It would identify you if they have discovered that one of them was the companion of the harlequin.

"Have them paged and fetched up here. I'll talk to them."

Beryl, who had called in the valet and the *femme de chambre* to assist in the packing, attended to the paging, and took occasion to put in one personal call. In ten minutes Pete and Butsy, rather surprised, presented themselves at the salon of the Duchess of Mosmorshire.

That lady minced no words, and in a few seconds had Butsy hanging over the ropes, as they say in prize ring parlance.

"Look here, young man, you are the most arrant idiot I ever met in my life," she began. "Through your imbecility you have placed my daughter in a most unpleasant situation.

"How dare you persuade her to go masquerading among a lot of filthy natives and get her into the most terrible mess I ever heard of in my life?"

"Really, mother," said Artemis, whose heart smote her when she saw the distress of her accomplice, "I think I was quite as much to blame as Mr. Buttman."

"Girls are not supposed to have intelligence, but men ought to use their heads," retorted her mother. "Don't you know that you will be identified as the man who

hired these costumes, and that Lady Artemis is likely to be dragged into it?"

"You can depend upon my keeping my mouth shut," replied Butsy stoutly.

"They'll get it out of you or produce people who saw you together. You've got to leave Nice, at once."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, your grace," said Hargreaves. "Because we happened to know something about the robbery last night we have been ordered to remain in Nice by the chief of police. I am sure we should be stopped at the railway station. I doubt if we could get away by automobile."

"Oh, ho," cried the duchess. "That complicates matters. Do you suppose you could get to the quay without attracting attention?"

"We couldn't board a steamer without passing the authorities," Pete replied.

"There is nothing for it," the duchess said to Artemis. "We must take them with us."

"It's the only fair thing to do," the girl replied, regarding Butsy rather kindly.

"We are leaving at once, or within an hour, for England," said the duchess. "I must get Artemis away before they have a chance to identify her. My friend, Sir Charles Hartmann, has a big yacht in the port, the Lucretia, and he will call for us in an automobile.

"You must not be seen in our company about the hotel, but if you are on the pier when we arrive we shall take you on board with us. There are no port formalities regarding the sailing of a private yacht.

"In view of the outrageous folly of your friend, Mr. Hargreaves, you owe it to me to inconvenience yourselves to do what you can to make reparation."

Pete exchanged glances with Butsy.

As both earnestly desired to escape from Nice and the unpleasant chief of police, and were restrained only by lack of means, neither considered it an inconvenience to be carried away by a private yacht which could escape port investigators. As for Butsy, the prospect of making a yachting cruise with Artemis threw him into the seventh heaven of delight.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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FLAME O' THE NORTH

(Aurora Borealis)

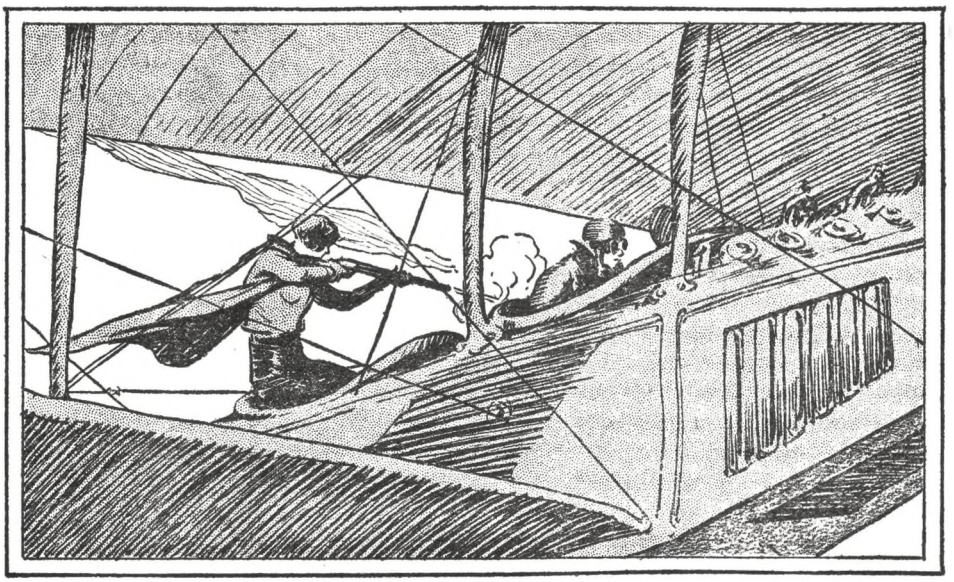
UP from the rim so dim and cold,
Spanning the dome o' the sky's gray mist,
Arching are beams of the bridge of gold
And crimson and purple and amethyst.

Under the quivering wraith of fire
Altars of ice lie bleak and dead,
While a white bear, guarding the frozen pyre,
Crouches and waggles his grisly head.

Over the snow wastes, lone and stark,
Treading the trails that gods forgot,
To the rhythmic roar of the husky's bark
Marches a man where men were not.

Ghosts of old flames in the Arctic sky,
A witching blaze on a phantom hearth;
And under it fires that will never die
In souls of the questioning sons of earth.

Olin Lyman.



Prize of the Air

By BEN CONLON

AT a height of about two thousand feet Bill Barlow completed the loop and then flew into the wind over the landing "T".

"Great stuff!" yelled his passenger, and Bill could hear his chuckle, for he had now throttled his motor and was making a quick bank to the left.

"Thought you'd like it," he called back, "but it may get me in wrong down below."

After making a complete circle, he landed just where he had intended to, and taxied up toward the hangars. It was a maneuver he had learned thoroughly years before, when he was a cadet flyer—this landing with a dead engine.

Bill's passenger was smiling as he unbuckled his safety belt and climbed from the cockpit, but there was no smile on the face of the field superintendent who came running up to the plane.

"Hey, what's the idea, Barlow?" he queried. "You know as well as I do that it's against the law to loop with a passenger, don't you?"

"That's right."

"You bet it's right! Then why did you do it?"

"Boss," said Bill Barlow, showing his sound teeth in a wide grin, "Mr. Saxton here, my passenger, has some red blood in his veins. He offered me five hundred dollars to loop the loop with him. You know that temptation is the one thing I can't resist, and—well, Mr. Saxon's got plenty of jack, and if I didn't do it he'd have found some one who would, and I just happened to need the five hundred very badly right now."

"Well, I've got nothing against you personally, Barlow," said the superintendent, which was probably true, for very few people had anything against the likable Barlow. "But either I'm here to see that the rules

of this field are kept, or I'm not. You fellows are getting too skittish around here. I'll have your license as a passenger pilot revoked."

As a matter of fact, he did have Bill's license revoked. Friendship in private life is one thing; in aviation, as in the army, it is quite another when it interferes with vested authority.

But Bill Barlow didn't seem to mind. A man who can laugh in the face of death is not to be disturbed by such a trifle as the revocation of a license. It was Saxton, his passenger, who seemed the more concerned. He approached Bill later that afternoon.

"I think I've got a job for you, Barlow," he said. "I've got to start to-morrow for my home in Pampa, New Mexico, and trains are getting too slow for me in my old age. How about flying me there? I'll buy the gas and pay you for the trip."

Bill looked at him wistfully, and shook his head.

"You're hitting me right where I live," he said dolefully. "An old pal of mine, Jack Harraden, is barnstorming down that way, and I'd like to join him. If I could make connections with Harraden I'd be set for the season. More than once Jack and I have gone through a season together stunting at fairs and carnivals—and I'd like to make the dough, too. But you know I can't go."

"And why not? Seems an ideal arrangement to me. And, by the way, when I left Pampa, your friend Harraden was part of a carnival at Las Vegas, according to the papers."

"Las Vegas, eh? Well, I might join him. But I couldn't carry you, now that my passenger license is revoked."

Saxton laughed. "I'll fix that for you, boy! I'll buy your plane. Give you two thousand dollars for it. You ride with me technically as a passenger, but you're hired to do what you're told to do—and you'll be at the joy-stick. Get the idea?"

Bill got the idea, and the transaction was duly carried out.

"Remember," Saxton warned him, as he pocketed the dummy bill-of-sale. "I've 'bought' that plane. I have you at my mercy now. I may charge you plenty when you want to get it back—and get the free ride into the bargain."

"Fair enough!" Bill chuckled. "But you haven't got it all your own way, Mr. Wise Guy. Don't be surprised if I suddenly decide to quit piloting the ship when we're five thousand feet above a Kansas farm and take to parachute stunts unless you come to time with me."

So Bill Barlow and Frank C. Saxton, since they could laugh with each other and threaten to do each other, knew that they were friends, and the next day Bill Barlow had his ship ready for the long jump.

Saxton wished to arrive at Pampa, where he operated a cattleman's bank, as soon as possible, he explained, as a shipment of gold bullion was due in Pampa that week from a correspondent bank in Trinidad, Colorado. He wanted to be on the ground when the transfer was made.

He rode out to the field in a taxicab accompanied by a slender, gray-eyed girl who looked trim and athletic in a heavy blue jersey and knickers.

"Think she's dressed warm enough for the hop?" Saxton asked, his shrewd eyes twinkling. "I forgot to mention yesterday that my daughter is going along. This is Mr. Barlow, Ruth. He's the fellow that looped the loop with your dad yesterday."

Ruth extended her hand boyishly, and Bill may have held it just a trifle too long, but the act was unconscious.

"The more I see of you bankers, Mr. Saxton," he said, turning to the gray-haired man, "the less I value your keenness in a business deal despite your reputation. If I'd known Miss Saxton was coming along, I'd have piloted you for nothing."

And the remark may not have been entirely jocular. Hours later, flying high above the fields of Ohio, Bill Barlow somehow could not develop that devil-may-care feeling that he always had in the air.

He had done his share of stunt-flying and had never known fear of any kind, but right now there was a certain conscious concern within him which he could not analyze. He finally doped out what the matter was.

It was the precious freight he was carrying. Those straight-gazing gray eyes of Ruth Saxton had nearly sunk Bill Barlow.

A single stop was made, at the air mail field at Maywood, Illinois, for refueling; then the flight was continued, and completed without special incident, Bill Barlow making a landing in a field just east of the town of Pampa.

He had never been in the Southwest before, and he was eagerly anticipating the surprise he had in store for Jack Harraden. Two planes in a New Mexico town would be something of a sensation, he assumed.

That day he enjoyed an old-fashioned noonday dinner at the comfortable home of the Saxtons, and telephoned Las Vegas. The city authorities, Saxton had said, could doubtless enlighten him as to the activities of his friend Harraden.

But the news he received proved to be a keen disappointment. Harraden had been flying passengers in Las Vegas, but had hopped off in his De Haviland two days before, saying that he was going to Beaumont, Texas.

"Me for Beaumont, then," said Bill. "I'm beginning to vegetate already, with nothing to do."

Ruth Saxton lowered her eyes. She was not the type to be forward. If this good-looking chap chose to hop off for Beaumont, then that was his business, she supposed.

And Frank C. Saxton said nothing. He had liked Barlow on sight, but he himself was in the banking business and this young daredevil would never be satisfied with that. And Bill himself was thinking that he might better have been in some game like banking as the husband of a gray-eyed girl like—

Oh, well, he'd hop off for Beaumont in the morning.

But he did not hop off for Beaumont in the morning. For something happened that night to keep him from Beaumont. As a matter of strict record, to this day he has never seen Beaumont.

II.

BARLOW borrowed one of Saxton's cayuses to take a lope into the hills. He would have invited Ruth along, but then he was not sure that Ruth would be interested, and anyhow he realized that he did not cut a very expert figure on a horse.

Hard work, too, this horseback riding. He realized it more and more as the sun gradually sank behind the ridge to the west of the town. He had been walking beside his mount along the trail, but with darkness approaching he decided to try once more to ride, despite his soreness.

Saxton would probably be wondering what had become of him. Dusk had fallen with unexpected swiftness here in the mountains, and he was none too sure of the trail.

It was as he was rounding a curve from where he hoped to be able to see the fork leading into Pampa that he heard a sound that could not possibly be mistaken—by Bill Barlow. He had heard that sound too often to make any mistake about it.

That subdued roar was the pounding of twelve cylinders all right enough. He'd have bet a million dollars on it—if he had had it.

He gazed up into the violescent dusk. The roar was getting louder now, and sure enough, over the ridge from out of the north swooped a great shadow that circled about and made a landing in the hill-rimmed meadow just below him to the right.

"Jack Harraden!" he said to himself. "He must have heard I was in Pampa."

Bill Barlow forgot all about the trail into town now. He took the first path that led downward, tied his tired beast to a fence-post and started afoot cross-country in the darkness, guided by the roar of the plane's engine as it taxied along the ground.

He continued on, the soft ground serving as a pad for his feet. He heard the sound of men's voices after a considerable walk, and he was about to call out when he discovered that the men were wrangling over something. He could not make out the words, but there was no mistaking the intonation.

Some sixth sense caused him to stoop in the shelter of the fence that inclosed a large field with an overhanging hill at one corner it. He could distinguish the outline of the plane there in the gloom, its wings looking ghostlike and mysterious, and from the loud voices he could tell that the men were walking in his direction.

Some of the talk was in Spanish, and he got a word of it here and there. Bill had

taken Spanish two years at college—and had become very fluent in football.

He caught the words "Pancho Lopez" and "dinero," which he knew meant money. Then, to his satisfaction, a new voice boomed out in English:

"Yeh, he's big chief—down there. But I'm boss up here until this thing is put over, Ramos, and don't ever forget it!"

There was a sullen response in Spanish, too low in tone for Bill to make it out.

"That's all right," came the first man's voice again. "That third plane stays in the hills. You never can tell what might happen. Them armored cars could pick us off up there in the air with the right breaks."

Bill Barlow lay prone beside the fence as the men—there seemed to be four of them—passed within a few feet of him. One of them had a holster strapped at his side, and wore a cartridge belt.

He seemed to be the leader, and he was raking down the untractable Ramos who had evidently ventured to irritate him with some rash suggestion. His voice trailed off as the group walked toward a dark smudge a hundred yards or so away which Bill thought might be a cabin.

"An armored car!" Could there be any connection? Saxton had told him that afternoon that he wished him to remain in Pampa in order to meet his son, who was coming down with the bullion shipment from Trinidad in an armored car.

Bill Barlow waited until there was no sound from the cabin, if that was what it was, then leaped the fence and crept toward the airplane. No watchman had been left on guard, and Bill believed the mysterious aviators might return at any moment.

On the far side of the plane he risked a flash from his torch, and then snapped it off quickly.

The ship was a De Haviland painted green. In front of the pilot's seat was mounted a machine gun. Bill thought he recognized the type and that it was synchronized to shoot between the blades of the propeller.

At any rate, it was a weird sight on an airplane in peace time in a New Mexico meadow.

He did not risk another flash, but scurried away in the darkness, and somehow found his way to his tethered horse. When he finally reached the Saxton home it was almost dawn, and he rapped on the window that he knew to be Saxton's.

In a couple of minutes the banker, pyjama-clad, stuck his head out.

"What the devil's up?" he asked, sleepily. "Where were you, Bill?"

"I'll tell you all that later," Bill replied. "Meanwhile, I'll ask you one. What time is your son starting from Trinidad in that armored car?"

"Who? Ted? Why, he may have started by this time. First streak of daylight they'll shove off. Roads 'll be clearer then, and what folks don't see won't bother 'em." Saxton kindled a cigar, and gave vent to his rumbling laugh. "Why? You're not worrying about that, are you? That type of armored car could stand off an army, boy."

"I suppose so. But, Saxton, I want you to do something right away. Get Trinidad on the phone. If your son hasn't started, tell him to wait till to-morrow. Make it emphatic. It may be very important. If he has started, get one of the towns this side of Trinidad, and see that the car is held there. Now do that. Be sure. Will you, Saxton?"

The banker looked at him keenly.

"There's something up, I can see that," he said. "But I think you're getting upset over a trifle. Those armored cars, you know—"

"Yes, I know," Bill cut in.

Should he mention his discovery to Saxton? He might be on the wrong track entirely. The armed plane might possibly be one of the exhibits from the recent Las Vegas carnival.

At any rate, only he himself could be of any possible service now, if the car had started from Trinidad. No use worrying Saxton and Ruth, he decided.

He waited until he heard Saxton at the telephone asking for long distance to Trinidad, and then grabbing up a rifle and several rounds from a little denlike hunting room which Saxton had furnished off of the living-room, he remounted his horse and galloped along the road to the east of the

town, and, just as dawn streaked the sky, reached his plane.

A few minutes later he had turned the horse loose to graze, and had hopped off, the nose of his old Jenny pointed toward Trinidad.

As he sailed along he wondered if he was on a useless quest. He might be.

In the first place, there was a possibility that his suspicions were not well founded. Then Saxton might be able to get Trinidad before the armored car started, and could head it off.

But as he flew along he almost hoped that he was in for action. For that was the way with Bill Barlow. Fellow war aces had said that he " fattened on trouble."

And, if that was the case, there was enough trouble ahead to make Bill Barlow very fat indeed.

III.

Bill flew straight north for awhile and had no difficulty picking up the Trinidad road which wound about the foothills rimming Pampa to the north. After he had skimmed over the hills he swung lower in order to scout the highway thoroughly.

He passed over a couple of little settlements and climbed to a higher altitude, for there was mountainous country ahead. It was after he had climbed high and had sailed over the summit that he made out a low-flying plane ahead.

He used his binoculars—the plane was the green De Haviland of the night before, as he had suspected it would be. But the hawk would wait for its prey in vain if Saxton's telephone call had been in time. And then, as he zoomed along, he saw that he was in for action.

A turreted car of the type used by banks to transport money and bullion swept around a hairpin turn in the road that hugged a steep bluff, and as soon as the car had swung into the straight road Bill saw a grayish cloud shoot up just ahead of the car. It looked to him as if a bomb had been dropped; and yet it did not seem possible from the position of the green plane.

Bill Barlow put on all speed, and tilted his aërilons to climb. He was planning to get above the green plane and keep it below and in front of him where he would be safe from that machine gun nested in front of the pilot.

In this manner he might be able to take the joy-stick between his knees, get a pot-shot at the pilot, and send the green ship down out of control. It was a long chance, but it was his only one, and Bill Barlow had fought against long odds before.

He hardly believed he was seen as yet, and he nosed up steadily toward a low-hanging cloud. And then, as he climbed, he noticed, backgrounded against the cloud, another plane—a big blue-gray one, that seemed almost to blend into the cloud. This, then, was probably the explanation of that explosion that had taken place in front of the armored car.

The second plane was far above him, and, although his own ship was a good climber, Barlow realized that it would be useless now to try to get above the blue-gray plane. He would have to take one chance and wait until it dived.

The blue-gray plane had sighted him now, and he maneuvered as it started down after him. The man at the machine gun was trying to get Barlow from the rear; but that game was only too familiar to Bill.

His mind went back over ten years to glorious jousts above the lines, and almost instinctively he changed his course by a sharp turn to the right. The blue-gray plane followed him, its pilot still trying feverishly to get Barlow in front of him—which is just what Bill Barlow had no intention of letting him do.

Since he himself had no machine gun, there was no offensive advantage in getting to the rear himself, but there was a strong advantage defensively. If he kept on the tail of the other machine he would be able to spike that machine gun.

Around and around circled the planes in this carousel of death, for that was what it was, Bill Barlow knew, although just at present there were no wars nor rumors of wars. Below them on the slopes cattle grazed peacefully, but here in the air was the seed of death.

He must not let that gray plane take

him from the rear. Both of the ships were steadily losing altitude, but Bill knew the possibilities of his own plane, and he might lure the enemy until it got too low to maneuver, and it might crash.

He was pretty low himself now, as he circled about. He started to dash and zigzag—anything to get out of the path of that machine gun. And yet he had to get out of the circle to climb. He'd try it.

It was a few minutes after this, just as he had reached a safer altitude and once more tried to get on the tail of the gray, that a spray of machine gun bullets pinged against the wires of his ship. But he was in the strategic position that he wished now. With the joy-stick between his knees, he flew slightly above the enemy plane and shouldered his rifle. It spoke, and the pilot of the gray plane let go of the joy-stick and placed his hands to his side. Then the gray plane seemed to leap and swerve and turn, fell into a nose dive and went out of control.

As he tried to bank and make now for the green ship, Bill Barlow realized that he had not escaped unscathed. His own plane careened sharply, and at first he feared that his control wires had been shot away. Probably not, though—the ship still took direction, if rather awkwardly.

He could still make a landing if he kept the ship's nose up, although he knew that now he had been put out of the engagement. Still keeping the nose of his plane up, he sailed along over a little ridge and managed to make a hazardous landing in a cleared space.

As he snapped out his pliers and feverishly tried to repair the damaged wire braces, he was wondering what was happening over the ridge. He heard a couple of explosions, and then the sharper report of rifle shots, probably from the armored car. A few minutes later, while still working on the damaged wire, he heard the roar of the green plane's engine, and, looking up, saw it passing over him, and a spray of machine gun bullets splashed against the bowlder to his left.

Bill grabbed his rifle and ran to the shelter of the bowlder, but the green plane paid no further attention to him. It sailed away to the northeast. Evidently the men in its cockpit had made their haul from the armored car and were making away with it, and had decided to leave well enough alone.

With his wire braces repaired, Bill once more took off, circled and climbed, and skimmed back over the ridge. The armored car, he could see now, was toppled over on its side in the road.

A few rods from the spot the blue-gray plane was crumpled up like a great wounded bird. Bill picked out a suitable landing place, throttled his motor and volplaned down. Then he ran back to the road, passing the gray plane on the way. The dead pilot of the gray plane sat half upright in a weird position, his head to one side. The legs of another man protruded from the wreckage. A little mustached man was beside the plane, circling about it queerly and jabbering away and feeling his head.

"Knocked goofy," said Bill to himself. "Well, two of 'em are dead, and that little bozo seems cuckoo. He can wait."

He continued toward the sagging armored car. The uniformed bodies of two men, evidently guards, lay sprawled beside the car. One of them still had a rifle cradled in his arms.

The driver, although wounded, was trying to crawl down from the seat, and a fourth figure, a blond young man, sent a charge from an automatic whistling over Bill's head, evidently believing that, since he came in a plane, he was another of the stick-up men.

Bill threw himself to the ground.

"Hey! Lay off that!" he yelled. "I'm here to help you. I recognize you from your father. You're Ted Saxton, aren't you?"

"Yes." There was doubt in young Saxton's voice.

"Well, I know your father. No use taking after that green plane now. You and the driver there seem to be in bad shape. I'll take you in my ship to the sanatorium at Valmora, where you can get treatment. And one of those birds in the gray wreck there seems to be moving. He does not deserve it, but I'll take him along."

He crossed back to the wrecked gray plane. The small man with the mustache was still circling about, jabbering in Spanish. He showed no injury, but he had probably been creased badly by the fall.

He looked blankly out his black eyes when Barlow questioned him, and Bill suddenly seized and shouldered him like a sack of barley, and dumped him into the cockpit of his plane. A few moments later, with the injured Saxton and the driver as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, he was winging along toward the sanatorium at Valmora, the peaked roof of which he could see in the distance.

He made a landing, left his cargo of casualties there, and speeded back to Pampa.

"But Ted! Is he hurt badly?" asked Ruth, when he had told his remarkable story.

"Oh, I know he'll be all right, Miss Saxton. A fragment of a grenade struck him in the head. The doctors at Valmora say they'll patch him up all right. I'm not sure about the driver. He stopped a bullet in the side."

"Oh, I must get to Ted!" Ruth exclaimed. "Come on, dad. We'll fly to Valmora with Mr. Barlow."

Saxton put in a quick telephone call to the police to scour the hills north of Pampa.

"I'm afraid they'll have a tough time," he said, as he pulled on a cap and hurried toward the plane with Bill and his daughter. "That's the first time there's been an air stick-up in New Mexico. But if Ted's all right, I don't even mind about the bullion."

Bill's plane had proceeded about twelve miles in the direction of Valmora when Ruth, gazing through the binoculars, made out a plane coming from the mountains in the northwest.

"I'll make a landing," Bill suggested, "and let you out, Miss Saxton. Then probably I can climb above it, and—"

But Miss Saxton was of quite another mind.

"Indeed, you will not!" she cut in. "I'm not a bit afraid. You get above them, and I'll keep below the cowl of the machine and pot those murderers. If you could do it alone, I ought to be able to do something now. I was on the rifle team at Vassar, you know."

Bill climbed steadily, and as the green plane flew nearer, swooped down to the rear and kept on its tail. As he passed within twenty feet of it there was a report back of him, and then another report, and still another.

The green plane seemed to stagger in the air. Its fuel tank had been perforated by the bullets, and the pilot had turned to gesticulate wildly to one of the men back of him.

It was then that, as Bill flew alongside, but a trifle in the rear to keep out of range of the machine gun, that Ruth drew a steady bead and fired again. The pilot threw up his hands.

A second member of the green plane started to reach for the joy-stick. There was another report from Bill's plane, and the great green De Haviland spiraled down dizzily.

Ten minutes later Bill Barlow, with Ruth and her father, had made a landing and were running toward the crushed green ship. Bill put out his hand and barred Ruth's progress. He knew that it was not a pretty sight that would meet their eyes, for the ship had caught fire, and even as they ran forward there was an explosion.

The three men of the green plane's crew were dead, and two of them were badly burned. There was no sign of the bullion. A box of grenades had toppled out from the plane when it careened in the air, and had miraculously not exploded.

Bill gathered them up and handed them to Saxton.

"We'd better keep 'em," he said. "No telling but that they might come in handy on a day like this. I think these birds must have a cache somewhere up there in the mountains, and I have an idea. We'd better hotfoot it to Valmora and get something out of that injured Mex if we can. He didn't seem badly hurt, but he might pop off."

At Valmora, the Mexican, whose name proved to be Pedro Cesar, had made a quick recovery. He was on his feet in the ward, but under guard.

Bill drew him aside.

There's one chance for you, Cesar," he said. "It's up to you what you want to do. You know your pals abandoned you this morning. They could have taken you, couldn't they? Now I want to get some information out of you."

The little Mexican surveyed him out of sullen black eyes.

"Me, I am no traitor," he replied. "I fly weeth Villa. I am gentleman."

"Then your friends are traitors," Bill informed him. "You know what they did? They flew back over that crashed gray plane about an hour ago, and fired into the bodies they found there. You know why? They thought some of their pals might have been alive, and they didn't want to share that gold. And they probably thought that *you* were one of the ones stopping their lead. Not very nice treatment, was it? But they have been captured by the State patrol, and by coming clean you can get free. You'd better come through. There was murder done there—and you're in on it."

Pedro Cesar seemed to have fallen for the story. He broke into a series of curses in Spanish.

"*Por Dios!* If they want to doubla cross me, eh? An' go away weeth de gol'—yes, so soon night come. How many you say they arrest—de men in de green plane? Three? Ah—two more are in de mountains weeth another hair-sheep. They doubla cross them too, eh? They turn what you say State's evidence?"

"That's it," Bill lied cheerfully. "They didn't have the gold in the green plane—but in another hour the authorities will know where it's cached in the mountains. Then you all get the works. Say, how did you birds get hold of three airships?"

"Ah! That surprise you, eh?" Pedro Cesar laughed. "You have perhaps heard of Pancho Lopez, eh—de beeg bandit chief of Sonora? Ah, I theenk you have heard so much, yes? Pancho Lopez he have de sheeps from de ol' Villista army, an' he hear of de gol' being transport from Trinidad. He ees poor now, ol' Pancho, yes. He weesh to make de one haul an' take to de hills where no one ever find him. But Pancho he be very mad now if he not get gol'."

"I'm afraid your friend Pancho will have to stick mad and stay mad," Barlow told the Mexican. "But you show me where that other plane is cached in the hills, and you'll get out of plenty trouble."

"You carry me in de hair-sheep," Pedro promised, "an' I show you we gat them, ver' queek."

"O K," said Bill. "But I'd like a third man along, with another rifle."

"What's the matter with me? Am I a cripple?" Saxton interrupted. "And don't forget, that's my plane you're piloting," he laughed.

"Maybe," said Bill, chuckling back. "All right, get the guns, Saxton. And we have the grenades. We'll see if we can't rout out those birds. They must have the dough cached there."

So, after a quick lunch at the sanatorium, Bill Barlow once more hopped off, with Pedro Cesar and Saxton in the cockpit—hopped off to the north, where Cesar claimed that his former confederates were hidden.

Saxton had orders to watch Cesar, whom Bill did not entirely trust, but the Mexican seemed to have been converted and chastened, and as they neared the mountains and Bill increased his altitude, he directed the pilot to veer to the right to avoid a machine gun mounted in the robber camp as an anti-aircraft weapon.

"Believe me, these birds have a modern organization," said Bill. "And look, Saxton over to the right there. See that sky-blue monoplane? By golly, they're getting ready to take off. And with the dough, I'll bet."

It seemed true enough. Here in a natural bowl made by a circular plain and the rimming hills was a speedy-looking monoplane with its engine already warming up. On the ground three men were gesticulating to each other, and one of them pointed up toward Bill's ship, whereupon all of them ran for cover.

Bill swung over the plane and, taking precise aim, let go two of the bombs he had taken from the wrecked gray ship. The second one seemed to hit the monoplane squarely and tip it over on one wing.

Then Bill spiraled down in an effort to

destroy the machine gun back of the bowlder before it could be manned. Cesar pointed it out, and just as he did so there came the quick rat-a-tat-a-tat of machine gun bullets.

Bill throttled his motor and swung to the right, then circled and made a landing at the far end of the field.

" That other plane's out of commission," he said. " We want to have one left to get away in. Down on your bellies, men, and keep to shelter. We'll fight this action out right down here."

He taxied his ship behind a spur of hill out of range of the machine gun. Then, rifle in hand, he held a quick conference with Saxton and Cesar.

" You folks keep in shelter behind these rocks here, and draw that bozo's fire," he said. " They've got bad medicine there, but we may be able to outmaneuver them."

His plan was to creep up the side trail with his rifle, and try to get the machine gunner from the rear. Cesar had said that the gun was rigged on a swivel, but if one of the other three men turned it back in his direction there were plenty of rocks and bowlders behind which to take shelter, and Saxton and Cesar could then charge from the front.

Bill made his way cautiously up the mountain trail, circled to the right and picked his way down the slope. He found a friendly bowlder halfway down the slope, and to his delight could make out the hat of one of the men about the machine gun. He took careful aim and fired.

The hat disappeared, and he believed he had got his man, for one of the others took to his heels, running up the slope which led past the bowlder at a distance of about a hundred yards. Evidently he had not guessed that an enemy was behind the bowlder.

Bill drew a bead on the running man's legs, and toppled him to the ground. But the rat-a-tat-a-tat of the machine gun broke out occasionally, proving that the machine gunner was alive and was trying to get the men in front of him.

Bill himself had not been discovered. He crept farther back and over to the right. Things were going nicely. Saxton and Cesar had a good chance if they did not show themselves too clearly, and all he had to do now was to get that gunner.

He took to his hands and knees and had topped a little rise that he thought would give him command of the machine gun position, when far to the right in the rear of the gun he saw another man creeping along. He raised his rifle and was about to fire, but then the man raised his head, and from the cap he wore Bill could see that it was Saxton.

He stood up and waved his hat at Saxton, so that the latter might not make the same mistake that he had almost made—fire on a friend. Saxton waved back, and hastened toward him.

The two of them crept back of a screen of rocks, and to their delight saw the hunched figure of the machine gunner back of the bowlder in front of them.

" We'll fire together," Bill suggested. " This is too easy. Then we'll never know which bullet killed him."

They fired. The man at the gun slumped forward. They waited a moment, but he did not move again."

" Well, that's that," said Bill. " I think we've won the field."

He had hardly finished the sentence when a bullet spatted against a rock back of them, and another kicked up the dust at their feet. Both men threw themselves flat on the ground.

" I guess I spoke too soon," said Bill. " I toppled a fellow a few minutes ago. He was running back up the trail, and I think I got him in the leg. He must have beat it back to some retreat for a rifle, and this is the result. Don't show yourself, Saxton. We'll outwait him."

They lay there on their stomachs back of the bowlder, their rifles ready for the first sign of the remaining bandit.

But it seemed that it was always the unexpected that was happening on this eventful day. There was the roar of a motor below in the field. Bill unconsciously made himself an attractive target as he sat up and looked at Saxton sharply.

" Holy sufferin' Moses!" he said. " That must be my ship. Maybe the third stick-up guy, or—"

He raced down straight toward the field, Saxton on his heels. As they passed the machine gun and its dead gunner they were just in time to see Barlow's machine take to the air. At the joy-stick was Pedro Cesar.

Bill stopped and sent a rifle bullet at the plane, but the ship sailed calmly through the air, and Cesar playfully tossed a grenade over the side. It exploded a few yards away from the bewildered men on the ground.

"I'll bet ten to one he's loaded the loot from that sky-blue one," shouted Bill.

He streaked over to the sagging monoplane, and found that his prediction was only too true. Pedro had also taken the box of grenades.

"My fault!" Saxton admitted. "What a dumb-bell! I should have stayed and watched him. Now the little rat's got away with everything."

Saxton's crestfallen penitence touched Bill rather humorously, despite the circumstances.

"I guess it's Pedro Cesar's," answered Saxton. "Cesar's gold, Cesar's plane, and Cesar's bank, for all I care. But believe me, if I could get my hands on that little greaser it would be a case of 'I've come to bury Cesar,' believe you me! What's the matter, Bill? Something else wrong?"

Bill Barlow was looking at the sky-blue monoplane as if it was bewitched, and as if he himself was bewitched along with it.

"Why—why—" he started. "By golly, man," he almost shouted, "there's not a thing wrong with this sky-blue ship except that this control wire is snapped. Pedro didn't stop to examine it, the boob!" Already he was taking out his pliers. "We'll be up in the air in less than fifteen minutes."

He fixed the wire in record time, he and Saxton straightened up the plane, pushed it back toward the machine gun bowlder for a longer take-off, and a few seconds later the motor was whirring.

"Just a minute," called back Bill, as he disappeared behind the bowlder. He returned with the machine gun and started to lift it into the cockpit.

"It won't be rigged up as snug as my old Browning," he explained; "but it can shoot, and there's a drum in it already. And this ship looks like a lulu. If I don't overtake that grease ball before he gets to the border my name isn't Lucky Bill Barlow. This toy comet ought to be able to do a hundred and a half going backward."

At Valmora, on the way to the border, Bill throttled his motor and began to volplane.

"What's the idea?" asked Saxton.

"Wait!" Bill commanded. He made the landing.

"Get out, old pal," he told the banker. "I'm alone this time, boy. Cesar is alone, and this is my ship, and the war is solo from this minute, until I come back with the dough."

He stuck out his hand and patted Saxton on the shoulder.

"So long, old pal," he said. Then he "gave 'er the gun," and the sky-blue monoplane went roaring down the field.

IV.

BENEATH the cottonwoods in front of the sanatorium at Valmora, Frank C. Saxton and his daughter waited nervously. An hour elapsed. Two hours.

Saxton was shaking his head. There was concern in the gray eyes of Ruth. Three hours. And a half.

The sun was setting behind the ridge to the west when Ruth sprang to her feet, her gray eyes alight.

"I hear it!" she yelled. "Oh, daddy! Daddy! It must be—be Billy!"

Out of the sky to the south skimmed a sky-blue monoplane. It roared overhead; then the plane, with a throttled motor, came into the wind and made a quick bank to the right, and a few seconds later was bouncing gently along the broad exercise field of the sanatorium.

As it taxied to a stop, out jumped William C. Barlow. He hailed his friends and pointed to the cockpit.

"The bullion!" he announced proudly. "Better leave it here and set a guard till morning. We'll take it to Pampa in time to open the bank."

Saxton put up the back of his hand and wiped his forehead.

"I'm getting to believe whatever you say, Bill Barlow," he announced. "If you say it, it must be so. But where's the other plane—my plane?"

"Oh, yes—your plane," mimicked Bill, grinning. "I brought it back for you. Here it is—about the biggest part of it." He handed Saxton a fragment which looked like a piece of charcoal.

"That's why it took me so long," he explained. "I had to wait until the darned thing burned before I could get at the bullion. But I've got a ship now that makes yours look like just what it is—a pile of junk!"

"You win!" said Saxton, throwing his hands in the air in a burlesque sign of surrender. "You could win—all the stakes—any game you play."

"I just might take you up on that," Bill replied, and he looked meaningly at Ruth Saxton.

She did not drop her eyes this time. She was looking right back at him with that straight gray gaze of hers, and her eyes said more than words could ever express.

THE END

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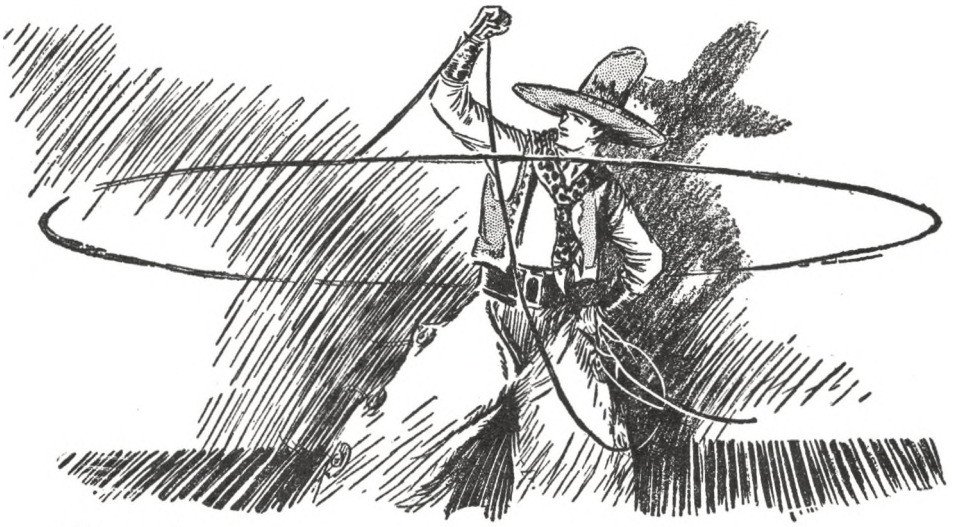
A HOUSE IN THE WOODS

I'VE read o' rich men as will spend
A fortune to possess
A lodge to go for the week-end,
Deep in the wilderness!
A reg'lar *mansion!* Yes, and gee!
Servants trigged out to wait
Upon their city guests, and see
Their trunks brought through the gate!

But *that's* not livin' in the woods!
That's bringin' city ways
To spile the scenery with goods
As never really pays!
What I can tote in my old pack
Is quite enough for me!
And for a house, give me a shack
Through which the wind blows free!

Why, roughin' it is half the fun;
It's what gives vim and zest!
If I have fryin'-pan and gun,
Nature provides the rest!
I'd rather have as roof the sky,
Pine needles for a floor—
Than all the "*lodges*" gold can buy,
With butlers at the door!

Clarence Mansfield Lindsay.



Whoopee McGee

By JOHN HOLDEN

Author of "The Clock That Struck Thirteen," "Fingers Don't Lie," etc.

CHAPTER XXIII.

OPEN WARFARE.

ANDY reseated himself on the cot. In a way, he was glad that Ginaldi had entered. Fate had decided the question of whether he should flee or face the thing that menaced him and, deep down in his heart, he desired to get the Mansard affair settled and done with.

Jane Winterling stood looking at Ginaldi, as expressionless as a plaster image, while the musician spread a smirk over his swarthy features like jam upon bread.

"You see, Jane," he said, "what an honorable man ze cow-punch' is. He promise he would do one of two things; stay and spill ze bean, or go and keep still ze mouth. But he does not keep ze promise. He spill ze bean and then he tries to make what you call ze get-him-away."

Andy said nothing in rebuttal. Ginaldi's charge was true. He had intended when he told Jane everything to remain and face the music, but she had insisted that he go.

She realized the facts, however, and therefore Ginaldi's charge made no impression on her. She remarked succinctly that she had urged Andy to go, and asked Ginaldi what he proposed to do about it.

"First I should like to know: Did he make ze charge that I steal ze violin?"

Andy laughed sarcastically.

"No, Jinny; I said an angel hopped in her window and pinched it because they're running short of harps in heaven."

"Ah! I know. You tell ze big lie. You say I do what you did yourself."

Jane said:

"Please keep still about that, Signor Ginaldi. I am convinced that you stole it."

He bowed low. "But why, dear lady? He has not show ze proof. He has make only ze say-so. If he say that he saw me carry out ze fiddle last night, who is there to support that story?"

Jane stamped her foot.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for February 25

"Will you stop making that claim? You think because I was foolish enough to half believe you once I'm foolish enough to do it again. Well, I won't! You did steal it. You know you did!"

Ginaldi looked at her, and as he read his fate in her eyes his suavity faded into a sneer.

"Very well. For you I would maybe save ze big ranch steer from ze gallows, but now—no! For ze murder that he commit he shall swing with ze neck till he is like ze limp handkerchief."

Andy glared at the fellow.

"How about yourself, old boy? Stealing a twelve-thousand-dollar article is grand larceny. You don't think you can get away with that, do you?"

Ginaldi snapped a white finger.

"Bah! You have no proof of ze larceny. Nobody besides yourself will say that he saw. Circumstances are all against. Ze great musicians, they do not make ze small steals."

"Who told you you were great?"

"Bah! You give me ze pain in ze belly."

Jane looked shocked, and Andy said:

"Nice refined guy you are when you throw off your mask. Give you half a chance and I'll bet you could outswear the worst mule-skinner I ever heard."

"Do you propose, Signor Ginaldi, to have Mr. McGee arrested?" Jane asked.

"Yes! Why not? Unless maybe you would give me ze fine fiddle to let him off."

Andy shot the exclamation, "I guess not!" like a rifle bullet, and then he caught his breath and stared at Jane when she made the quiet reply:

"All right, Signor Ginaldi; I'll do that."

Andy grabbed her hands.

"Jane! You're still sane, aren't you? Your violin — genuine Strad — heirloom worth twelve thousand or more—think what you're saying!"

She pulled her hands free.

"A violin, Andy, is a small thing compared with human life. Other Strads can be bought for money, but your life, should it be sacrificed because of this foul man's unholy thirst for vengeance, could not be regained or replaced."

At the appellation Ginaldi flung off the remnants of his culture like a bathrobe.

"Ze foul man, am I?" His voice was a shout; his gesticulations those of an enraged ape. "Very well, I shall be foul! Ze bargain for ze fiddle, she is off. I will not be bribe, for defeat ze law. Ze man who killed Mansard shall suffer the penalty—"

Andy saw Jane's white arm flash like a semaphore. A large bottle was whipped under Ginaldi's nose. He broke off in the middle of a word to clutch at his throat and gasp for breath. Again the strangling bottle. He collapsed on the cot. Jane recorked the bottle, laid it down, and exploded words like firecrackers.

"Ammonia! Bought it to clean things with. Effect lasts just a minute. Bind him up. Put something in his mouth. You must get away from San Francisco, Andy. I'll not have you tried for murder with that man to testify to lies against you."

"But you, Jane. He's got it in for you now."

"Yes, I'll go, too. Was going to New York pretty soon anyway. Means a quicker start, that's all." She was ripping a sheet into strips. "How do you tie a man up?"

Andy had not mastered the technique of binding and gagging any more than she had. They worked away, however, and soon had the fast recovering man trussed like a Thanksgiving turkey.

"Tie 'em tight," warned Andy. "Never mind if they hurt him. Think of the princess he drove to suicide."

The job concluded, with Ginaldi lying comfortably enough on the cot, Jane started whipping things into two suitcases. Andy took both and Jane grabbed the precious violin and together they left the tent. By a stroke of good luck Andy found a cab and they were whisked off to the railroad station. No train could get them out of the city for two hours, however, so Andy suggested the ctiy of Oakland.

They talked less excitedly.

"Jane, I wish you'd come to the ranch for a day or two. Stay there till Ginaldi gets over his mad, then you can proceed to New York in peace."

"No, no, Andy. Going to your ranch with you—the very idea! They'd think I was a bride."

"Come as a bride then."

Jane stamped her foot.

"Andy, I get so vexed with you! Like all men you are. Think that by asking a woman to marry them a million times you can wear them down till they consent."

"Come as a guest then. The boss will be glad to see you. Ma Stover too. She'd chaperon you fine and dandy."

Jane hesitated.

"I ought to go into hiding somewhere, I suppose. Not so much because I fear punishment for tying up Ginaldi as for something else—the fact that the police would torture me into telling where they could find you."

Andy coaxed:

"The ranch lies near the railroad that goes to New York. Please stop off, if only for one day."

"I'll think about it."

At Oakland they found that a local train would leave for Andy's home station very soon, whereas the through flyer to New York would not start till next day.

"You shouldn't remain here," he urged. "If Ginaldi gets the cops after you the railroad stations are the first places they'll look. Much safer on a train. Please come along with me."

Jane finally consented and they boarded the local.

They sat side by side in a day coach. Andy started to grin and chortle, and Jane asked why he was so happy.

"Thinking how glad I'd be if we were starting on a wedding trip."

She made no reply for a moment, and then she stated very seriously:

"Andy, you must give me your solemn promise not to mention that subject while I'm at your ranch, or I shan't stop at your station. I'll go right through and stop elsewhere, at some village hotel. Is it agreed or isn't it?"

"It is."

But soon he was smiling again. He noticed that Jane was looking at him questioningly and he explained:

"Know what I'm grinning about this time? About Dad Stover. I promised to bring him a fiddle like the one I broke, and I forgot."

"What's mirthful in that?"

"This: We'll tell him you've got a ginnywine Straddy-vary-ess, just as good as his old one and you'll lend it to him to play a couple of tunes on. He'll play and tell us whether he likes it better than the one I broke. Then we'll knock him dead with the statement that yours is worth as much as the whole darned ranch and all the cattle put together."

Jane agreed that the joke might be amusing. They chatted about one thing and another for four hours, and then they alighted. Andy had wired to the station agent and the latter had telephoned the ranch, so there was a buckboard waiting.

Jane and Andy got into it, and as the team of horses started clop-clopping down the dusty road through a countryside that was so different from the fire-blackened San Francisco, Jane remarked:

"I dare say this will be quite a new experience for me."

CHAPTER XXIV.

NEW EXPERIENCES.

PROUD and happy as he was, Andy grew a bit nervous as he and Jane Winterling neared the Lazy X ranch. The boys would kid him about the fair visitor, he feared. The fellow who was driving the buckboard was a new hand and therefore had nothing to say, but the old hands would be different.

Dad Stover was the first to greet him when the buckboard halted in the yard beside the corral and he and Jane alighted. Ma Stover was in the kitchen, and Andy guessed that the hands had recently breakfasted and gone off to work. Neither Jane nor he had slept during the night. He was too excited to feel the need of sleep, but he guessed that Jane did not share his exalted state of mind.

Old Dad was grinning like a Thanksgiving pumpkin.

"Here ye are at last, ramblin' home like a fool steer that's gone and lost his-

self from the herd. Don't look like the big fire damaged ye none either. About giving ye up for lost, we were, Andy. Not that we shouldn't 'a' known better, on account it's a true fact that them as is born to be hung is safe from earthquakes and fires."

Dad looked at Jane and resumed his address to Andy.

"Ye've gone and done it too, by gum! Got yerself a wife. After all the good advice I give ye about not letting no woman get her hooks into ye. But she's a good looker. Yes sir, by gum! Sound in wind and limb, too, or I miss my guess. Is she broke to halter and traces, ye danged old woman rustler?"

Andy flushed beneath his tan.

"Dad, don't be more of a fool than the good lord made you. This is Miss Jane Winterling—get the Miss? She's honoring this home for the aged and weak-minded with a visit. She isn't married to me nor anyone else and, what's more, she isn't going to be. She's got too much sense, even if I haven't."

Dad pushed out a hand that resembled a burned boot, and Jane clasped it in a way that caused him to straighten up like a two-year-old.

"I've heard about you, Dad. You're Andy's best friend."

"Yes, miss." Dad noticed Jane's violin case. "Be you a fiddler too?"

"Just a student."

"Stoodent, heh? That means ye're larnin', don't it? Well, I'll larn ye. Yes sir, miss, I can larn ye good and, bein' as you're a friend of Andy's, I'll be glad to do it. Five and forty years I been larnin' myself, so I ought to be good at it, heh?"

Dad turned on Andy.

"If that's her fiddle, where's the one ye promised to bring me? Did you go and forget it, ye ornery, good-for-nothing cow waddy?"

Andy explained regretfully that, in the excitement of the fire, he had.

"But Miss Winterling will lend you hers, Dad. Try it after awhile and see what you think of it."

"Be it a ginnywine Straddy-vary-ess? 'Tain't no good unless it's that."

"It sure is."

"We'll see. But come to breakfast, miss, and you too, Andy. Then you can lay down for a bit o' sleep, miss. You, Andy, can sleep to-night. Off to Section Four the boss said you could go, to help with the boys there."

Ma Stover was as puzzled as Dad when she learned that the visitor was neither married nor engaged to Andy.

"You mean the nooptails ain't never to come off at all?" she inquired when she got Andy alone.

"That's exactly what I do mean, Ma. She won't have me. I ain't half good enough for her, as any one can see. It just happened that I was able to do her a bit of service when she got burned out in Frisco, and out of sheer gratefulness and goodness of heart she consented to pay us a visit when I begged her to, almost on my hands and knees."

Jane made as big a hit with Ma Stover as she had with Dad. The old lady served a fine breakfast. She told Jane how wise she was not to have anything to do with good-for-nothing cow waddies, and showed her to a nice room, and finally added, in Andy's hearing:

"The boss, now—I'll bet a cookie he'd like to have a nice gal like you for a wife. Set your cap at him and see how you make out."

Jane gave Andy a look which plainly indicated her dislike for that sort of talk, and when she had gone to her room Andy warned the Stovers to cut it out.

"She's a musician, I tell you. Got no use for men at all. All she thinks of is a career on a concert stage."

"Heh, heh!" cackled Dad. "That's what gals all say till they meets a felly that looks good to them; then they forgets their careers like sheep forgets their last year's crop o' wool. Silly talk, this cackle and gossip about careers for women.

"Plumb disgusted it makes me to hear folks say that along about 1925 women will be lawyers and doctors and bankers and everything. Women won't never have no careers excepting their rightful ones of looking after men and bringing up babies."

"I think you're wrong, Dad. The world

is changing. Trouble with you is, you're not changing with it."

"Heh, heh! Go 'long out to work, like the boss left word for ye to do, and pray the Lord give ye sense. If the girl won't have ye, like ye want her to, it ain't because she wants a career. It's because she either don't like ye enough, or else she's too sensible to fling herself away on a felly that ain't got no ranch nor cattle nor nothing."

As he rode reluctantly to work, Andy wondered if Dad were right. He felt humiliated. He did not want to commence work so soon; would have preferred to spend the afternoon riding around with Jane, showing her the sights. But he had no choice in the matter. He was a mere employee who must do as he was told.

"The nerve of me, asking her to marry me," he ruminated sadly. "If she doesn't think I'm loco already she sure will when she realizes how little I amount to here. If she weren't as full of gratitude as a book is of words she wouldn't have stopped off. She didn't do it because she wanted to. She doesn't care for ranch life any more than I'd care to play a fiddle for a living."

Andy informed the boss that he had taken the liberty of bringing a visitor to the ranch. Mr. Biddle said it was quite all right, and asked questions. He raised his eyebrows slightly when he learned that the visitor was a young lady, but went on with his work.

That evening Andy explained to his employer his disposal of the cattle he had taken to San Francisco, and was complimented upon the fact that he had quickly disposed of them and deposited the check to Mr. Biddle's credit in a bank which already had resumed business because its vault came through undamaged, even though the building was destroyed.

In the cool of the evening Andy got out saddle ponies and took Jane for a ride. They stopped at the top of a hill to view the scenery, and Andy asked wistfully:

"Do you think you could ever learn to like ranch life?"

Jane smiled and shook her head.

"Never, Andy. Music has too much fascination for me. A month or so of ranch life each year, when the concert season is over, would be plenty."

"You like it a little then?"

"Yes."

When they returned to the house, Dad Stover tried Jane's twelve thousand dollar violin.

"Good enough for some people," he averred, "but not good enough for Old Dad. She ain't got the twang the old one had. Too soft and syrupylike. Gimme a fiddle that's got a rasp to it, one that strings your ears."

Andy laughed loudly and Jane smiled, but neither disclosed the fact that Jane's fiddle was one of the world's best while Dad's had been one of the world's worst.

Then Jane played. Andy had never heard her. He had an idea that because she was a student she could not play very well.

He was dumfounded when he found that she could play extremely well. The ranch hands and Mr. Biddle and Ma Stover were highly entertained too; every one except Old Dad, who gloomed in a corner and muttered that such music was too high-falutin' for him.

Mr. Biddle got an idea. He was a middle-aged bachelor who lived a sedate life on the ranch, but there were whispers that when he went to the cities, as he frequently did, he was not quite so decorous.

"Tell you what," he proposed. "Let's get up a dance for to-morrow night in honor of our guest."

"Whoop-ee!" yelled Andy.

"Fine and dandy."

"Get the whole countryside."

Dad Stover showed no enthusiasm at first, but was won when Jane diplomatically insisted that he should play the dance music, since he was far better at it than she. Right away invitations were sent out by telephone and eagerly accepted.

Jane offered to contribute to the enjoyment by playing a few numbers, but when some one urged that Andy should recount his experiences in the great fire he objected.

"Me get up before a crowd and talk? Gosh, no! I'd be scared stiff!"

Dad Stover cackled:

"Heh, heh! What's become o' that big

boast o' your'n that you'd try anything once? Guess we'll have to change your name to Never-Try-Nothing McGee."

"That's so," Andy admitted. "Try-Anything-Once is my name, and I've got to live up to it. So I'll give the folks a talk. Yes, sir. If it sounds like nothing at all, I'll twirl the old rope and see how they like that."

"Can you twirl a rope?" exclaimed Jane. "I'd love to see you do that."

The gathering finally dispersed, and Andy and Jane were left alone on the moon-flooded veranda.

Wonderful moon, wonderful girl, wonderful everything—except the black fact that he could not win her for keeps any more than a horse can climb a tree.

"Now that I've had time to think it over," Jane remarked, "I'm a bit doubtful of the wisdom of the proposed dance."

"Why? I think you'll like it. Not much culture, maybe, but lots of merriment."

"Oh, I should like it. There's plenty of so-called culture too. Nobody has ever treated me better than your people. It isn't that, it's this: News of my being here with you may filter back to San Francisco, and then the police—they're looking for us, remember—will know where we are."

"Maybe you're right. Ginaldi has got them on our trail by this time." A bit of reflection. "Aw, let's not worry. This is an out-of-the-way part of California. News of what we do never gets to Frisco, even when they haven't got half as much to attend to as they have now."

Jane rose presently.

"I'm sleepy, Andy. Must go inside. Good night."

She gave him her hand, and he held it as long as he dared.

"Good night, Jane."

CHAPTER XXV.

AFTER THE BALL.

MR. BIDDLE permitted Andy to knock off work on the following afternoon in order to help him get the house ready for the dance that evening. Word had been sent to every one in the valley, and practically every one had signified his intention of being present. It was several weeks since the valley had enjoyed a regular blow-out, and the population seemed eager to make this one memorable.

Dad Stover helped Mr. Biddle and Andy. The rugs and furniture were cleared from the big living room, and benches were ranged along the walls. The floor was "slicked down" with wax for the dancing, Dad overseeing this operation with an air of importance that would have become a lord mayor.

Dad was in his element again. His long reign as fiddler-in-chief to the valley was not to be interrupted, as he had feared. He was reconciled to playing on Jane's genuine Stradivarius by this time.

He still complained faintly that it did not possess sufficient rasp for a good dance fiddle, but when he practiced on it, it was noticeable that he could scarcely bear to lay it down.

Half of the afternoon he spent by himself drawing golden notes from its bottomless well of melody, and when he finally stopped, Andy's fear was that he secretly liked it so well that he never again would be contented with a cheap imitation.

Jane helped Ma Stover in the kitchen with a degree of vigor and efficiency that won the old lady completely. Much cooking had to be done. A supper would be served at midnight in accordance with the local custom, and then the dancing would continue merrily until daylight.

A dance in the valley was no three hour affair. It was not until after supper that things got going under a full head of steam. Many of the guests would travel long distances in buckboards and on horse back in order to be present, and anything short of an all-night dance would scarcely have warranted the effort.

With everything in order late in the afternoon, Andy settled down to the task of getting his monologue in order. It was to be a simple recital of some of his experiences during and after the great fire.

Every one wanted to hear about the Frisco happenings at first hand. There had been plenty of newspaper news, not to mention the first wild rumors of hundreds

of lives lost, but no actual participant had talked to the valleyites as yet.

First he decided to say nothing about Ginaldi, next he judged it wise to confine himself as much as possible to the comedy aspects of the great tragedy.

Plenty of funny things had happened—the reactions of the teamsters in the little restaurant to the first shock, the running out of people in their nighties, the eagerness of some small merchants to do business in their tents, the odd names that had been attached to the dwelling shacks which had sprung up on the ruins.

He replaced his high riding boots and neck handkerchief and other work-a-day habiliments with ordinary town attire, and practiced the rope tricks with which he meant to supplement his talk.

At eight o'clock in the evening the guests commenced to arrive, and by nine all the valley notables were on hand—the local judge, a banker, Sheriff Killigrew, and others.

Valley girls were present, some twenty or twenty-five of them, but not one, thought Andy, could compare with the girl who had done him the immense honor of accepting his invitation to the ranch—another man's ranch, he thought with mingled humiliation and wonder at his own audacity in issuing such an invitation.

At nine o'clock Jane mounted the temporary platform for her first violin number, with the valley school-ma'am at the piano as accompanist.

The applause was loud, but Andy sensed that it was not quite so hearty as it might have been. Dad Stover did too, and whispered some advice to Andy.

"Too highfalutin' for these folks. Tell her to play things they understand—Swanee River, Old Black Joe, and things like that."

Andy relayed the comment to Jane and she nodded. Her next number was a familiar one, and the walls of the big room fairly rocked with applause.

Andy's turn now. He felt awkward as a week-old colt when he stepped up to the platform, rope in hand. His white collar choked him, his low-heeled shoes felt queer after the high-heeled riding boots he was accustomed to, his unaccustomed coat felt too tight.

He put his fingers down between his neck and his collar, dropped his rope, went red as a sliced beet when he picked it up. The audience tittered, and some one called, " Ride 'im, cowboy."

Andy began:

" Folks, there's only one thing ever got me up here to make a speech in public. Once there was a son of a gun tacked on me the name Try-Anything-Once McGee, and ever since I been trying to live up to it. Got to live up to it, in fact, 'cause if I don't there's somebody ups and makes these here—what do you call 'em?—critic-isms.

" So here I am, like a bull in a sheep pen—no, I ain't meanin' you're sheep—I mean like a sheep in a bull—well, anyhow, the big fire got started like this."

Andy did not do so badly, once he got warmed up to his talk, and when he broke off to do a little of his well known rope twirling the applause that rewarded him rattled the oil-lamps in their metal holders as it had when Jane concluded.

The rope would not work as it always did in the corral or yard. It hit his head, fell on the floor, knocked a chimney off a nearby lamp when he tried again to twirl it, flew into his eye, and again fell flat.

Sheriff Killigrew called: " Take off your coat, Andy," and Andy did so, but to no purpose. He could not make the rope perform. Off came his constricting collar, off his vest, up went his sleeves to his elbows.

Laughter grew into shouts, advice was given from all parts of the hall. Some one suggested that he could do better if he had a steer in sight on the platform, another advised him to try a clothesline. Andy finally stopped and laughed with the others.

" Folks," he said, " this darned old rope thinks that because it licked me in the first two rounds it 'll win the fight. But I'll show it. It takes a lot to lick Andy McGee. You've heard of what happens when Greek meets Greek and likewise when Dutchman meets Dutchman, but you've never seen, I guess, what happens when a determined cow waddy meets a stubborn rope."

Zip! The rope was in the air again,

twirling in a perfect circle above his head. He spun it down on one knee, twirling it, lay on his back and still kept it going.

He whirled it horizontally, turning around as he did so. Little by little he enlarged the twirling hempen circle until it was big enough to skip through. Back and forth he skipped. He decreased the circle, shot it to the ceiling, let it drop around his head, and bowed to the thunder of applause that awarded his determination to conquer.

Another number by Jane, a song by a local amateur, a solo by the piano accompanist, a final number by Jane, and the concert part of the program was over.

Men crowded around Andy, seeking introductions to the guest of honor, Sheriff Killigrew being particularly insistent.

"How a rummy like you managed to entice a real pippin here beats my time. How long is she going to stay?"

"Till the dance ends," Andy replied. "Then she takes the local to the station where the flyer stops, and that's all we'll ever see of her."

"Ain't she ever coming back?"

"No."

"Bet you wish she would, eh?"

"You win."

"How did you come to get her here anyhow?"

"Just happened to do her a little service. She came out of sheer gratitude. Stayed yesterday and to-day and now she's on her way."

"Oh, mebbe she'll stay awhile." Andy wondered if any sinister meaning lurked in the county official's statement, but concluded that none did when Killigrew added: "As a persuader you're pretty good, you know."

At supper Andy tried his persuasion on Jane.

"We'd all be tickled stiff if you stayed awhile longer. I in particular. I haven't talked to you half as much as I'd like to."

"Sorry, Andy, but I can't."

"To-night 'll be the last time I'll ever see you, eh?"

"Yes."

"Gee, that's tough! All I deserve, though, I guess. I'll bet you think I've got a nerve, eh? Inviting you here to the boss's ranch, where I'm just a common cow waddy?"

"You don't need to remain a cow waddy, as you call it, all your life."

"That's so. Gee, if I could only get artistic, too! I might have a chance to grab you off in the end if I did, eh?"

"Who knows."

"You do kind of like me, don't you?"

"Maybe."

"Hot chance I have to get artistic, though."

"You twirl a rope nicely." With a smile.

"Nope; couldn't even do that till I'd fought the thing for enough time to get thrown off any stage. But even if I could, what of it? No one in his senses would compare rope twirling to violin playing or singing or acting in a play."

"I'm afraid you're right."

Andy did not enjoy the proceedings after supper as much as he had previously. Dancing with Jane was bitter bliss. Never to see her again!

"Couldn't you pay us another visit some time?" he inquired.

"Goodness, no! Coming here this time was unconventional enough. I couldn't think of making a habit of it."

Killigrew claimed a dance.

"Hear you're figuring on leaving us in an hour or so," he remarked.

"Yes," Jane replied.

"Poor Andy; he looks as cut up as a watermelon in a boarding house. Shucks! I have an idea you're going to stay in California after all."

"No, I'm not."

Jane's belongings were packed, horses were hitched to the buckboard, Andy was all ready to drive her to the station. He was as nervous as a man approaching a dentist's chair. He thought of nothing but Jane, of the void she would leave in his life.

Jane was inside saying final good-bys and Andy was fussing around the horses when Sheriff Killigrew approached.

"Andy, old laddybuck, you'd better count me a good prophet. I hinted that the girl wouldn't go East on that train and sure enough she won't. She's going to stay near you for some little time."

Andy gasped. Killigrew had a queer sense of humor. One never knew what to expect from him.

"What's wrong?" Andy cried.

"Just a little matter of a murder in Frisco. I got your description and the girl's several hours ago, but I didn't like to bust up the party."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MISSING WITNESS.

IT was only as a witness that Jane Winterling was wanted back in San Francisco, but that was bad enough. Andy felt almost as keenly for her as for himself because he was directly responsible for the interference with her arrangements.

Jane showed no resentment, however. All her concern was for him.

"Please don't worry about me," she insisted. "They won't confine me in jail when I convince them I'll be on hand for the trial. And try not to worry about yourself, too."

Andy was sitting with Killigrew, to whom he was handcuffed, and Jane was leaning over the back of the seat. Killigrew was no merry dance guest now, but a serious official charged with the grave duty of delivering a man charged with murder to the city authorities.

He had done a good deal for Andy, he pointed out, when he deferred the arrest till the dance was concluded and then kept it concealed. Andy realized it and harbored no resentment.

"I'm not worrying about myself," Andy replied. "All along, I've been half wanting to face the thing and get it over with."

"That awful man, Ginaldi," Jane exclaimed. "His mind is so full of vengeance on both of us that he'll do anything he can to make trouble."

"He can't do much. All I want is a quick trial."

They arrived in San Francisco and found that despite the havoc the courts were operating with speed and efficiency. Jane was not held, but Andy was.

Ginaldi had told all he knew to the police. He, too, must remain for the trial, but he seemed not to mind the inconvenience of that, so keen was he for revenge.

During the three weeks that followed, Jane visited Andy often. She was permitted to play for him and did so frequently. She lived in Oakland and was continuing her lessons there, though not to the same advantage that she could have studied in New York, since her musical education had outgrown local instruction.

Andy now learned what he had formerly suspected. Jane possessed money. Her folks, who lived in the Middle West, were well-to-do. She had lived away from her class in a cheap rooming house because she had wished to avoid time-wasting temptations, also because of her desire not to spend her parents' money unnecessarily.

He did not welcome this confirmation of his belief, since her comparative wealth placed still another barrier between them when there were too many already. She with her culture and education and absorptions in music, he with nothing but his health and audacity and skill in the trivial trick of twirling a rope.

Morning of the trial. Judge and jury and lawyers. A degree of solemnity so thick that it seemed to befog the air. Jane had procured a good lawyer for Andy though his employer had also evinced a willingness to perform this service. Andy had protested, but Jane was adamant.

"It was on my account that you got into all your trouble," she argued, "therefore it is my plain duty to help you. Please get out of your mind the idea that you can persuade or dissuade me from anything."

Additional evidence, thought Andy, that he could never persuade her to marry him. Absurd thought anyhow. When the law got through with him he would probably be too old to marry any one—if they failed to hang him.

Newspaper reporters, spectators. Excitement and drama. With himself the central figure of it all.

Andy was surprised that so much interest should be shown in his trial, that it should be played up in the newspapers as it was.

Jane, who was free to mingle with people outside, explained. Folks had got tired of discussing the earthquake and fire. They wanted to get interested in something else. Mansard had been well known as a wealthy

eccentric, and his death had aroused much interest.

The trial began.

Andy was charged with the willful murder of Nicholas Mansard and witnesses were produced to substantiate the charge, the chief one being Ginaldi.

The gypsy violinist swore that he had seen Andy in the act of committing the murder. He told how he had followed Andy and Jane and then Andy alone, and how Mansard, whose body he had identified, had arrived on the spot immediately after Andy dug up the violin case.

" They talk and suddenly ze prisoner make ze attack on ze old man," Ginaldi testified.

" It was the prisoner, then, who precipitated the fight?"

" Yes."

" How did they fight?"

" Mansard swing ze fist, ze cowboy fight with both fist and ze heavy violin case."

" The prisoner had the advantage then?"

" Yes."

" Was a knife used by either fighter?"

" Not that I could see."

" How do you account for the presence of the knife found near by by the police?"

" I do not account."

" How did the fight end?"

" Ze cowboy, he swing za wicked blow with ze fist. Mansard is hit. He fall. Ze prisoner bends down to look at him, but another man comes along and ze prisoner disappears behind ze bush."

" That other man—who was he?"

" I do not know."

" Did you get a good look at him?"

" No."

" What did he do?"

" He look at Mansard, say to himself something that sound like ' Murder,' and walk away very fast."

" Then what?"

" I go to ze wounded man. I kneel down and lift his head and see he is not dead. I lower ze head to ze ground, and then I go away."

Cross-examined, Ginaldi admitted that he had not summoned assistance for Mansard. He tried to explain how he could recognize Andy in the moonlight when he could not get a good look at the pedestrian who happened along, but did not make a good job of it.

Andy's attorney tried to get something about Ginaldi's scandalous affair with the European princess into the testimony, but this was barred.

Andy took the stand. He began at the night when he first met Jane Winterling and detailed everything that had happened. He told about his quarrel with Mansard at the time he dynamited his house, and mentioned that when his testimony was concluded his affirmations would be corroborated by the fire chief and the man Gagger who had assisted him.

He told what had happened when Mansard attacked him, and the dented violin case was produced to substantiate his story regarding the dagger blows.

He stated that he had telephoned the hospital. He admitted that Mansard had probably died as the indirect result of the blow he had struck him, and that he had tried to keep his part in the affair concealed.

Jane testified to what she knew, and so did the storekeeper and the ambulance surgeon and policemen and others.

This detailed questioning took time. Day succeeded day. Andy's fate remained as uncertain as it had been in the beginning. One newspaper predicted that he would be acquitted, another was equally certain that he would be convicted of manslaughter.

There was no longer any talk about premeditated murder, and Andy was thankful for that. He was glad, too, to see that his service to the city, when he helped to stop the great fire at Van Ness Avenue, was recognized.

Jane was sure he would be acquitted, but his lawyer was hopeful rather than confident.

The case neared its close. With the exception of one person, every one who had any connection with it had been examined. That person was the pedestrian who had chanced along the cement path immediately after Mansard had fallen. He had not since been heard of, let alone identified and compelled to take the stand. Andy could not see how the man's absence mattered much.

Despite the fact that he seemed to have an even chance of acquittal, Andy grew more and more depressed. No matter how justified he had been in defending himself from attack, the sad fact remained that the man had met death at his hands. He grew a bit morbid about it. His old gayety and optimism vanished little by little, until Jane Winterling, visiting him, could not help but notice it.

"Guess you're right," Andy admitted when she accused him of letting the thing prey on his mind. "I try not to think about it, but it seems that I've got to. I hit him and he died. There's no two ways about that. If I hadn't hit him he'd be as much alive as you or I."

"It's this gloomy cell you're in," Jane comforted. "Once you get free and start chasing cattle again you'll recover your natural good spirits."

Andy shook his head.

"Cattle don't appeal to me any more. Don't care if I never look another steer in the face. Since you don't like them, I don't."

"I do like them. Calves are cute."

"That's what you say, but you wouldn't live with the darned critters."

"No, I don't like them that much."

Andy hung his head. He was sitting on a bench in his cell, and it seemed as natural to sit slumped over as it once had been to sit up straight in a saddle.

"What's it matter if I do get out of here? You'll go to New York as soon as the trial is over."

"Yes, I must do that."

"While I must stay and wrestle with stupid cattle that I got no more use for than a tramp has for a private secretary."

Jane told him again to cheer up, and left.

He was still glooming over the fact that indirectly he had killed a man when, an hour later, his lawyer entered his cell.

"That pedestrian in the park who walked past right after you fought Mansard—he came to me and told me something."

"Yeah?" queried Andy. "What?"

"This," and in a gleeful tone the lawyer explained.

"No!" cried Andy when he finished.

"Positively yes," confirmed the lawyer.

In court next day, the pedestrian turned out to be a shy man named Mullins. He explained that he had come forward to give evidence only because he felt it was his duty to do so.

"When I saw the body of a man lying on the park walk right in front of me I was frightened," he admitted. "I hurried around a corner and then I heard a footstep somewhere. I thought it might be a policeman who would blame me for whatever it was that had happened, so I dodged behind a bush.

"Nobody appeared, but I knew some prowler was in the vicinity because of the footsteps, and I was scared to step out for fear he would attack me. I stayed behind the bush, shaking all over, wanting to get away, trying to decide if I should step back on the path and invite an attack or sneak away through the bushes and get suspected of a crime if I happened to be caught.

"I was still trying to decide when a man appeared. He came to the man lying on the walk, and knelt down to examine him."

Mr. Mullins failed to identify Ginaldi as this man, but since the latter had admitted that he went to Mansard and knelt down beside him it was plain that Ginaldi was the man he had seen. The man who knelt down beside the wounded man lifted his head up to get a better look at him—and then he did something that caused me to start a yell that I muffled in the nick of time so no one could hear me."

Andy's lawyer was grinning sardonically at Ginaldi and the latter's counsel. Andy was on pins and needles of anxiety and Jane was, too. The court room became silent as every one hung on the witness's words.

"The thing that the man who knelt beside the wounded man did was this," resumed Mullins. "He lifted up Mansard's head, and then, instead of letting it down gently, as anybody naturally would, he banged it down hard."

Gasps of horror and amazement were heard in all parts of the court room.

Mullins's testimony was attacked at once

by Ginaldi's counsel, but the man stood firm. No, he could not be mistaken. The wounded man's head hit the walk with a bump that he heard quite distinctly.

That was the blow on the head, insisted Andy's counsel, that had killed Mansard. The degenerate Ginaldi, who had caused the death of a princess in Europe and whose career was spotted with odious episodes, had deliberately sought to make Mansard's death a certainty in order that he should secure upon Andy the hold that he desired.

In the end Andy was acquitted.

But Ginaldi was not found guilty of the charge of killing Mansard either, since the only testimony against him was that of Mullins, and that was deemed insufficient.

"He'll serve a few years for stealing the violin, though," stated Jane as she filed her charge, and in the end that is precisely what happened.

A free man again, Andy McGee was troubled by only one problem—how to win Jane Winterling for his wife.

It still appeared as impossible as learning to play a violin in ten correspodence school lessons.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT.

RELEASED, Andy McGee was surprised to find that his trial and acquittal had made him more or less of a hero. All the men who had fought to stop the fire at Van Ness Avenue were regarded as heroes, and he was one of them.

He, however, had come into the limelight because of his trial and sensational acquittal, and therefore received more notice, probably, than all the rest of them put together.

Nobody now blamed Andy for Mansard's death. The universal opinion, as reflected in the newspapers and elsewhere, was that he would have been justified in defending his life and Jane Winterling's property even had he actually killed the man.

It was held, however, that he had not done so. Ginaldi received the blame for that, and there was much murmuring because the lack of corroboration of Mullins's testimony, and the possibility that he had made a mistake, had permitted the malodorous virtuoso to escape the penalty for that particular crime.

Andy was surprised, too, at the manner in which the city was tackling the problem of reconstruction. In fireproof vaults the city's securities were found to be intact, fire insurance companies were paying their losses, new money was coming in from Eastern centers, rebuilding had commenced and was proceeding at a pace that might almost be compared with the fire's pace of destruction.

Many homeless people still were encamped at the Presidio, however, and it was in regard to these that a prominent citizen approached Andy on the second day after he was released.

His first had been spent with Jane Winterling. She seemed to enjoy his company, and certainly he enjoyed hers.

But his prospects for winning her hand in marriage were no brighter, apparently, than on the first night he met her.

"Yes, yes, I know all about that argument," she replied when Andy remarked that in marriage love was the thing that counted. "In the first place, I've never said that I loved you—"

"You've acted like you did."

"Mere gratitude, Andy. You saved my precious violin, didn't you? In doing so you got into serious trouble, and I did what I could to help you out of it. But even if I did love you that doesn't necessarily mean I'd marry you."

"Why not?"

"Because a new age is dawning for women. From now on they're going to be guided more by their brains and less by their emotions. You and I don't match."

"Something like hitching a mule with a thoroughbred horse, eh?"

"I'm not saying you're a mule, even though you stick to your marriage ideas with a mule's stubbornness. What I'm saying is that your path in life is as different from mine as a baby lion's is different from a Persian kitten's. You wouldn't marry a lion to a kitten, would you?"

"Maybe I could quit being a lion—thanks for the compliment—and become a

kitten. I mean maybe I could learn to play a fiddle, or bang a piano, or be an actor on the stage. Then we'd have something in common, wouldn't we?"

Jane shook her head. "Don't be absurd, Andy. You couldn't learn any of those things. You're set in your profession and I'm set in mine—and there you are."

Andy shrugged his shoulders.

"Yep; here I am, as the shipwrecked sailor said to his wife after she'd spent the life insurance money and married again."

That was the gist of the conversation that had occurred on the first day after Andy's release. On the second, the prominent citizen sought him out and said:

"Mr. McGee, we're getting up a big benefit concert to aid the destitute people that the city is still taking care of. The people have heard so much about Miss Winterling and her now famous violin that I'm sure they'd be delighted to hear her play on it. I was wondering if you could persuade her to play a couple of pieces."

"Why ask me?" Andy replied. "I'm not her manager."

The man grinned. "Better than that, I understand—her fiancé."

Andy did no grinning. "Everybody hears that, it seems, except the guy that wants to hear it most—from a source that counts."

"Well, anyway, it isn't Miss Winterling alone that we want, but the both of you. You're a big attraction now, too, you know—being a Van Ness hero and the subject of oceans of publicity."

"Hah! What could I do?"

"Give the crowd a little talk. Anybody can do that. If you can't think of anything to say I'll have a little speech written for you."

"Well—I'll see Miss Winterling and let you know."

At least he had another good excuse for calling on her. He did so, and she received news of the offer with glee.

"Of course we'll accept. It 'll be fine practice for me. I've got to get used to big audiences sooner or later."

"Yeah. You can give 'em something. But what about me? It's both of us he wants."

"You—why, you can twirl your rope."

Andy grinned ruefully. "And get all balled up in it again? Besides, I can't give 'em the talk I did at home. People here know all about the fire. They want to forget it."

"Tell them some stories."

"The common cow-puncher kind I've been hearing all my life? Gee, no! Nice people would never stand for those."

Jane considered.

"I think they would, Andy, if you toned them down and told them in character, as a cowboy. Appear in your plain regalia, spurs, leather trousers, sombrero, and all.

"Carry your rope and twirl it in between your yarns. Chew gum, too. That would make you look more natural. Roll a cigarette and take a few puffs at it if you want to. Your stories aren't so terrible that you couldn't tone them down for decent people, are they?"

Andy grinned.

"Golly, I don't know! The one about the Montana Belle, for instance—ever hear that one?"

Jane had not, and Andy told it. She blushed and gave him an indignant look.

"The very idea! I should say they wouldn't stand for it, as you say. But maybe if you told it this way—" She proceeded to expurgate the yarn.

"Fine!" agreed Andy. "Then there's the one about the grasshopper's legs—here's how it goes."

Jane agreed that it ought to bring a laugh.

"Tell them something to encourage them," she advised. "Bring out the fact that California is a wonderful State, that the folks here shouldn't be discouraged by a bit of hard luck that may never occur again."

Enthusiasm grew upon Andy.

"By golly, I'm game if you are. Try anything once is my motto, you know. I'll practice with the rope, get the yarns all off by heart. Shall I tell the man we'll be there?"

"Yes."

It was difficult for Andy to find a used rope that would be sufficiently pliable for his purpose, but finally he found one in a

pawnshop. On a sand lot outside the city he practiced for hours, then had his cowboy's regalia sent from the ranch by express, and commenced to memorize his stories.

" By golly, that 'll get 'em—that one about how Stub called the dances. And the guy that had to have his whisky strained—whoopee!"

Nevertheless, Andy was as nervous as a hen in a coyote's den when he stood face to face with a huge audience.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MONTANA BELLE.

JANE'S violin number had been received with as much enthusiasm as any of Ginaldi's ever had been, and when Andy appeared he found the audience in a very receptive mood. He grinned and chewed his gum and pulled his four-gallon hat over one eye, and gave his rope a few simple twirls.

An ear-splitting burst of applause greeted this simple stunt, and his confidence grew like the well known snowball that rolled down the equally famous hill.

" Folks," said Andy, " I guess some of you have been hearing lately that California is a pretty rummy State, what with a little shake and a big fire and so on, but lemme tell you I knew a guy once who thought it was pretty good.

" This guy, he was a regular old forty-niner, but he had to go to a town in another State. He got drunk and it came Sunday and he'd thought he'd go to church to finish his sobering up.

" Well, the preacher, he starts to talk about where good folks would spend eternity. He spoke of a city that was paved with gold, where the birds made merry music all day long, and all the streets were covered with beautiful foliage, and the air was heavy with the scent of orange blossoms.

" ' Where is that wonderful place whereof I speak?' says the preacher, and up jumps the forty-niner and yells loud as anything: ' I know; I been there; that's Californy!' "

Loud applause. People wanted to hear stories of that sort, wanted to have their faith in their State bolstered up, and Andy had begun by doing it. He started to twirl his rope, but they wouldn't let him.

" Tell us another," called a voice from the gallery, and Andy proceeded to do it.

" Just lately I met a guy from another State that had the nerve to say his State was as good as ours, but I showed him where he got off with this yarn about myself that now I'll tell you.

" You see, I once spent three years in that State where he came from, and, oh, man, it was tough. Why, the land was so poor that a chicken couldn't make a living on an acre of it, so the result was they had no chickens. No, sir, not a darn chicken in the hull State from end to end. Three years I spent there without once gnawing a chicken leg, and then come the grasshoppers.

" Gee, folks, you never seen the like of them. Big as kittens some of those grasshoppers were. Yes, sir, now and then you'd hear of one that was even as big as —well, as a chicken.

" Come one day, I walks into a restaurant in the biggest city of the hull dad-blamed State, and there on the bill of fare was the thing I'd been hankering for for three years—broiled chicken. You could order breast meat or leg or wings or anything, so I orders legs—two of them.

" Well, the waiter he brings me legs, and right away I thinks they look kind of funny. Awful yeller like. I picks up one and sinks my teeth into it, and it tasted even funnier than it looked, so I looks it over careful. Well, I looked and looked, and say, what kind of a leg do you think that was?"

Andy paused and looked up at the gallery. He expected a reply from there, and in two seconds he got it.

" I know; grasshopper leg!"

Andy grinned and chewed his gum and gave his rope a little flirt in the air.

" Naw, it was chicken leg. It just looked and tasted queer 'cause I hadn't et any for three years."

The house roared at the discomfiture of the confident lad in the gallery, as Andy

knew they would, and he proceeded with his next yarn.

"Down in the part of the State that I come from—good old Californy, God bless her!—we got a guy named Stub who calls the figures in the quadrilles. He ain't any too polite, Stub ain't, being just a common cow waddy like m'self."

"You're all right, Andy," called a voice.

"Thanks. Well, Stub was a waddy, as I say, and one night he was calling at a ranch sociable, and there was a young lady on the floor who wore a red calico dress with a brown stripe down the back and had once turned Stub down when he asked her to dance. Stub got kinda excited once, and he points at the girl and yells, 'Balance to that line-back heifer.'

"But, say, talking about girls, maybe you'd like to hear about the girl that I once had myself when I lived in Montana. Awful nice girl she was, and her name was Salina, Sal for short. She was purty as a picture, and at dipping sheep she was good too, but she was careless in her dress.

"Well, there's a brand of flour they make in Montana called Montana Belle, and the name is printed in big letters on the sack. The people use up the flour and then they wash off the red printing and use the sack. Yeah. It's good cloth, and makes fine underwear. The girls all use it for making their you-knows.

"The neat ones are careful about getting the red letters off, but, as I say, my Sal, she wasn't much for neatness or hooking on her dresses tight or nothing like that.

"One night we were at a dance, Sal and me. Mebbe I got swinging her too hard, or mebbe she just naturally wallowed into the other dancers more than she should have, but anyway, quick as a wink, her skirt gets unfastened in the back and drops kinda halfway down, showing her—well—her underwear.

"And, say, what do you think? Honest, I got kidded a lot about it, and so did Sal, poor thing. There in great big red letters there were the two words, Montana Belle."

The applause was deafening. Andy grinned and chewed his gum, and in a moment did a little rope twirling. He broke off presently and proceeded.

"Once I had another girl, too. Yeah. Peach that I didn't want to lose nohow. I was trying to pay her a compliment and I tells her her ear is like a shell.

"She grinned, mighty pleased, and she sticks her finger in my coat lapel, and we were getting along mighty chummy when she says, 'What kind of a shell is my ear like?' and I, not knowing much about shells, says, 'abalone shell.'

"Well, she walks over to a dictionary they had and she commences to thumb through it, and I got kinda uncomfortable on account of not knowing what an abalone shell is.

"Bang! goes the book shut and she whirls around on me like a heifer on the prod. 'An abalone shell,' says she, 'often grows to the size of a wagon wheel, so you can just make tracks outa here, you insulting wretch, or I'll set the dog on you.'"

Rope twirling again, Andy doing his best tricks this time and thereby winning another burst of applause. He doffed his sombrero and tossed it into the wings and mopped his brow. He was having a grand time; enjoying himself quite as much as was the audience.

"Talking about another of these neighboring States that think they can toss aspersions on good old Californy on account we got a little shake-up—which is good for anybody, because it rouses them out of their sleep—I was over in one of those States once, in a town called Paradise because that's what it ain't like, and I overhears two men talking, one a resident and the other a traveler.

"The traveler asks the name of the town, and the booster replies: 'This is Paradise, and the next town down the line is Eden.' 'Yeah?' says the traveler. 'Well, I come over the road from Eden to Paradise this afternoon and that sure was Hell."

"Getting back to my own county again, there was a bullwhacker from another State come into a saloon in my home town and when the barkeep sets out his licker he looks at it and says, 'Is this here stuff strained?'

"'Strained of what?' says the barkeep.

"'Mister,' returns the ox waddy, 'I got an aged mother back in Missouri and I

come out here to make a stake for the old girl, but I ain't done it yet. Besides, I was brung up religious and my old marm she told me never to die till I was prepared to face the music. I ain't ready to die, so what I want to know air this—is the snakes strained out of that air whisky?' "

The affair was over at last—a huge success. Andy took Jane home, and when he reached his own lodging house he gloomed over the applause he had received.

" Clown, that's me. Good for nothing but just kidding. Make people laugh, yes, but that isn't earning their respect."

He was surprised next morning when the landlady carried a printed card to him, and stated that a grand-looking gentleman wished to see him in the parlor.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ANDY GETS A JOB.

" DID it ever occur to you, Mr. McGee," said the caller, " that you might be able to enjoy a successful career on the stage?"

" It has occurred to me that I couldn't," Andy rejoined. " There's nothing I can do on any stage except twirl a ripe, and that's no good."

" You entertained a houseful of people last night. That was doing something."

" They wanted to see me and Miss Winterling on account of the trial. Those bum yarns of mine wouldn't raise a laugh anywhere else."

"Some of them were certainly poor, Mr. McGee. But, on the other hand, one or two were good. I ought to know, because I happen to be a theatrical manager from the East. Supposing you were given stories that were all good, could you put them over the footlights as well as you did last night?"

" Aw, heck! I can't act, I tell you."

" In New York you wouldn't need to act. Just be yourself. Twirl your rope and chew your gum and spin your yarns. People would laugh their heads off, or I'm no judge."

The man continued seriously.

" I'm not joking, Andy. You'd be a new sort of comedian, altogether different from what the stage has ever seen, and New Yorkers go clean crazy about new things. Personally I think you'd make a hit. At any rate, I'm willing to gamble on it.

" What do you say to two hundred dollars a week for a starter, three months' work guaranteed? Does that interest you at all?"

Andy stood up and blinked.

" Are you serious?"

" Never was more so in my life."

" Two hundred dollars—a week?"

" Yes."

" Every week for three months?"

" That's my guarantee. With a permanent engagement if you make good, as I'm sure you will."

Andy pulled at the collar of his shirt, though it was not a tight shirt.

" But, say, I guess you don't understand. I been working all my life for not more than thirty dollars a month and found."

" What of it? Once I sold newspapers for thirty cents a day. What we used to do isn't what counts. It's what we can do now."

" And you really think—"

" No thinking about it; I know."

" You want to give me a job right from now?"

" Yes."

Andy wanted to jump and yell " whoopee!" but he restrained himself. He accepted the offer—and went with carrier-pigeon speed to Jane Winterling's place.

" I got a job!" he cried.

" Back on the ranch, you mean?"

" On the stage!"

" Doing—"

" What I did last night."

Jane gasped.

" No!"

" Yes! Two hundred dollars a week. For twelve weeks, maybe more. With all good jokes, no rummy ones. Twirl the old rope and chew gum and be myself."

" I told you you'd make good as yourself, Andy."

Andy's merriment sagged.

" Yeah—on the stage maybe—not in real life."

" Why not?"

"Because you said—"

Jane interrupted. "I know. I said our paths were different, and so they are."

"They're not now."

"Yes, they are, but in another way. You're the stage success and I'm the struggling aspirant. You're as far ahead of me now as I used to be. I got a hint of that last night when you received more applause than I; and now that you've got an offer for stage work and I haven't, I'm sure of it. So I've got to catch up."

"Aw, rats! You're far better than I am. I ain't anything at all except lucky. All my life I'd keep on trying to catch up to you, Jane."

"No. I won't marry you. Not, at least, till I've finished my training and received an offer at least comparable with yours."

"Will you then?"

"Maybe. I do like you an awful lot, Andy. And if I work dreadfully hard it may not take more than a year or so."

"Year?" cried Andy. "That's nothing. There was a sheep herder once named Jacob—story's in the Bible—and he waited seven years for his girl. What a sheep herder can do a cow waddy sure can, and then some. Whoopee! I'm going to get you in the end, girl, and you might as well make up your mind to it right now."

THE END

DOWN THE EASTING

SPARS creakin', blocks squeakin',
Sailin' full and by,
Beatin' down the Eastin',
'Neath the southern sky:
Lights blinkin', stars winkin',
Romance in the air,
Laughin' eyes a beckonin'
In the sky out there.

Log spinnin', crew grinnin',
Breeze freshenin' fast,
Mains'l set, jibs strainin',
Tuggin' at the mast:
Gale howlin', mate growlin',
Seas a runnin' high,
Sails reefed, ship a scuddin',
Storm clouds in the sky.

Gulls wingin', crew singin',
Port's a gettin' nigh,
Land in sight, Frisco's light
Shinin' in the sky:
Mate bawlin', crew haulin'
Fast this trip to win,
Tug comin', lines runnin',
Ship a standin' in.

Ralph Eugene Glass.

Peaceful Henry Horns In

By ALBERT WILLIAM STONE

THIS tale really starts back in the town of Poison Trap, seven counties north of Upheaval, where Peaceful Henry's father, Old Man Barrows, owns the general store. Upheaval figures in it largely to be sure, but it was in Poison Trap that Henry sprang his original sensation.

He dropped off the Coast Limited one bright morning in late June, hooked a yellow cane over his arm, took a hitch at his balloon pants and strode across the road toward the one-story building that housed his dad's emporium. A sign, "Hank Barrows, General Merchandise," flaunted itself across the front of the aforesaid store.

Hank was sunning himself on the front porch, being old and past his days of useless energy. He scowled in bewilderment as his eyes focused on the youth.

"Howdy, dad," greeted Peaceful Henry.

The old man's scowl deepened. He was staring at the brilliant raiment with which his son had bedecked himself. Henry, be it understood, had been East to college.

"Where'd you git them pants?" his father demanded in a strangled voice.

"Bought 'em."

"Where'd you git that hat?"

"Bought it, too."

"What's that thing hangin' on yore arm?"

"It's a cane."

"A cane, eh?" Old Hank grinned sourly. "Thought maybe it was a crutch, or somethin'. Where's yore wet nurse?"

Now, you'll agree that Henry had grounds for retaliation. In addition to the balloon trousers, the shapeless hat and the yellow cane, he wore a lavender silk shirt with pink stripes three quarters of an inch broad, a silk tie that was tied in a bow-knot, and shoes with soles that extended considerably beyond the contour of his feet.

Doubtless old Hank was justified, according to his standards. But to ask a red blooded youth fresh from triumphs on the football field the whereabouts of his wet nurse is putting it pretty strong.

Henry had the grace to flush.

"These clothes are all right," he asserted.

"Maybe. But it's a cinch *you're* all wrong."

"The trouble with the men around here," Peaceful Henry argued, "is that they're all of a pattern. There isn't any originality left. Just because some idiot started in, years ago, wearing high-heeled boots and leather chaps that make a man look like a Dutch windmill in a breeze, everybody else has followed suit. Cowboys look ridiculous, if you want to know what I think."

"Ain't nobody askin' what you think," retorted the old man. "You git in th' house an' peel off them clo'es, right quick. 'Fore somebody reco-nizes yuh, an' I've gotta lot o' tall explainin' to do."

He spat disgustedly.

"Cowboys looks reediculous, do they? Well, I ain't never seen one tryin' to imitate a circus sideshow with his clo'es, anyhow. Hurry up, now, an' shuck that truck!"

Peaceful Henry mounted the porch; but he made no move to obey.

"I'm a peaceful man; you know that," he boasted. "But no man is going to dictate to me what I shall wear. Not even you. I've learned independence of thought, back there in college. I've got my own life to live."

"You won't live more'n half an hour in P'izen Trap—not with them clo'es."

"I don't intend to live in Poison Trap," stated his offspring calmly. "I'm going to hang out my shingle in Upheaval."

"In—where?"

"Upheaval."

For the space of a full minute there was silence. It might be stated, with reasonable accuracy, that there was a stunned silence.

The old man's chin sagged and his eyes popped. Then his feet came to the floor with a thud.

"I might 'a' knowed it," he mumbled presently. "Loco; that's what. Plumb loco— Why, that town's th' toughest, meanest, orneriest collection o' shacks between Montana an' th' Rio Grande. It's everything P'izen Trap started out to be, but ain't. Talk about hangin' out yore shingle in Upheaval—why, yuh doggoned fool, don't yuh know there ain't no law in that town, an' never was?"

"That's why I'm going there," Peaceful Henry retorted. "They need some law. I aim—intend to see that they get it."

And leaving his father staring dazedly into space, he entered the store and sought his quarters upstairs.

And that's that, for the present at least.

II.

THE town of Upheaval had once harbored ambitions to be the county seat of Hard Rock County. Failing that, it had settled down to show an impressed world just how bad a disappointed town can be when it tries. And thereafter professional bad men with reputations to maintain discreetly remained away from Upheaval.

The town sprawled over the plain, some forty miles from the foothills, like a lazy Gila monster sunning itself while it kept right on distilling poison within its system. Neither mayor, sheriff nor town government existed there.

Upheaval possessed a distaste for law that amounted to homicidal mania.

The outside world was invited to leave it strictly alone, and the outside world had thus far complied with the invitation. The celebrated pirate cities of old times had nothing on Upheaval for unadulterated wickedness.

Precisely two days after Peaceful Henry's illuminating conversation with old Hank Barrows he alighted from a creaking narrow-gauge train at the Upheaval depot, suitcase in hand, and made a preliminary survey.

Upheaval consisted of one street, along the sides of which a ragged line of one-story shacks leered drunkenly in the dusk.

It was almost dark. Henry looked in vain for anything resembling a conveyance in which he might ride to a hotel. So he picked up the suitcase and walked up the street.

Presently he paused before the only two-story building on the thoroughfare. A faded sign over the entrance proclaimed it to be the "Bucket of Blood" saloon. A smaller sign atop it conveyed the information that the Bucket of Blood also conducted a hotel, presumably on the second floor.

"I want a room," Henry informed the bartender inside. "Got one?"

The bartender stared at the visitor's brilliant plumage and grinned.

"Three dollars a week," he said. "In advance."

Henry spun three silver dollars on the bar, and the other scooped up the coins with the expertness of long experience, dropping them in the till.

"Up them stairs, there," he said, pointing. "First door to th' right. Can't miss it."

Henry found the room and proceeded to install himself and the contents of the suit case, which proved to be largely yellow-bound books of legal aspect.

The barroom had been empty save for himself and the bartender, it being too late for the afternoon trade and too early for the night patronage. Hence only the bartender had seen his clothes.

"Tenderfoot in town," the knight of the soiled towel informed his chief, one Jake Shellback, when that gentleman returned to duty. "Rented him a room awhile ago. Dog-gonest lookin' specimen yuh ever seen. Straight from th' east, I reckon. Yuh oughta see what he's got on!"

But Henry remained in his room a good part of the time, it developed, reading in the yellow-bound books. Doubtless there were certain legal points upon which it would behoove him to become very clear indeed before he essayed to practice law in Upheaval.

He wasn't hungry and failed to put in an appearance for supper. At ten o'clock he was still reading earnestly.

At precisely two minutes after ten one "Slim" Updike, who had assimilated enough raw whisky at the bar downstairs to redden his vision and give him an inflated sense of his importance, suddenly decided that it was time for some excitement. So he staggered forth into the street, unlighted save for sundry yellow gleams that filtered through the soiled windows of the Bucket of Blood and kindred establishments, pulled his forty-five and discharged it in a series of sharp pops.

He aimed at nothing in particular, but the bullets shattered the glass of a window directly across the street, set into the walls of a small building housing one Lemuel Potts, real estate agent.

The noise roused Peaceful Henry from a reverie, in the course of which he had been trying to work out a hypothetical case involving the behavior of a young lawyer trying his first case in a town where law had theretofore been unknown.

"Wow!" howled Mr. Updike, fumbling at his belt for shells with which to reload. "Whoop-ee! Ye-ow-w-w-w!"

The forty-five popped again. This time Henry was at the window, strving to pierce the darkness with his eyes. More glass crashed, and the position of the hilarious celebrant was betrayed by the series of red flashes that punctuated the gloom.

"I'm a plumb bad hombre!" shouted Mr. Updike, starting to reload a second time. "Don't nobody cross my path! When I'm mad I'm bad! I kin shoot th' eyebrows off a hoot owl any time I take a notion. Whoop-ee!"

He wound up his defi in a shrill falsetto. Followed a third fusillade.

Apparently Mr. Updike was shooting in a circle; for presently the window through which Peaceful Henry was staring fell with a crash, and the smoky lamp went out abruptly. A bullet had clipped the top from its chimney. The chill air of night swept into the room.

Mr. Updike was preparing to reënter the saloon when he was suddenly confronted by a figure in the gloom. Peaceful Henry had climbed through the shattered window and eased himself to the ground without being seen.

"What's all this shooting about?" he demanded indignantly.

He had seized the tipsy Mr. Updike by the arm and was shaking him vigorously. And Peaceful Henry was not exactly a weakling.

"Lemme alone!" shouted Mr. Updike. His gun had been mysteriously wrested from his hand. Peaceful Henry had sent it hurtling into the darkness, as a matter of fact. "Can't a man shoot out a few windows without gittin' his—head—shook off? Leggo!"

"You shot my lamp out," Henry told him, pausing in his shaking. "And you shot my window out. I'm a peaceable man and don't like such treatment. Next time you do a thing like this I'm liable to lose my temper. Understand?"

He gave the inebriated one a shove that sent him sprawling in the dust. The colloquy had occupied so short a time that other occupants of the Bucket of Blood, apparently, had taken no cognizance of it.

Two minutes later, Mr. Updike, his clothes dirty and his language copiously emphatic, was standing at the bar.

Some coyote took my gun away from me!" he wailed. "Grabbed it an' busted me plumb over th' head with it." Which was not strictly true; but some alibi was essential to explain the abrupt cessation of the shooting and the absence of his artillery. "Sneaked up when I wasn't lookin' an' grabbed it. Wait till I ketch th' skunk; that's all I'm askin'. Jest wait."

"We're waitin'," responded Jake Shellback. "Who was this mysterious gent? What's th' name an' pedigree of th' galoot what dasts invade th' peaceful town of Upheaval an' interfere with its leadin' citizens in th' performance of their plain dooty?"

"I dunno," said the outraged Mr. Updike. "All I know is, he's as big as a Kansas corncrib, an' plumb onreasonable."

The bartender brought to mind the resplendent stranger upstairs.

"He's big enough," he asserted dubiously. "But I shore doubts it was him. He ain't hardly human, that maverick."

"Neither was this feller," Mr. Updike declared with conviction. "Took my gun away when I wasn't lookin', he did—"

III.

It was Hairoil Johnson who came in for the second contact with the mysterious stranger.

Hairoil's *modus operandi* was simple. He simply lined his interior with the fiery contents of a good-sized bottle of hooch, stepped forth into the street, unlimbered a pair of guns that would have graced any museum of Revolutionary relics, and gave vent to the speech that was surging within him.

This was the night following Mr. Updike's humiliation. Doubtless Mr. Johnson's object was to call the stranger into the open, where he might subject him to a closer scrutiny.

"Hi!" he yelled by way of preliminary, staring upward at the shattered window through which the light of Peaceful Henry's restored lamp was streaming. "I'm a humdinger from Arizona! When I snort I starts stampedes on every ranch inside o' two hundred miles! My hide's so tough a brandin' iron can't make a mark on it! I chew dynamite 'stead o' terbacker, eat cactus pancakes fer breakfast, an' git drunk on double distilled nitroglycerine! *Whoop-ee!*"

You must admit that Mr. Johnson's claims to distinction outrivaled those of Mr. Updike by a considerable margin. He teetered expertly on his bow legs, drew a bead on the shattered window over the Bucket of Blood, and pulled the trigger.

Both guns roared simultaneously. One of the bullets carried away the remains of the window sash, splintering the wood with a rending crash and burying itself in the cracked ceiling of Henry's room. The other one neatly decapitated his lamp, plunging the immediate surroundings into stygian darkness.

"Hi-yi!" yelled Hairoil in the street below. "I kin lick ary man in town! I kin jump higher'n a bobcat, climb where a mountain sheep 'ud bust his neck, spit cl'ar acrost th' State of Arizony, an' swaller a yucca backward! Hear me howl!"

At the expulsion of the light Henry uttered an exclamation of annoyance. He had been in the middle of a legal exposition on irrigation rights, and the two bullets had left him in the air, so to speak. He felt his way to the window and peered out.

Bang!

He saw the flash at the same instant that a bullet whizzed by his ear and thudded into

the wall behind him. Coincidentally, he caught a glimpse of the vague outline of Hairoil's figure.

With a single spring he was through the window and sliding down the outside wall, his eye on the spot where he had seen the flash and the outline.

" Yee-ow-wh!" roared Hairoil, who had paused to reload his two guns. " I'm a tough ol' buzzard, I am! When—"

Just what would have followed the " when " is problematical and will never be known; for at that instant two singularly muscular hands closed over Hairoil's wrists, twisted them with extraordinary power, and the guns dropped to the dust of the street.

" I'm getting tired of this," Peaceful Henry remarked. " Next time you want to play, go to the other end of the street. I'm paying rent upstairs, and I'm entitled to reasonable quiet. You cowmen think you can't enjoy yourself without making a lot of foolish noise, don't you? Well, you can't make it around me. I know my rights as a citizen. Understand?"

" Who—who th' hell are you?" sputtered Hairoil, helpless in the other's grasp.

" My name's Barrows. I'm a strictly peaceable citizen. Hereafter you'd better take note of the fact."

Hairoil reached the interior of the Bucket of Blood considerably unarmed. He had been unable to find his guns, for the simple reason that the astonishing stranger had picked them up and hurled them into the sage back of the main street.

Mr. Johnson leaned against the bar and, in a voice that trembled, ordered a drink.

" His name's Barrows," he said when he had imbibed the drink. " Says he's a peaceable citizen, strict an' complete. Proved it by—by liftin' my six-guns an' throwin' 'em away. Dog-goned if I could find 'em, either. Dog-goned if I could."

Stark astonishment had impelled Mr. Johnson to give a truthful account of the affair. The other denizens of the Bucket of Blood gathered around and listened to his recital.

Peaceful Henry, unobserved by the listeners, entered quietly on his way back to his room. He touched Jake Shellback on the arm, and that individual whirled to confront such an apparition as he had never yet beheld—an apparition clad in a green shirt of brightest silk, a yellow knitted tie knotted under a soft collar, pants that would have held a month's provender and a couple of children, and pink silk socks gleaming over the tops of low-cut shoes such as the cow country had never harbored before.

Hairoil was in the midst of some blood-curdling threats of reprisal at the moment. Peaceful Henry waited until he had paused for breath.

" I just wanted to notify you," he said to Jake, " that your boy friend there just shot out my light. This makes twice I've been interrupted, and I don't like it. Please see that the lamp is fixed at once, will you? Or else get me another one."

The Bucket of Blood proprietor stared with slack jaws, and Hairoil Johnson took a step in the direction of the brilliantly clad youth.

" So!" he growled, scowling fiercely. " You're th' coyote that throwed my guns away, are yuh?"

" I'm the one," Peaceful Henry stated calmly.

That he was wholly unarmed was obvious. It might even be stated that it was plainly obvious. And even in Upheaval the ethics of the community will hardly permit of the shooting of an unarmed man.

" Go heel yoreself!" snapped Mr. Johnson suddenly. " Go heel yoreself, pronto. I'm servin' notice on yuh, right now, that I'll shower down yuh th' first time I ketch sight of yuh."

" Same here," chimed in Mr. Updike, who had secured other guns and was now fingering them suggestively in their holsters.

The others were silent. They had no personal grudge to settle with the peaceful young stranger, thus far, and were constrained to observe the amenities of polite gun-toting society.

Even " Sour Grapes " Wilson, who had lived in Upheaval four continuous years by virtue of his skill with the gun and who had contributed generously to the population of the town cemetery, preserved his peace. Sour Grapes, be it known, never pulled his gun unless he intended to use it.

Peaceful Henry folded his arms and regarded them.

"I may as well introduce myself, gentlemen," he said grandly. "My name is Henry Barrows, and I have come to your community to practice law. I don't carry weapons, and I don't intend to. I am a lawyer. I might add that I am a peaceable citizen and hope to remain so."

This might be as good a place as any to describe Peaceful Henry. It can be done briefly.

He was six feet tall, two and a quarter feet broad across the shoulders, and possessed of a set of muscles built up for the purpose of employing them in various strenuous college athletics.

He had light hair, reasonably thick, and blue eyes that gazed steadily at anybody or anything that happened to engage their attention. He wore the kind of expression that might best be described as "open."

"So you're a peaceable citizen, are yuh?" sneered Hairoil Johnson. "Don't believe in fightin', or anything like that? Think yuh kin do as yuh please without gittin' shot full o' holes? Insult better men—"

"Fighting is foolish," Peaceful Henry interrupted. Deliberately he turned his attention to the landlord again. "How about that lamp?"

"I'll 'tend to it," Jake Shellback promised weakly. His pins had been knocked out from under him, so to speak.

"Right away?"

"Right away."

"Very well. Good night, gentlemen."

The astounding disciple of peace turned on his heel and went upstairs. Two minutes later Jake Shellback followed him, bearing in his hand a freshly-filled and clean lamp to replace the one shattered by Hairoil Johnson's bullet. His customers watched him in stunned silence.

IV.

A CLIMAX to this sort of thing was of course inevitable. If Peaceful Henry had deliberately set about to stir Upheaval to the depths of its being he had succeeded beyond his wildest dream.

The climax came the third day of his sojourn, while Upheaval's citizens were casting about for ways and means to eliminate a man who carried no gun and announced that he didn't intend to.

It came in the shape of a fight between two belligerent canines of obviously jumbled breed, in the middle of the street directly before an establishment known as "The Owl." Both animals were part wolf and correspondingly fierce in their hates.

The entire male population of Upheaval presently was gathered around the fighters, cheering them on.

The Hoot Owl was several doors down the street from the Bucket of Blood, but near enough so that the noise of the combat assailed Peaceful Henry's ears annoyingly. He promptly laid down his book and repaired to the scene without troubling to put on his hat.

He pushed his way to the center of the disturbance, seized the two dogs by their collars and held them apart by main strength.

"Whose dogs are these?" he demanded.

Nobody answered for a moment. Then a gentleman named "Big Jaw" Turner, who weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred and ten pounds and who had a chin upon which a double-rigged saddle could have been hung with room to spare, stepped forward.

"Th' brown one's mine," he said evenly. "An' I'm askin' yuh, stranger, what right yuh got to horn in on a good dawg fight?"

He had thrust out his chin at Peaceful Henry, and Peaceful Henry gazed at it respectfully.

"The right of a peaceable citizen," he replied, hanging on to the dogs with some difficulty. "These dogs were making a lot of unnecessary noise."

The animals were yelping and making frantic efforts to renew the struggle. Big Jaw Turner grunted.

"Let go of them dawgs," he commanded, his hand on his gun. "Or I'll plumb forget myself an' see if I can't shoot my initials in your carcass, Mr. Peaceable Citizen."

Henry drew a long breath. One might have said it was a breath of relief. The respectful expression went out of his eyes; then he dropped one of the dogs.

A gentleman skilled in the art of puncturing his fellow beings usually keeps his eye on the other fellow's holster and right arm. Mr. Turner did both. Hence he was totally unprepared for Peaceful Henry's next move, which was to seize the big man's gun in his left hand and twist it out of Big Jaw's grasp before he knew what was happening.

The next instant the gun was describing a parabola as it curved over the roof of the Hoot Owl and out of sight beyond.

The gun went off in its flight, possibly from the mental impetus given it by the outraged owner, and one of the dogs—the one dropped by Henry—uttered a surprised yelp and gave up the ghost. Henry dropped the other one, and the survivor promptly began smelling curiously of the carcass of its late rival.

"Now, see here," Peaceful Henry began argumentatively before Mr. Turner could explode. "Be reasonable. Your dog's dead." It had, indeed, been the brown one that had been rendered *hors de combat*. "You ought to be glad it's only the dog that's dead, instead of me. You wouldn't want *that* on your conscience, would you? Be reasonable."

Mr. Turner was reasonable, according to his lights. He was so reasonable that he went about the circle, begging somebody to lend him a gun long enough to send Peaceful Henry after the brown dog.

But the gentlemen comprising the citizenry of Upheaval didn't believe, obviously, in parting with their guns even in a good cause. Besides, there was the matter of Peaceful Henry's unarmed condition.

"I'll shoot him up so dog-goned complete he won't even cast a shadder in th' sun!" howled Mr. Turner. He was positively in agony about it. "He ain't fitten to live!"

"That's right," agreed Hairoil Johnson sorrowfully. "But what kin we do about it? He won't wear a gun, like a real human. All he does is tuh talk about his rights. Can't shoot a man that don't wear a gun, Big Jaw. 'Tain't bein' done this year."

His opinion was the consensus of that of the crowd, and Mr. Turner was compelled to abandon his plan of reprisal, for the present.

Peaceful Henry eventually returned to his room and perusal of the yellow-bound volume he had been reading when the dog fight started. Mr. Turner glumly dragged the carcass to an ash heap and deposited it there with an oath.

As by common consent, the witnesses of the affar repaired to the barroom of the Hoot Owl and imbibed several rounds, while they talked ways and means. Something, it was unanimously agreed, must be done.

The normal peace and quiet of Upheaval had been shattered. Moreover, her dignity had been assailed and her fair name challenged by this yellow-haired upstart from nobody knew where. The word had leaked out that he was a lawyer and intended to hang out his shingle in Upheaval; Peaceful Henry had sprung the leak himself, in fact.

"Law!" snorted Mr. Updike indignantly. "Ain't we managed to git along this far without no law? Next thing he'll be tryin' to saddle us with 'll be a sheriff, an' maybe a jail."

"Yes, an' from that it ain't but a step to a sky pilot an' a meetin' house," added Mr. Johnson.

"Th' town'll go plumb to th' dawgs, if somethin' ain't did pronto," opined Sour Grapes Wilson. "This Peaceful Henry, or whatever he calls hisself, ought be rid out of town—on a rail."

The suggestion caught on. Nobody knew exactly the procedure incidental to riding an undesirable citizen on a rail, but it had the right swing.

It was obvious that they couldn't dispose of the interloper in the ordinary way, since he refused absolutely to adopt the defensive and offensive methods that had obtained in Upheaval since its birth. But to ride him out of town on a rail—that sounded like the solution.

Details were discussed. A rail, it was evident, involved the dismembering of a tree.

The nearest forest was on the slopes of the Rockies, forty miles away. The only tree within reasonable distance of Upheaval was a cottonwood that decorated the south

bank of Four Mile creek, a short distance from the edge of town.

But it takes a saw or plenty of axes to fell a tree, and there wasn't a saw in Upheaval, it was recalled. What axes there were contained a plethora of rust and were too dull for the purpose; besides the men of Upheaval were more expert in handling a rope than an axe.

Somebody suggested that Peaceful Henry might be strung up in regular fashion under the cottonwood, thus putting that tree to good use anyhow; but the suggestion was finally rejected on the ground that to string up a man because he interfered in a dog fight would hardly be fair.

"Tell yuh what," said Hairoil Johnson suddenly. "What's th' matter with gittin' a scantlin' down there where Pete Morrisy's buildin' his shack? A scantlin's as good to ride a maverick out of town on as a rail, ain't it?"

It was, the others agreed with the first enthusiasm manifested since the meeting convened. Pete Morrisy had caused to be shipped to Upheaval a carload of pine lumber with which to build a house, having tired of living in the tumble-down structure of ancient logs that had thus far sheltered him and his family.

The lumber was at the very moment reposing on the ground at the far end of the street; and thither they adjourned.

But Pete Morrisy, when interviewed, gave evidence of being a peculiarly unreasonable and stubborn man. The lumber had cost money, he asserted; moreover, he wasn't any too sure that there would be enough as it was.

"But we're only borrowin' it," protested Sour Grapes Wilson. "We'll bring it back. Can't yuh trust us with a piece o' scantlin' fer twenty minutes or so?"

"I don't trust nobody," averred Mr. Morrisy obstinately.

One word led to another, and then to a lot of words. Mr. Morrisy wore a gun. So did Sour Grapes Wilson.

Presently the argument reached the draw stage, and when smoke cleared away Mr. Morrisy lay stretched on the ground beside his lumber pile, with a hole in his thigh.

"Maybe that'll learn you a lesson," observed Mr. Wilson as he replaced his gun. "You're lucky I didn't put yore light out, Pete."

"You'll have another chance," the fallen man promised with a groan.

The shooting affray had quickened the spirits of the plotters amazingly. They carried Mr. Morrisy into his cabin and saw to it that he was as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. Then, with the hardly-won scantling in their midst, they started for the Bucket of Blood saloon and the object of their wrath.

The met him in front of the Bucket of Blood, his hat off and minus his coat, his blue silk shirt—apparently he was well supplied with silk shirts of numerous colors—fanning in the breeze he made as he hurried out of the door.

"What was that shooting?" he demanded, pausing.

'That," observed Mr. Johnson, licking his lips in anticipation of the good time about to come, "was a gent gittin' punctured fer refusin' to be a good citizen."

"What are you going to do with that scantling?"

They told him, with relish. Then they started to surround him; but he backed into the doorway and surveyed them from the threshold.

"Be reasonable," he said. "If you ride me out of town on that thing, you'll have to drop me somewhere. Then I'll come back. What sense will there be in that?"

"Not a bit," assented Big Jaw Turner with a growl. "Try it, an' we'll shoot yuh down same as we would a jack-rabbit; savvy?"

Big Jaw looked fully capable of carrying out the threat, and Peaceful Henry studied him with a peculiar light in his blue eyes.

"You'd shoot an unarmed man?"

"Same as I'd shoot a p'izen lizard," Big Jaw declared, lifting one corner of his mouth like a snarling dog's. "When we dump you on th' prairie, Mr. Peaceable Citizen, yuh'd better keep right on goin'."

They were crowding closer upon him, and Peaceful Henry held up one hand. He was playing for time. These gentlemen evidently meant business.

"You'll never ride me on that thing," he said slowly. "I'm a peaceable citizen, and I object to such treatment."

His wide shoulders filled the doorway, and the entire male population of Upheaval was in front of him with the sole exception of the bartender. "I want to say a few words before you go any further."

They invited him, profanely, to fire away and to make it short in the interests of saving the time of busy men. He nodded.

"You fellows think you're pretty good men," he began. "There you stand, twenty or thirty of you, all wearing guns and threatening an unarmed man."

He held up his hand for silence as a growl came from the ring before him.

"You couldn't even take a piece of wood away from its owner without shooting him down," he went on, immeasurable scorn in his voice. "All you know is the gospel of force, backed up with forty-fives. You've been doing as you pleased so long you've got the idea you can do it forever. Take your guns away from you and you're helpless."

"Is that so?" This from Big Jaw Turner, who had stepped forward and thrust his chin out for all to see. His shoulders were hunched as his head held out like a monster turtle's. He had doubled his fists. "Well, Mr. Peaceable Citizen, maybe you'd like to try yore luck with me—*without* guns."

The peaceful one smiled.

"Now you're talking!" he exclaimed. "That sounds more like it." He looked around the circle. "Do I get fair play?" he inquired. "If I lick this big stiff, do I stay in Upheaval from now on?"

It was the sort of challenge that looked like a safe bet. Big Jaw Turner was the general size and contour of a broad-gauge freight gondola, and, furthermore, was of a proved belligerent nature. It ought to be better than the dog fight they had been cheated out of.

"It's a go!" declared Sour Grapes Wilson, whose word carried weight in Upheaval. "How about it, gents?"

They assented with a unanimous shout. The circle moved to the middle of the street, with the two gladiators in the midst.

Big Jaw Turner took off his coat, doffed his leather cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. Peaceful Henry merely ran his fingers through his mop of thick hair and waited. In the glare of sunlight he looked like an advertising banner for a carnival.

They squared off, and Big Jaw aimed a terrific swing for his opponent's countenance. Peaceful Henry merely stepped back enough for a clean miss, then sprang forward and slapped the other resoundingly across the cheek with his open hand.

Big Jaw was off balance at the moment; the open-handed blow caught him squarely and he fell, stumblingly, into the dirt. When he came to his feet he was fairly frothing with rage.

"Damn yuh!" he shouted. "I'll learn yuh—"

He rushed forward and was met with a blow on the chin that sent him over backward. For ten feet or so he kept his feet; then he went down with a plop, the dust rising in a cloud from the impact. He came to his feet more slowly than he had the first time.

At the end of five minutes, during which interval he had put in most of his time swinging wildly and falling down under the impact of Peaceful Henry's fist, he wiped the blood from his mouth and looked at his antagonist out of bloodshot eyes.

"I reckon you think you're a hell of a fighter," he mumbled through puffed lips.

The accommodation had come in, and somebody, all unnoticed by the spectators of the fight, was alighting. Peaceful Henry smiled. He seemed to be thoroughly at home.

"I am," he said as he met Big Jaw's weakened rush with a neat jolt that almost knocked the big man's head off. "I can lick a dub like you every day in the week, and a couple of times on Sundays."

He gazed down at the other's supine form. Big Jaw's unhandsome countenance was turned up to the sky, his eyes only half open, his grizzled jaw slack. He was knocked cleanly out.

Peaceful Henry transferred his gaze to the circle of Upheaval's astonished citizens. They were looking at him with a new respect.

"Anybody else?" he demanded.

Apparently no one was eager to accept the challenge. Peaceful Henry dusted off his balloon pants.

"Gunplay," he observed, "is a thing of the past in civilized communities. Anybody can use a gun. It takes a man to use his fists scientifically; see?"

He paused for comment, but none was forthcoming.

"Where I learned to fight," he continued, "I was taught to use my dukes. I never use 'em unless I have to, but when I do, I try to use 'em right. I'm a peaceable citizen by nature, character and inclination. If there's anybody else that would like to have his diaphragm separated from his disposition, now's the time to say so."

The passenger that had alighted from the accommodation pushed his way through the circle at this juncture. His son stared at him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Old Hank Barrows took a position at his son's resplendent side. He cleared his throat.

"I dunno what this boy o' mine has been up to, exactly," he began, "but whatever it is, I'm apologizin' for him.

"'Tain't like he wasn't raised right, cause he was. I trained him to shoot th' fuzz off a prairie dawg's nose 'fore he was ten years old.

"Then, in a locoed moment, I sent him back East to college." Old Hank's voice grew husky with emotion. "I give you my word, gents, he went away bearin' all the earmarks of a reg'lar he-man. He was wearin' a six-gun when he got on th' train, an' th' things he wore on his legs was pants, not meal sacks. Now look at him!"

He stared sorrowfully at his son.

"Calls hisself *peaceable*," he sneered. "Don't believe in carryin' guns no more, looks like. Talks like a dictionary. Won't even cuss. Says he's learned to think fer hisself. Look at him!"

They looked at him.

"Reason I'm here," Old Hank went on to his son, "is to take yuh home. You ain't fit to be at large." His eye fell on the unconscious Big Jaw Turner for the first time. "What's happened to that hombre?"

It was Sour Grapes Wilson who answered. He stepped to Peaceful Henry's side to do so.

"Yore son's been givin' him a lesson in th' way to be peaceable," he said. "Also, he's been givin' him a lesson in law." He looked Old Hank straight in the eye. "I'm askin' yuh somethin', mister, man to man. Yuh say this son o' yourn kin shoot?"

"Who—my boy?" Old Hank snorted. "Listen, stranger. I'm a cowman. This here monstrosity in circus clo'es was raised right, even if he did git saddled with a college education an' all that goes with it. He'll git over them baggy pants an' fool notions generally, or I'll knock seventeen different kinds o' hell out o' him; see?"

Sour Grapes clapped Peaceful Henry on the shoulder.

"Yuh don't take this boy home; not any yuh don't," he proclaimed. "'Cause why?" He glared around the circle. "'Cause I hereby nominate him for mayor of Upheaval, an' declares him elected by acclamation. Any objections?"

Sour Grapes's hand was on his gun, and there was no dissent.

"Do yuh accept?" he asked Peaceful Henry.

The transformed cowpuncher considered.

"On one condition," he said firmly.

"Name it!"

"This town's got a tough reputation." Henry clearly was not inclined to resort to flattery. "It's got to reform. It's got a bad name, and it ought to be changed."

"All right," agreed Sour Grapes surprisingly. "Maybe yo're right, son. We hereby sheds th' name of Upheaval, an' awaits your pleasure. What do yuh aim to call Upheaval from now on?"

"I think," Peaceful Henry said promptly, "that we'd better call it 'Harmony.'"

"What?" shouted Old Hank Barrows.

But his voice was drowned out in the roar of approval that went up from the throats of the newly-christened municipality's converted citizens.

Peaceful Henry had ushered in a new regime.

THE END

THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

A FEW days after David C. G.'s letter was received, a New York paper carried a dispatch from Miami, Florida, stating that a man down there was building a rocket in which he proposed to take off for the planet Venus some time in March. So you see, our Akron correspondent builded even better than he realized.

AKRON, OHIO.

It looks to me like what you set out to do in the "Return of George Washington" was really got over in "Luckett of the Moon." *Napoleon* comes back, much more sensibly. George Worts is a good author, and I like him very much as long as he stays in his own field, in which he cannot be beat. But for big imaginative flights this new one, Slater LaMaster, is better balanced and he sure swings a funny pen. It is really wonderful the way he can let himself out until his story seems absolutely impossible, like Burroughs, and then makes good with a practical, true to life ending. Strange as it may seem, everything in "Luckett of the Moon" could actually happen. In fact, if you will think back over what you have read in newspapers everything in it has happened at one time or another, except the trip of a short distance out of the skyrocket to the movie place, and surely no one could say that this is beyond the realm of reason when several moon rockets have been built, I believe, according to the newspapers. DAVID C. G.

CHATTANOOGA, TENN.

All readers seem to want a story to compare with one they liked. So do I. Please let us have one like "You're Under Arrest," by Worts. I like stories like "The Future Eve," "Personality Plus," "Thunder Off Stage," *et cetera*. I notice some of the readers don't want "impossible" stories. Why not? This is a fiction magazine, and if they don't want to read fiction, why, let them buy a true story publication.

"Slaves of the Wire" and "Luckett of the Moon," this week, were fine. W. G.

CHICAGO, ILL.

I sure do like ARGOSY and have recommended it to many of my friends, too. I am waiting for Thursday to come around so that I can finish that perfectly thrilling serial, "The Eagle's Brood." It is one of the best stories I have read. What has happened to Mme. Storey? Let's hear more about her. GRAYCE F.

Another Mme. Storey adventure will appear very shortly.

PITTSBURGH, PA.

I am not so old as ages go, but an old reader of the magazine, which is more than worth its weight in gold. My favorite type of story is the "impossible" type. How the weeks drag when one is reading a story by Edgar Rice Burroughs, or Ray Cummings! I cannot see how any one could possibly say that impossible stories are the "bunk" after reading one of them.

My favorite authors are Edgar Rice Burroughs, A. Merritt, Ray Cummings, Garret Smith, George F. Worts, Richard Barry, and Lieutenant John Hopper.

Some recent stories that interested me greatly were "The War Chief," "Seven Footprints to Satan," "The Sun Test," "The Return of George Washington," "Slaves of the Wire," "Luckett of the Moon," and "The Eagle's Brood."

Perhaps I am wrong, but I guess that "Eyes West!" was written by Charles Francis Coe. Am I right? (No. ED.) J. VERNON S., JR.

DALLAS, TEXAS.

In your magazine dated February 4, 1928—my birthday—some bimbo from New York by name of J. B. F. states that he is going South and doesn't expect to find the ARGOSY "while browsing around in some out-of-the-way corner of this sphere." If he means the Southern States he is goofy. Let me tell you, mister, that the phrase, "The solid South," has no connection with the head, therefore we read the ARGOSY. Why, Dallas, the metropolis of the Southwest, is a New York itself. Our viaduct across the Trinity River compares to the Brooklyn Bridge; Fort Worth, thirty miles away, is a small Chicago, minus crime; Galveston, a Coney Island; New Orleans, a New York; Birmingham, a Pittsburgh; and you have no Florida. Some one should write a story about Texas, not a Western nor an oil story. Why, cowboys and horses are as scarce in Dallas as they are in New York City or Paris. Any one who reads the history of Texas soon learns why we Texans love the "Lone Star State." I hope this letter finds the Reader's Viewpoint, for it may change some one's mind about the South. No! Hair does not grow on the cowboys' pants in Texas, and I never "forked" an outlaw cayuse in my life. I have seen cowboys by the hundreds in West Texas, but never with a gun. L. E. D.

P. S.—"Who *Did* Kill Ezra Klagg?" I wanna kno.

MT. CARMEL, ILL.

I have been in a hospital and in bed here at home since Xmas morning, and all I have been reading is ARGOSY. We have taken the magazine for over seven years without missing a one, and in my opinion it is the best all-round fiction

magazine published. Most any kind of story may be found in them and they are all to my liking.

Some of the best stories I ever read are in the ARGOSY, such as: "Pounding the Rails," by Don Waters; "Seven Footprints to Satan," "The Return of George Washington," and the best fiction story I have ever read, "The Eagle's Brood," by Lieut. John Hopper.

The ARGOSY is the one and only book for a good, real, live Western story. Put in a few more by Don Waters and Lieut. John Hopper. They are my favorites. GUY E. C.

WALDRON, ARK.

When I sit down at the table for a square meal, likely there will be some dishes that I dislike, therefore I simply partake of the dishes I like and leave the others. If I get a full meal in this way, I am then satisfied and pleased and will come back next dinner hour.

In like manner, when I read the ARGOSY, there may be some stories such as war, baseball, movie stories, that my taste refuses, but there may be others who like this kind. Everybody is not alike.

I am sending in my renewal because I think you are able to continue to "set a full meal" and not be influenced too much by those who assemble around the board. J. B. C.

BROOKLYN, N. Y.

I only started recently to read the ARGOSY and have found it favorable to my taste. The most favorable comment I can make with my short experience is that the variety of stories furnished make the ARGOSY the magazine for everybody, whatever his taste may be. Stories like "What! Los Angeles?" and "The Clock That Struck Thirteen," are ideal for an evening of interesting entertainment. F. G.

SANTA CRUZ, CAL.

This family has not missed an ARGOSY in eight years. We have many times purchased two, so as not to cause any family argument on account of wanting to get at it first.

I have never written you before concerning any story. They are all very, very good.

Just now I finished reading "A Mysterious Captivity," by Geo. M. Johnson. He is a dandy writer, one of your best, if not *the* best.

C. H. M.

LANGLOIS, ORE.

Have read ARGOSY for three years and find no better magazine on the market, so keep it coming just as it is, for it is worth a good deal more than you ask for it.

A satisfied reader. L. C. A.

ATLANTA, GA.

I have just finished "Luckett of the Moon" and sure liked it fine. I also liked "Adventurers All," by Ben Conlon, and can only say give us more and oftener.

Could you tell me if an Edgar Rice Burroughs's story is to be in print in the near future? If not, please wake up Mr. Burroughs and give us a good serial.

Also if this is not too big an order give us more war stories. In all, give us more of all kinds except such stories as "Golden Fetters," *et cetera.* C. C. A.

FORT D. A. RUSSELL, WYO.

I feel it my duty to write a few words in praise of the *best* fiction magazine in the good "ole" U. S. A.—ARGOSY-ALLSTORY—regardless of the price! I can't remember just when I first became interested in your wonderful little entertainer—ARGOSY—but to date I have only one *regret*—that I didn't start reading it soon as I was old enough to understand and appreciate such clean, interesting and inspiring stories as ARGOSY-ALLSTORY contains. I have finished the last part of "The Eagle's Brood," and consider same the best serial I have read in a long, long time. Owing to the fact that I'm a soldier in the U. S. Army, I'm always interested in stories pertaining to military life. "The Eagle's Brood" proved that right always *wins* over wrong, sooner or later—that a young man can accomplish anything worth while if he is a *man*—regardless of of circumstances!

Personally, I don't like such stories as "Luckett of the Moon," "Beyond the Stars," *et cetera.* They seem to rush the future too much, but I am not *selfish* enough to complain if a few stories are not quite up to the standard. The one complete story which appeared in February 11 issue—"Special Duty"—was worth a dime of any man's money, therefore I haven't any "kick" coming.

Assuring you of *one* more "soldier" in the "ranks" of your *great army* of readers, and continuance of same as long as I can "rustle" the price, I am yours—another "ARGOSY *fiend!*"

R. C. L.

P. S.—May I hope for another good railroad serial in the near future?

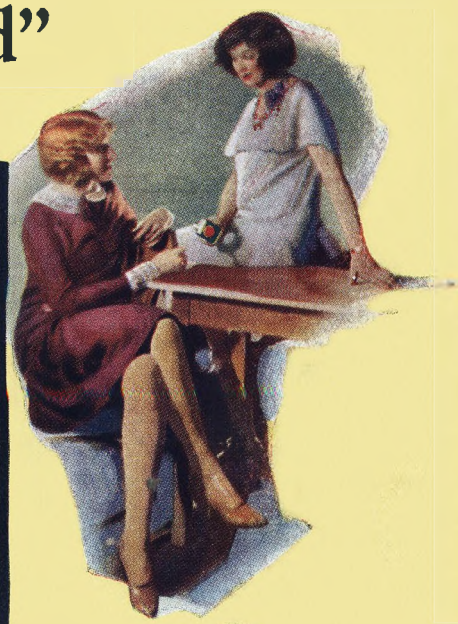
AKRON, OHIO.

I thought ARGOSY was a magazine for men until I read "Luckett of the Moon." Gee! That was a great story. You can count on me as a regular reader looking for more of them. That story ought to satisfy everybody. HOPE P.

Out of two hundred and eighty-five guesses submitted to date—February 13—as to the authorship of "Eyes West!" the fourteenth successful one comes from Hilda M. Worth, of Gansevort, New York, who adds: "Kenneth Perkins, Charles Francis Coe, Charles Alden Seltzer, Hare, and Don Waters are my favorite authors."

"I got the idea from Florenz Ziegfeld"

Said Gladys Glad to Flo Kennedy behind the scenes at The Ziegfeld Theatre between acts of The Follies.



Florenz Ziegfeld, famous theatrical producer, writes:

"As the producer of 'The Ziegfeld Follies' I know full well how important it is for my stars to have clear voices at all times. Several years ago, when I first began to smoke Lucky Strikes, I noticed that my voice remained unirritated after a most strenuous time directing rehearsals. I passed this information on to my stars and now we are all agreed: Lucky Strike is a delightful smoke and most assuredly protects the voice, eliminating any coughing, which often interrupts a perfect performance."

Florenz Ziegfeld

"It's toasted"

No Throat Irritation–No Cough.