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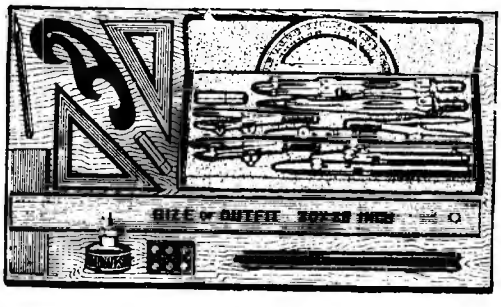

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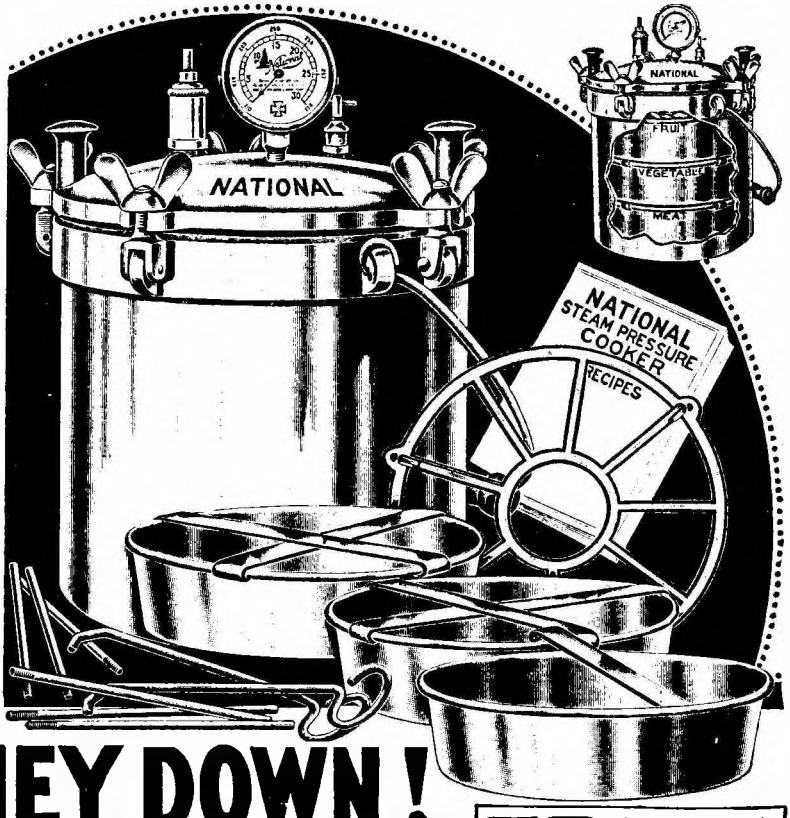

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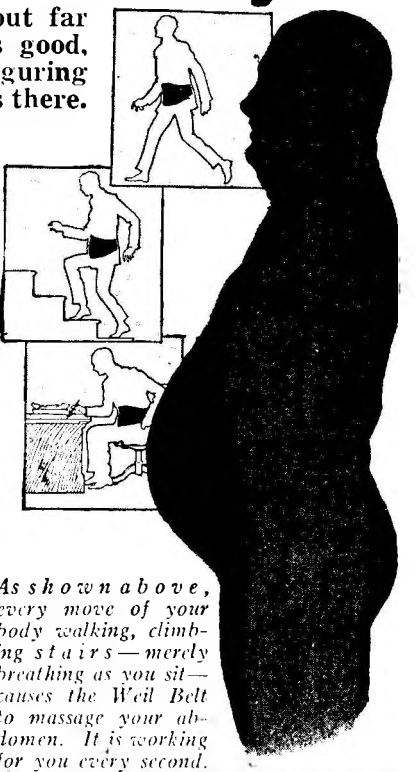

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLX SATURDAY, MAY 17, 1924 NUMBER 2

Tarrapin Toes

By E. K. MEANS

Author of "E. K. Means," "Further E. K. Means," "More E. K. Means," etc.

FOREWORD

MAGAZINES, like men, have their big moments. And for the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY this is a very big moment, for in this issue begins the first book length work of E. K. Means, the noted Southern humorist. Pleasing as the occasion is for the magazine, we confidently believe it will be even more pleasing for the readers.

E. K. Means made his reputation as a writer through his short stories, over fifty of which were published in these pages; in Tarrapin Toes he establishes himself as more than a writer—as an authority on Southern folk, white and colored. He knows them, from birth to "buryin'," and in this novel he shares his knowledge with you.

Characteristically, Mr. Means has not concerned himself with the rules and technique of the novelist; he has a story to tell and real, human people to tell it about, and that's all he cares about. Tarrapin Toes wanders all the way from screaming comedy to stark tragedy and then to the enchanted realm of romance. It is not literature, but life. And since Mr. Means is an optimist, laughter and love prevail.

The author is happiest when he is laughing with the colored folk, for he knows as no other writer knows their quaint superstitions, their spontaneous gayeties, their religious emotionalism, their stalwart loyalties—all the phases of their happy-go-lucky lives. If Buckety does not tickle your ribs with ready laughter, if the Rev. Vinegar Atts, Figger Bush, Pap Curtain, Dee Bester, and Skeeter Butts do not ring true, then negro life will never be revealed in print.

And as for the white people, grown-ups, growing ups, and just started, you'll find these same people in every town. But may you never encounter, even in dreams, that sinister skulker, the Swamp Cat!

In Tickfall Mr. Means has created a Southern village that is as palpably real as any that may be found on a large scale map. And he has done it, not with the lengthy, laborious description of the prosy realist, but with the light, brief touches of one who knows the soul of the place. All the salient features of Tickfall are there. You know that town, but how Mr. Means has revealed it to you without interrupting the swift, gripping course of the story is something only he can tell you.

His is the real South, a South teeming with action, adventure, comedy, under a deceptive cloak of humdrum, easy-going existence.

And as you read, his whimsical magic will translate you, body and mind, to Tickfall, you'll act, not read, the happenings that began by the old town well.

CHAPTER I.

—AND A MONKEY.

IT began with two dogs, two boys, and a monkey.

The star in the village comedy was the monkey. Facing a dog, he stood at the foot of a telephone pole, snarling his contempt in simian language, emphasizing his speech by certain strikingly human gestures which indicated that in his estimation a dog was a dog and that was all there was to him.

The dog resented this and promptly rushed to battle. But the organ grinder's pet was not there to fight. He climbed up the telephone pole and walked along the wires and climbed down the next pole that he came to, while the dog stood insanely barking up the first pole he had climbed. At the foot of the other pole the monkey stood, surveying his assailant with an attitude of contempt only comparable to the action of the ill-bred boy who puts his thumb to his nose and twiddles his fingers. The frantic dog ran across the intervening space, the monkey shinned up the pole a fraction of a second in advance of the canine's snapping teeth, and then walked along the wire and climbed down the other pole to repeat the performance, while the dog stood clawing at the base of the pole he had just climbed, searching his soul for sounds to express his impotence and his fury.

This was not a new thing. Every dog in Tickfall had been annoyed by this monkey's capers. While the dog was rushing from his pole to make another attack upon his tormentor, unexpected canine reënforcements arrived. A cur sneaked around a corner in a rear attack. The monkey, taken by surprise, was caught between two poles, and was compelled to flee across the street with both dogs in hot pursuit.

A crowd had collected to watch the old familiar comedy. A white boy and a negro boy, owners of the two dogs, were ki-yi-ing and earnestly hoping for the monkey's extermination. The little animal sprang upon the curb of the old town well. The two dogs plunged at him, snapping their jaws within an inch of his face. Involuntarily he leaped backward and fell into the well! He struck the water with a loud *spat*, uttered a frightened squall, received loud applause from the Tickfall loafers, and, fortunately, found a friend.

A tall young man named Manse Verdell ran to the well curb and began to lower a bucket suspended on a chain. The monkey did not wait to be drawn up, but climbed the chain and leaped out, standing again upon the well curb. He shivered, shook himself vigorously, slapped his hands across his breast in a perfect imitation of a

human being, and gave utterance to one breath-expulsive exclamation:

"Whee-ee!"

A shout of laughter from the village crowd, several half bricks thrown at the two dogs to indicate to them that the show was over, and the people dispersed, going into their stores, one citizen remarking:

"That dang monk ain't nobody's fool!"

"Who's gonna drink that there well dat a tarrapin toe is good luck?"

"I won't mind it," was the reply. "That little feller warn't big enough to flavor it none."

Then the monkey, to express his gratitude, suddenly leaped into the arms of Manse Verdell. Manse liked the little animal, and was very much attached to him, but in this case the attachment was of brief duration, for this pet was about as agreeable to hold in his arms as a large wet bath-sponge. Profanity, well provoked but unjustifiable, expressed his dissatisfaction, and the monkey leaped to the ground where the sun shined warm, and the youth glowered with wrath at his gray trousers, which had turned dark color where the water had soaked into the cloth. Then he saw the fun in the situation, and laughed. Two boys glared at him with no appreciation of his humor, and finally the white youth said in disgusted tones:

"What you want to bust up our fun for?"

Manse Verdell looked down at the boy with a quizzical smile and said:

"I want the little scrapper to live to fight another day, Tucker. It's nice to pull 'em out and give them another chance."

Thereupon, the little colored boy gave a cackling laugh, whirled around on his bare feet with gestures which presented a fair imitation of the monkey, and announced to the world:

"Dat white folks talks jes' like a preacher. Ya-hoo! Amen! Rescue de perishin', keer fer de dyin', snatch up de little monk outen de well—weep o'er de errin' one, lif' up de fallen, ef you don't yank him out, he'll be dead as hell."

This last was a song, and to its music the two boys began to move away in the direction that their dogs had been chased. Then out of an alley Hastie Melhaven, the town drunkard, staggered in the last stages of physical exhaustion. His fat round face was seamed with the countless wrinkles of laughter, and his fat round body shook like jelly. Tears of pure joy and laughter filled his eyes and ran down the cheeks, marking little white roads for themselves through the dust upon his countenance. He leaned against the curb of the well, still in the hysteria of enjoyment but without the physical strength to express it.

"Gosh dang!" he exclaimed in panting laudation. "That there monkey shore got a laugh out o' me!"

CHAPTER II.

A TERRAPIN TEACHES.

MANSE VERDELL turned from the well and walked slowly down the tree tunnel of overarching boughs toward the Cooley Bayou. He had no destination, except that he loved running water and this was the nearest spot where he could see the flowing stream.

Stepping upon the little bridge, Manse found the same negro boy who had been so interested in the escape of the dogs and the monkey. The colored youth was sitting on the floor of the bridge, his feet hanging over the edge, his arms resting upon one of the bridge side-walls, and his eyes concentrated upon a particular spot upon the edge of the water. For a moment Manse thought he was fishing, but as he stopped beside him he, too, became all concentrated in his attention.

An immense swamp rattlesnake, five feet long, and as big around in the middle as a man's arm, lay upon a little ridge of sand on the edge of the water. Crawling slowly toward him, with almost imperceptible movements, was a land terrapin with a shell about as large as a man's two fists placed together. The snake remained inert until the terrapin's hard shell touched his shining skin.

Instantly the snake was a shining coil, and the tail whirred its warning and its menace. The terrapin's head slipped quick-

ly back into the shell, and the snake beheld nothing but a hard, shining object devoid of life and menace. Finding nothing to fight, the snake's coil slowly loosened, and he was stretching out once more to sun himself in the grateful warmth.

Then slowly the terrapin's head emerged from the shell. Its mouth snapped upon the snake's tail, and the terrapin's head was withdrawn in the shell, the tail firmly captured. Hissing fury of poison and death! A thrashing horror of virulence, splashing its deadliness harmlessly upon the terrapin's hard covering! Again and again the snake writhed and twisted and struck until it fell back in utter exhaustion, twisting its tail about, and dragging the terrapin constantly toward the center of the coil where it must poise to strike. Finally the snake rested for a moment, and the terrapin lay upon the thickest part of its body.

The terrapin's head slowly emerged from its place of refuge, the grip upon the tail was released, and then the snapping jaws of the terrapin closed upon the thick flesh in the center of the snake's body, and once more the terrapin's head sought the shelter of its hard shell! Another exhibition of fury and of fighting, an oozy, slimy, blood-like mess upon the ground, and the two gazed with horror and fascination at the dying struggles of the rattler.

A few minutes later the snake lay helpless upon the sand. The terrapin released his hold and crawled slowly toward the serpent's head. There was no effort at defense upon the part of the snake, for he had been grievously wounded, and his strength was ebbing away. One inch behind the snake's head the terrapin snapped his jaws once more into the serpent's flesh, and the fight was over.

Slowly the terrapin crawled away, crawled to the water's edge, and went in under the water. Five minutes later, washed of all poison, the terrapin emerged from his bath, and the two upon the bridge breathed easier and began to talk.

"Mr. White Boss, is you-all heard tell dat a terrapin toe is good luck?"

"Yes," Verdell answered.

"Us niggers b'lieves in 'em an' totes em," the boy chuckled.

"The terrapin seems to signify that the way to succeed is to get a good grip on something, pull into your shell, and keep quiet until the opposition ceases from weariness and exhaustion; and then slip out of your shell and take another big bite," Verdell remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes, suh, dat's de idee."

"I need some luck pieces. You slip down there and capture that terrapin!" Manse said.

The negro promptly swung over the edge of the bridge railing, walked down the sandy ridge on the edge of the water, and picked up the little creature. Bringing it back to the bridge, he laid it at the feet of Manse, and said:

"Dat's a good one, boss. He done been tried out. Whut he done to dat snake wus a plenty. How many of his toes is you aimin' to tote aroun' fer luck?"

"All of them," Manse answered.

"Want me cut 'em off fer you?" the negro asked, producing a big knife.

"No. I want the terrapin to wear them. I'm going to keep the whole thing for a luck piece. You want to go along with me and take care of him for me?"

The negro surveyed him for a moment as if uncertain of his meaning; then he asked: "Is you mean dat you needs a strong, willin' boy to wuck fer you?"

"That's it."

"Boss, you done got a nigger!" the colored boy replied with a chuckle, as he picked up the terrapin. "When do us start to wuckin' an' whut wuck does us do?"

"Right now," Manse smiled. "Let's go!"

Side by side the two started back toward Tickfall.

After a while Manse asked: "What's your name?"

"Eve'ybody, white an' black, calls me Buckety," the boy replied.

"Where'd you get that name?" Manse wanted to know.

The negro chuckled; his eyes protruded, showing much of the whites. Countless tiny wrinkles rippled across his coal-black face, reminding one of the ripples made by a tiny fish on the surface of a

dark pool. Then the face became smooth again and the voice with its sad minor tones began:

"Well, suh, my las' job wus wuckin' fer a white man. He kep' a grocery sto' an' a jug. He hid de jug in de stove. One kinder coolish mawnin' I built de fire in dat stove, an' sot dat jug on fire, an' de dram exploded. Yes, suh, it shore bust! Dey picked up plugs of chawin' terbacker an' sawdine cans all aroun' dar fer a week atter de bust come off. I went away from dar jes' when de stove cut loose—"

The negro stopped. His feet performed a motion like the loping gait of a galloping horse, and as each clumsy foot struck the street with a peculiar sound the darky gave utterance to an expression indicating speed: "Buckety! Buckety! Buckety!"

They walked on, Manse smiling over the story he had heard.

Finally Buckety said: "Cap'n, whut wuck does us do?"

"Nothing."

"I means to ax you, whut wuck does you do fer a livin'?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, suh, but whut does you aim fer me to do while I is wuckin' fer you?"

"Nothing."

"Bless Gawd! Dat sounds good. But whut pesters my mind am dis: how will us know when we is through? When does us finish doin' nothin'?"

CHAPTER III.

EXPLOSIONS.

THEY stopped at a little frame office building. Buckety sat down on the steps, fondling his terrapin. Manse entered, and an irate voice greeted him at the door:

"Where have you been? What made you so late? Expect me to wait here for you forever?"

The young man looked at his father with indulgent fondness. In earlier years the son had been afraid of this peppery gentleman, but after a certain European experience he had learned that German shells made more noise and splutter than even his father could, and after that he had a sort of amused toleration for the old parental smooth-bore.

"I stopped to rescue a monkey from a well," Manse said with a grin. "By this kind act I offended two boys. I walked down to the Cooley Bridge and found a terrapin, and hired a negro to wait on me."

"Sure! I know!" Verdell snapped, rubbing his bald head with both hands. "That monkey belongs to old Melhaven. That little white boy is the devilish son of old Gabe Roone. Did he have a negro boy with him?"

"Buckety was there, too," Manse smiled.

"And you can't separate 'em," Verdell added. "That Tuck Roone brat thinks up as much devilment as that monkey. He and that little monkey negro get into all kinds of scrapes. They've got two dogs, too. I'd like to poison the whole outfit. By damn—"

He broke off suddenly and looked at his son with a surprised recollection of something else he had just heard him say. Then:

"What's that you told me about finding a terrapin and hiring a boy?"

"I've done both," Manse grinned. "They're out there on the step."

"What for?" Verdell snapped.

"The terrapin for luck, and the negro for 'wuck,' Manse smiled.

"Lord, forgive me for being the daddy of a fool," Verdell said disgustedly, as he broke three matches in an effort to light the ragged end of a worn and battered cigar. When one match finally struck into flame, the head of it flew off and fell into his lap.

"By damn!" he howled, as he sprang up, pawed at his clothes, and danced up and down. "I'm about to set my fool self on fire. You and a negro and a terrapin will make a fine outfit. What in the thunder did you want to see me about? What did you come down here for? If it's money—not another cent."

"Tain't money; it's matrimony," Manse grinned. "I want to marry the dearest, sweetest, prettiest—"

"Oh, gosh, by damn, I get you!" Verdell, Sr., interrupted impatiently. "*Et cetera*

and so forth, *ad finitum*, also *nauseam*. What did you say her name was?"

"I haven't said yet," Manse grinned. "I made this engagement with you in order that I might announce her name down at this office. It is rather a remote spot, no ladies present, and the people living here are accustomed to your manners."

Manse hesitated a moment as if preparing himself for the explosion which he expected. Then he spoke a name intc the ears of his parent:

"Miss Lois Roone!"

"No, no, no!" Verdell howled, springing to his feet. "No, no, no! Blank-dash it, no! Never in a thousand years! I won't have a red-headed, snub-nosed, ill-tempered Roone around me—no!"

"The lady I refer to is golden-haired, dainty, piquant - featured, vivacious—" Manse began, and then broke off, for his father's manifestation of wrath was such that he seemed about to destroy himself by his internal violence.

"No!" Verdell howled. "We're talking about the same person, but the viewpoint is different. I'm referring to that baby-faced, feeble-minded, bob-haired, bobtail daughter of that old white-headed, white-whiskered, whited sepulcher of an imbecile, hypocrite, and moral paralytic, Gabe Roone!"

There was a good deal more of this sort of thing, and then old Verdell subsided, and for a time nothing was said by either father or son. Manse was serene, his father seething with internal emotion.

Forty years before, a difference of opinion had arisen between Roone and Verdell over a line fence. Roone raised fine horses, and wanted a smooth-wire fence. Verdell raised fine cattle, and wanted a barbed-wire fence. The two could never agree, so each built the kind of fence he wanted.

Between their two beautiful plantations there were two fences, one foot apart, one of smooth wire and one of barbed wire, running for a mile in length. The space between the two men was wider than their fences. The distance had been increased by countless annoyances and irritations through the years, based on social, political and business rivalry.

To Manse the whole thing was ridiculous. To Lois Roone it was absurd. They saw no reason why they could not pull down both fences and unite the plantations into one.

Manse tossed aside his cigarette and stood up.

"I think I'll go tell Lois what you think about her," he grinned.

"Huh!" Mr. Verdell grunted.

Outside the door he took his lucky terrapin in his hand and stood caressing its slick, hard back. Then he looked up and gazed at his irate and explosive father with the most disarming and engaging boyish smile, and said: "Good-by, sweetie!"

CHAPTER IV.

A PROBLEM FOR COLONEL ROONE.

COLONEL GABE ROONE was occupying his favorite seat on a side porch under the shade of a big pecan tree. On the other side of that tree was a lawn swing. Near the swing Tucker Roone and a little neighbor girl were playing. Buckety sat near the trunk of the tree, playing with a terrapin.

At intervals Roone could catch phrases of their conversation. The word circus caught his ear and stirred his attention. There is magic in that word as long as one lives on the earth. Listening, Roone learned that the youngsters were planning a circus parade.

"We can put our cat in a box and haul it on my little wagon," the little girl said. "That will be our tiger."

"And we will put my new owl in some kind of cage, and that will be our American eagle," Tuck suggested.

"I knows what us kin git a goat, and 'twon't be no trouble to git plenty of dogs," Buckety contributed to the conversation.

"Of course, we can get the monkey and put him in the show, and maybe we can borrow Old Flounce's parrot; but we will have to borrow him without letting Flounce know," Tuck proposed.

"We can get calves and ponies and pigs," the girl announced.

"I know a feller who has got a pet coon and some white rabbits," Tuck declared.

" Mr. Manse Verdell owns dis here land tarrapin I'm nussin' fer him," Buckety informed them. " Mebbe he will lend us de loant of de tarrapin."

Roone's attention was attracted by something in the paper, and half an hour passed before he thought of the children again. One sentence spoken by Tuck caused him to look up from his reading. The sentence linked the name of Lois Roone with Manse Verdell. Without moving his paper from in front of his face, he listened and observed what followed.

Tuck and the little girl walked over and sat down in the swing. There was a conversation between them which Roone could not hear, but he caught the low murmur of their suppressed voices and realized that the tone of each child's voice had changed. Tuck was trying to imitate the voice of Manse Verdell, and the girl was playing the part of Miss Lois Roone.

It was clear to Roone that Manse and Lois had occupied that swing at some previous time, and these children had observed their ways and were now imitating them. They were acting the game of love according to the example which had been set by the two lovers.

Roone found this extremely interesting and somewhat disconcerting. Up to that moment it had not come to him that there was any association whatever between his daughter and Verdell's son. But now the proof before him was not open to doubt. The murmuring love tones of those children, like the cooing of doves in the branches of a tree, presented indisputable evidence.

Tuck reached over and laid his hand upon the little girl's hand. She promptly placed his hand back on Tuck's knee, and said:

" Please behave yourself. I do not want to hold your hand."

But Tuck was not disturbed by this rebuff. He repeated his offense two or three times, and the little girl's tone changed to a sort of appeal:

" Don't do that, please. I don't like that."

But Tuck still acting the part of Manse, was not restrained by the plea. Finally his hand rested upon his companion's little dirty hand, and she not only consented to let it stay there, but covered it with her other hand! Roone knew from this that Manse had won the first point in the game of love.

Buckety, who had been watching this with eyes which nearly popped from his head, broke out into an insane cackle of African hilarity.

Hidden behind the paper, the face of Roone would have made an interesting study for the moving picture screen in its panorama of conflicting emotions. There was surprise, perplexity, annoyance, then complete disapproval. Finally the face bore an expression of profound meditation. Roone was thinking back into the past and thinking forward into the future. But his thoughts were interrupted. There was a nervous protest, uttered in an excited voice in the swing:

" Quit, Manse, quit!"

Peeping over the top of his paper, Roone saw Tuck with his arm around the little girl's waist. She had seized Tuck's hand and was trying to pull it away from her body. Roone acutely observed that she was not trying very hard. After a moment, there was a little struggle in which the girl tore herself frem Tuck's grasp.

Tuck did not seem to be disturbed by this failure. He waited a few minutes and tried again. This time the note of protest was not as keen and had lost the tone of nervous excitement. It was a sort of murmur:

" Please don't do that!"

But Tuck persisted in his amorous intention and in a moment the girl settled down into a sort of sweet contentment, enfolded in her lover's arms. Their voices calmed to a cooing murmur as they maintained that attitude of close embrace and behind the paper the face of Roone became another study of expression for the moving picture artist.

Once more, Buckety laughed his appreciation of the show with genuine Ethiopian abandon.

The love play ended abruptly.

" Look!" Tuck exclaimed. " We forgot all about our new furnace!"

The boys ran over to a corner of the

yard and began to work at a new amusement. The little girl, unceremoniously abandoned, wrinkled her infantile nose at them and went home. With a few bricks, the boys constructed something in the likeness of a furnace. Across the top of these bricks, they placed a shiny new can which had contained either gasoline or petroleum. Their idea was to fill this can with water, making a small hole in the top for the escapement of steam. With a little ingenuity this escaping steam could be made to blow a whistle. Imagination would do the rest and the boys would have what they called a steam engine.

While Buckety went after a bucket of water to pour into the boiler, Tuck constructed a fire in the furnace. They knew very little about steam boilers and their idea was to heat the boiler first and then pour in the water, just as Buckety had seen his mother heat the skillet before she fried the meat.

As the fire grew hot the gasoline or oil which still remained in the container was converted into gas and this gas had no way of escape. The boys had failed to punch a hole in the top of the can as a safety valve, for the time had not yet come in their operations to make their whistle.

Then something happened. Tuck was picked up beside a rose bush in an unconscious condition, Buckety was found insensible in the corner of the fence. There were two dead chickens lying near, a few broken bricks, and a hole in the ground where there had been a fire. The same afternoon, a neighbor living a hundred yards away picked up a layer of battered tin in her yard, the remnants of some kind of can, and wondered how the thing came there.

Tuck, being a white child was brought to consciousness by aid of a physician, put to bed amid the fluttering attentions of the excited women of the household, inquired about over the telephone by a number of friends and neighbors, called on by the preacher, and sent a lot of delicacies to eat while he was convalescent.

Buckety, being a negro child, was stretched out upon the ground, was restored to consciousness by having cold water poured on his head, was lifted to his feet by rough and unsympathetic hands, and was told to "get to hell out of there!"

Miss Lois Roone arrived in the midst of the excitement, and when everything had quieted, she seated herself upon the porch beside her father. Colonel Roone waited a minute, and then began:

"Lois, what is that scalawag son of old Verdell doing around here?"

That was not a very good start, but it was as good as any man in the world could have done. What man can talk to a girl who is in love?

Lois's face flushed, but she looked at the colonel with the incomprehending innocence of a glass-eyed doll.

"Where?" she asked.

"Here!" Roone answered shortly, with a gesture toward the lawn swing.

The girl did not reply.

Roone sat for a long time in such complete silence that he gave Lois the fidgets. As far as she was concerned, her father had always been as plastic as wax under her manipulation. She made her demands like a queen to her favorite servant, and he had always given her what she wanted in the surrender of complete infatuation.

She knew that she was now against a solid granite wall built up by years of antagonism between her father and the father of the man she loved. Their animosity antedated the birth of both herself and Manse Verdell. There had been brief periods of truce, but when these ended, matters had been worse than ever.

There was a great difference between the two men. Verdell, through all the years had fussed and spluttered, jerked cigars out of his pocket, broken matches in an effort to light them, dropped cigars on the floor, stooped over to pick them up and let his glasses drop from his nose. His animosity was an unholy spectacle for the irreverent.

Colonel Roone's dislike was characterized by serene composure, his handsome face unmarred by any expression of animosity, and through all the years his dislike was unshaken by a single thunderclap. For him, Verdell simply did not exist.

At last Roone spoke:

"I don't want any Verdell to marry into my family."

The girl made no reply. Nothing but a nervous twisting of her fingers indicated that she had heard.

Roone turned and looked at the girl, the light of extreme fondness glowing in his fine eyes. Then he tried again:

"Look here, Lois, I can't talk to a girl who acts like she is deaf and dumb. I can't ever talk to a woman and get anywhere. Right now, I feel like a snake that's got its tail in its mouth—just going round and round!"

"What is it you think you want to try to say?" Lois asked with a sympathetic chuckle, as she rose and sat upon the arm of his chair, and placed her fingers in his thick white hair. "Maybe I can help you to go straight."

The telephone rang. Lois, with a prayer of pure thankfulness, excused herself and hastened to answer.

Two minutes later, she appeared, dressed to go out.

"Miss Caby is taken quite sick again," she announced, "and she has asked me to come down there to her."

For a moment after Lois had gone, Roone was oppressed with a sense of failure and defeat. Then he thought of Miss Caby Proman, and brightened up.

"I'm a fool," he reflected. "I might have known I could not talk to that girl. I'll get Old Flounce to talk to her!"

CHAPTER V.

"TO-MORROW NIGHT."

MISS CABY PROMAN had been Miss Caby so long that many people had forgotten that she was a widow, and that somewhere in the world she possessed a son who was a bum, a tramp, or a wandering boy of that general description. She was "Miss Caby" because for over thirty years she had been a school-teacher. That was the name by which the children called her, and as nearly every white child in Tickfall in the past thirty years had been taught by her, the title was of almost general application.

Some of the older men who had constituted Miss Caby's earliest pupils, called her "Old Flounce." Years before when the streets of Tickfall were not paved, this young school-teacher had navigated the mud by wearing boots like a man. She concealed the boots under the long skirts of that period, and endeavored to effect a more complete concealment by wearing many frills around the bottom of her dress—hence her nickname.

Old Flounce was as tall as an ordinary man, and there was much that was masculine in her appearance. She taught with authority and power. She was the intellectual light of Tickfall and took especial pride in the fact that she was the president of the Tickfall Dramatic Club.

Several years before something had happened in Miss Caby's life which had given her a nervous shock. Nothing was known except that her son who had been away from home for years, had returned to Tickfall and had remained two days and disappeared. Miss Caby had never been the same, from that day.

Then had come the world war. It seemed to have the most tragic and dreadful influence upon this teacher. Some surmised that her son had gone into the war, and then as time passed and Miss Caby's condition grew more distressing, that the boy had been wounded or killed. But those who knew most of the woman's unfortunate marriage and her worthless son asked no questions, and the others were not sufficiently interested to inquire.

After the war, Miss Caby showed no improvement. Once when she was asked when last she had heard of her son, she answered:

"Not since he came to see me last."

All that Miss Caby could wish her son had been, Manse Verdell was. He had been her pupil and in the development of his fine mind and the growth of his handsome body, she had taken a real maternal interest. He was her own boy, dearer to her because his own mother was dead. For her, on his part, Manse had a sincere affection. All her little business affairs, he conducted. Boylike, he showed his affection best by thinking up a thousand different ways to tease and annoy her.

Miss Lois Roone had been especially

prompt in answering the telephone call to Miss Caby, because the voice which summoned her was that of Manse Verdell. She entered a little cottage which sat back in a small yard almost completely filled with vines and shrubbery. Passing one door as she walked down the hall, she entered the next room, and there on the bed lay the sick woman.

"Is it your poor head again?" Lois asked. "And have you sent for the doctor? Shall I—"

"I've got no patience with these old doctors," Miss Caby snapped. "Some of them are fools and the rest are ignoramuses."

Lois heard noises in the kitchen which indicated that somebody was at work about the stove. Then Manse came in carrying a hot water bottle and the grin on his face was one of supreme delight at the job he had to perform and the nurse he had secured for his patient. He stepped forward in a professional manner and laid his fingers upon the wrist of his old teacher, under pretense of feeling her pulse. Changing his tone to the fine imitation of a physician, he asked:

"What seems to be the trouble, madam? Does everything you eat stop in your stomach?"

"Stop your foolishness," the suffering woman moaned.

"That's too bad," Manse said, his face as solemn as the face of a horse. "How long have you been afflicted this way?"

Manse looked at her a moment as if wondering what to do next. Then he bethought himself of the hot water bag which he was carrying. Handing it to Lois, he said:

"Nurse, the patient says her stomach ails her. I don't believe I know where the stomach is located. Would you mind?"

"Don't pay any attention to him, Lois," Miss Caby said sharply. "I taught him in school and he was always an idiot. I am suffering with rheumatism. Put that bag to my feet."

While Lois was ministering to the suffering woman, Manse sat down on the side of the bed and watched the girl. When she had finished and seated herself, Manse said:

"Aunt Caby, I know a wonderful remedy for rheumatism. Negro remedy—the best there is. Negroes got it from the Indians. It's a sure cure, but you can't monkey with it."

"What is it?" Miss Caby asked eagerly.

"Rattlesnake oil in whisky. You don't drink it—you rub it on. I've got some rattlesnake oil and some whisky at the house. All I have to do is to mix 'em. Then you rub it on, and all is well!"

"You go get it at once," Miss Caby ordered in that old school-teacherish tone which she used so well. "Lois will stay with me until you get back."

When Manse returned, he handed her a quart bottle, full of a ropy whisky-colored liquid, and said:

"Now, Miss Caby, rub it on and walk a mile or two every day. Take plenty of exercise, and make daily applications of the liniment. And for goodness' sake, don't drink this stuff—don't take even a little taste—there's enough poison in this bottle to kill an army. Keep it where nobody else can find it."

"I'll go to the kitchen and fix you some broth," Lois said.

"That's the idea," Manse agreed. "We'll feed Miss Caby, rub her up like a racehoss, and let her single-foot around town a while."

When they entered the kitchen and shut the door, Manse smiled:

"You have fixed it so we can be together undisturbed for the next fifteen minutes. I have fixed it so that Old Flounce will have to go out for that walk. Then we will remain here and keep house for her, undisturbed, while she is gone."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Lois told him.

"I ought to be given some great reward," Manse answered, coming nearer in case she wished to administer the reward. "I have done a fine work. Miss Caby is on the way to recovery, you are here and I am here, and everything is lovely."

During this speech he had drawn constantly closer to the girl and now he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I had a row with my father this morning," Manse announced when this ceremony

was over. "He does not like the Roone family and does not wish any domestic alliance with any member thereof. He says the Roones are no good. He doesn't hold the same opinion of you that I do!"

"I had a talk with my father this morning," Lois giggled. "That is, he talked to me. It's wonderful how little he thinks of the Verdell family. He says they are no good. I don't agree with him, entirely."

"These old guys don't like each other even a little bit," Manse announced. "Two or three times I have known them to bury the hatchet, but they always left the handle sticking out, and in a little while they would be chopping at each other again."

The two young folks looked at each other and laughed. There may have been a time when the disapproval of parents or guardians to a matrimonial alliance might thwart the purpose of two lovers. But these two at this time did not care a hoot whether old man Verdell liked old man Roone or not. They loved each other and all the rest was fun. Finally Manse said:

"Let's run off and get married and let the old men fight it out."

"When?" Lois asked.

"To-morrow night," Manse answered.

"I'll be waiting for you at twelve o'clock," Lois answered, her eyes sparkling in anticipation of the adventure.

Then followed ten minutes in which they were unconscious of their surroundings, and were brought back to practical realities by the odor of scorched food.

Of course, they had to start the food all over again, Also the love making began again, Manse helped up to a certain point and then resigned.

"You do the rest, Lois," he said. "I've got to go and make arrangements for my wedding."

CHAPTER VI.

BUCKETY! BUCKETY! BUCKETY!

THE next morning Manse was busy about many things concerned with his secret designs for the evening. His automobile was carefully inspected and set in order for a rapid trip. Reservations at a hotel in a neighboring city had been secured. Money was drawn from the bank, and all other things were being put in readiness for the elopement.

Going down the street, Manse was stopped by Hastie Melhaven.

"Did you hear the news?" he asked.

"Nope."

"Tucker Roone, old Gabe's brat, is dead," Hastie informed him.

"What?" Manse exclaimed in surprise.

"I got it right I reckon. That little nigger named Buckety told me. I asked him how Tuck was, and he said he was dead. Told everybody the same thing. They always played together, and they both got blowed up together in the explosion. Everybody knows it but you."

Manse turned away, distressed at this news, and wishing he might go to Lois and console her. But the Roone home was not open to him and he could only write her a note of sympathy and wait until he could meet her away from her home.

Of course, now all arrangements for their elopement must be abandoned until after the funeral. Manse hastened uptown and found that the news had spread everywhere. Numbers of people were talking about it on the streets and all of them said that Buckety had told them. A number of men had telephoned their wives of the tragedy in the Roone family and they had gathered flowers and started for the house of sorrow.

This gave Manse an idea. Jumping in his automobile, he raced up to his own home, cut the costliest and most beautiful flowers in his yard, tied them up in the best imitation he could remember of a floral offering, then, jumped into the machine and rode to the Roone house.

Loading himself down with these floral offerings until he looked like the sacred bull which the ancient Greeks used to adorn when set apart for sacrificial slaughter, he walked up the pavement and saw Roone occupying his favorite seat on the side porch near the pecan tree. He staggered around to where Roone sat, even as the sacrificial ox went toward the butcher who stood with a sharp knife in his hand.

"I am sorry to know the bad news, colo-

nel," he announced, as he laid all the flowers upon the porch. "That was a bright little boy, and I certainly regret the tragedy which ended his life. I hope you will accept these flowers with the expression of my sympathy and regret."

Roone looked him over with the expressionless face of a professional poker player. Here was the son of his lifelong enemy, advancing up the walk, draped with flowers and looking like an idiot. It was like the son of old Verdell to be guilty of some imbecility like that.

"What the devil are you talking about?" Roone asked.

"I refer to Tucker. I am sorry to hear of his death. I brought these flowers with my regrets," was Manse's answer.

Roone gazed at him with utter incomprehension of his meaning.

"What did you say these flowers were for?" Roone asked. "I don't understand."

Manse thought a moment and began again:

"I just heard of the tragic result of the explosion. Sorry to know that the little boy is dead. I am sure you will miss him very much. He was a bright boy, and everybody liked him."

It occurred to Roone that they were not getting anywhere. His next question was exactly the same as his first:

"What the devil are you talking about?"

Manse stood before him confused by his dullness of comprehension. Surely the old foozle ought to understand when floral offerings were brought to a house where death had occurred. The young man did not know how to say any more than he had said. So there he stood, in his embarrassment looking more and more like Roone in his heart thought he was, a sublimated idiot.

"You are old Verdell's son, are you not?" Roone asked finally.

"Yes, sir."

"What are you doing here?" Roone snapped.

"I brought these flowers," Manse said, with a gesture toward the floral offerings.

"Who ordered these flowers?" Roone inquired.

"Nobody. I just brought them," Manse replied with some embarrassment.

"Take them back with you when you go," Roone replied in a tone of finality. "I don't want them."

Promptly Manse stooped and gathered up his flowers. From the corner of his eye he could see a procession of women entering the front gate, all of them bearing floral offerings. He picked up his and hurried around the house and met the advancing procession.

"Colonel Roone is on the side porch, ladies," he said. "If you have no objections, please take these flowers I have brought and add them to yours. Tell Colonel Roone that I regret the unfortunate event that has happened in his family."

He stood in the middle of the yard and watched the women go around the side of the house. He listened and heard a number of expressions which indicated that all minds were in confusion and a mistake had happened somewhere. When the confusion of talk became general, and everybody seemed to be trying to talk at once, an automobile rolled into the yard and stopped at tne Roone front door.

The machine was driven by a negro chauffeur, and Tuck was sitting beside him, his face bound up with bandages. But he was very much alive. The women, hearing the automobile, came around the side of the house still bearing their floral offerings. They informed Roone of the rumor of the street that Tucker was dead, the first that the Roone family had heard of the tragedy.

While the crowd was gathered around the machine, and everybody was trying to explain to everybody else, Buckety had the misfortune to come slinking from around the house like a stray black cat. Instantly they pounced upon him and dragged him to the automobile and stood him in front of Colonel Roone. The boy was frightened.

"Buckety, did you tell everybody that Tuck was dead?" Roone demanded.

"Yessuh!" Buckety said, showing the whites of his eyes.

"Didn't you know that Tuck was not dead?" Roone thundered.

"Yessuh," Buckety quavered.

"Why did you tell that lie?" Roone bawled.

"Everybody axed me how Marse Tuck wus, I tole 'em all he wus better till I got tired sayin' dat. Then I up'n tole 'm he wus dead—fer a change."

Everybody laughed, and Buckety looked with frightened eyes at Tuck. Tuck made a slight gesture with his thumb.

Buckety took the hint. He dodged like a rabbit and ran for his life—buckety, buckety, buckety!

And as Buckety loped out of the lawn, Hastie Melhaven staggered in. His features seemed to have disintegrated and run together in his paroxysms of laughter. He pressed both hands against his sides, and seemed about to fall from weakness.

"Lord, what do you know about that?" he whooped, in the midst of his demoniac laughter. "That little coon made it all up out of his head. Gosh, that pickaninny shore got a laugh outa me!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE SWAMP CAT SPOILS PLANS.

IT was nearly midnight when the Swamp Cat came slinking into town.

He came to town on business, and he preferred to transact that business as invisibly as possible. He appeared upon the edge of the swamp, crossed a long pasture, climbed a steep hill, and stood at last under a pecan tree beside a porch of the Roone home. Beneath that pecan tree was a swing. Several of the tree's branches extended over the roof of the porch. The Swamp Cat climbed to the cross-piece on top of the swing, grasped a branch of the tree, walked out on the limb, and leaped noiselessly over to the roof of the porch.

A window above this porch roof was open. The Swamp Cat knew that it was the window of a bedroom. He had played around this old home years before when he was a little boy. He hesitated just a minute to assure himself that all was quiet within, and then climbed over the sill and stood inside. In just a second his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, and he was struck into immobility by the dim vision of a human figure sitting in a chair not ten feet away.

He strained his eyes to catch the first movement of the person sitting in the chair. At the slightest motion he intended to fall flat upon the floor and thus avoid a bullet wound. But the inmate of the room for some strange reason did not fire at the intruder. This gave the Cat a little courage and he whispered hoarsely.

"Don't shoot!"

The answer was a low musical chuckle from a girl's throat. Evidently she was expecting him or somebody else, for in a low tone as noiseless as a whisper she said:

"You ought to be shot. Do you expect me to climb out of this house by swinging off the limbs of the trees? Why did you not bring a ladder?"

The Swamp Cat decided it was time for him to go. If this girl was expecting somebody to arrive with a ladder, he did not want to be there when the expected visitor came. As if in response to her suggestion to get the ladder, he turned to the window and stepped out. As he stood on the porch the girl came to the window and whispered.

"You can find the ladder down at the barn where I told you it was. You might as well take my suit case with you now."

She placed the suit case on the sill of the window. The Swamp Cat reached for it, and dropped it noiselessly off the porch into a flower bed beside the house. Then he went over the edge of the roof to the ground, retrieved the suit case, and disappeared.

Miss Lois Roone sat for a long time at the window waiting for Manse to return with the ladder.

The Swamp Cat hastened down the street toward the business portion of the town carrying the suit case. He entered the first convenient alley in the rear of a store, and there in a little shed, he examined its contents by the light of an electric flash. He was disappointed in his loot. The suit case contained a great many things that would be valuable to a girl. If the young lady was planning to travel, she did not put either her money or her jewels in her traveling bag. The Swamp Cat was interested in nothing else.

But the Swamp Cat delighted in shielding his operations by beclouding them with

mysterious and unaccountable things. As he had other business in Tickfall that night, he decided to take the suit case with him. He walked up the street and stopped at a certain house which he surveyed for a moment with a thoughtful grin.

Inside that house Old Flounce had lived for more than fifty years. The front yard was a perfect jungle of rosebush growths. Nearly all the rosevines were trailing on barbed wire, and a winding path led from the gate up to the front door.

In the rear yard grew nearly every variety of grape, and these vines trailed over barbed wire stretched from post to post. There were very narrow passageways between the strands of wire where one might walk to gather grapes.

The Swamp Cat remembered from his boyhood that Miss Caby always kept her purse hidden in a hole in the wall back of a tall grandfather's clock. He reflected that old people did not change their habits. She had doubtless kept her money in that same hole through all the years.

Walking cautiously down the winding path between the rosebushes, he pushed up an old fashioned window and stepped into the room. Then he precipitately stepped out, followed by a series of piercing screams. As he ran down the winding walk, he suddenly remembered that he had left the suit case beside the window. It brought him up with a jerk: then, chuckling with amusement, he traveled on with the speed and noiselessness of a shadow. Behind him in the midst of the excited screams of the woman, he distinctly heard the words:

"Thief! Robber! Help!"

The Swamp Cat did not know that Miss Caby had been kept awake that night by her rheumatism. Awakened by the sound of screaming, the men in the neighborhood hastily dressed and started from every direction to the help of the lady. Some rushed in from the rear and in the darkness became confused among the grapevines and stumbled, and tripped, and fell, and tore themselves upon the barbed wire. Some rushed in from the front, and in the darkness they became entangled in the rosevines, and their clothes were nearly torn off their bodies on the barbed wire. Some of the men became so confused in the jungle of vines that they could not find their way out at all, and had to be rescued by their friends when the excitement was all over.

Two men managed to get inside the house, one advancing from the rear with a baseball bat, and the other advancing from the front with a pistol. The two men met in the dining room, each mistaking the other for a robber, and the battle was on! The man with the baseball bat had most advantage because the man with the pistol was a poor marksman. One flying bullet put out the only light burning in the house, and the battle ended, neither man hurt except where they had hurt themselves by tearing their bodies on the strands of barbed wire.

After things had quieted a little, Miss Caby explained that she had seen a man enter the room, and when she screamed, he ran away.

As the excitement subsided they suddenly heard a steady sound of sawing as if some man was trying to work his way into the house by cutting a hole through the floor of the house.

The men tiptoed out and began a cautious investigation. One of them turned a flash light under the house and the cause of the sawing sound was revealed. A neighbor's pet pig had entered the yard and gone under the house and he was solemnly scratching his back by rubbing it up and down against one of the foundations of the building.

As the man turned away to enter the house, he stumbled over a suit case and fell sprawling in a mass of barbed wire and rose vines. He rose from there, picked up the suit case and carried it into the house. The crowd gathered to inspect the discovery and an identification tag on the handle of the bag contained the name of Roone.

"Whoever attempted to rob this house, had already robbed Roone's home," somebody suggested. "I move that we go find out what has happened up there."

Very quietly the crowd of men walked up the hill to the Roone home. They entered cautiously from a side gate, just as Manse came around the corner of the barn carrying a long ladder.

Manse dropped his ladder and ran. The

men hearing the noise of the falling ladder began to fire off their pistols and call to the fugitive to halt.

Manse was not accustomed to fleeing from pursuers, so his only mode of flight was to run down the middle of the street toward the main portion of the town. As he passed the courthouse, he ran into the widespread arms of the sheriff, John Flournoy. A brief struggle ensued, and Manse might have escaped from this officer if reenforcements had not arrived from those in pursuit. They closed in on the struggling young man, and he soon found all escape was hopeless. They put him under arrest and led him to the office of the sheriff in the courthouse. When they saw whom they had captured the ardor of the men cooled appreciably.

"What are you doing out so late at night, young man?" Sheriff Flournoy asked, smiling at the inanity of his question.

"I won't tell," Manse answered.

"Why were you up at Roone's home with a ladder?" the sheriff inquired, and several men chuckled audibly.

"I don't think I ought to say," Manse replied.

"We'll have you charged with trespassing," the sheriff said. "Have you got nothing to say, no explanation?"

"Nothing to say," Manse replied with evident embarrassment.

At that moment an automobile stopped in front of the courthouse, and Colonel Roone climbed out and came into the room. He greeted all the men and then asked:

"What is all this racket about? Who is arrested, and what for?"

"Manse is arrested," Flournoy told him. "He was seen in your yard carrying a ladder."

Roone turned and glared at the young man, becoming irate at the mere mention of the Verdell name.

"Up at my house, was he? Old Verdell's brat. Trying to steal something, I reckon. No good in any Verdell I ever saw."

Then he turned and looked Manse over in a patronizing way, and said:

"Sonny, does your father know you are out?"

"No," Manse grinned. "He does not know I am out, and he does not know I have been run in. I would like to telephone him and inform him of that fact."

"The telephone is in the other room," the sheriff informed him.

Manse walked into the other room and pulled the door shut behind him.

At the telephone, Manse decided to take a chance and telephone Lois and inform her of his predicament. He asked for Roone's number, and the following conversation took place, for Miss Lois was awake, and aware that something unusual had happened, because Manse had not come back for her:

"Is that you, Lois? This is Manse. I have been arrested by the sheriff and constable and about ten men."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the hold-over at the courthouse. Colonel Roone has just arrived. They are trying to find out something, but I won't talk. Don't you tell anything yourself."

"Why were you arrested?"

"They discovered me in the yard carrying the ladder."

"Why didn't you bring the ladder in the first place? What made you climb the tree and come up on the roof of the porch?"

"Who?"

"You!"

"Did what? When?"

"Don't be silly. You climbed up on the porch from the pecan tree and came into my room, and I sent you after the ladder."

"I didn't."

"You did."

"I say I didn't."

"Look here, Manse, what did you do with my suit case?"

"I didn't see your suit case. I never had your old suit case. What suit case?"

"When you came up in my room and climbed out of a window I gave you my suit case and you dropped it off the edge of the porch. You know you did."

"I didn't."

"You did."

"I didn't."

"Why, Manse Verdell! You did! *Good* night!"

There was a finality to that last expression, and Manse heard a click in his ear which indicated that the girl had hung up the receiver. He sat for a moment considering the advisability of telephoning his father. Then he decided not to do it. He would wait until morning.

He returned to the room where the men were sitting.

"Well, did you get the old man?" Flournoy asked.

"No, I did not try. I called up somebody else," Manse answered.

"Who was that?" somebody asked.

"None of your business," Manse answered in a surly tone.

The men sat around for a while longer trying to get Manse to say something that would explain the events of the night. When he positively refused to talk, Flournoy said:

"I think we will let you go. It will be no trouble to find you when we want you, and we will likely want to talk to you tomorrow. Good night!"

Without a word Manse arose and left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOST—A REPUTATION.

WHEN Manse had gone, Sheriff Flournoy turned to Colonel Roone and said:

"Somebody tried to rob the Proman home to-night. She screamed, and the neighbors ran to her rescue. They did not capture anybody, but they found a suit case. It appears to be the property of a member of your household.

"Let me see it," Roone said.

He promptly identified the bag and its contents as belonging to Lois Roone.

"I don't know a thing about it," Roone said. "I will call Lois on the phone and ask her if she has missed anything."

Miss Lois answered the telephone call.

"The sheriff found your suit case containing some of your nice dresses," Roone told her. "What about this?"

"Where did he find it?" she inquired nervously.

"He found it in the Proman home, where somebody tried to break in and rob Old Flounce," Roone answered.

This amazing information struck Lois speechless. She simply had too many things to think about at the same time. She could not see why Manse should take her suit case and carry it over to the Proman home and try to rob his old teacher, and then come back to her without the suit case and be caught while carrying the ladder to the porch.

The incident chilled the very marrow of the girl. Before every maiden contemplating matrimony there is a big question mark. She has read how men have betrayed, how men have proved false, and at that critical hour as she approaches her own wedding the flags of terror easily wave in her eyes, and the slightest thing may turn her love to suspicion and great dread. At that moment she hated Manse as she never hated any one in all her pleasant, genial days. Colonel Roone's voice spoke through the telephone:

"Hello! Are you still there?"

"Yes, daddy, I'm still here. I'm thinking. Please bring my suit case home with you. I'll tell you about it when you come."

Before Roone could answer there was a sound like a sob and the telephone connection was broken.

Roone entered the room where the men were sitting.

"I'll take my girl's suit case back to her," he said. "I think we had better postpone any further investigation until tomorrow. She says she has something she wants to tell me."

The men all parted at the door, and Roone got in his machine and went to his home. The girl met him at the door and they stopped in the reception room. Roone placed the suit case beside a chair and sat down, and the girl sank down on his lap.

In a quiet voice she told him of her love for Manse Verdell, of their plans to elope that night, of his taking her suit case and disappearing from the porch, and she had heard of him no more until he telephoned her from the courthouse when he denied that she gave him the suit case and said he knew nothing about it.

During the recital the girl had wept a little, but her indignation flared up at the miserable fiasco of love's dream, and she concluded the story with the statement:

"And now, daddy, it is all over between us. I hate that imbecile child. I will never have another thing to do with him as long as I live."

"Do you mean that, Lois?" Roone asked quietly.

"I mean it," she said, and Roone could feel her body become tense with feeling like the body of a cat, as she spoke. "If I had him here I could kill him."

In quieter moments, if Roone was in a reflective mood, he could easily have recalled other little annoyances in the girl's career when her words had been just as bitter toward other people and other things. She had threatened to kill girl chums, and had been seen the next day with her arms around their necks. She had threatened to burn up automobiles which refused to do her bidding, and then had ridden in them for many thousand miles with a fire extinguisher at her feet. She had expressed the utmost hate for young men whom she subsequently danced a hundred miles with to the sound of sweet music.

Lois Roone's moods were as variable as the shifting clouds of the spring day. Hers was the gift of youth and beauty and loveliness. All was as pliant as a willow, as intangible as quicksilver, as fluid as the cool mountain stream. Nothing about her sweet loveliness had hardened into a mold. What she felt at the time she uttered, and all her feelings flamed with the fires of youth.

Just now she hated Manse with an everlasting hatred.

Feeling thus, she went to bed and slept in perfect peace.

In the meantime, Manse, released from custody, went to his father's law office and let himself in. He sat there in solitude, smoking one cigarette after another, with no light in the room except the glow of his smoke. He reviewed the events of the night from every angle, but could make nothing out of the mystery. Hours passed and he was unconscious of the flight of time.

In that hour, darkest just before the dawn, he found that he had consumed his supply of cigarettes and he arose to go home. Opening the door quietly, he let himself out upon the street. At that moment the door of the Roone store opened and a man emerged, carrying a heavy sack. There was poor street illumination from a small electric globe in front of the courthouse half a block away, and the man with the sack seemed not the least afraid of discovery and arrest.

Manse stepped quickly back into the office and lifted from the corner of the room a double-barreled gun loaded with squirrel shot. Raising this to his shoulder, he fired twice. The man fell face downward in the middle of the street, uttering no sound as he stumbled. Then he sprang up and ran, leaving his sack behind.

Reloading his gun, Manse advanced cautiously to the sack. He found it filled with groceries, mostly food of various kinds. Carrying the burden back to the door of the Roone store, he tried to open the door and place the sack inside. The door had a spring lock and could not be opened from the outside without a key. Manse carried the sack to his father's office, placed it in a corner beside the shotgun, and went home and to bed.

The next morning he slept late. The robbery of the Roone store was discovered. The bag of stolen articles was discovered in the Verdell office. The room reeked with cigarette smoke, several empty boxes of the brand of cigarettes smoked by Manse were strewn around, and the floor was littered with the stub ends of his smokes.

At noon, Manse awoke to find himself devoid of reputation in his own home town. He was distinctly an undesirable citizen. One man, accounting for this startling event, blamed it on the world war.

"That feller must have been shell-shocked or something like that. I've heard tell of such."

"Naw! He's a darn crook!" an unsympathizing hearer replied.

Out in the jungle, the Swamp Cat grinned.

Manse Verdell, after a day of annoyance in Tickfall, during which he had tried to explain certain events to his teasing friends

who pretended to believe nothing except that he was a crook and a thief, went to the office of Sheriff Flournoy.

Verdell, after a conversation lasting over an hour, asked to be deputized and given the task of finding the robber known as the Swamp Cat. The sheriff consented, and Manse left Tickfall that night.

"It's bad to be conscious of increasing age, Manse," Flournoy said, as he told him good-by. "I would love to go with you, but my old heart would not stand the strain. Bring the Cat's hide back with you!"

CHAPTER IX.

"—GOT A LAUGH OUTA ME."

MISS LOIS ROONE was like a billiard ball—when it strikes a cushion, it caroms off. Her hatred and contempt for Manse Verdell was the hard cushion upon which she struck. She had a perfect disgust for the failure of her plans to elope and blamed beyond the measure of his deserts the young man who had not done his part to make the elopement a success.

It had hurt her pride that she had had to confess to her father that she had planned to run away with the son of the man he hated, and now she had promised him that she would never have anything else to do with a Verdell. She meant it, too.

But what was she to do with her girlish dreams of love? Manse Verdell had been the center of all her imaginations for a long time. Now she was oppressed with the sense of emptiness and somebody had to fill the empty place in her heart and mind. She moped around the house all the morning, stirring the fires of hatred for the man that a few hours before she was willing to vow to love and cherish forever.

The telephone rang. She jumped nervously, and then took down the receiver, and answered. When she heard the voice of Manse, her fiery eyes emitted sparks of malignant dislike.

"May I come up to see you, Lois?" Manse asked pleadingly.

"No," Lois snapped. "I never want to see you again."

"I think I could explain some things if I had a chance," Manse pleaded.

"Don't want to hear any explanations. Explain to the police," Lois replied.

"Don't be cruel, Lois," Manse begged. "Give me the opportunity to represent my case."

"Hush, Manse," Lois said in a sharp tone. "Now listen to me: I never want to see you again. Don't ever speak to me again, please! You go your way, and may your evil conscience be your guide. I want never to see you again—never!"

"Never?" Manse asked in pitiful tones.

"Never!" Lois snapped, and hung up the receiver.

After that she felt better, and she began at once to dress to go out. She did not know where to go, but she decided that a long ride on her favorite horse would be a good thing for her nerves. A few minutes later, she was galloping out of the lawn and down the street toward the main portion of Tickfall.

She arrived just in time to find the peaceful calm of the little town again shattered by a great disturbance caused by Dago, the monkey. He began the fun by snapping the chain which bound him in the yard of Hastie Melhaven, to whom he belonged, and he started down the street looking for adventures.

Mrs. Sentelle, wife of the town clergyman, had given a lawn party for children at her home the night before, and the lawn was still strewn with wires overhead to which many electric bulbs were attached. Dago saw this arrangement and climbed to the wires. He began to unscrew the bulbs and toss them to the ground, where they made quite an explosive sound as they burst. Mrs. Sentelle leaned out of the window and uttered some piercing screams, which promptly brought the neighbors.

Dago liked the audience, but when he saw that his act was not making a hit with them, he unscrewed a few more bulbs and hurled them at the indignant onlookers. Then the onlookers picked up rocks and other missiles and "chucked" back, and there were so many against him that the little monkey refugeed to the roof.

He tried to dislodge all the chimneys on top of the clergyman's house, but failed in this. Meantime, the crowd kept him busy dodging the missiles they were throwing at him. Then he climbed down and visited several other roofs in the vicinity, showing no partiality. As he advanced from roof to roof, an ever-growing number of his pursuers followed. Tickfall is too small for an incident like that not to cause all business to stop and every activity to be concentrated upon the one great event.

It was a great game and Dago was in top form. Gaining the roof of one residence, he slid down a pipe and entered the house through an open window. He found himself in a bathroom, and cast about for something with which to entertain himself. He broke a mirror—seven years hard luck for Dago. Then the gleam of a well-polished razor attracted his attention. Dago appropriated the razor, and hopped out of the window upon the top of the porch, brandishing this formidable weapon of attack. About ten people looked upon that polished instrument of keen blade, and instantly remembered that they had important engagements elsewhere.

Then followed a chase over back fences, through yards, over roofs and galleries, up and down alleys, the crowds ever growing and becoming more and more hilarious—but Dago ever eluded. The crowd shrieked and cursed and laughed, called warnings to each other as the little monkey ran from place to place, and his agile arm brandished his razor of defense. He seemed to be completely captivated by that dangerous weapon. Everywhere he went, he carried it, and he had an uncanny wisdom which prevented him from cutting himself with it.

Then Miss Lois Roone appeared upon the scene. When Lois took a ride, she got on a man's saddle, mounted a real horse, and rode like a girl who regarded her steed as something else than a fancy plaything to be galloped around a drive in a park. There was a cow-rope upon the horn of Lois's saddle, and that girl had the idea that as a rope tosser she was second to none in the State. Maybe so, but despite the meanness with which she attempted to lasso Dago, the monkey ducked every time. If the loop settled over his head, he leaped through it. Generally, he saw it coming and leaped to one side before it landed. Once, as Lois was drawing it in, Dago leaped at it and caught it in his tiny paws. In some way the rope came in contact with the keen blade of the razor, and was cut in two. Then Miss Lois gave it up.

After that, the officers of the law arrived upon the scene. The big fat constable was Mr. Huff. What was this racket about? he wanted to know. Ah, just a monkey—that same monkey that is always cutting up monkey shines in Tickfall. Well, watch him!

That monk and he are good friends, and he will show them how to capture da monk. And they did watch him while he and the other minions of the law sweated and swore, raved and ranted, chased Dago down alleys and up trees and over houses, sicked the dogs on him, threw rocks at him and finally gave up in disgust and wanted to shoot Dago.

Mr. Everett Kurtin hove in view. He was carrying a seine one hundred feet long across the pommel of his saddle. He could catch the monkey.

"Sure! You fellows help me spread out this seine, and then we'll run Dago down the middle of the street, and close in on him and get him all tangled up in the mesh."

So while Dago sat upon a telephone pole, they spread out the net, and straightened it. Now all they had to do was to chase Dago off the pole and when his feet struck the net, close in on him. The monkey accommodated them—he leaped into the exact center of the net, seeming to think it had been stretched there for him as a sort of life saving device in view of his trapeze performance. But, alas, it was demonstrated that you cannot catch a monkey with a fish seine.

From a housetop Dago laughed rancorously. Sheriff Flournoy shook his fist angrily and muttered to himself. No dumb monkey, he claimed, could put anything over on him. He threw a half brick. It hit above Dago's head, rolled down the roof into Dago's arms, and he hurled it back with his lithe arms, having the advantage

of height in the throw. If Flournoy had not ducked, the brick would have brained him.

All of this did not consume much time, but the hunters wearied of the familiar amusement and dwindled. Lois Roone and Everett Kurtin stayed with the hunt. They found each other most congenial company, and they had nothing to do but to see the thing to the end. Lois Roone had laughed until she could hardly sit her horse, and Everett had been on and off of his horse until he was almost too weary to mount or dismount again. Darkness came and with it the end of the chase. A little shower of rain began to fall. A weary monkey decided to go home and call it a day. Everett and Lois followed him on his return journey and saw him enter the lawn of the Melhaven home.

Beth Melhaven was standing upon the porch, and she greeted him with cheers. He dropped his nicked and broken razor upon the porch floor at her feet and leaped into her arms.

The next day it was common rumor in Tickfall that Dago, the monkey, had tried to cut the throats of several of the most prominent citizens of Tickfall. This rumor was subsequently denied.

As the two rode slowly homeward, they met Hastie Melhaven going to his house. Hastie looked like he had had a spell of sickness. Lines of weariness seamed his face, and his loose lips trembled as he walked as if there were not energy enough remaining in his body to close his large, easy smiling mouth. They stopped and greeted him, but Hastie merely waved his hand at them in a helpless way, and as he staggered on he muttered:

"That monkey shore got a laugh outa me."

CHAPTER X.

THE TERRAPIN POINTS.

LOIS ROONE felt that the arrival of Everett Kurtin was an act of Providence. She had not seen him for more than a year, for he had been away to school. Now he had returned with his diploma, a little white and stoop shouldered from severe application to his books, with gentle, easy manners, and a pleasant, rather timid smile.

He lived alone when in Tickfall in the big old homestead which had been left to him with a comfortable fortune when his father and mother had died in the same week of an epidemic of disease. Two old trusted servants kept the place in good condition, and Everett had continued in his school work. He had always been a quiet, rather unobtrusive youth, and his years of application to his books had made him even more so. Lois Roone had always liked him, and he had found her always a refreshing and delightful companion.

When the two saw the little monkey leap into Beth Melhaven's arms, Lois had promptly invited Everett to go home to supper with her. She remembered that Beth and Everett had been more than good friends in the years past, and she noted that he was very much disposed to enter the lawn after the monkey. She imagined that Everett looked at Beth as if he wished that he might enter and leap into her arms like Dago had done.

After the evening meal the two were sitting out upon the porch looking over a large lake which was at the foot of a hill in the rear of the house. They glanced up, attracted by a bright light, and they saw a meteor falling from the sky. When they first observed it, Mr. Roone, who was standing in the lawn had called to them, and they beheld with astonishment the falling mass, seemingly as large as an ordinary arc light in a city street.

In two seconds the sky had become so bright with a bluish light they were blinded, and such a glow was seen as had never before shone upon the earth around them. Then there was a loud explosion, a terrible glare of light, and total darkness. Looking up again, they beheld a part of the meteor, spinning like a wheel, and falling toward them. They watched with breathless interest, and the fiery mass fell into the lake not a hundred yards from where they were standing.

"Get a line on it, young folks!" Colonel Roone shouted. "If we can find it, it will be valuable."

A great cloud of steam arose, a sizzling sound accompanying it, reminding Everett of the scene he had often beheld when a blacksmith thrust a red hot iron into the slack tub. The rising steam gave them an opportunity to locate the exact place in the lake where the portion of the meteor had fallen.

"Oh, let's go get it now!" Lois shouted in great excitement.

"We can't drag the lake to-night," her father answered.

"Everett and I can dive for it," Lois declared. "I'll put on my bathing suit and Everett can wear yours, and you can chaperone the bathing party. Come on, daddy!"

"All right," Roone laughed easily. "You get my suit for Everett and you two get ready for deep sea diving. I'll go down and get the skiff ready for the expedition."

Ten minutes later the young man and woman raced each other down the hill and sprang into the skiff. Roone rowed them to the spot where the meteor had fallen, as nearly as they could estimate, and then held the skiff while the two leaped into the water, each eager to find the treasure.

Both of them came up, panting. Neither had been able to touch bottom.

"How deep is this lake, at this point?" Everett asked.

"At least fifty feet," Roone answered.

They tried again and again to reach the bottom of the lake. But while they regarded themselves as expert swimmers, the effort to reach the bottom of a lake fifty feet below changed their views of their ability as swimmers. Every effort to bring up even a handful of mud was a failure.

But they had a good time making the effort, and Colonel Roone seemed to enjoy directing the sport. At last when both of them were thoroughly exhausted, they climbed into the skiff and sat down.

"Let's get a pole and feel for the thing and see if we can touch it," Lois proposed.

"Where'll we get a pole fifty feet long?" Roone asked and that ended that.

After a while Everett Kurtin began to chuckle.

"The last time I went swiming in this lake I played hookey from school," he said. "You remember Old Flounce's hogshead, Lois?"

"Who will ever forget it?" Lois asked.

"That old sister had that hogshead up on the platform beside her desk. She had a heavy top on it, and a big bunghole in the center. When a little boy or girl misbehaved Old Flounce would pick us up, all squirming and kicking and squalling, and put us down in that barrel. Then she would fasten the top and let us think over our sins and misdemeanors, until we brought forth works meet for repentance. Then she would admonish us through the bunghole until we promised to behave ourselves in future."

"Did she put you in the barrel after you swam in this lake?" Lois asked.

"She did, and I promised her through the bunghole that I would never play hookey again."

They walked back to the house and found Tucker Roone on the porch playing with a terrapin.

"Where'd you get that insect?" Lois asked.

"Buckety got it offen Manse Verdell, and I got it offen Buckety," Tuck answered. "Lookit! I call him my mascot. When I come to a street corner I never know which way to turn, so I wait until this terrapin sticks out his head and whatever way he looks, I go!"

"Suppose he don't stick out his head?" Everett asked.

"Then I stay right there," Tuck answered. "I don't take no chance in going nowhere. That is what made me so late coming home to-night. This old terrapin went to sleep on me."

"How did you wake him up?" Lois asked.

"I laid a lighted match on his back," Tuck told her. "When his old back got hot, he had to move to a cooler place, and he turned this way, so I lit out for home!"

"That's a new idea to me," Everett said.

"Ain't you never heard of the luck of a terrapin toe?" Tuck asked in surprise.

"Yes."

"Well, I've just got four times that much

luck. I've got all the lucky toes on all four feet. I hog it all."

"I see," Everett mused. "Lay a match on his back and let's see if he tells me it is time to go home."

Tuck struck the match.

"Now, watch him!" he said. "If he comes out and sticks his head in the direction your home is, that means that you mosey along."

In a moment four feet began to squirm upon the porch floor and the head of the terrapin slowly emerged. Instantly he turned with his head pointing in the direction that Everett must take to go to his home.

There was a shout of laughter. Everett went to a room, changed his clothes and appeared upon the porch. Lois stood beside him like a slim, athletic boy in her wet bathing suit, to tell him good-by. The light shined from the door upon her.

"Good night!" he said reluctantly. "I hope some day the terrapin toes will bring me better luck."

"Who knows?" Lois smiled. "Maybe instead of going, you will be commanded to stay."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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HIT TH' SUNSHINE

WHEN you are on your uppers,
Hit th' sunshine.
When there's yellow in your scuppers,
Hit th' sunshine.
When y'u very seldom grin, an' you seem to feel all in,
An' your bending backbone shrivels till it shrinks your puddy chin,
An' y'u've lost your cunning charm, and you don't know how to win,
Hit th' sunshine.

When y'u feel yourself a slippin',
Hit th' sunshine.
An' things are torn an' rippin',
Hit th' sunshine.
Just clench your feeble fist, give your grit a trigger twist,
An' with your on'ry conscience, turn a high brow humorist,
An' remember that all trouble is a moody mental mist,
Hit th' sunshine.

When life is rich an' rosy,
Hit th' sunshine.
An' y'u're feelin' coy an' cozy,
Hit th' sunshine.
Folks that are worth while, all wear a catchin' smile,
This spreads th' laughin' habit in a very little while,
An' they disinfect their neighborhood of ev'rything that's vile.
'Cause—they hit th' sunshine.

Clem Yore.

The Sentimental Bloke

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "Jungle Laughter," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

JIM HARDWICK carefully read the legal-looking document he held in his hand, not missing a single word, noting subconsciously a misplaced comma, checking up with rapidity the accuracy of a totaled column of figures. And having come to the end, to the row of dots between the words—Signed.....Mining Engineer—he placed the paper on the deal table before him, brought his open palm down on it with a resounding whack, leaned back in his chair and with a half-scornful, half-quizzical look in his clear, steel-gray eyes said:

"Well, gentlemen! I've read your pretty report. What of it?"

"What of it, he asks!"

The little fat man, with a thick lock of greasy black hair plastered over a large bald spot, spread his fat fingers expressively, palm downwards, holding them as a pianist does before striking a smashing chord. This gesture of Sam Isaacs was not so much a racial idiosyncrasy as well-considered

strategy. The average man looked at the diamonds which sparkled on Sammy's fingers and not at his face. But not so Jim Hardwick.

"Yes—what of it?" he repeated looking straight into Isaacs's clouded brown eyes.

Isaacs shrugged his shoulders, smiled fawningly, and then turned to the tall, hard-featured man who was standing by the grease-spattered window, looking out on the dusty thoroughfare which was the Main Street of South Africa's diamondopolis.

"You tell him, Smithers," Isaacs said in a soft, amused voice. "He wants to know —What about it?"

The big man turned quickly from the window.

"Why act like a fool, Hardwick," he said impatiently. "You know what we want—your signature at the bottom of that."

His crisp speech was that of an English college man.

"You won't get it—at least not until I've seen the land. And then it'll be attached to a report of my own writing."

"You'll sign that or—"

Isaacs rose, making a clucking noise of distress, and coming to Hardwick's side held toward him a pen which he had already dipped in ink.

"That's a very right and proper stand you're making, my boy," he said suavely. "You should never sign your name to something you don't know nothing about, that's bad business. But when your employers—generous employers like me and Smithers here is—ask you to sign something, then it's good business to do so—ain't it?"

"If I sign this," Hardwick said slowly, thoughtfully, "it might be the means of cheating this—" he consulted the paper again—"this Miss O'Brien out of some valuable property."

"It won't," Smithers declared harshly. "The land's worthless, I tell you. We wouldn't touch it, I tell you, except that the girl's father was an old partner of mine. But she's hard up and wants to sell us the land at our own honest valuation. And that—" he indicated the report—"is it."

"Then why the secrecy?" Hardwick asked incredulously. "Why won't you let me inspect the property or, at least, tell me where it is?"

"Because—" Isaacs began gently.

"Because—hell!" Smithers flared. "Do we have to give the insolent young devil reasons? He'll sign or he won't sign. If he signs he gets a good commission and lots of other jobs thrown his way. If he won't sign, we'll quickly find some one who will and Mr. Look-before-he-leaps will look for another job."

"I won't," Hardwick began, but Isaacs, patting him on the shoulder, interrupted:

"You sign, my boy. Even supposing this was a crooked game, which it ain't, 'pon my Sam it ain't, what's it to you? You don't know this O'Brien girl—she's sweet Fanny Adams to you. You be a nice boy and do what we say and—why, the diamonds I've got will look like brummagem trash to them you'll buy.

"And then again: It ain't nice to be in this country without any money, specially in this *dorp*. Living comes high—you know that. And you haven't any money, have you? Young engineering coves from America—you've only been over a little while, ain't you?—ain't very popular; and if you ain't popular in South Africa, or got friends that is, you might as well cut your throat—before somebody else does it for you—or go home. And you ain't got no money to go home with, have you?"

Hardwick looked fixedly at an enormous spider in a far corner of the shabby little office.

All that Isaacs said was only too true. He had heard that there were great opportunities in South Africa for American mining engineers, in the gold or diamond mines, and had come to the country with visions of fame and wealth.

His disillusionment had been sudden, as sudden as the exhaustion of his small capital, as he quickly realized that big names were wanted or men who would not hesitate, as he now hesitated, to append their signatures to reports written by some one else.

Isaacs looked at Smithers, closed one eyelid slowly in a grotesque wink, dipped the pen in the ink and put it into Hardwick's hands, closing his fingers on it.

"Sign here, my boy," he said, indicating

the dotted line with a stubby, black-nailed forefinger. "Sign, and let's go and have a bottle of fizz to celebrate."

Hardwick, with a gesture that was half despair at the hardships to which he was committing himself, half disgust that he should have hesitated at all, threw down the pen, which rolled slowly to the floor, leaving an inky trail all down the report.

"Go to hell," he said and almost ran out of the room.

II.

ONCE outside the office of Isaacs & Smithers, Hardwick walked at a swift pace up the street, kicking wrathfully at the empty tins of bully beef which littered the road, staring straight ahead, his lips moving as he rehearsed the conversation he had just had with Isaacs, thinking of all the things he wished that he had said.

In some way he felt unclean, and the fact that he had rejected the shady proposition made him was no great comfort.

Presently he came to the Royal Hotel—a barn-like structure built of galvanized iron—and started to climb the rickety steps leading up to the *stoep*. Then he hesitated, and sitting down on the lowest step slumped over in an attitude of despair.

His prospects were discouraging and, as he considered them, his strength seemed to flow from him and he felt slightly nauseated; he even considered returning to Isaacs and offering to sign the report. Why couldn't he have taken their word as to the value of the property? Miss O'Brien was nothing to him and by refusing to sign he had not helped her in any way. They'd find some one else to do it—there was no doubt of that. As it was he had helped no one—and specially not himself.

The sun was very hot; he was tired, hungry and thirsty and, having nowhere else to go, he leaned back and, closing his eyes, sought temporary relief from his troubles in sleep.

And so he did not notice the small man, with a bristling red mustache which drooped sadly over a large mouth, who came out of the hotel and stood looking down at him intently, appraisingly. And when that man, with cat-like tread, slowly descended the steps, Hardwick did not move, neither did he open his eyes when the little man sat down beside him.

A Chinese laundryman shuffled by; a nasal voiced West Indian fruit seller, beyond the bend in the street, could be heard calling his wares; a group of intoxicated natives, dressed in ludicrous imitation of the white man's style, were singing across the way the tune they had learned at a mission school, but the words were their own and blasphemously obscene.

Otherwise the street was deserted—a dead street in a town of dead hopes and dead ideals—for it was the hour of the siesta when white men, in order that they might have strength to gamble and drink a lot, and to work a little, rested.

The little man edged up closer to Hardwick, so close that his head almost touched Hardwick's shoulder. He yawned widely, but noiselessly, and, pushing back his helmet, disclosed a mop of tangled hair which was even redder than his mustache.

Then his eyes closed, his mouth gaped; broken and discolored teeth showed behind the fringes of his mustache.

His head drooped sidewise. He and Hardwick seemed to be two pals sleeping the sleep of men who have drunk well—but not wisely.

But Red Head's hands were not asleep—far from it! They fluttered about Hardwick; the long, agile fingers explored pocket after pocket extracting a cheap watch, a packet of letters, a few silver coins and a limp, empty wallet.

Through half opened eyes Red Head looked disgustedly at his haul and at Hardwick. Then, with a shrug, he returned the watch, wallet and letters, put the coins in his pocket and rose quietly to his feet.

He was about to tiptoe noiselessly away when Hardwick's hand shot out with lightning rapidity, closed in a viselike grip about the fellow's ankle, causing him to sit down very suddenly and very hard.

"Lumme!" he exclaimed as his twinkling blue eyes met the penetrating, half humorous, half wrathful glance of Hardwick's gray ones.

"Lumme!" he said again in tones of self-condemnation. "So you was awake hall of

the bleedin' time. That's a 'ell of a game ter play hon a covey! But I ought ter 'ave known better. I suppose now as 'ow yer wants this?"

He fumbled in his trousers pocket, and bringing out the silver coins, counted them slowly into Hardwick's outstretched hand.

"Two bob, an' a tanner an' two th'rpuny bits. That's three bob haltogether. S'elp me! That's all I took."

"That's all I've got," Hardwick said as he returned the coins to his pocket.

"G'wan. Wot are yer tryin' ter give me. That ain't the price of a drink. Yer mean ter tell me that's hall ye've got?"

Hardwick nodded, and releasing his hold on Red Head's ankle, rose slowly to his feet, stretching his hands wearily above his head.

The little man eyed him warily and rose, too, ready to dodge a blow or bolt as the occasion demanded, or opportunity offered.

"Well," he demanded, "wot hare yer goin' ter do wiv me?"

"I don't know—what's your name?"

"Samson—Dick Samson! My pals calls me Ginger Dick, but, lumme! I'm 'anged hif I knows w'y. Your name's 'Ardwick, ain't hit? I've 'eard hof you. You're that bleedin' American chap wot's lookin' fer a job an' can't find one, ain't yer?"

Hardwick nodded.

"Well?"

"Well? I asks again. Wot are you goin' ter do wiv me?"

"I might get something for turning you over to the police," Hardwick said, eying Ginger Dick speculatively. "I bet you're wanted."

"Lumme, yes," the other agreed cheerfully. "Allus wanted. But they won't give you anything, cully. I ain't valuable enough. I don't do any I. D. B.—(illicit diamond buying)—or big stuff like that. They allus knows where they can get me an' so, w'en they wants ter arrest anybody—which is most frequent—they runs me in and I does a seven days wivout 'ard labor—gets good grub an' don't 'ave ter pay board—w'ile there's a line in their rag of a noospaper abart 'hour efficient police.'"

"Do you think they'd arrest me if I threw a stone through the hotel window?"

"Gawd, yes, Yank! But don't you do hit. They'd give you the limit. They ain't got no use fer Yanks in this *dorp*. Now me, I'm a privileged character, so to speak. Hi'm a bloomin' institootion. But speakin' strite, now: Is that hall yer've got—three bally bob?"

Hardwick nodded.

"And no more coming to yer?"

"No—unless I do some I. D. B. or—"

"Don't yer do that, cully. Ten years on the breakwater at Cape Town hif they catch yer at that; an' they would—a green'orn like wot you is. But you was goin' ter say something else. Or—"

"Or sign some papers for Isaacs & Smithers."

Ginger Dick scowled fiercely.

"You a friend of them bleedin' blighters?"

"Not so you'd notice it. Only I thought I'd landed a job with them, my first one. They wanted me to sign a report of some property I hadn't seen. And I wouldn't. So I found myself out of a job again."

"An' they was a goin' ter pay you fer signing hit?"

Hardwick nodded glumly.

"Fifty pounds and more commissions."

Ginger Dick whistled softly.

"And you refused!" His tone was incredulous. "Wot fer?"

"The property might have been very valuable," Hardwick said slowly and as if assuring himself that his action had been a correct one. "And I couldn't sign a report saying that it was valueless, could I?"

"No, hof course you couldn't," said Ginger Dick, mocking the other's tone and rolling his eyes upward in a mock pious expression. "So wot did you say to the perishin' blighter?"

"I told him to go to hell!"

"Ow, yer did, did yer? Gor blimme! Ain't yer the blinkin' sentimental bloke? Throwin' aw'y jimmyogoblins because yer was afraid o' cheatin' somebody yer don't know an' never will know."

"It belonged to a girl—" Hardwick began lamely, but was silenced by Ginger Dick's look of utter scorn.

"A girl, a bit of fluff! Lumme. That makes yer a bigger fool than hever. Who'd

throw away fifty quid fer a girl?" Then he continued hurriedly: "Look 'ere, cully, I've taken a shine to you. We're goin' ter be pals, see? You hacted like a gen'man abart 'aving yer pocket picked. Most coveys make a bleedin' fuss an' tike most o' my pleasure aw'y. But, you— Besides, I owes yer someſing fer torkin' right hup to hold greasy Isaacs and that lout, Smithers. Blast both of 'em! They did me dirt w'en I was a green'orn hout 'ere. 'Course, I've mined afore—in Haustralia: yer thought I was a Limey, didn't yer? But Hi ain't. Sydney's my 'ome—but I didn't know the ropes hout 'ere; I didn't know wot was wot —specially not abart diamonds—an' they rooked me hout hof a good claim. The—"

Hardwick moved impatiently—and yet he found himself liking the loquacious little man, rogue though he might be.

"An' so we're goin' ter be partners," Ginger Dick concluded flatly.

Hardwick smiled.

"I'm afraid I'd be no good at picking pockets," he said.

Ginger Dick's eyes twinkled.

"Lumme! I don't fink you would," he agreed. "But 'ow abart selling rot-gut gin to the blacks—there's money in that an' hit takes two men to 'andle hit properly."

"No," Hardwick said slowly. "I don't think I could do that, either."

Ginger Dick snorted.

"You're too bloomin' soft 'earted. Then 'ow abart waitin' hout there on the veldt an' knockin' down blacks who are goin' 'ome from the mines an' takin' their pay from 'em?"

Hardwick shook his head, but his attempt to look stern utterly failed.

"Lumme!" grumbled Ginger Dick. "You're a 'ell of a pal fer a covey like me. Yer can't afford ter be sentimental in this bleedin' country, I tell yer. An' so, Hi supposes as 'ow we'll 'ave ter be 'onest?"

"I'm afraid we will," agreed Hardwick.

"Then you say wot hit shall be. I'm as ignerant as a kid abart things like that."

"Well"—Hardwick hesitated—"well, I'd like to find the girl who owns the property Isaacs & Smithers are interested in. Perhaps it's valuable."

Ginger Dick's face lighted up.

"An' hif hit is," he said breathlessly, "we can do 'er hout hof hit."

But Hardwick did not answer. He was watching the little procession which was coming slowly down the street—a rickety Scotch cart drawn by four undersized donkeys driven by an aged, wizen faced native. Walking beside the cart was Smithers, who argued heatedly with a slim, bare footed, youthful person clad in wide, tattered trousers, khaki shirt, and large slouch hat, in the front of which an ostrich plume nodded jauntily. This youthful personage was riding a razor-backed mule.

III.

"LUMME!" exclaimed Ginger Dick. "Twig the scarecrow on the mule!"

The little party had now come to a halt, in a cloud of dust of their own creation, opposite the hotel, and Hardwick could see that Smithers's face was red with poorly suppressed anger.

"Get down and have a drink," Smithers said thickly.

Hardwick was surprised at the clear, bell-like soprano of the "scarecrow's" voice and wondered at the queer sounding clipped vowels.

"Ach sis! No, I tell you ma-an. Let go the rein. Let go!" The voice rose to a shrill key and was answered by a deep, mocking laugh.

"You little spitfire!" he exclaimed, grabbing at, but missing, the sjambok—the whip of rhinoceros hide—which the other held upraised menacingly.

He now took a firmer hold of the bridle reins, close to the mule's jaws, and started to twist the beast's head sidewise, pulling toward him, exerting all his strength.

"Stop! Now, ma-an, I warn you, stop!" the scarecrow cried. "If you don't—"

"Not unless you get off and come have a drink with me. If you won't, I'll throw this brute and carry you in. So you'd better come quietly."

The mule struggled, but ineffectively; it could not break loose from the man's hold, and as Smithers now leaned against its withers it was plain that in another moment or so the mule would lose its balance.

And then Hardwick sprang forward, intending to interpose between the bully and his victim and at the same moment the scarecrow struck Smithers across the face with the sjambok, leaving a long purple wale.

Cursing loudly at the pain, Smithers released his hold of the bridle and clutched with both hands at the slim figure in the saddle. He would have lifted the scarecrow off, but at that moment Hardwick grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and, with a bellow of rage, Smithers released his hold of the rider and turned to face this new opponent.

As he did so the scarecrow lashed the mule which, with a parting kick aimed in the general direction of Smithers, dashed off at a gallop—the sudden plunge sending its rider's hat sailing to the ground.

"Lumme!" exclaimed Ginger Dick. "It's a woman," and then lost all interest in the fleeing girl and the rickety Scotch-cart which moved off slowly in her wake. Ginger Dick was something of a woman-hater and, besides, he was infinitely more interested in seeing how his new pal would "shape up."

He had not long to wait.

Smithers and Hardwick wasted no breath in wordy warfare. The issue between them had already been set forth—had been set forth in the office of Isaacs a few hours previously. This affair was rather an excuse than a reason for fighting. Previously the conventions of civilization had restrained the two men from flying at each other's throats.

But now!

They eyed each other for a moment, their faces set, muscles tensed.

Then, as Ginger Dick called out joyfully, "A mill! A bleedin' mill!" they closed, disdaining any attempt at science, and wrestling furiously, striking wild, body-jarring blows.

Men came running out of the hotel—a fight was always preferable to sleep—and formed a ring about the two men; excitedly questioning Ginger Dick as to the cause of it all, betting on the outcome, cheering first one, then the other.

One, a big, black-bearded man who carried two revolvers stuck in his belt, after ordering the gaping natives, who had run over at the first sign of excitement, to "Get to hell out of here," separated the fighters.

"Strip," he said.

In silence both men obeyed him, stripping to the waist; Ginger Dick loudly and proudly proclaiming himself Hardwick's second; several men nearly coming to blows over the honor of performing the same service for Smithers.

"Fight like men," the black-bearded one ordered roughly, and drew a line in the dust with the toe of his boot. "Toe that line, both of you, and you'll fight until one of you ain't got the strength—or the guts—to come back and toe it after a knockdown. And I'll see you get fair play, Yank."

His hands dropped to the butts of his revolvers and he glared fiercely around the ring of faces.

"What odds?" cried one of the onlookers.

"No odds!" replied another. "Even money—that's fair enough. They're well-matched. Man who's got the most guts will win this mill."

It was true. It would have been difficult to find two men more evenly matched as to strength, weight, height and reach. Science hardly entered into the comparison! Luck and guts did, and they were, as yet, an unknown quantity.

Warily the two men toed the line. Smithers held his hands in the orthodox fashion, left hand slightly advanced, his right close in across his body. He stood flat-footed, seemingly as solid and unshakable as a rock. Hardwick, poised on his toes, swaying slightly and his hands moved in and out like pistons.

For a moment they stood thus, then—

Thud! Thud!

The two blows were almost simultaneous and both men staggered back from the line—blood pouring from Hardwick's nose; an angry red blotch showing on Smithers's ribs.

They came back to the line again.

At the sight of blood the spectators seemed to cast off all restraint and howled madly—some calling for a knockout, others

advising Smithers to " chop up the blooming Yank!" Only one voice was raised for Hardwick—and that, Ginger Dick's.

They sparred for a moment and then they rained blows on each other, each seeking to batter the other into insensibility, disregarding the blows received; they did not move their feet; these seemed to be fastened to the line.

Hardwick's face and body was streaked with blood, presently the front of him showed all red—he seemed to be all one large wound. Smithers, on the other hand, was unmarked save that the red patch on his ribs was larger, more angry looking and he breathed loudly.

And then Smithers got in an uppercut which landed flush on Hardwick's jaw, sending him back and down with a deadly thud. He landed almost at Ginger Dick's feet.

Ginger Dick hastily procured a bucket of water and sloshed it over him, washing off the blood; showing that Hardwick was unmarked, that the blood was all from his nose. Then, as his man did not move but stared blankly with wide-open eyes at the dazzling blue of the skies, Ginger Dick bent down and bit his ear.

Hardwick stirred fitfully, endeavoring to win back to consciousness.

" Get hup," Ginger Dick shouted in his ear. " Get hup an' show that bleedin' Henglishman that 'e can't put a Yank down."

Hardwick rolled over slowly and slowly drew his feet up under him.

" Show 'em yer got guts," Ginger Dick shouted, and threw another bucketful of water over him.

Hardwick raised himself on hands and knees, slowly, painfully straightened himself and, taking a long drink from a bottle which some one thrust into his hands, weaved slowly toward the line, fell, crawled a few paces on hands and knees—his strength coming back to him with every passing moment—rose again and a moment later, swaying uncertainly, toed the line.

" Take yer time, cully," shouted Ginger Dick in agonized tones.

" Shut up!" growled one of the men. " It's too late now. You should have held him back for a while."

" He's going to take a long time." Smithers panted as he measured himself for the blow which would put Hardwick away for good. He looked around triumphantly at the crowd which watched in hungry anticipation.

" Quick!" screamed Ginger Dick, jumping up and down with excitement.

His advice was superfluous.

" Rat-tat! Rat-tat."

Hardwick got in four quick blows on Smithers's ribs, receiving a hard jolt which was meant for his jaw but landed high on his forehead.

Hardwick's strength had come back to him. Years of clean living had endowed him with great recuperative powers. The blow which had knocked him down—almost out—had been punishing at the time, but now!

He laughed aloud and some of the men muttered:

" The Yank's mad. That knockdown's made him loony."

Smithers looked at him doubtfully. A moment ago he was well-assured of an easy and quick victory. But now!

The two men no longer paid heed to the line, but circled around each other, both over cautious until Smithers, rushing in, using elbows, head and knees, sent Hardwick down again with the very impetuousness of his attack.

" Back to the line, Smithers," the black-bearded man yelled as Smithers stood over Hardwick, waiting to hit him as soon as he got to his knees.

With ill-grace he obeyed. He was breathing now through wide-opened mouth and each in-drawn breath sent a sharp, cutting pain through his body. He was uncomfortably conscious of the sun's terrific heat and the noise of the cheering spectators annoyed him. He wanted to finish this fight and go somewhere and sleep.

So, when Hardwick regained his feet, Smithers did not wait for him to come to the line but rushed toward him. He was met with a stinging jab between the eyes. The unexpectedness of it hurt him more than the blow. Hitherto Hardwick had confined his blows to the ribs.

Again and again Hardwick jabbed him

in the face, while his own blows did not land or, if they did, seemed to be losing their force.

He raised his guard and then the sickening pounding on his ribs began again.

He doubled over—seeking to cover up.

"G'wan!" screamed Ginger Dick. "You've got 'im."

Encouraged, Hardwick closed in, seeking an opportunity to put a *finis* to the struggle, thought he saw his opportunity and, dropping all caution, all attempt at guarding, swung for Smithers's ear.

The blow landed, landed at the same time as Smithers's foul one, low down.

Smithers went over like a ninepin: Hardwick's knees sagged and he crumbled up in a heap; he was horribly nauseated.

The men were shouting, jeering, laughing.

The black-bearded man kept them back, refusing to let the seconds go to their men.

"They're not out—neither of them," he shouted. "It ain't over yet. Watch! There's the line!"

He drew another line mid-way between Hardwick and Smithers.

Hardwick walked over to it and waited.

"Come on, Smithers," the crowd shouted. "The Yank's awaiting for you."

But Smithers did not move, save to turn over on his belly and clutch at the ground as if he was afraid that some one would lift him and by force set his foot against the line.

"I'm finished," he groaned.

Some of his friends picked him up and carried him into the hotel; the others followed—remembering suddenly that it was very hot and that they were very tired and thirsty; forgetting Hardwick, the Yank. Only Ginger Dick remained behind.

Hardwick stared straight before him with dull, lack-lustre eyes, still toeing the mark; wondering, vaguely, at the sudden quiet. He made a few feeble passes with his hands—then the sun went out and he collapsed completely.

IV.

When Hardwick again opened his eyes, he found himself on a rickety camp-bed in a small, native-built hut. He stared quietly at the thatched conical-shaped roof for a moment, endeavoring to collect his thoughts.

It was very hot; mosquitoes *pinged* savagely and flies swarmed everywhere save above the bed where hung a green-leaved branch on which an enormous chameleon clung, its long tongue darting out and encircling any foolish fly that ventured to close.

The delicious smell of cooking coffee and of fried bacon filled the air. Slowly turning his head Hardwick saw Ginger Dick bending over a small fire built on a large slab of stone in the center of the hut.

"Hullo!" Hardwick said feebly as, with an effort, he sat erect.

Ginger Dick crossed over to the bed and stood looking down at Hardwick; his eyes shining happily.

"'Ullo, cully!" he said boisterously. "Feelin' hall right, now? You've been asleep four bleedin' hours. Hit's after sundown."

Hardwick swung his legs over the side of the bed and gingerly stood up. His nose was swollen and both of his eyes were puffed—but otherwise he was unmarked, unhurt. A little shaky—but he'd soon get over that. Just now he was conscious only of a great hunger.

"Sure yer hall right?" repeated Ginger Dick, watching him anxiously.

"Will be—as soon as I've had something to eat."

"That's heasy."

Ginger Dick helped him to a chair at a rickety deal table and lighted two candles, stuck in their own grease on the table top.

"There!" he said triumphantly as he placed a cup of black coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs before Hardwick. "Get houtside that, cully—then we'll talk."

Hardwick needed no further urging.

"How did you get me here?" he asked finally, leaning back in his chair with a satisfied sigh.

"Lumme! It was a 'ell of a job. You ain't 'arf 'eavy! Me an' Burke dressed yer—Burke's that black-bearded blighter—and carried yer 'ere. Dead to the world yer was. This is my plice of residence.

Pretty nice, ain't hit? Yus, Burke 'elped me. Allus can pick a winner—man or fluff —Burke can. And, blimme, you're game."

Hardwick passed his hand across his eyes —seeking to collect his memories.

"How did it come out—the fight? Did I win?"

"Blimme, yes. Smithers didn't 'ave the guts to come back to the line. Lucky fer you 'e 'adn't. He'd 'ave knocked you cold hif 'e 'ad. You was hout, standin' hon yer feet—only yer didn't know hit. That's the difference a-tween you hand Smithers.

"Hit was the best mill I've ever seen. Burke said the same. Yer made a hit wiv 'im. 'E's a-goin' to make the blokes come across, taking hup a collection fer yer, 'e is. An' there won't be anybody 'olding back w'en 'e passes the 'at."

Hardwick winced.

"Wot's the game now?"

Hardwick had risen to his feet.

"I'm going to stop Burke taking a collection. He mustn't do that."

Ginger Dick's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"An' w'y not? W'y the 'ell not, I asks yer?"

"Because—"

"They ain't no because to hit. You're broke an' you ain't got a job, or likely ter 'ave one for a long time ter come. Well, then?"

Hardwick moved toward the door of the hut.

"I'm grateful to you and I'll show it some day," he said, holding out his hand.

"Aw, hell! We're pals, ain't we? All right, then, we stick together. Where hare yer goin'?"

"I'm going to tell Burke I don't want money—I want a job. Perhaps he'll give me one."

"You're a queer duck, Yank. W'y not take the heasy picking w'en they're hoffered yer? And, anyway, you wouldn't take the kind of job Burke could offer yer. It hain't hin your line."

"Why not?"

"'E's a himporter."

"I don't care. If I can't get an engineering job—I'll take anything. What does Burke import."

"Lydies—of a sort!"

"Oh!" Hardwick's tone was one of intense disgust. "Then I'm doubly damned if I'll take any money from him."

"Hall right!" Ginger Dick said placatingly. "You don't 'ave ter. Look!"

From his pocket he pulled out a handful of golden coins. "That'll keep hus goin' fer a while, won't hit? I did a bit o' collectin' meself w'ile you an' Smithers was a-millin'. Now you go hon lookin' fer a nice cushy job, a nice 'onest job, an' I'll stake yer."

"You're a good scout, Ginger Dick," Hardwick said impulsively. "I don't believe you're half as bad as you pretend. Now come on up to the hotel with me and I'll call the subscription party off. Perhaps I can strike somebody for a job."

"All right," Ginger Dick grumbled. "But I'm thinkin' I'm a bleedin' fool ter go along with you. Look wot's 'appened to yer to-day—an' hall because yer so bleedin' soft. Do you know 'ow to use a revolver?"

Hardwick nodded and added with a smile:

"I cut my teeth on one, Ginger Dick."

"That's a yarn I've 'eard before from men who went w'ite w'en a door slammed. Well, 'ave yer got a revolver?"

"No. I thought men didn't carry them out here and—and I sold mine in Cape Town the day I landed. Burke's the first man I've seen heeled."

"Yer don't need 'em hoften, that's a fac'. But w'en you does—yer need 'em bad. 'Ere! I'll give yer one o' mine."

From the table drawer he took two revolvers, stuck one in his belt, under his coat, and gave the other to Hardwick. "It's loaded," he said, "but yer'd better take some more cartridges. Never know wot may turn hup. Lumme! You're more bother than a bleedin' kid."

But for all his gruff tones, Ginger Dick carefully, almost tenderly, helped Hardwick on with his coat, and, after carefully extinguishing the fire and the candles, led the way outside.

It was pitch-dark and Hardwick, not knowing the road, stumbled and would have fallen several times had not his companion taken him by the arm and steadied him.

Soon they saw ahead of them the lights of the hotel and heard the boisterous singing that told of thirsty souls who were finding ample refreshment—of a sort and at a price!

"Yer wants ter watch hout fer Smithers —or Isaacs, specially Isaacs. He'll do yer dirt, hif 'e can," Ginger Dick warned as they came to the hotel. "An' don't yer go hinsulting Burke. There's men with dirtier professions than his hin this bleedin' *dorp*. Besides—'e can shoot, an' does."

"I'll be careful," Hardwick promised and together they entered the hotel, going at once to the barroom.

They paused for a moment in the doorway, dazzled by the light after the abysmal darkness outside.

As they stood there a slim, dark-featured man brushed against Hardwick.

They seated themselves at a table near the door, paying no heed to the greetings of half-drunken miners. Standing at the bar they saw Smithers and Isaacs talking earnestly to a policeman. As they watched the dark-featured man came up behind Isaacs and whispered in his ear.

"Two whiskies, darling," Ginger Dick ordered when a blousy barmaid simperingly asked his pleasure.

He threw down a ten shilling gold piece on the drink-stained table.

"Yer can keep the change," he said with a grand gesture, "hif you'll 'ave this lamp turned hup—" He pointed to the oil lamp in the bracket just above his head. The room was lighted by four of them.

She tossed her head.

"There won't be any change, smarty," she snapped, "an' you can do your own dirty work."

She flounced majestically away, returning after a long time with two glasses, wet from the suds in which they had been rinsed, and a bottle which was lyingly labeled, "Imperial."

She half-filled one glass and then, affecting to hear an order from a thirsty customer in the far corner of the room, hastened away again—taking the bottle with her.

"Lumme!" exclaimed Ginger Dick admiringly. "I'm goin' ter run a 'otel meself w'en hi 'as enuff money to start.

"But wot's that, cully? Where did you get it?"

Hardwick was looking with puzzled surprise at what appeared to be a piece of unpolished glass, which he held between thumb and forefinger.

"It's a diamond," he said softly, "and a beauty. It must be worth at least—"

"Never mind that," the other interrupted with a note of alarm. "Put hit away before some one sees hit."

Hardwick obeyed wonderingly.

"Now, tell me w'ere yer got hit, an' tork quick an' low."

Ginger Dick looked apprehensively around the barroom.

"I found it in my pocket just now!"

"'Ell! Then the covey 'oo knocked against yer as we came hin must 'ave put hit there."

"But why?"

"W'y?" His voice was full of scornful contempt. "Don't yer see. That's Smithers and Isaacs little game. Trying to frame a I. D. B. charge against yer. That's their low way of gettin' heven. Come hon. Let's go."

But Hardwick settled back comfortably in his chair.

"There's nothing to be afraid of surely. If they arrest me I'll tell the magistrate how I got the diamond and—"

"Don't be a bleedin' fool, Yank. Ain't yer been 'ere long enuff to know the I. D. B. laws yet? They don't ave ter prove yer guilty; you 'as to prove yer innocent. Hand do yer think they'd take any stock hin a tale like that. Not a bit. Ten years yer'll get hif they find that stone hon yer."

"Then I'll throw the damned thing away."

"That might 'elp a bit—fer a little w'ile. But hif that's their little game—tryin' ter frame yer, I mean—best thing for you to do is ter go away from 'ere for a bit. Hif yer don't—they'll get yer, surely. The perlice and 'tecs abart 'ere are nearly hall crooks: hall they 'ave to do is search a man an' they'll find fings on 'im 'e didn't know 'e 'ad.

"Come on!" He rose to his feet, and Hardwick, impressed by the little man's deadly earnestness, rose also.

And then a big, lumbering Dutchman pushed his way through the crowd of drinkers and came toward them, leering maliciously.

" 'E's a plain-clothes man," Ginger Dick whispered hoarsely, " an' a damned dirty one. Come on!"

Rising, they turned toward the door and stopped short. A man in the uniform of the mounted police blocked the way; one hand insolently twirling his waxed mustache, the other resting on his hips, near his revolver holster. Hardwick noticed that the flap of the latter was buttoned down—as is the custom in Africa. There was never very much gunplay in South Africa, even in the early days of the gold and diamond booms, and there were practically no exponents of the art of the quick draw such as were produced during the winning of the great American West. Disputes were settled by fist fights; revolvers were only carried as threats, and hardly ever used except, perhaps, in ambush and against natives.

" Better stay a little while," the policeman said mockingly. " Dutch Pete, there " —he indicated the Dutchman with a wave of his hand—" is thinking that you have some sparklers in your pocket that shouldn't be there."

" Are you a good shot, Ginger?" Hardwick whispered hoarsely.

Ginger Dick nodded.

" All right, then. Cover that man at the door—quick!"

Few men could have equaled the dexterity with which Ginger Dick drew his revolver and got the drop on the policeman and yelled happily:

" 'Ands hup, cully!"

Still fewer could have equaled the speed of Hardwick's draw.

The Dutchman froze in his tracks, staring goggle-eyed at the menace of Hardwick's revolver. Behind him, crowding forward at the urge of their curiosity, gathered the other occupants of the barroom, their hands raised high.

Burke, lolling against the bar, smoking an enormous black cigar, ignored Hardwick's command to put up his hands, but changed his mind swiftly when that man, hardly seeming to take aim, fired. The bullet cut through Burke's cigar barely an inch from his lips.

" You—fool," Burke roared.

" Sorry," Hardwick said pleasantly. " I thought your ash was rather long, and meant to trim it. But I've never fired this gun before. I'd like to try it again." He glanced searchingly at the men. " Did any one speak?"

" Allehmahtig! Yes, I speak," the big Dutchman spluttered. " What game is this you play?"

" This is no game. I've been warned that you wanted to find a diamond on me, and I don't intend to be searched. That's all!"

" That's straight talking, Yank," one of the men cried. " I'm with you. These scoundrels have had their own way too long. A chap never knows when he's going to be framed and sent down to the Breakwater for a long term. I bet there's not a man here who hasn't paid dirty blackmail at some time or other."

Several others signified their agreement with the speaker's sentiments:

" You'd better leave the *dorp* for a while, Yank," called another. " They'll get you sure for this: you and that Sydney rat, Ginger Dick."

" Wot did I tell yer," moaned Ginger Dick at Hardwick's elbow. " But wot do yer want me ter do with this cove?"

" Line him up with the Dutchman."

" D'yer 'ere, Mister Bloomin' Smart Aleck? Do wot Yank says."

The policeman sheepishly obeyed the suggestion.

Reaching up, Hardwick turned out the light hanging above his head. Then:

Crack — crack — crack! The reports followed each other so closely as to seem but one, and the place was plunged into darkness as suddenly as if a tornado had been loosed in the room, the lamps went out—extinguished by bullets from Hardwick's revolver.

Men cursed, Isaacs whimpered in fright, the barmaids screamed hysterically—and a door slammed.

When order and lights were finally procured, Hardwick and Ginger Dick had

made good their escape and were running swiftly down the street leading to the open veldt beyond the town.

V.

THEY had not gone far when Hardwick, owing to the darkness and his unfamiliarity with the road, fell heavily to the ground.

Ginger Dick cursed impatiently as the other rose slowly and seemed to be more intent on brushing the dirt from his clothes than continuing the mad flight.

"Didn't think yer was a bloomin' dude, Yank. Oo's goin' ter care 'ow yer look, heven hif they could see yer, w'ich they can't. Come hon! Look slippy."

"There's no hurry, Ginger. And, anyhow, we'll make better speed and get farther traveling slowly. My wind's gone."

"Don't waste hit torking, then. Come hon, I say."

They moved on through the darkness at a more leisurely gait.

"This isn't the way to your hut, is it?" Hardwick asked suddenly.

"Naw! Yer don't fink as I'm such a bleedin' fool ter go there, do yer?"

"Why not?"

Ginger Dick snorted in disgust.

"W'y! Heverybody knows where Hi live, hand that 'll be the first plice they'll look for hus. But hus won't be there. Naw! We're goin' to leave town fer a while. Hi knows a w'ite trader—an' 'e's a w'ite man—'bout fifteen miles hout. We'll make fer 'is plice an' 'ide hup fer a bit."

"It's not as serious as all that, surely?" Hardwick expostulated. "They've tried to frame me and failed — they won't try it again; they know now that I'm on guard."

"Hand can yer be on guard against hevery bleedin' man yer meet? Can yer be on guard w'en yer asleep? Say, Yank, show some sense. 'Ere yer've gone an' got hin wrong with Isaacs and Smithers! That's enough! They've got a lot hof hinfluence in this *dorp*. An' yer riled Burke a little w'il' back—an' 'e's got a lot more hinfluence. Listen!" He halted.

Men's angry voices floated down to them on the night's breeze. Looking back Hardwick could see the lights of the hotel and other smaller lights which moved. They were hurricane lanterns in the hands of men.

"What fools!" Hardwick exclaimed. "To go searching with lanterns for armed men!"

"This hain't America, Yank—or Haustralia, fer the matter of that. W'en they wants ter harrest yer hout 'ere yer supposed to stand still an' let 'em do hit. We're in Dutch, we are. We've defied the majesty of the law.

"Now, w'ile I finks of hit, throw away that blinkin' diamond."

"But," Hardwick expostulated, "it's valuable and—"

"Hell!" Ginger Dick spat derisively. "It ain't worth doin' time fer, is hit? 'Aving a diamond like that in yer pocket is worse nor carryin' about dynamite. An', suppose yer kept hit? Who could yer sell hit to? Honly to I. D. B. dealers—nobody else 'ud dare ter 'andle hit—and, like as not, they'd split on yer ter the perlice. Throw the bleedin' thing away."

With a sigh Hardwick obeyed.

"That's better," Ginger Dick exclaimed in relieved tones. "Now come on."

For a moment Hardwick considered the advisability of going back to face the music; then he thought of the many well-authentitated stories he had heard of innocent men who had been sent to the Breakwater under the I. D. B. act, having been framed, and realized that he would be powerless, without friends—always excepting Ginger Dick—and that the cards would be stacked against him. Even if he cleared himself of the charge, which they would surely press, arising out of this present incident, they'd get him eventually. It was so easy to slip a diamond in a man's pocket and later discover it there. More than one man had had a diamond mailed to him and had been arrested before he had a chance to open the envelope.

So Hardwick hesitated no longer, yet was loathe to drag Ginger into his troubles.

"There's no need for you to leave town, is there?" he asked. "You've done so much for me already that I—"

"I've done a bleedin' sight too much hif you asks me," the other interrupted irri-

tably. "Look at the mess I've got hinto hall through you. 'Eld hup a bloomin' perliceman, got hin Dutch with Burke an' the rest—'cause I'm your pal—and then 'as to run like 'ell before I could horder another drink. And now I've got ter leave the *dorp* w'er' I was makin' a respectable living 'elping meself to the spondulicks hother men didn't want. Blast yer. But, blimme Yank: You can fight, an' shoot—an' 'ow it makes me lafi w'en I finks of hold Burke's face—an' yer got nerve. So I 'as 'opes for yer. Hif honly yer wasn't so bloomin' particular abart being 'onest and hacting soft. Oh, hell! I'm gettin' soft meself! Come hon!"

They went on, and Hardwick, his eyes having by this time become accustomed to the darkness, had no difficulty in keeping up with Ginger Dick; no longer dodged the black figures which seemed to materialize out of the darkness, but which were only figments of his imagination.

And so they soon passed beyond the confines of the town, passed the compounds where native laborers at the mines were kept like prisoners until the period of their contract had expired, and passed out on to the open veldt.

"I'm only sorry fer one thing," said Ginger Dick after—for him—a long period of silence. "I'll miss her."

"Who? Your sweetheart?"

"Naw! Ain't got none. I mean my chameleon. I calls hit her 'cause hits halus changing. I 'ates women."

Hardwick laughed.

"Yus—I 'ates women," Ginger Dick repeated with some heat. "They're nasty, sneaky things. Halus wantin' yer to pet 'em like cats, an' hif yer stop—w'y, they scratches yer. Don't yer hever take hup wiv no woman not w'il' yer my pal."

"But you don't mind my trying to find Miss O'Brien, surely," Hardwick asked banteringly.

"Her? Her as 'as the land Smithers hand Isaacs wants? Naw! That's diff'runt. There's a chance to make a pie hout hof 'er—hif yer ain't too bloomin' squeamish.

"Look hout, now. The road crosses a river 'ere, drops sharp like. Though w'y they calls hit a river, Gord knows. It ain't got no water hin hit hand never 'as—'cepting w'en hit rains. Hon the hopposite side there's a plice we can stay huntil the moon comes hup. It's a hold 'ut. The Peruvians use hit sometimes."

"Peruvians?"

"Yus — Peruvian Jews — though Gord knows hif they comes from Peru or hif they're Jews. They're — hanyway, an' that's the name as 'as been given 'em hout 'ere. They sell rot-gut likker to the blacks, the perishin' blighters."

"Thought you wanted to go into that business, Ginger?"

Ginger Dick swore horribly.

"You're too soft!" he exclaimed as soon as his wrath had subsided somewhat. "You believe hany bleedin' thing you're told."

They crossed over the sandy bed of the river, climbed the steep bank on the other side, and, a few minutes later, came to the deserted mine.

Ginger Dick fumbled with the fastening of the rickety door of the hut which had once been used as living quarters by the owner of the mine, finally managing to open the door with much creaking of rusty hinges.

"I 'id some candles last time hi was 'ere. Light a match, cully, an' let's find 'em."

Hardwick obeyed, and in the moment's flickering glare the hut seemed to be full of weird, menacing shadows. Then, as the match went out, the shadows leaped upon the two white men.

In the pitchlike darkness of the hut Hardwick put up a stiff but losing battle against his unseen adversaries. They were naked, and their well-oiled skins made it impossible for him to grapple with them. Occasionally one grunted as, lashing out right and left, Hardwick caught him in a vulnerable spot.

Ginger Dick, too, was fighting hard—and enjoying it. His pessimistic curses made Hardwick laugh, sounding strangely above the hissing breaths and the dull thud of hard fists coming in contact with hard flesh, and the patter of feet upon the floor of the hut.

Neither men could get at their revolvers;

even if they had been able to draw them it is doubtful if they would have dared to use them. In such darkness, at such close quarters there was always the danger of hitting friend instead of foe.

"Damn you, Yank," Ginger Dick panted. "You bring more bad luck than a bloomin' magpie or thirteen black—"

His voice ceased suddenly. A dull thud put a period to his sentence, and, at almost the same time, Hardwick went down like a pole-axed bullock, struck on the back of his head by a knobkerrie.

VI.

WHEN Ginger Dick and Hardwick awoke to greet the sunrise of another day they looked at each other and their surroundings with puzzled wonder.

Each had uncomfortable memories of the night past; each had a large bump on the back of his head where he had been struck by a knobkerrie. Between the blows and their next consciousness time had elapsed—how long they had no way of telling, but each had unpleasant recollections of a long ride over bumpy ground—bound tightly together and gagged—at the bottom of a light, springless wagon.

There had been much shouting in the native tongue, much cracking of a big driving whip and the rattle of hoofs and the clatter of wheels as they moved at a swift pace over the veldt. On they had traveled without a pause—the darkness of the African night gave place to the cold, hard light of the African moon; on they went, their speed scarcely slackening, over dried-up water courses, through rocky defiles and up a long, steep slope until at last they had come to a halt.

Again they were left for a time, acutely miserable, endeavoring to free themselves, wondering who their captors were, fully convinced that some great evil was in store for them.

Soon the babble of voices had recommenced until one—clear, bell-like, seeming somehow familiar to Hardwick despite the strange language—sounded authoritatively and the clamor had ceased.

A moment's pause, and then a lantern was suddenly thrust into the wagon and Hardwick was conscious of a pair of bright eyes examining him shrewdly through a slit in the wagon top. Then the lantern was withdrawn and the owner of the musical voice gave another order, and a moment later the two men had been carried from the wagon into a large hut and carefully lowered onto two cots.

There they were left to wonder once again as to the reason of it all. But conjecture was useless; the morrow would doubtless bring its explanations, and, after a little while, sleep had claimed them both.

But now, as they opened their eyes in the sunlit, roomy hut they found themselves free, the gags removed, and realized that they were lying on almost luxuriously soft mattresses.

"Blimme!" said Ginger, and he could say no more, being somewhat awed by the feminine daintiness of his surroundings. He stared lugubriously at Hardwick, who whistled softly as his keen, observing eyes noted every little detail of the hut's furnishings.

It puzzled him. Evidently a woman—and a white woman—was responsible for their capture then. At least a woman had ordered the arrangement of the hut—he could not conceive of a man being responsible for the dainty chintz curtains which hung at the narrow window, or the bowl of yellow veldt flowers which stood on a table between the two camp beds. And he remembered now the clear, treble voice which had stilled the confused clamor of the previous night. That voice was a woman's. There was no doubt of that.

Then, struck by a common thought, both men fumbled at their belts for their revolvers, but their hands came away empty. They felt in their pockets—the extra cartridges had gone, too.

They rushed to the door of the hut, but, as they reached it, two brawny native warriors, armed with assegais, blocked their exit.

"*Indaba wena icona let mena hamba?*" Ginger Dick asked angrily in the weird Kitchen Kaffir which, aided by curses and signs, takes a white man a long way in South Africa. At least the white man

thinks that it does, and the natives, being by nature courteous, do not disillusion him.

"*Icona hamba,*" one of the natives replied gravely in response to Ginger Dick's demand that they be allowed to go. "First *skoff.*"

His lips parted in a happy grin, disclosing white, strong looking teeth, and he rubbed his stomach as if in anticipation of a luxurious meal.

The two white men retired to their cots.

"Are they cannibals, Ginger?" Hardwick asked with some show of apprehension. "I don't mind dying—not so very much, at least—but what a hell of a way to be buried!"

"Naw! They ain't cannibals. Cannibals are dirty louts, Cannibals file their teeth. But these"—he shook his head doubtfully—"I don't know wot these have. Shall hus rush 'em, cully?"

"No! I don't think that would be wise," said Hardwick after a moment's thought. "Better wait and see what happens. I have a feeling that if we went looking for trouble we'd find it—and more than we bargained for, at that.

"Hell! I'm hungry!"

As he spoke a comely native girl entered. She carried a tray on which were two plates of mealie meal, milk, cups, and a pot of steaming black coffee.

She placed it on the table between the two men and then squatted down on the floor near the door.

Ginger Dick toyed suspiciously with his food then walked over to the girl and held to her a spoonful of the paplike cereal.

"You *skoff,*" he said.

But she shook her head, laughing slightly, as she replied:

"It no bad. No make you belly sick. I eat it if you no believe, but Mary no lie."

"An' oo' the 'ell's Mary?"

"Me, Mary."

"And who are you?"

"Me, Mary. Me Inkoosikaas Katje's servant."

"And who is Inkoosikaas Katje?"

"You eat, white man, then you see. Mary take you to her."

"Let's eat, Ginger," Hardwick said encouragingly. "If they are going to kill us —and, somehow I don't think they are—they wouldn't take the bother to poison us. Those chaps with the spears outside could do the job very neatly and without any trouble."

"Blimme if Hi don't fink you're right, cully," Ginger Dick assented. "But p'haps they're trying to fatten hus hup."

But he fell to without any further protestations and did not stop until he had, in a sense, licked the platter clean.

"You come along with Mary now?" the girl asked as Ginger Dick, smacking his lips with great gusto, loudly announced in well satisfied tones:

"I've never 'ad better coffee."

They followed her out of the hut, discovering to their great astonishment that the latter, which was on the outskirts of a small kraal—beyond the encircling palisade of thorn bush—was only a stone's throw from a large, rambling house built of red veldt stone and which blended in so well with the surrounding kopjes as to make it inconspicuous even at so short a distance; it appeared at first sight to be only a dark red blotch against a dark background.

The kraal and the house were both built on a small plateau and, apparently, was entirely surrounded by bare, rock strewn kopjes. The place seemed entirely cut off from the outside world; there was no road which they could perceive leading from the plateau to the veldt below, although they were well aware that such a road must exist.

But neither he nor Ginger Dick—who expressed the belief that they must "'ave floied hup 'ere," had time to give their surroundings more than a passing glance, for almost immediately upon their emerging from the hut, four brawny warriors closed in on them and they were marched down toward the house, preceded by the native girl.

A few minutes later they were ushered into a long, narrow room which, although it was almost devoid of furniture, had an air of luxury about it.

Seated on a low stool at the far end of the room, surrounded by gray bearded natives was a slender slip of a girl—at first Hardwick thought she was a boy—with short, curly hair, dressed in patched khaki

trousers and khaki shirt. She was barefooted; her shirt sleeves were rolled up about her elbows.

As the two men were brought to a halt by their guards she leaned forward, elbows on knees, resting her chin on her hands and regarded them intently—especially Hardwick.

"'Ere you," began Ginger Dick, but stopped, panic-stricken, when, in response to an imperious nod from the girl, one of the warriors prodded him slightly in the rear with the point of his assegai.

"Lumme!" he exclaimed indignantly and then, answering Hardwick's warning glance, fell silent.

"Sprechen sie Deutsch?"

The girl addressed her question to Hardwick.

He shook his head.

"*Nein! Nein!*"

"Do you speak the Zulu talk?" she asked in the vernacular.

He looked at her blankly.

"Fool!" She spat out the English word. "Then why do you come to this country?" Her eyes flashed wrathfully.

"To make money," Hardwick answered sarcastically.

She looked at him coldly, almost impersonally; her eyes seemed to bore right through him and it was with the utmost difficulty that he suppressed the desire to turn and see who was standing behind him.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Jim Hardwick," he replied.

"Jim—Jim Hardwick," she repeated, hesitating slightly over the surname.

Then, still looking at Hardwick, she spoke in a low, rapid voice to the graybeards, who nodded gravely or breathed softly their one exclamation: "Au-a!"

Although Hardwick could not understand a word she was saying, it was impossible for him not to get the purport of her remarks. Her eyes spoke eloquently; her intonation, her gestures were very expressive, and Hardwick moved sheepishly, his face flushed. Apparently she was finding much that was displeasing about him.

"Who are you? What were you and the red haired man doing in the hut by the river? That hut is used only by Peruvians who sell their rot-gut poison to fools among my young men. You are not a Peruvian. Neither is Red Head."

"Not bleedin' likely," grunted Ginger Dick and moved quickly to avoid another jab.

The girl smiled slightly and continued:

"No! You are not Peruvians. That is why your hands were free, the gags taken from your mouths last night while you slept. That is why you are alive this morning."

She was, of course, speaking English now and her queer, musical accent reminded Hardwick of people he had known, long ago, in some back water town in Pennsylvania. The curious, slightly aspirated vowel sounds fascinated him.

"Answer slowly," she concluded, "for I must translate what you say so that my people may understand."

And very slowly Hardwick told her of the events which had brought him to his present position. What he omitted—his refusal to sign the report prepared by Isaacs & Smithers; his fight with the Englishman—Ginger Dick supplied. Not even the menace of the guard's assegai could silence for long the little Australian's verbosity.

"Han hif hit 'adn't been for you," he said sneeringly, "'e wouldn't 'ave 'ad that fight with Smithers an' we wouldn't be 'ere now. But that's the trouble with Yank. 'E's too bloomin' sentimental—fightin' over a silly piece of fluff like you; only 'e thought you was a boy, 'e did then—'e'd 'ave fought fer a dog just the same, so don't you go. a goin' putting hon hairs abart hit. 'E thought you was a boy, an' blimme, so did Hi. Are yer?"

The girl's eyes narrowed as with an expressive, gnomish moue she turned her back on the two white men and conversed for a time with the natives.

Presently she turned again and the gray bearded natives left the room, chattering excitedly.

A sharp voiced command and the four warriors left also.

"We believe your story, Big Jim," the girl said quietly. "But it is best that you stay here for a little while. Here men will not think of looking for you that they may put diamonds in your pockets. Also, if we

let you go, you may remember things about the place which must be forgotten. You can go to your hut now, if you wish, Red Head. And if you want to go into the hills at any time, you are free to do so if four warriors go with you. But if you try to go alone, thinking to escape from this place, you will die. My warriors will see to that!"

"What is your name?" Hardwick asked.

"My people call me Inkoosikaas, Jim Hardwick. I am their queen. But you shall call me Katje."

Then the pose of authority left her and, jumping excitedly to her feet, she danced toward Hardwick, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"Come along, big man," she cried. "We go a hunting."

She caught him by the hand and dragged him—a not unwilling prisoner—from the room.

"Gor blimme!" Ginger Dick muttered as he followed slowly after them. "Ain't she the hellion?"

VII.

THAT first hunt was one of many, and for Hardwick the days passed rapidly, because happily.

The girl was an enigma, the solution of which constantly eluded him. He knew about her just as much as she wanted him to know—and that was very little—and all his clever questioning of herself, and of such natives he found in the hills who could speak English, brought him no further information. Her age—he sometimes thought she must be in her early teens, at other times he thought she must be at least twenty-five—was elusive, as elusive as her true self. He could not determine whether she was a queen of a savage race playing the part of a young girl, or a white girl playing the part of a savage queen. In both rôles she was equally convincing.

True it was, however, that the natives of the kraal and of other kraals located in the group of hills, worshiped her and were ready to obey her slightest behest.

And he had continual evidence of her foresight. Although apparently allowed to wander about unmolested, unattended, there were certain trails he and Ginger Dick could not take—finding the way barred by armed warriors—there were certain things they could not do. Neither were their revolvers returned to them, although on such occasions as Hardwick accompanied the girl on a hunting trip he was given a well balanced gun and cartridges. But the gun and such cartridges remaining unfired were taken from him as soon as the hunt was over and the homeward journey began.

So it was that two weeks elapsed and the two men were as ignorant of their whereabouts in relation to the diamond town, as on the first day of their arrival. And Hardwick was quite content.

Every morning the girl held court in the big room of her house and passed judgment on such complaints as were brought before her. It pleased her to have Hardwick sit beside her at these hearings and, as she swiftly translated the salient points of each case, he marveled at her shrewd insight of the black man's psychology and the fearless wisdom of the sentences she passed.

At such times she was truly regal and seemed very aloof, very unapproachable—so that Hardwick forgot the incongruity of her attire, or wondered that she should always be dressed in the same tattered garments.

But as soon as the court session was over her attitude immediately changed, and she became a happy, trouble free, pleasure seeking girl; a creature of bubbling buoyant spirits; a sprite of the chase who leaped up the steep kopjes, seemingly tireless, barefooted as she was; venturing along narrow ledges which offered scanty foothold even for the klipspringer, the tiny buck of the hills.

Hardwick was a good shot—but she excelled him.

And always, after sundown, she vanished inside her house and they saw nothing more of her until the following morning; and with her went Hardwick's happiness, though he dared not seek too closely the reason why this should be so.

"She's a vampire, cully," Ginger Dick protested. "She's got yer hin 'er net, she 'as. You bloomin' fool!"

He laughed at Hardwick's rather embar-

rassed expostulations and assurance that the girl was only a child.

"A woman hain't never a child, cully!"

Hardwick tried another tack with the irate little man—irate because he saw so little of Hardwick except, as now, after sundown when the girl had retired to the seclusion of her house.

"Don't you see, Ginger, that we're just good pals—that's all?"

"Gor blimme, Yank, hif you hain't torkin' just like all the hother fools oo' get goin' wiv a woman. Fallin' hin love, they calls hit."

And he turned sulkily away and did not speak to Hardwick again until the following night when he said, whispering hoarsely out of the corner of his mouth:

"Say, cully, Hi've got hit all fixed fer hus to get haway."

"What do you mean?" Hardwick asked absent-mindedly.

Ginger Dick looked at him in disgust.

"Man," he said, "ain't you got ears? I got round one hof the niggers. He torks Henglish, 'e does, an' 'e's sick of bein' told wot to do by a bloomin' woman, 'e is, so 'e's a goin' ter show the way hout of this bleedin' hole. To-night 'es comink wiv hour revolvers hand is goin' ter put us hon the road to the *dorp*.

"An' listen, cully! W'ile you've been foolin' abart the plice with the piece of fluff Hi did some prospecting, see? Hand look at wot Hi found."

He handed Hardwick two or three pieces of quartz.

"Wot do yer fink hof that, eh?"

"It's good stuff," Hardwick said calmly, "very good. I suppose you have discovered the ledge just back of her house."

Ginger Dick's face fell. Then he said, hotly:

"So you strikes gold an' don't tell a pal! That's a 'ell of a way to hact!"

"Knowing it's there doesn't do us any good, Ginger. We can't mine it. The land belongs to the girl."

"Blimme, I never thought of that!" Then another thought struck him.

"Did yer tell 'er abart hit?"

"No! Somehow, I thought she'd rather not have it discovered."

"Then that's one time that yer sentiment 'as done hus some good. Us 'll take hit away from 'er. You're 'er right 'and man. Hit 'll be easy."

Hardwick shook his head.

"No, we can't do that, Ginger. It wouldn't be playing the game. She's made this place a little paradise; her people are happy and—well, you know what would happen if we brought men in here and started to work the reef. They'd make it a hell on earth! No, I'm not going to leave here yet, and if you go—I shan't try to stop you—you'll give me your word of honor first that you'll forget all about that reef."

"Yer gettin' bleedin' sentimental again," growled Ginger, seeing visions of great wealth fade away. "No, yer ain't, though. Yer just bein' sly; yer wants to get hon the soft side of the girl so as yer can get hit all fer yourself with no risk. W'y! Yer as bad as Burke in a manner hof speakin'. Yer willin' to stay 'ere an live hoff a girl. Wi' you hand 'er—"

But he got no further. Hardwick's hands closed about his throat, choking off all sound.

Ginger Dick clawed the air frantically, his face grew purple.

Suddenly Hardwick, with a gesture of contempt, released his hold.

"All right, Ginger," he said tonelessly. "I'll go with you. But—we'll never come back."

"Blimme!" Ginger Dick gulped painfully. "My bleedin' tongue went hand got me hinto trouble again. Hi torks too much. Ferget it, cully, will yer?"

"That's all right, Ginger. How soon do we start?"

"Hany time now. Hi'll give the signal."

He put out the light and then both men sat down on their cots and waited.

Presently they were conscious of another's presence in the hut and, as they jumped to their feet, a voice said softly:

"We go now, white men."

"Where are you?" Ginger Dick whispered hoarsely. "Where are the guns?"

"I am here by the door; I have the guns."

They got to the doorway and a moment

later were buckling on their revolvers which the native put into their hands.

" The cartridges, except the ones already in the guns, I could not get," the native said.

" Lumme!" Ginger Dick exclaimed in dismay. " Then I hain't a goin'."

" Oh, yes, you are," Hardwick replied, and caught hold of Ginger by his shirt collar.

" Quiet!" warned the native. " They will hear us. Follow close."

He moved off noiselessly, his big black bulk barely discernible, though, by stretching out his hand, Ginger Dick could have touched him.

On they went, starting nervously as a dog yelped somewhere in the kraal, until, judging that they had left kraal and the house of Katje far behind, Ginger Dick said mournfully:

" Lumme! Can't we tork now?"

" No talk—too many ears," whispered the native. " If they find us now, the vultures will pick your bones to-morrow."

" Blimme! I'm deaf and dumb."

They went on in silence.

The stars seemed to have increased a thousandfold since the men had left the hut and the whole sky shimmered phosphorescently. But the light was deceptive; it made the judging of distances difficult, the shadows distorted everything so that the white men walked cautiously, fearing a sudden drop where the ground was level, or fell several times at places where they had supposed it to be even.

" Why don't we get on the road by which the wagon brought us to this place?" Hardwick asked suspiciously when, after an hour or so of clambering up and down kopjes, they rested for a little while.

" Men guard the road," their guide answered tersely. " Men with spears. Now let us go on. Near by is a large kraal and we have stayed here too long."

As he spoke some dogs having caught their scent, noisily gave tongue.

" Halright, let's go," said Ginger Dick. " I'm thinkin' them dogs is 'ungry."

And on they went until the gray of breaking day found them, footsore and weary, on a small plateau, halfway between a kraal and a long, rambling house built of red veldt stone!

Standing at the open door of the house was Katje. She laughed merrily at their look of discomfiture.

Hardwick laughed, too, whole-heartedly.

But Ginger Dick, almost crying with baffled rage, so tired and frightened that he was not altogether responsible for his action, pulled his revolver and aimed at the girl. The trigger clicked harmlessly just as Hardwick threw himself at Ginger, collaring him about the knees, bringing him to the ground with a thud.

" It's all right, Big Jim," the girl called. " He has only dummy cartridges. Let him go. Yours are dummy ones, too. So now come in and have *skoff*, it is all prepared for you. You come, too, Ginger, unless," she added meaningly, " you would rather eat with my warriors."

Rising, both men turned and saw that some fifty or sixty armed men had quietly surrounded them.

" Let's heat," grumbled Ginger Dick. " I'm bloomin' 'ungry!"

Katje led the way into a small room at the back of the house and, a moment later, they were eating a hearty meal with an appetite spiced by their wanderings of the night.

Only once did the girl refer to their attempted escape and then, as she passed Ginger Dick his fifty cup of coffee, she said reproachfully:

" You shouldn't have tried to bribe my people, Ginger Dick. That was very wrong. And of course I heard all about it. At first I was angry and wondered whether I should let you live. I'm angry still—but you've been punished enough, no? I arranged it all very well, didn't I?"

Ginger Dick hurriedly gulped down his coffee.

" Yus," he said. " Hand I'm a fool! Hif you'll hexcuse me, miss, I'll go now. I'm bloomin' tired."

As the little man left the room, his head hanging dejectedly, the girl turned to Hardwick.

" Can you keep awake a little longer, Bi Jim?" she asked softly.

" Yes; I'm not tired, Katje. Why?"

"Because I want you to be with me when I hold court this morning."

"All right, Katje."

She jumped excitedly to her feet and clapped her hands. Then, sobering instantly, she led the way into the long room, where all the men of the kraal had already assembled.

As she entered they all rose and, with right hand upraised, boomed their salutation.

"Inkoosikaas!" and so the court was opened.

Then there was a stir among the natives and two men—white men—were dragged before the girl.

They were degraded looking specimens, repulsive in appearance. Their faces were covered with beards of several days' growth, their narrow foreheads sloping back into a mop of black, greasy hair which was overlong and curled in ringlets about their ears.

"These men," Katje explained curtly, "were taken by my warriors from the hut by the river where they had gone, hoping to sell their poison to my people." She sighed. "There are always fools, and my eyes cannot be everywhere. Some of my people go to work at the mines where men like these teach them to drink so that they—who are no wiser than children—come back from a year's labor poorer than they went. Truly! They sell their strength for money and give their money to these curs for stuff which destroys their manhood."

She raised her voice and, speaking now in the vernacular, ordered that certain natives be brought before her and, presently, three emaciated, consumptive looking blacks were thrust beside the two white men. They were as degraded specimens of their race as the white men of theirs. All had the same bestial look, the same puny physique and bleary, furtive eyes.

"Six months ago," Katje said harshly, indicating the natives, "these men were as strong as any among my people. These"—she pointed to the whites—"made them what they are. What is your judgment, Big Jim?"

He hesitated, then:

"Are you sure that these men have sold gin to your people?"

She spread her hands impatiently.

"To my people or other black men. What does it matter whom they have destroyed? That they have destroyed is sufficient. But it is not gin they sell. It is no drink that white men could take. You are soft, Big Jim; you are too sentimental. Else you would have said: 'These men have killed—they must be killed.' That has been my judgment on other snakes like these."

Hardwick moved a little way from her, frightened somewhat by the passionate hatred in her voice.

"Yes," she continued, "sometimes I hate my race; sometimes I want to kill all white people for what they are doing to this country. They can take the gold and diamonds—they are valueless—but why must they utterly destroy all the game of the land? Why must they destroy nations?" Then in a calmer voice she said: "And is your judgment death, big Jim?"

"Have you any of the stuff they tried to sell?" he countered.

At her command a big stone jar was brought to him. Withdrawing the cork, he held the jar up to his nose and was almost nauseated at the stench. He sipped a little of the liquor it contained, taking hardly more than a spoonful, and at once gagged and called for water to cool his burning tongue and throat.

"No!" he said to Katje. "My judgment is not death."

The faces of the two men lighted up. Until now they had been inarticulate with fear. But now one said:

"That's right, my boy. Us white men have got to stick together. The stuff ain't a white man's drink, course not. But they don't have to drink it. We—"

"Shut up," Hardwick said irritably. Then to Katje:

"My judgment is this: Keep them here as prisoners until they have drunk all this stuff"—he indicated the jar—"which they meant to sell to your people. Give them no water until it is all gone."

Then he strode to the door, suddenly conscious that he was very tired, intent on getting to his hut and sleep, ignoring the appeals of the men, apparently not hearing Katje when she called mockingly:

"You've condemned them to death, big Jim, just as surely as if my warriors ran assagais through them. They had twenty jars of the stuff, and it is all at this place!"

VIII.

THE next two days passed very slowly for Hardwick, because Katje seemed to have vanished, and all his inquiries among the natives elicited no response, save: "When the Inkoosikaas wishes to be seen, she will be seen. Until then: who are we to question her goings and comings?"

And so Hardwick had to content himself with wandering aimlessly about the place, a target for Ginger Dick's coarse horseplay and coarser wit. On the afternoon of the third day—and it had rained without ceasing since early morning—the native girl, Mary, came to Hardwick.

"Inkoosikaas Katje, she come back; she want to see you."

Whistling cheerfully, Hardwick followed Mary down to the house, and found Katje huddled despondently in a chair before the fire; there was a chill in the damp air.

"Hullo, big Jim," she said wistfully. "Sit here." She indicated a stool near her chair.

He obeyed and, looking up at her suddenly, their eyes met. She turned her head away for a moment; then, looking at him again, stuck out her tongue.

"What a child it is," he said teasingly.

"And are you so old?" she retorted hotly.

Then they both laughed.

"You said you wanted to see me," Hardwick said presently.

"Yes." She was alert now, her dreamy mood had passed. "I need your help."

"What is the trouble, Katje?"

Her little, sun-browned, capable hands fluttered before her.

"That can wait a little while. First tell me why you wanted to get away from here the other night."

"Why—why," he began, and finished lamely, "I—I don't know."

Her eyebrows arched.

"So?" she said. "Were you afraid?"

"Yes."

"Of me?"

"Of you—and of myself."

"Why?"

He moved uneasily and, taking up the poker, prodded the blazing log, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney.

"You're so young, Katje, and—"

She laughed softly.

"Yes? You've said that before. But go on, big Jim."

She bent over toward him; her hands rested lightly, caressingly on his head. Suddenly he sprang to his feet and, taking her up in his arms, kissed her on the lips.

"That is why I tried to go away the other night," he said, and loosed his hold of her—intending to go to his hut. But she clung tightly to him.

"Silly big Jim," she murmured. "That is all the more reason why you should have stayed. Well"—she shook him slightly—"aren't you going to say something?"

"You are so young," he began; but she put her hand over his mouth.

"If you say that again, I'll scream. I'm twenty-two, if you must know. Now say something nice."

He said it, and she sighed happily and held her face up to be kissed again.

Then the remembrance of the gold reef came to Hardwick and, affecting a sternness he was far from feeling, he said:

"Katje, I'm a rotter to be acting this way. I haven't a thing in the world. All I own is the clothes I have on my back—"

"My clothes are just as ragged, big Jim," she interposed softly.

He nodded.

"But you'll soon have better ones. At the back of the house, Katje, is a rich gold reef. I'll stake my reputation as a mining engineer that it can be made one of the best producers in the country. You must develop it so that you can get away from here and see all the things young girls should see. Buy pretty dresses, jewels; you must learn things, meet young people, and—"

She silenced him with an imperious gesture.

"That's enough. You're getting—as Ginger Dick would say—'bloomin' squeamish.' I know all about the gold reef; have

known it for a long time. But never mind that. There are other things much more important.

"Now listen, and do not interrupt, or I shall get very angry. My father, his name was Patrick O'Brien—"

"Then you are the Miss O'Brien of Isaac's report!" he exclaimed. "What a fool I was not to guess that before. But—"

"Yes," she continued. "You were a fool not to guess. Because you heard me speak the Taal, because I live like this, you thought that I was a Boer—and how could a Boer have a name like O'Brien? We have been in this country, the O'Briens have, for over one hundred years, but we have not forgotten the land of our fathers. The strain is strong in us. And I went to a school in Ireland for three years."

"I knew you weren't the savage you pretended to be," Hardwick murmured.

"That's twice you've interrupted, big Jim. Now listen: My father once owned a large farm—all the land that surrounds these kopjes—and all the natives living hereabout worshiped him because of his kindness and just dealing with them. But after mother died and I was away at school he drank and gambled with Isaacs and Smithers, so they won all his land from him except this house and these worthless kopjes. They tried to find out about the reef, too—the O'Briens have always known about it—and shot him when he wouldn't tell them where it was located. He died fifteen minutes after I got home. That was five years ago, big Jim, and since that time I've been trying to get Smithers and Isaacs to visit me here.

"But they would not come. They pretended to be my friends, tried to make me believe that they had been my father's partners, and that he had shot himself, that his accusation of Smithers was the delirium of a dying man. The fools! And so I made my home here, alone, forgetting all that I had learned of civilization. My people pledged me their loyalty just as they had to my father. You have seen how faithful they are.

"And I have been fighting their battles, big Jim. I've tried to keep them away from the mines, away from the influence of white men. And I have punished many beasts like those two you passed judgment on the other day. But Isaacs and Smithers, who are the biggest rogues of them all, kept away. They are cowards, but they are very clever.

"I got tired of waiting for them, so I went to them one day with a large piece of quartz, and told them where I had found it—only I didn't find it in that place—and asked them if it were any good. They said it was valueless, but, for my father's sake, offered to buy the land on which I found it. I pretended to be cautious. I agreed to sell it at their price if a mining engineer examined the ground first and said it was worthless. I thought they would be sure to come then. But they didn't. Instead, you came, and—and I forgot revenge, Jim."

He reached up, and, taking her hand, patted it gently. For a while they sat in happy silence which was only broken when a native entered.

"Inkoosikaas," he said, "many strangers, black men, are coming, and at their head ride two white men—one tall and one fat like a pig."

Katje gave a little gasp of dismay. "I had forgotten," she said. Then, in the vernacular: "How long before they reach here?"

"One hour, Inkoosikaas."

"It is enough," she said. "Have all the things been done as I ordered?"

"Yah, Inkoosikaas."

"Good! Then get you to your place."

As the native left the room Katje turned toward Hardwick.

"I said that I had forgotten my desire for revenge—but I haven't. At last Isaacs and Smithers are coming."

"Why are they coming now, Katje?"

"Because the day before yesterday I sold them the land they thought they wanted. Yesterday they prospected it and found it valueless. Now they are coming here for an accounting. And I'm frightened, big Jim. They have a strong bodyguard. They'll try to make me tell them where the reef is, and if I don't they'll treat me as they did father."

"No, they won't," Hardwick said.

She laughed happily.

"You're so strong and brave, Jim," she murmured, and ran from the room, halting in the doorway long enough to add: "Wait for me, big Jim. I'm going to dress up for you."

Then she was gone, and Hardwick, forgetting the cool way in which she brought down a charging lion at twenty paces—after he had missed—forgetting that she had taken care of herself against just as great a menace as the one which now threatened her—preened himself on the fact that she had appealed to him for help.

IX.

OVER half an hour elapsed before Katje returned to the room, and so engrossed was Hardwick with his reveries that he did not look up until she had crossed the floor and was standing before him. Then he gasped with astonishment and admiration.

Katje—the betrousered tomboy—had vanished: Inkoosikaas was like a figment of the imagination, for the girl who now stood before him was neither, yet had the attributes of both.

The simple lines of the tight-fitting, dark green velvet dress she wore revealed what the boyish garments had concealed, and her figure was alluring in her soft femininity. The angular awkwardness of the girl she had appeared to be now gave place to soft curves and graceful undulations. Her eyes shone mistily, her lips parted ever so slightly, showing pearly white teeth. Hardwick wondered that he had not noticed her teeth before, they were so perfect: he wondered, too, that the grace of her carriage had not registered on his mind—that of all her charms he had been conscious only of her musical voice.

"Well," she said tremulously, "don't you like me this way? Must I wear those patched abominations forever?"

But before he could answer the door burst open, and Ginger Dick rushed in, crying:

"Say, missy, say cull, Smithers and Isaacs—"

Then he stopped short and looked at Katie wonderingly. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. Still disbelieving, he walked up to the girl and around her; he fingered the material of her dress.

"Blimme!" he ejaculated softly. "S'elp me, but hit's 'er. Hand she's got shoes an' stockings hon. 'Pon my Sam hif she ain't."

Katje laughed softly, and Ginger Dick looked relieved.

"Yus," he said flatly. "Now I knows hit's 'er. Know that larf anywhere, Hi would."

Then, remembering his errand, he went on: "As I was a-sayin' Smithers hand Isaacs are coming with fifty ugly blacks 'oo look as hif they mean business."

"We're expecting them," Hardwick said grimly.

"Oh, we hare, are we? And since w'en 'ave we gone hinto partnership with the lady, cully? My—but ain't she a oner! Then perhaps you knows, Mr. Inkoosikaas Hardwick, that none of her people hare to be seen. There ain't a 'ealthy man in the kraal—honly a few old graybeards and kids and women. There ain't a man fit ter 'old a spear hin the plice. W'ere are the men, I wants ter know?"

"They are obeying my orders, Ginger," the girl said quietly. "When the time comes they'll be ready to do whatever I want them to do. They have been waiting for this for a long time!"

"Oh! That's diff'runt. But 'ow about hus? I'd feel safer hif I had a revolver and plenty of cartridges."

Hardwick looked at Katje.

"I think we ought to be armed—dear," he said.

"Dear, he says," Ginger Dick chortled.

Katje indicated a door at the rear of the room.

"The revolvers and lots of cartridges are in that room, Ginger," she said. "Go and help yourself. You, too, Jim, and stay there until I call for you. I'll meet Smithers and Isaacs alone."

"You'll be careful, Katje?" Hardwick was reluctant to leave her.

"Very careful, big Jim," she smiled reassuringly.

Outside there was the sound of tramping feet, then a white man's voice raised in

harsh command followed by a loud knocking at the door.

One swift look round to see that everything was all right—that the door at the far end of the room was closed—then Katje seated herself before the fire and called lazily:

"Come in."

The door opened, slowly, and after a little delay the muzzle of a revolver appeared, and then the hand holding the revolver; finally Smithers stepped into full sight, and, taking cover behind him, the fat, roly-poly Isaacs.

"So you are all alone, Katie," Smithers said sourly. "And all dressed up."

"I always dress up at night," she answered coolly. "What do you want?"

"That's a nice question, ain't it?" Isaacs asked, coming from behind Smithers. "We have come to warn you, my girl." He shook a fat finger at Katje. "You'll go to prison, yes, if you are not careful."

Smithers put his revolver back in its holster and swaggered up to the girl's chair.

"You're looking very pretty, Katie," he said with a mocking bow. "Give me a kiss."

"What do you want?" she repeated.

"A few words with you, my dear." Isaacs leered at her, rubbing his plump white hands together.

"About the claim, you know," he continued. "You haven't been nice about that. You have fooled us, yes. All this way we have come to go prospecting, and no gold is there."

She looked at him in innocent surprise. "Why, of course not. You told me that the land was worthless and—"

"That's enough of that," Smithers snarled. "You are not such a fool as you would have us believe. We are here now to get the land we paid for—the land on which you found that quartz. We want the reef, and if you don't tell us where it is—why, we'll treat you a damned sight worse than we treated your father. See?"

His jaw stuck out menacingly, and she shrank ever so slightly from him.

"Why," she exclaimed, "what do you mean? I don't understand. I thought you were father's friends—that you were my friends." Then she laughed—a frightened little laugh which broke like a child's whose tears are always near to laughter. "I see; you are just pretending. You are my friends, aren't you?"

"Yes, my dear," Isaacs said smoothly, and spread his fat, chubby fingers to the warmth of the fire; the diamonds on them reflected its glow in little pinpoints of blood-red flame. "Yes," he continued, "we are your friends if you are our friends. Fifty-fifty—that's a fair enough business proposition, ain't it? So be a good girl and tell us where the reef is."

"I—I don't know."

Smithers smiled sardonically.

"You're a liar," he said roughly. "But we are going to stay here until we find out. And we're not going to look for it, either. You are going to tell us where that reef is."

She did not speak, and Isaacs took up the burden of the conversation again.

"Yes, my dear," he said, and his voice was oily, mock-paternal, but his eyes glinted avariciously. "You must tell us where the reef is, so that we can start men working on it. If you don't tell us, you'll be a swindler and a cheat. So you will tell us, not? That will be nice for us all. Perhaps we will give you a little present—a hundred pounds, eh, Smithers?"

"Two hundred if she speaks quickly. Hell, if she keeps us here much longer."

Isaacs beamed.

"There. Ain't he generous, my dear? Ever so much more generous than you deserve. But if you're a good girl and speak pretty, I'll give you another hundred pounds out of my own pocket. What do you think of that? Nice, ain't I?" He leaned toward her. "Come now, tell old Isaacs where it is?"

"No," she said flatly, "I won't tell you."

Smithers moved impatiently, but Isaacs put out a restraining hand. There was a suggestion of menace in his voice when he spoke again.

"You had better tell us, my dear. We are both very busy men. We can't waste time talking to a silly girl. We want to be good friends, but"—he shrugged his shoulders—"you see there's two of us, and we're armed, an' we've got fifty blacks outside—

more than enough to take care of your natives. So you'll tell us?"

"No, Isaacs! No, Smithers! I tell you I won't tell you anything. Now go away and leave me alone. You can't frighten me with your silly threats."

But, despite her brave words, her voice quavered.

Smithers stepped forward with a curse and caught both her wrists in his big hands, pulling her up to her feet.

"You'll tell," he muttered between set teeth, "and tell now!"

"I won't," she retorted, and kicked at his shins.

"You —— cat!" he swore, and twisted her wrists so that she was obliged to stand on tiptoes to relieve the strain.

"Look, Smithers!" Isaacs whispered hoarsely. "The door at the end of the room! Some one's turning the knob!"

With a snarl of rage Smithers swung her before him, then, holding her helpless with one iron-muscled arm, he drew his revolver and cried:

"The little wretch has fooled us. Get out of here at once, Isaacs, and warn the blacks."

He began to back toward the door just as the one at the end of the room opened and Hardwick and Ginger sprang out.

Smithers fired.

"Lumme!" yelped Ginger Dick, and his revolver dropped with a clatter to the floor, the blood streaming from a wound in his arm.

Before Smithers could fire again Hardwick dragged Ginger Dick behind a large table which he had quickly overturned. Hardwick dared not fire—Ginger Dick could not—fearing to hit the girl, and Smithers's retreat toward the door continued unhindered save by the almost futile struggles of the girl.

"I'll come and get you birds when I've finished with this filly," Smithers said. "Now, stay where you are. Move, and I'll plug the girl and still have enough shots to finish you."

They did not move—for Katje's sake they dared not.

A wild shot sounded outside. "Isaacs has started the blacks moving," Smithers said slowly, almost whispering into the girl's ear. "They're going to set fire to the kraal. Better tell before it's too late."

She shook her head and, getting a moment's freedom, cried:

"Don't move, big Jim. My people—"

Then Smithers's huge hand closed over her mouth.

And now from outside sounded a low murmuring like the beating of surf on a rocky shore. It increased in volume. The murmurs became wild shouts, cries of rage and pain. There sounded the sharp cracks which told of blows parried, dull thuds which told of knobkerries landing on soft, yielding flesh.

On Smithers's face there was a look of perplexity—of baffled cunning—of fear. Katje, squirming, twisting, kicking and biting, impeded his progress; the door leading to the open was still ten feet away. He was between the devil and the deep sea. He dared not loose her, knowing that to do so would expose him to the bullets of Hardwick; and he knew that he was needed outside at once.

There was a scream of fear, and Isaacs, his face streaked with blood which flowed from a wound in his forehead, his eyes protruding fearfully, his clothing torn and dust stained, backed into the room.

"We're done, Smithers," he sobbed. "Her black devils are all over the place. We might have known. We might have known. Katie, my dear," he pleaded, "you'll save an old man who's always been your friend. I tried to persuade Smithers not to—"

"Shut up, you fool!" Smithers, beside himself with rage, struck the groveling man across the face with the barrel of his revolver and Isaacs collapsed, screaming like a clumsily stuck pig.

With an oath Smithers flung Katje from him—she hurtled across the room, crashing into a table, falling limply to the ground near the unconscious Isaacs—and ran to the door, then cowered back, not daring to face the armed warriors who were lined up outside the house.

Turning back into the room, his face lighted with malicious glee, for, casting all caution to the winds, Hardwick had left

the cover of the upturned table, intent on reaching Katje's side. Smithers realized that all hope was not yet lost. With Hardwick and Katje out of the way he did not doubt that he could handle the natives. A few threats, a few judiciously placed bribes and they would come to heel—no doubt of that. Hadn't he done the same sort of thing before?

"You're first, and then the girl," he shouted and fired.

Hardwick was spun half way around with the force of the bullet's impact. He was conscious of a stabbing pain in his left side—of distant, confused sounds—of an inner voice prompting him: "Get him before he gets Katje!" As he fell he forced his tired body—strange how tired he felt—round to face Smithers. He drew his revolver and as he fell, fired. Then all noise, all light, all sense of living, vanished. He was an atom in infinite darkness.

Smithers, mouthing horribly, fell too, hands clawing at the floor. He shivered as if with a violent ague, then moved no more.

And then Katje rose to her feet, a smoking revolver in her hand, and going over to Hardwick knelt down beside him and expertly examined his wound, stanching the flow of blood with a towel taken from a near by chest.

"He'll be all right," she said with a happy sigh of relief. "A week in bed—that's all. But you, Ginger? Let me see your hand."

"I'm all right—honly a scratch. Blimme! I'm going to learn ter shoot wiv me left 'and. A bloke's in a 'ell of a pickle w'en his right's out of commish. But are yer sure 'e's orlright?"

She nodded.

"He's a bleedin' fool, ain't 'e? Alus puttin' 'is 'ead hinto trouble. I tells 'im back there," he indicated the inner room with a jerk of his head, "that you could take care hof yerself. I guessed that yer 'ad a plan hall figgered hout. But 'e would 'ave hit that yer was only a tender female, a fragile slip hof a girl as 'ad ter be pertected. And 'e nearly spoiled yer plans, didn't 'e?"

She nodded happily, and Ginger Dick wondered at the light which shone in her eyes. "And you 'ad Smithers covered, didn't yer? It was you wot shot 'im. I'm hon ter you, my lady. You hain' arf a smart 'un."

"Yes," she whispered. "But you must never let him know. He saved me—do you see, Ginger?"

"Yus! I finks I does. Ain't he the lucky devil though?"

One of the gray-bearded natives entered.

"It's all over, Inkoosikaas. The black dogs have thrown down their knobkerries. There was no fight in them."

"They had no chance. Were any killed?"

"None. Many will have sore ribs and aching heads. That is all. But what of the white men?"

"This one—he is soon to be my lord—is wounded, but not badly. In a little while all will be well with him. That one," she indicated Smithers, "is dead. The bullet entered his heart. Take him away. That one," she pointed to Isaacs, "is sleeping. He will awaken when fear leaves him."

X.

SEVERAL days later three men waited outside of Katje's house: Isaacs, sitting on a donkey, his legs tied together under the beast's belly, was one; the others, sickly looking, dirty, unshaven, their hands bound and tied to a belt around Isaacs's waist, were the two illicit liquor dealers.

All three looked extremely miserable and fearfully eyed the natives who stood guard over them.

They were waiting for Ginger Dick who, armed with a full confession signed by Isaacs, was going to take them into the *dorp* and hand them over to the authorities.

The little man was saying good-by to Hardwick, who was able to sit up now.

"Good-by, Yank." Ginger Dick held out his hand. "Yer got me won hover to this sentiment stuff. Hit pays—blimme hif it don't. By right yer ought ter be dead—or doin' seven years on the Breakwater. An' look at yer!"

Hardwick laughed.

"Larf hon. I'm goin' ter try it meself.

Makes me want to sniffle, any'ow, w'en I looks at you and 'er.

"Hanything yer wants sent hout from the *dorp,* cully?"

"There's something, some one, I want you to *bring* back."

"Me come back 'ere? Does yer mean it, cully? Do you, missy?"

Hardwick nodded and Katje said softly:

"You'll have to be best man and bridesmaid, and give the bride away!"

"Lumme!" Ginger Dick's merriment almost choked him. "Can't yer picture me a perishin' bridesmaid? An' yer do wants me ter come back? Yer do? Then 'ere's w'ere I 'urry. Sooner gone, sooner back, says I. Good-by!"

He went to the door, then turned and coughed softly.

Their heads were very close together.

He coughed again—louder.

They started.

"Wot was hit you wanted me ter bring back from the *dorp?*" he asked.

"Why—a—minister, of course, you—you perishin' blighter!" Katje's cheeks were very red; her eyes like mist-veiled stars.

"Now get out!" Hardwick added.

And Ginger Dick, chuckling happily, got out.

THE END

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THE REAL LIFE

THE festive pleasure-seeking throng
Can voice no sentiment or song
Of my sad heart to-night.
No bright emblazoned thoroughfare,
Nor strains of music in the air,
Can stay my hurried flight.

The ribald laughter, jesting jeers
Around me ring, but my soft tears
Replace the old-time smile.
I choke at thoughts of merriment,
And hasten faster on, intent
For many a weary mile.

Until at last behind me lies
The city of a million eyes,
Distorted and ablaze.
A million hearts may beat and sing,
Make light of love and everything.
I cannot stand and gaze.

For me, no vain fictitious life,
No hollow emptiness of strife,
No foolish tinseled goal.
I claim the open road and sky,
For this I'll let the world pass by,
And feed my famished soul.

Percy W. Reynolds.

Dirty Work

By RUFUS KING

Author of "Dirty Weather," "The Silent Command," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I.

GEORGE FIELDING MORTIMER BUNTZ, wireless operator on an oil tanker, runs foul of the Finnish cook. As a result, "Sparks" finds himself swimming in a midnight sea with a bump on his head, and the vessel beyond hailing distance. He is picked up by a yacht, and thus encounters Nancy, daughter of James K. Vail, a hydrophosphate king. She is seventeen, and a red head. Buntz tells her that he is "Victor Swift," owns his own yacht, and is a mechanical engineering and electrical genius. Nancy believes him, and reveals that her father wishes to move a mountain of coral rock for building purposes from an outlying island to his Florida estate. Sparks gets the contract on pure bluff, equips a tramp steamer with electrical derricks, and sets to work. Meanwhile Hindu fanatics have discovered that the coral mountain contains material essential to their religious exercises. Sparks uses electrically charged defenses to fight them off, and safely brings his first steamer load of rock to Papa Vail, a mighty short tempered customer.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRST CRIMP IN THE RAJAH'S BONNET.

THE rajah rose with immense satisfaction from a make-believe chair of the fourteenth Louis and offered a fatuous smile to the dark faces of the gathered twelve.

The Hudson flowed pleasantly beneath his windows and the breeze came coolly through their curtains of rich lace.

His manner indicated that all was well. They were waiting the report that would announce that the young American pig employed by the big American pig had agreed to accept their inconsequential bribe of three hundred thousand dollars and double-cross his master.

The rajah gave a brief résumé of this expectation and warned, incidentally, Finger Number Four of the twelve, please not to scatter his cigar ash over the small medal-

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for May 10.

lions of the Tabriz rug as, although many persons held that the ash was good for rugs, the rajah held otherwise, and a perfectly good tray was within reach anyway, he thanked him, yes.

Their road from now on, the rajah went on to explain, would of course be perfectly simple. The young American pig would work like the mysterious sixty and level the hill. Having done so, the last load aboard his amazing steamer—and it was amazing if the reports from their Number Thirty-Two in Galveston were to be believed, and why should they not be?—would be composed of the priceless deposit of blue coral which would not be disposed of upon its arrival in India, the rajah smilingly hinted, for a tune in anything short of nine figures.

The true kernel of the jest was, as the rajah then cleverly indicated, that even their three hundred dollar bribe would not be lost. They would of course as agreed—for were they not honorable gentlemen?—put such an amount in the young American pig's pocket, but there, however, their responsibility in the matter would cease, and there was nothing to prevent their instantly plucking it out again and sticking the young American pig in his neck to prevent his squealings.

The rajah, spurning the ormolu timepiece on the mantle, glanced at his platinum wrist watch. The hands hinted at four o'clock. It was strange, he remarked, that the wire had not been delivered by then. The deal should have been closed the previous night and the information dispatched early that morning.

No matter, another bottle of champagne would tide them over the intervening short quarter of an hour, at the conclusion of which the telegram would most assuredly arrive and please, would the same offending Finger Number Four strive to bear in mind his few remarks concerning ash when spilled upon the damned *cartouches* of that same damned Tabriz rug, he thanked him, yes?

Finger Number Four, it appeared, would and a pleasant flowing of sparkling gold passed most swiftly into oblivion the following quarter of an hour when a wire was handed in at the door, as the rajah had predicted. The fact shot his stock up a good deal in the line of prophecies, a thing not to be lightly sneezed at, especially in India.

Glasses were hastily emptied and set aside. Another bottle of champagne was ordered to be cooled, that they might drink a toast in acknowledgment of the success of their Number Thirty-Two, and the rajah then opened the wire.

He glanced at once at the signature.

It was Oswald.

"Oswald!" he said in alarm. "That is not the sign of our Number Thirty-Two. By Rudra, can it be—" A hasty rustling through a small and expensive leather notebook confirmed the fact—"It is our Number Forty-Nine! In the name of Pradhana what can *he* have to say?"

"If you'd read the message, rajah, you might find out," suggested the ash scattering Finger Number Four, and who made a target, even as he spoke, on another and still somehow virgin *cartouche*.

The rajah was too startled even to note this last, or rather latest, desecration of his Tabriz rug.

"The message," he said, "is this: 'Pestilence devouring pineapples. Immediate relief essential to check scourge. Break news gently to mother and wish her a merry Christmas from her dutiful nephew, signed, Oswald.'

"And this," continued the rajah, "when it is decoded means: 'Plans miscarried. Number Thirty-Two disappeared. Believed murdered. Young American pig unharmed and first load of Coral Isle safe on way to owner. Await instructions. Signed, Number Forty-Nine.'"

The first thing the rajah did was to cancel the cooled bottle of champagne. He ordered up a quart of Scotch instead.

What, demanded the twelve Scarlet Fingers, was to be done?

"Be calm, gentlemen," advised the rajah, "for all is not yet lost—far from it. You have seen an exhibition of just one of the little tricks that I have up my sleeve. There are, I can assure you, many others."

"Let us hope," muttered Finger Number Four, who liked scattering his ashes tremendously and grew grouchy whenever he was

called down for it, "that they will prove a mite more efficacious than the last."

He also had gone to Oxford.

CHAPTER X.

ROUND NUMBER ONE.

MR. VAIL realized, upon striking the graveled walk that led sharply to his wharf, that in his haste he had forgotten to encase his feet in slippers. His fury scorned the fact as a trifling detail in spite of the stifled howls he gave vent to.

"Ahoy, there, stranger, good morning!" called Sparks cheerily in answer, as he imagined, to Mr. Vail's hearty hail, a faint echo of which had reached his ears.

He saw Mr. Vail pause a minute on the path and stare stonily at him. It also appeared as if Mr. Vail's lips were moving, perhaps in some kindly message of welcome.

He next saw Mr. Vail pluck his honey colored dressing gown about him and with an exciting exposure of lavender silk pyjamas, and no ankles to speak of, step daintily across the path and onto the grass lawn where, as if the cooling verdure had inspired him, he again broke into an exuberant lope and started a Spring dance, as a Swede might interpret one, for the dock.

"Mighty decent of you to run down to meet me," shouted Sparks, when he deemed Mr. Vail near enough to hear him.

Mr. Vail almost tripped, as if some invisible spur had pricked him, and then redoubled his pace.

"I see you believe in combining exercise with your pleasure," continued Sparks.

Mr. Vail, who had by this time reached the approach to the dock, managed to pause. He drew the revolver from the pocket of his honey colored dressing gown and, breathing rapidly, squinted along its barrel.

"Target practice?" enquired Sparks pleasantly. "Move it a bit; you're aiming it at me."

Something like a "Stand still, damn it!" came faintly to his ears.

Mr. Vail in a rage that was now towering, the soles of his feet badly bruised and his restraint scattered irrevocably to the four winds, knew perfectly well that the distance was still too great for proper aiming. He pulled the trigger anyway.

The gun did its duty and the bullet clanged against the iron side of the Princess, several yards to the left of where Mr. Swift hung in welcoming fashion over the rail.

"Are you mad?" shouted Sparks.

"Yes!" roared Mr. Vail, becoming articulate for the first time in ten minutes.

Sparks took him at his word value and dove for the chartroom where he bolted the door and then, making for a porthole, stood waiting for further manifestations on the part of his lunatic employer.

Mr. Vail felt better. He began, in fact, to feel a trifle worried. Perhaps he had been a dash too headstrong. No matter how slick a con man young Swift was, it would go hard with himself if he were to hit him with a bullet.

Lead thus being put aside, Mr. Vail ascended the gangway with the intention of mounting to the bridge and giving the young sharper a large piece of his mind, if not all of it. After that he could hand him over to the proper authorities and collect as much of his twenty thousand dollars as he could. It would be, he feared, little enough.

"How much have you got left of my twenty thousand dollars?" he shouted, as he neared the opened port where gleamed a wary and suspicious eye.

"None. And what do you mean by trying to shoot me up?"

None! It was even worse than Mr. Vail had feared.

"What did you do with it?" he demanded.

"Well, I bought this boat for one thing—"

"My God!" murmured Mr. Vail, eying the purchase through a mist.

"And I ask you again what you mean by pulling a gun on me?"

"You dared—you had the inconceivable audacity—to bring this floating, no this half sinking nightmare, purchased with my money to—to—to—" Mr. Vail found himself getting seriously involved in the imitation of a whistle and paused to recapture his breath. "Twenty thousand dollars for

this antiquated, measly, moth-eaten, wretched imitation of a Victorian bath tub that even a third rate junk dealer—"

"Nothing of the sort," interrupted Sparks, raising his voice to the necessary pitch so to do. "Six hundred was all I paid for her."

"Aha!" cried Mr. Vail and added, with a fine show of sarcasm and exactitude, "then the remaining nineteen thousand and four hundred dollars were dissipated, I presume, to the winds?"

"No!" shouted Sparks. "They were spent in getting machinery to get your fool rocks from your fool island and every one of which I ought to throw at your fool head." He stuck his own outside the porthole for the sake of greater emphasis.

Mr. Vail, spotting Mr. Swift's neck for the first time within reach, made a grab for it. He missed. "Do you mean to tell me you actually pulled any bluff at getting that rock?"

"Bluff? Go take a look under those hatch covers and then come back here and tell me what the fireworks are about."

Mr. Vail, seeing there was nothing to be gained by hovering in the vicinity of a neck that possessed such a high degree of elasticity, complied. He descended to the forward deck and approached, suspiciously, a hatch cover.

Of course, it was absurd. It was simply some fresh outrage in the form of an ill-timed jest that would be perpetrated upon him. Still, Mr. Vail was just seaman enough to recognize the fact that the fool ship, his—ye Gods!—fool ship, was loaded with something and he might as well find out with what.

A child could have knocked him down with a feather upon his catching sight of the top layer of slabs of peculiarly shaded beryl green coral rock that mocked him from the hold.

The first sensation to assail him was one of exultation and immense satisfaction. He fairly trembled with excitement. A vision of Mirapa as it was to be arose dazzlingly before his eyes.

He stepped over the hatch coaming and descended the ladder into the hold where he stroked the soft, fine surface of the cargo with his hand, the better to convince himself of its reality.

His heart, volatile at best, switched in a flash from anger to joy, from recrimination to gratitude. Mr. Swift, whoever he was, whatever he was, was a smart young feller, just the type of fine upstanding young American that Mr. Vail liked to have around him. If Mr. Swift's neck had at that moment been within his grasp he would, instead of wringing it, have released it.

Mr. Vail intended, as it was, to ascend at once and make the *amende honorable*. He had been hasty. He would explain. All would, all must be forgiven. He wanted many more cargoes of that precious rock.

He started to ascend the ladder with the dove of peace prettily circling a rosy halo about his head when a sudden darkness and the clank of boards descended on him from above. A few more rungs explained the meaning of it.

The hatch cover had been shoved into place and, which was worse, battened down so he couldn't budge it. The dove of peace, one need scarcely mention, took sick and fainted on the spot.

Up at the house, Miss Nancy Vail completed her toilet with sundry birdlike and useless pats at her hair, her linen dress, and wherever her hand happend to land, and sauntered from her room to meet the morning, her breakfast, her father, and all comers.

Mr. Victor Swift stood glaring up at her from beside the newel post at the foot of the stairs.

"You!" she said, in the tone of voice reserved for those who have returned in the shape of a ghost from the grave.

Sparks ignored all amenities, social and otherwise. "If you have any influence with that papa of yours," he said, "come down and get him. I have him battened down in the Princess's forward hold.

"Princess? Papa—Princess—papa—papa—"

"For heaven's sake, stop saying 'papa' and come with me. You'll see him in a minute."

There was a good deal to see when they got there.

Miss Vail had explained a number of

things on the way. She insisted that personally she had never wavered for an instant in her confidence in him and she totaled the number of times she had been called fool for her pains.

Now that he had reappeared, and especially with a full cargo of the coveted material, everything was serene again. She told him he was wonderful. He admitted the fact with an abstract and wholly charming frankness.

There had been much to be said, he realized, upon Mr. Vail's side of the question, and the hold of the Princess was not, when you came right down to it, the most comfortable sort of place in the world.

It was with no small amount of perturbation that he slid back the hatch cover and, thinking discretion the better part of valor, begged Miss Vail to poke her head over the edge and take a look below.

"Papa!" she cried, catching sight of a swirl of honey colored silk.

A resounding roar answered her.

"Quick!" she whispered to her genius. "Put the lid on again. We'll have to reason with him through a crack."

Sparks hurriedly obeyed.

"Papa?" Miss Vail enquired again, placing her lips close to the aperture left by the all but closed hatch cover. "Can you hear me?"

A growl and a string of fortunately unintelligible words assured her that he could hear her very well.

"In that case," she continued, the advice had become a habit with her, "keep your—I forgot you were in your pyjamas. Everything is a mistake. A misunderstanding on both sides.

"If you'll promise to cool off and be reasonable about it we'll let you out. If you don't I guess you can stay there all day. I guess that's fair enough."

"Let me," strangled a voice from the depths, "out."

"You promise to be reasonable?"

"Yes," said the voice, more strangled than ever.

"Lift the lid," commanded Miss Vail. "I'll be on hand to soothe him, so you needn't worry anyway."

"So!" said Mr. Vail, after he had emerged and seated himself weakly upon the hatch coaming. "So!"

"You must admit it was your own fault," said Sparks.

"That shot, young man was a mistake."

"I'm glad, sir, you think so."

"It should never have missed you," continued Mr. Vail nervously clenching his fingers.

"Papa!"

Mr. Vail eyed his offspring coldly. "Go home," he said.

Miss Vail, who was a wise enough lady to know when enough was enough, went.

"Now, then, Mr. Victor Swift, you and me have got to talk."

"We have," Sparks agreed. "In the first place I want it well understood that I can't have my work interfered with again by sudden whims on your part to go running about after me with a gun.

"It hasn't occurred to you, perhaps, that this is the sixteenth day since our contract went into effect. Providing you can figure it out, that leaves only fourteen more before the entire hill must be removed from Coral Isle. It will take three more loads to do it.

"Every slab that's aboard her now must be ashore by midnight and the Princess on her way back for more if the job is to be a success—which it is. This is the last time I'll talk to you about it.

"I can't and I won't have you running about at my heels. Understand that and remember it."

Mr. Vail, who had planned to do the talking, finding his mouth open and nothing coming out of it, hastily closed it.

"I am taking it for granted," continued Sparks, "that you are an honorable man and intend to live up to your written and spoken word. Have I or have I not so far lived up to mine?"

The beautiful load of more beautiful beryl green coral rock slabs that had so lately been his temporary painful couch shouted, to Mr. Vail, an uncompromising yes. He echoed it weakly.

"Then what," demanded Sparks triumphantly, "are you bellyaching about?"

"I'll tell you just what," murmured Mr. Vail, considerably subdued. "It's this. I

wanted, at first, to believe in your concern and in consequence I did. But you sent me no advices about your activities. All you did was to waltz off with my check and cash it, as I found out when I tried to stop it.

"It's the mystery about the whole thing that gets my goat. What is this concern? Who's the head, the brains of it? Where in hell's bells does he get his efficiency? His men?

"Coral Isle must be swarming with them, working day and night, to get the load you've got aboard. I must run over and see."

"You must do nothing of the sort," said Sparks.

"Because he wouldn't like it."

"'He'?"

"The chief."

"Give him a name, can't you?" said Mr. Vail testily.

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's part of his efficiency. It's the reason he is able to accomplish what he does."

"How does he figure that out?"

"It's simple. Take any great man. If you met him personally and knew him as well as you know, say your own daughter, there wouldn't be much of a halo about him, would there?"

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Mr. Vail with decision.

"Rulers pull the same sort of stuff. The more symbolic a person makes himself, the more difficult he is of approach, and the more he leaves himself to the imagination of his dependents, the greater and more unassailable is his power.

"Any chump knows that a man will work ten times harder for an ideal, for some invisible power, than he will for Tom, Dick or Harry. It's just the old story over again of intimacy breeding contempt, whereas aloofness inspires awe, fear, any of the stronger and more desirable emotions.

"Such a man, of course, requires able lieutenants—like me. You can call the chief, for want of a name, the Invisible Mohammed until he moves that mountain into your back lot."

"And then?" Mr. Vail found himself strangely, and uncomfortably, in the rôle of questioner rather than his habitual one of expounder.

"Perhaps I'll introduce you to him."

Mr. Vail checked himself on the very point of answering, "If you would be so kind." He offered, instead, a non-commital grunt.

"I'll ask you to step ashore now," said Sparks. "I've got to pitch in and I can't have people around bothering me."

It was the shock of Mr. Vail's life when he suddenly found himself walking, with his back to the Princess, pensively homeward across his own green lawn.

CHAPTER XI.

"CLOTHES DO NOT—" ETC.

MARIPOSA TIBBET eyed Miss Vail sternly, and tightly compressed her thin lips into a straight line. Tibbet had been in Miss Vail's service for many years, in fact since a brief few days after Miss Vail had been born. At first as a nurse, at present as a maid, and always—as Miss Vail was wont indignantly to remark—as her severest critic and most uncompromising Nemesis.

"If you put them there things on, miss, I leaves!" said Tibbet feelingly, as she pointed a bony finger accusingly toward certain garments spread out upon the bed. "What your ma wouldn't say if she found out about it I cannot think."

"Neither can I," agreed Miss Vail complacently. "But as she won't find out about it until after it's done, what's the row?"

"Think of your conscience," urged Tibbet impressively.

"Bother my conscience, Tibby. Go get me a collar button."

"Strike me dead if I stir from this spot on any such errand as that," Tibbet implored a vague Providence with her eyes.

"If you don't get off your high horse, Tibby, and get me that collar button at once I'll make it a point to scatter certain hints, certain dark hints," Miss Vail paused to give weight to her threat and succeeded

quite admirably in so doing, "where they'll do the most good, about the milkman."

"I guess as I'll go get it," muttered Tibbet uneasily.

"I guess as how you will," agreed Miss Vail.

Miss Vail crossed to the window and looking out let her eyes rest upon the Princess, brilliant in the flare of her cluster lights, and upon the scene of tireless activity surrounding her.

It was a strange activity, a small world of machinery that moved and purred and accomplished its results with the ease of a silent giant.

Block by block throughout the day the great slabs of beryl green coral rock had risen swiftly from the hold, curved for a bold moment aloft at the derrick's end, swung with precision onto the railed runway that tilted downward along the pier, and slid smoothly to the shore where a second derrick piled it gently into place on an ever increasing mound.

And throughout the whole efficient stillness of the operation had moved only one lonely man, a most insignificant looking figure in his dirty dungarees and greasy singlet in comparison with the mighty giants he held beneath his lone control.

Genius?

She laughed the word to scorn and told herself a hundred times he was a superman, a god, a well built and healthy looking one at that, which was more than lucky as the two entities rarely went together. The illusion, however, had been carried to an annoying degree of verisimilitude.

Mr. Swift was, she felt, her own show and as such she wanted a free pass to the works. She had made several efforts to approach him and had found his vicinity as unassailable as the heights of high Olympus. Even cinnamon buns at tea time had failed as baits. He had simply done as many a wary fish has done before—swallowed the bait and ignored the hook.

Miss Vail, and quite properly too, had felt most indignant. Moving a hill was important enough, but what—and what woman is there who has not felt it also?—was the moving of the greatest mountain on earth in comparison with the importance of the planting of a single seed of love?

Along that particular line of argricultural endeavor her technique was far from slouchy and it annoyed her in the present instance to be balked. It appeared there was no getting near the fallow field.

She could feed him cinnamon buns all day and all that he did was to eat them—not a little caress, not even a little bite at the hand that fed him. But Miss Vail was not the young lady to stay balked very long.

Tibbet came into the room and shut the door hurriedly behind her. "I have the collar button," she said, "and will you or will you not, miss, promise you will say nothing about the milkman now?"

Tibbet produced an authentic specimen in collar buttons.

"Very well," said Miss Vail, taking it. "You didn't think I'd say anything really, anyway, did you?"

"Yes," said Tibbet firmly, "I did."

"Then you've more sense than I thought you had. Help me on with these things and get some pins."

"Never! So help me God, miss, never!"

"Mamma—" began Miss Vail in the ascending scale.

"Hush, miss!"

"Then hold them for me."

"I'll never live through the night, miss."

"Yes, you will—pin the buttons up straight, at the sporty height—and you'll sleep very well, too. The air at sea is very bracing."

"The—sea—air—miss—"

"That's what I said, and don't drop them again. I was almost in them."

"You ain't thinking I'm going with you?"

"If you think I can spend two or three days on Coral Isle alone with a strange man, Tibby, I'll tell you flat I can't. Whatever would my mother say?"

Tibbet gave Miss Vail what is commonly known as a "look." She was incapable of words for a full minute.

"Not in a pair of them!" she whispered.

"If I could have gotten another pair you would, but as I couldn't you'll wear your dark plaid shawl and your black bonnet

with the velvet forget-me-nots so's you'll be practically invisible while you creep on board, and I'll let you wear that mauve veil Alice sent me to cover your face."

"I won't," said Tibbet feebly.

To which Miss Vail answered in a manner discomfortingly prophetic, "You will."

Some two odd hours later Sparks watched, with tired eyes, the last slab of coral rock swing from the hold and speed along the runway to the shore. For the first time since the sun had set he went into the galley where he drew a cup of black coffee and, sinking wearily upon an upended box, drank it with deep satisfaction.

The sixteenth day was all but ended and success had crowned its close. His schedule was working on time. The first load was an accomplished fact and midnight would find him heading back for Coral Isle.

The coffee finished, Sparks returned again on deck and made things shipshape for getting under way. This took the better part of half an hour. Then, with decks cleared, he swung the Princess toward the open sea.

A long blast on the whistle was his sole good night to Mirapa.

The flutter of something from behind a ventilator caught his eye. There was nothing that he knew of that should have fluttered.

Was another attempt to be made upon his life, he wondered. He smiled grimly. He was only too well prepared for anything like that. Still, particularly as he was as yet almost within hail of shore, it would be better to investigate.

He kept the Princess moving at slow speed ahead and, taking a blanket from the settee in the chartroom as he passed, went softly down to the deck. Surprise being half the battle in life, he wasted no time in investigating, but swooped around the ventilator's broad base and threw the blanket over the top of a stout body and bore it, struggling, onto the clear space of the deck.

A smothered, if hearty giggle, caused him to whip about and eye, with frank amazement, a poorly put together young man who was dressed, heaven alone knew why, in a tuxedo. His first impression was that the stranger should either change or, preferably, shoot his tailor.

"Don't be rough with her, sir," implored the young man, in an unconvincing croupish contralto.

"Her?" Sparks examined the struggling bundle more carefully and, a smothered shriek emerging from its folds, hastily let it go.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked severely.

"It's unfair of you to discover us so soon!" continued the young and willowy cake-eater.

Sparks eyed the beautiful creature with itching fingers as he saw him stamp his foot.

"Say listen here, sister," he growled, "you're going to be spanked and sent back to your mommer. I predict for you a long and healthy swim."

"Catch me!" demanded the engaging youth and, with a hop, skip, and a jump, darted aft.

By this time the bundle had unwrapped itself from the blanket and revealed a belligerent and highly indignant Tibbet.

"I demand to be put ashore from this wessel!" she announced as soon as her mouth hit the air.

"Stick around," urged Sparks as he dashed in pursuit of the flapping tuxedo, "and you'll get your wish."

Miss Vail, in spite of the impediment of her father's trousers which were ten or twelve sizes too large for her, was exceedingly nimble and quick and, with a surprising agility, flitted about and jumped onto or over everything in sight.

Realizing the chase was likely to be a hearty one, Sparks made the bridge, brought the Princess to a stop, and dropped her anchor. When he caught up again with the young nut in a tuxedo he found him improving the view by straddling the top of a ventilator.

"Come down off that!" said Sparks.

"Who is Sylvia?" sang the youth tunefully in a high falsetto.

"If you don't, I'll come up and get you," warned Sparks.

A scornful and jarring laugh dropped down upon him. The laugh, in a sense, was a boomerang in that it loosened the youth's large black mustache to a point

where it started to wave most unconvincingly from the center of Miss Vail's lip. The mustache was a part of a more than revered transformation of Tibbet's bloomier days.

"You!"

"Well, what of it?" Miss Vail removed the mustache and dropped it onto the deck. Then she asked softly, "what are you going to do about it?"

"This," said Sparks, with an equal if more strained sort of softness, as he spread a firm hand about Miss Vail's left ankle and gave it a pull.

The most passing sort of an acquaintanceship with the laws of balance must convince anyone that an equilibrium cannot be maintained when one side or the other is of a different weight. The object, thus conditioned, is bound through a low collusion with the force of gravitation to topple down upon its overweighted side.

Miss Vail at once gave a striking example of the working out of that law. Sparks caught her with professional ease, and draping her over his right shoulder, started amidships for the Princess's tender.

"Brute!" said a stifled voice from the region of the middle of his back. "Beast! I'll never speak to you again as long as I live!"

"Quit trying to kick," advised Sparks. "You'll only hurt yourself."

"I'll k-kill you!" promised Miss Vail.

"The trick runs in the family."

"Perhaps it does. But," added Miss Vail, as darkly as the reversed position of her head would permit, "when I aim I hit."

"Be quiet!" said Sparks, as he slung her into the tender and held out a hand to assist Tibbet to climb over.

"Bless you, young man," whispered Tibbet from the heart, as she did so.

Miss Vail had recovered her poise to an extent where she could stand up.

"Sit down," said Sparks, as he jumped into the tender and pressed a button.

"I won't," said Miss Vail.

The tender's davits swung outboard and they dropped easily down upon the water. Miss Vail, incidentally, sat.

"My only wish," said Miss Vail, with difficulty, as she stepped upon the dock at Mirapa, "is that nothing happens to you, Mr. Swift, before I can attend to you myself."

CHAPTER XII.

DEAD SEA FRUIT.

"YOU mustn't take what she says and does too much to heart, sir," said Tibbet, the disembarking of whom from the tender was a lengthier process and required more deliberation. "She's an exceptional high strung young piece."

"She is that," agreed Sparks, giving Tibbet the psychological and needed boost.

"Yes," said Tibbet, settling herself on the pier's edge for a brief rest before further motion. "I've known her since she were a little baby, no bigger"—Tibbet indicated a monkey wrench on the tender's stern sheets as a fit object for comparison—"nor that."

"It's a wonder you're alive to tell the tale."

"It is."

"And what in hell's bells, Tibbet, are you sitting here for with your feet hanging over the water?" demanded a familiar voice from behind her on the pier.

Tibbet got to her feet with great dignity. "It's a pity, indeed, Mr. Vail, that a body can't take a bit of an airing without being started out at like from the dark."

"Rubbish! You're up to something with Nancy. I know her earmarks."

Tibbet departed on a sniff.

"I am glad you're still here, Swift," said Mr. Vail, settling himself in the place just vacated by Tibbet.

"I must start at once." Sparks intended to indicate that he had no time to waste on chatting. He had already lost a good half hour, thanks to that red-headed creature.

"Don't worry, Swift. I'm not here to waste your time. What I want to talk about is business—our business."

"Then make it snappy."

"Our contract calls, I believe, for the payment to be made for this job in the form of a deed to the residue of Coral Isle after the hill of coral rock shall have been

leveled and delivered to me, does it not?" Mr. Vail knew perfectly well that it did—down, even, to the last consonant and punctuation mark.

"Yes," said Sparks, beginning to prick up his ears, "it does."

"I was wondering whether that was quite fair to your concern," continued Mr. Vail, airily waving the lighted tip of his cigar in a careless sweep.

"Yes, you were!" murmured Sparks to himself. A cat, it would seem, was beginning to come out of a bag.

"Now, see here, Swift, wouldn't it be more satisfactory all around if we were to translate that clause into a sum of money—say fifty thousand dollars?"

Sparks admiration for Mr. Vail began to mount in leaps and bounds. He could scarcely refrain from shaking his hand. The man wasn't just a plain business magnate at all; he was a first-class pirate.

"The chief would consider no such offer," he said decisively.

"How do you know?"

"I am in constant communication with him. I've already talked over with him the possibility of your making just such an offer."

"It's a good stiff price for the work, young man."

"Very."

"Then why won't you take it?"

"My conscience would trouble me," said Sparks sweetly.

"Nonsense!" cried Mr. Vail heartily, and rubbing his hands. "Having this rock here is more than worth it to me. I don't mind if you do pull my leg a little."

"That's good."

"Come, what do you say? Is it agreed?"

"What?" asked Sparks.

Mr. Vail moved uneasily in his seat and stopped rubbing his hands. He began, instead, to clench them.

"This, young man: that you alter our contract to read fifty thousand dollars instead of the deed to the island."

"Oh, I never could take an advantage of you like that, sir. I wouldn't be able to sleep—from thinking about it."

Mr. Vail was untouched by any alarm as to Mr. Swift's possible lapse into a severe case of chronic insomnia. In fact, if his hand could have reached as far as the monkey wrench on the stern sheets of the tender he would have given a most convincing example of how simple it was to make a man drop off into unconsciousness no matter how much he might have on his mind to keep him awake.

"Perhaps an added ten thousand might act as an anodyne to your conscience?" he suggested, beginning to breathe heavily.

"How little you know my conscience!" said Sparks reproachfully.

"At least I'm beginning to get better acquainted with it. Seventy-five thousand is my last and final offer, young man, and you can take it or leave it."

"If you'll cast off that line I'll bid you good night and be on my way," remarked Sparks pleasantly.

Mr. Vail made a grab for the line and pulled it tighter.

"One—hundred — thousand — dollars." He separated the words to make them more impressive.

Sparks had a very good laugh which he reserved for just such occasions. He used it.

It inspired Mr. Vail into a form of motion known as quivering. He made a mental note that he must go in for a course of training in target practice at once, and not until he could put a hole in a dime at twenty yards would he feel content.

"Two hundred thousand dollars!" he gagged.

"Oh, why are you so kind?" Sparks wanted to know, in a voice that was sickeningly sirupy in nature.

With a violent grunt and an adroit clutch at Mr. Swift's short black hair, Mr. Vail sought to haul his tormentor bodily up upon the pier.

"If you have managed to hurt yourself it's your own fault," said Sparks, looking at Mr. Vail who was rubbing himself at the bottom of the tender. "You've got a bad temper and you ought to do something about it."

"I'm going to," muttered Mr. Vail as his hand, through some divine chance, closed about the monkey wrench.

"But not with that," said Sparks, taking it away from him.

Mr. Vail draped himself heavily upon a seat. "I'm through with offers," he said. "The contract stands—precisely as it is!"

There was an alarming dash of triumph in the way Mr. Vail made the announcement. His voice, Sparks felt, was not the voice of a beaten man.

Of course Mr. Vail had learned, somehow, of the precious deposit beneath the hill of coral rock, and, realizing his folly in having let it slip through his hands, intended to get it back; but not, Sparks swore, if he could help it. He hastily reviewed the contract in his mind and could find no reason for Mr. Vail's apparent ease.

"That suits me," he said.

"And also, young man, since you insist upon it, me. I gave you your chance, remember, so don't come whining to me when the thirty days are done and asking for any extension. You won't get it."

Mr. Vail grew almost jovial. "The fact that there's a time limit clause doesn't seem to bother you. It should. Let me call your attention to this: if a single block of the final load is not delivered by so much as even one second after midnight of the termination of the thirtieth day from the one on which that contract was signed, the whole thing is null and void, and you get"—Mr. Vail hereupon indulged in a pet little laugh of his own—"nothing!"

It was apparent that Mr. Vail considered this to be in the nature of a Parthian shot, for he scrambled onto the pier and, leaving behind him a wake that he intended to be sinister in the extreme, vanished in the direction of the house.

Sparks thoughtfully jumped to the pier himself, to cast off the tender's line. Barring unforeseen accidents, he knew he could pull through. Mr. Vail was too good a sport, he was certain, personally to put any obstructions in his path: on the other hand Mr. Vail would not make any effort to remove ones that chance might cast.

He looked at his watch and saw that an hour, in all, had been wasted. Hours, in view of Mr. Vail's sudden determination to live up to the letter of the contract, were henceforth priceless, inasmuch as one single lost second might, at the climax, prove fatal.

He leaned over to leap into the tender when a hand, placed heavily upon his shoulder, checked him.

"George Fielding Mortimer Buntz," snapped a cold, hard voice, "I arrest you in the name of the law!"

Sparks stood up. He looked at the metal shield, brilliant in the moonlight; looked at the heavy, beefy face of the constable.

"You can't," he said, still confused after the shock of hearing his real name. "Not for the next fourteen days."

"Fourteen days!" snorted the constable. "You'll be lucky if you get off with life. The charge is murder."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE UNKNOWN.

EVEN the most contained sort of human nature can only stand so much. Beyond a certain point the strain is bound to become too great and restraint snaps.

Sparks had fairly well reached that point.

From the night, now over two weeks ago, when the Finnish cook and he had had a slight culinary argument which had resulted in his being cast like so much bread upon the waters, his life had been so frequently threatened that he had begun to feel as if somebody or other was picking on him, and here, at one of the most critical moments of his plans, was a person who had the colossal audacity and impudence to accuse him, perpetually on the point of being murdered, of murder.

It was too much.

He had no more idea than the man in the moon that his right hand was moving until he felt its clenched fist making contact with the point of the constable's thick chin. Nor even then, after the constable had dropped to the pier, did he pause to dissect his actions.

Like a bag of meal he lowered the constable into the tender, and, casting off, turned her nose toward the Princess. Hav-

ing arrived, he hooked the falls, and pressing a button suspended over the side on a flexible wire was hoisted in the tender which was swung inboard by its davits and onto its cradle.

He dumped the constable, who was beginning to recover, out upon the deck, and stripped him of a pair of bracelets, a sap, a come-along, and a jack knife. Then taking a firm twist in the back of his collar, he dragged him up the ladder to the bridge, and, wrapping the chain once about a stanchion, handcuffed the constable's wrists.

And then, one hour and twenty minutes behind his schedule, he got the Princess under way and headed for Coral Isle. He must endeavor to make up the lost time. So far he had not pushed the Princess to the limit of her capacity. He was wary of straining her too hard. She was doing, at the moment, her steady twelve.

He pressed a button and sensed with satisfaction an increase of two knots. If she held it until morning she would arrive at Coral Isle on schedule time.

And only then did he feel that he could afford the time to think. The realization of the enormity of what he had done came upon him in full. Although innocent of murder, he had assaulted an officer of the law in the performance of his duty, resisted arrest, and not alone escaped from the official making the arrest, but had kidnaped the man as well. He felt that the least he could get for such a list would be twenty years.

The thought was most absorbing. In twenty years, as Sparks viewed the matter from his aspect of twenty-one, he would be a decrepit, senile man in his forties and only fit for the grave. How bitter this chance, he reflected, that threatened to cut him off in the very prime of his life!

Supposing that he even could get away with the stunt of keeping the constable a prisoner until his contract were completed and Coral Isle with its precious treasure were legally his, what good would his wealth do him in the drab of his declining forties?

On the other hand there was this much of a silver lining to his cloud: as a poor man, accused of murder, he would stand less chance of clearing himself of the charge than as the very wealthy owner of valuable Coral Isle. He was frankly skeptical about the equality of justice for the rich and for the poor, and held the rather shocking belief that the lady with the balanced scales was not as blind as her bandaged eyes tried to lead one to believe.

He absolved Mr. Vail from any collusion in the matter, and attributed its source to the group of villains who had assaulted him in the cave and whose representative had committed suicide by accident by tumbling off the bridge. That man's death would, of course, be the technical base for the murder charge.

What dumb-bells the villains must be if they thought they could get him like that! The accident had occurred on the high seas. He was the master of the ship. His word was law. His word was final. Any maritime court in the world would uphold him.

But they must realize this fact themselves. What they probably were after was to get him out of the way, and a trial with all the delays their lawyers could arrange might drag on for months, for years. This appeared the most reasonable solution, and he turned to the constable, who had just let out a groan, and told him so, adding for good measure, "And I'm glad I did what I did to you, my bucko. I don't like your face."

"There is nothing left of my face," insisted the constable thickly.

"So much the better. If you have any sense at all you'll thank me for having done my best to change it."

"I guess you think you're smart," muttered the constable, removing a tooth that had been loosened beyond any reasonable hope of sticking it back in again.

"I'm smart enough, my man—"

"I ain't your man, you young toad, you—"

"Pipe down or I'll loosen your other tooth. I'm smart enough, as I was saying, to know this: you've been bribed."

"So help me—"

"And you're like all fools who take bribes. How much did they give you?"

"Two hun—say, see here, you—"

"Two hundred dollars. Now the reason you're a fool, and why all people who take bribes are fools, is this: if it's worth two hundred dollars to the people who bribed you to have you pull this phony arrest—"

"Who said phony?"

"We'll take that up later—this phony arrest, how much do you think it would have been worth to me not to have it pulled?"

"Am I to answer?" asked the constable, who was getting cowed.

"You are."

"Then I dunno."

"Two thousand dollars. And that's why bribe takers are fools. They ought to bargain. If A is bribing you to get B, don't just call it a day and let the job rest at that, but go to B and find out how much it's worth to him not to be gotten. When you find out, go back to A and tell him there's a new level to the ante.

"After you've moved diplomatic-like back and forth between them five or six times you'll hit high water mark, and instead of being called a bribe taker and looked down upon, people will tip their hats to you and call you a financier and a pillar of whatever happens to need an extra one at the moment. Are you too dumb to get me?"

It appeared that the constable was not. "If you was to take these bracelets off my hand perhaps we can talk," he suggested.

"They'll do where they are."

"You're a hard one all right."

"Only failures are softies."

"Then why ain't I a success?" complained the constable.

"For the same reason that a marble statue can't become a bank president. You have the marble, but no brains to fill it."

"If you'd jest take these bracelets off for one minit I'd try to swipe a handful of yours," the constable remarked longingly.

"And by doing so you'd lose two thousand dollars."

"And they told me you was a nut," said the constable mournfully.

"You'll get over the idea during the next couple of weeks."

"The next what?" shouted the constable.

"I said the next couple of weeks—while you're my guest."

"But my job!" gasped the constable. "I got things to attend to. I run a grocery store—there's, there's a letter that's most important and which I got to get off north to-night. I got a wife—I—you can't yank me off like this—it ain't human—"

"Did you think of that when you planned to do the same thing to me for a measly two hundred dollars? Quit pulling any humanity stuff, because it won't work. It will do you good to see the other side of the picture.

"The law's scum like you show little enough to alleged criminals, so why should an alleged criminal show any to the likes of you. I'm just following your own tactics. Take a good look at them and see how you like them."

"Flint!" declared the constable, with bitter admiration. "As hard as flint!"

"Harder."

"I could send a message, perhaps? You got a wireless, ain't you. My wife, she's sick and 'll worry. She ain't so spry as she used to be and can't hop about much to speak of."

"Have you got twenty dollars to bribe me with?"

"I ain't got a red cent. I thought to be back to home in half an hour and—"

"Then you can send nothing and be damned to you. Does that sound familiar?"

"To the life," confessed the constable, who felt that he might even then be saying the words himself in his own lockup. He attempted a placating grin. Sick though it was, it made him feel slightly better.

"Now there's a few things I want to get out of you."

"Try and get them!" urged the constable, with returning truculence.

"I will. I don't expect you'll tell them to me of your own accord, so I'll put you through the usual thing—the third degree."

The constable indulged in a perfectly frank and hearty laugh.

"The idea naturally strikes you as funny," continued Sparks. "You know all the tricks of that game backward. What

you don't know is the psychological principle on which that particular brand of torture is based. In other words, the inborn fear of every man for the unknown.

"That's why you laughed. It holds no terrors for you as you know the different processes like a book. I am going to change that book; the title of my book will be Unknown."

"What you mean to do?" muttered the constable doubtfully.

"It's working already. You're getting worried. I've put doubt in you—wonder—at the Unknown That's the first rule in handling a criminal. The second is to let him stew."

The constable essayed another laugh. It was somewhat forced and unconvincing even to his own ears.

"Quit kidding yourself," he said.

Sparks made no reply. He began to stare fixedly at the boom of the derrick on the forward deck. For three minutes his eyes never wavered from it.

"What are you looking at?" asked the constable at last, almost suffocated from curiosity.

Silence.

Three more minutes of concentrated staring and silence.

The constable found himself, puzzled, staring in the same direction. He paled and gave a slight start as the boom of the derrick rose silently and swiftly to an angle of forty-five degrees, whirled around in a complete circle, and settled back again into place

"How did it do that?" asked the constable thickly.

Silence.

The constable shifted uncomfortably upon his feet. The rattle of the chain of the handcuffs against the stanchion gave him a momentary fright which was doubled when the boom arose again into the air, swung silently around until its cold steel finger was pointing directly at him and stopped.

He moved nervously to the left as far as his chained hands would permit. The steel finger followed. He moved, more swiftly, to the right. The steel finger followed.

"Stop it!" he muttered, speaking rather to the boom itself than to any human agency.

The boom circled and settled into place.

The constable laughed constrainedly. "I heard you had some queer fittings aboard."

"From whom?"

"Never mind. What else you got?"

"You are going to see."

"You think you can get me this way, but you can't."

"A line always pulled by the criminal to hide the fact that he's breaking."

Another silence, longer than the two preceding ones.

Nothing to hear but the wash of the sea, the thrum of the sea, the tireless, sorrowful, unanswerable whispers of the sea. Nothing to look at but the crisp, black circle of the horizon's unbroken rim; but the indifferent stars; but the restless shadows of the backstays on the deck.

The constable started to hum a tune.

A sudden, shrill shriek of the boat's whistle drowned him out and left him shaking with the shock.

"I didn't see you pull no cord," he said.

"I didn't."

"Who did? Where's the men—where's the rest of the men on this boat?"

"There are no other men, except those whom you will never see."

"Come off!"

"We are alone—yourself and myself."

The constable frankly shivered.

"Are you ready to talk?" asked Sparks.

"I don't believe you. There must be other men. I ain't alone here with you."

"Isolation is the breeding place of the Unknown."

"There's others—there must be others!"

"There is no one. Shout! Shout and see!"

The constable did so. His voice rang again and again along the lonely length of the heedless ship. No head appeared to question the disturbance.

He shouted louder, more wildly, growing ever more terrified at the unfathomable stillness at every pause for breath. Not even an echo came back to answer him.

"You see?" said Sparks quietly.

"You could do away with me," whispered the constable, "and there'd be none to know."

"I could."

"Suppose—suppose, too, you was to die—be taken short like, with a stroke—"

"You would sail on until you struck something, or until the ship's source of power ended. You would eventually die, too; a death of slow hunger and of solitude. Will you talk?"

"I think"—and the constable said it with perfect sincerity—"you are mad."

"As you wish. We will pass on to the next rule. Physical violence."

The constable shrank as if from a blow. This rule he did understand. "You going to hit me?"

"Not directly. That would not be Unknown to you. Your handcuffs are steel. Steel is a conductor of electricity. The stanchion they are wrapped around is steel.

"I am going to send a certain amount of electric current through that stanchion. It will pass from your wrists through your body and down to the deck. It will be unpleasant. Hitting you would not be unpleasant; either for you or for me. You do not understand electricity. You fear it. It is Unknown."

"That's a bunch of bull," muttered the constable brokenly.

Sparks pressed a button.

"Stop—it—stop—it—" Sweat stood in beads on the constable's face. "I'll—talk—"

Sparks released the button.

"They always do," he said.

CHAPTER XIV.

LOVE'S OLD SWEET SONG, WITH VARIATIONS.

THE Princess pursued her even way throughout the quiet night across the level of the calm, disinterested sea as the constable talked.

A man, a foreigner of some sort or other, had approached him with the story that he knew of a murderer who was at large. From the very start, the constable claimed, he had scented a fishy smell about the whole affair. The man had been too smug, too glib with his facts—not natural-like and stumbling, the way the truth goes.

The foreigner had had the facts all neatly typewritten down on a sheet of paper: the disappearance of the wireless operator, George Fielding Mortimer Buntz, from the tanker Mohawk in the vicinity of the Berry Isles—that fact had been reported in a Havana newspaper and also had been briefly noted by the New York press; the rescue of Mr. Victor Swift by the Vails in the vicinity of the Berry Isles; the obvious coupling of the two facts; Mr. Swift's queer proceedings in Galveston; the approach of Mr. Swift by an emissary of the foreigners on a business offer; the decoying of that emissary by Mr. Swift aboard the Princess and his subsequent disappearance in a manner that left no doubt of foul play.

"That last is a lie, of course," said Sparks.

"I guessed as much," answered the constable.

"Was it then he bribed you?"

"Not yet. He started telling me how to pull the arrest. No warrant was to be sworn out as yet. I must wait until no one was around, until just before you was ready to sail. I was to bring you back to my house instead of to the lockup. It was then that I got my dander up, and he bribed me."

"Did the stranger tell you what was to happen to me when you'd brought me back to your house?"

"I never asked."

"It didn't interest you, I suppose?"

"It didn't," the constable confessed.

"You'd just have forgotten about the whole business?"

"Yes."

"Well, at least, you're man enough to admit it."

"Well," said the constable slowly, "you see, I've been looking at the other side of the picture for the last half hour or so. It ain't quite so pretty as the front."

"Then I guess you'll do." Sparks unlocked the handcuffs and watched while the constable thoughtfully rubbed his wrists. "You'll find coffee in the galley."

"I—I'll stick around until you're ready to get some, too."

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I'd kinder rather stay here with you. I'm sociable to heart."

"All right. I can't leave the bridge until we land at Coral Isle. I'd be glad, though, if you would get some coffee now, and bring me back a cup."

"That being the case, buddie, I guess I'll go. Where's your galley?"

"Second door amidships to starboard, matey. Thanks for getting it."

"Not at all—not at all," said the constable, as he started down the ladder.

Sparks smiled. How simple it was to get a man on one's side.

Two little rules: first show him strength, and then get him to help you. No matter how small the assistance might be, get him to help you. No act on earth becomes so quickly a habit.

By the time he has helped you in a small thing he is ready to move on to a larger one. The third time comes more easily still and before he knows it he's helping you in things that really count.

Then he begins to help you without your asking him to. Then he begins to insist on helping you. It gets to be like a drug he's taken a craving for. Then he gives you his shirt.

During the next four days Sparks had many opportunities for putting this theory into practice. He further found that the speed of the work was considerably put forward by the constable's assistance.

All trace of his former assailants in the cave had vanished. Whether a boat had put into the island and taken them off or whether, in approved East Indian fashion, they had simply vanished into thin air there were no means for determining.

The constable, after he had recovered from initial amazements, was fascinated by the efficiency and expedition that attended the work. In no time at all he insisted upon taking a hand. His admiration for the young woodpecker who gave him permission to help him—and thus made work desirable—changed slowly into a species of reverent awe.

By the time they returned to Mirapa if Sparks had told him he intended to alter the usual successions of the four seasons, the constable would have simply asked, "Which one you planning to have come first?"

On the morning of their arrival at Mirapa, Miss Vail, properly clothed and, presumably, in her right mind, stood waiting on the pier in the early sunlight to greet the Princess. As to her greeting of its owner—what she intended to say to that young man was a caution.

She had rehearsed it carefully the night before, with Tibbet as an audience. Tibbet, two minutes after the curtain had gone up, had excused herself for a moment and had returned with cotton in her ears.

Nothing, as Miss Vail well knew, was so demoralizing to a member of the opposite sex as a carefully, and expensively, dressed young lady. In her philosophy, the sweetest face that ever bloomed in gingham gown stood the chance of a hunk of raw meat in a lion's den when put alongside of a battle axe in one of fashion's best.

And so, in a simple little frock of jade that had set her father back a matter of three hundred and fifty berries, Miss Vail was prepared to launch her worst. She almost felt sorry for Mr. Swift. Tibbet, during the rehearsal of the night before, had been driven, vicariously, into tears.

The sight of a second figure on the Princess's bridge gave Miss Vail a start. Upon recognizing male attire she wondered, for a shocking instant, whether any other female had copped her idea of the night of departure and had gotten away with it. A more definite view of the person's figure reassured her. No woman in the world ought to look like that, and if she did, she didn't matter.

Standing beside Miss Vail was a puppy. It was a friendly looking sort of puppy, as homely and as understandable as cottage cheese. It's name was Atlas.

Miss Vail had by now recognized the second figure on the bridge as the constable.

Her first reaction was to stoop and snatch Atlas hastily into her arms. She had once seen the constable kick a dog out of his path. She did not like the constable.

Miss Vail's second reaction to the indentification of the constable was more curious and yet, when you come to analyze it, as right as human nature.

It was a sharp stab of alarm for Mr. Victor Swift.

For four days and for four nights she had been preparing a welcome for him that would sizzle. And yet, on the very point of tendering it to him hot, as it were, from the griddle, she suddenly felt that her one and overwhelming desire was to swim the stretch of water intervening between herself and the Princess and flay the constable alive and protect Mr. Swift. It was not a question of balked revenge. It was an older emotion than that.

In a fever of impatience she waited for the Princess to come alongside. Why was the constable aboard her and how had he gotten there, she asked herself futilely again and again. His presence anywhere was known to be as disastrous as an ill wind. What trouble was her genius in and could she save him?

She never paused to be amazed at the thought.

Sparks, with one eye on the business of bringing The Princess alonside the pier, kept the other one pinned searchingly upon the jadely dazzling figure of Miss Vail. He had a pretty good idea of about what to expect when he got within reach of her tongue, and a quite definite idea of what to expect if he ever let himself get within reach of her hands, which, he promised himself, he most certainly wouldn't unless he lapsed into a trance.

"Oo-hoo!" called the figure in jade, and then, noting that she had caught Mr. Swift's attention, "What-tha-mawith oo?"

"She's begun," groaned Sparks. "If only she'll get the worst of it off her chest before we dock, it will save a lot of time."

"Ar-oonder-rest?" reached his ears. As it had left Miss Vail's lips it had been "Are you under arrest?"

Sparks nodded methodically in the affirmative. He wanted her to go on shouting, to get rid of the bulk of it.

"Wait," shouted Miss Vail, shaking her fist, "until I get my hands onth-abool!"

"She seems a bit peevish this morning," commented the constable, who had been watching with interest.

"She is," said Sparks. "She doesn't like me."

"I could guess that from the way she shook her fist at you."

"Beast!" cried Miss Vail, continuing to shake her fist at the constable. "Brute! Oh, wait till I get you!"

"She's calling you names," said the constable. "I could make out the words 'beast' and 'brute.'"

"So could I," muttered Sparks. "They're the ones she usually uses."

"They say her temper is about as bad as old man Vail's himself."

"Worse—there's no comparison."

"She's beginning to hop about. Seems impatient-like. I guess that's what they call 'dancing with rage.'"

"If I had a horsewhip with me I'd horsewhip you!" yelled Miss Vail with admirable clarity.

"It's a lucky thing she hasn't," said the constable, with greater truth than he knew.

"You come down with me and keep her quiet while I make the lines fast," said Sparks. "I don't want her in my way."

The constable looked doubtful.

"She isn't sore at you," continued Sparks. "It's me she's after."

"All right," agreed the constable, and stroked his mustache. He had, as he thought, a way with the ladies.

Miss Vail, while the Princess slipped quietly alongside, wasted no further time in words. She was husbanding her strength. She sat Atlas on the pier and assumed a position. All she needed was to have a ring roped around her to make the illusion complete.

The constable descended the gangway first. He advanced a few steps toward Miss Vail in his politest manner and removed his hat. He managed to get half way through a wish that, for her, the morning would be a good one when Miss Vail leaped. She hurled at her Mr. Swift, as she leaped, the single word "Fly!"

Her Mr. Swift accepted the word as an epithet rather than as a command. Its variety at least was refreshing, and if she was doing what she was doing to the constable what in heaven's fair name, he wondered, would she do when she passed on to him? The brotherhood of man asserted itself at once and leaping to the pier he reached out and picked Miss Vail off the constable.

"Stop it!" she hissed, making a side-swipe for another handful of the constable's hair. "Idiot! Why don't you fly?"

The amazing truth burst upon Sparks like the sun's face when a dark cloud has departed from it. She had been—he held her tighter—defending him!

"Bless you!" he said, with a happy laugh. "I wasn't in any danger. Why, that man there eats out of my hand."

It completely bewildered Sparks when Miss Vail, after a minute's pause, said thickly, "Oh—does he?" gave him a resounding whack upon his cheek and muttering, "If you say another word I'll never speak to you again as long as I live!" stalked, followed by Atlas, off the pier.

"Gosh!" said the constable, carefully touching the bridge of his nose with a finger, "These wimmin!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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THE FRONTIER

THE bat his eerie pattern weaves
Against the lantern sky
Whose clouds are vivid bowls and pools
Where swans may dip and fly.
Along an avenue of grass
The seeded shadows fling
A scarf of lace upon the ground
Where crickets chirp and sing.

My frontiersman is lithe and straight
With limbs that hint of strength,
And supple, flow in eager grace
To tapered, agile length.
His curling lips, contagious laugh,
And gayly gleaming teeth
All indicate the sunny soul
That glimmers underneath.

His searching, dancing, merry eyes
Are keen and golden-gray,
For eyes that search the wilderness
Have need to be that way.
His hand is firm and strong and tan;
His step is sure and fleet—
And when he talks, it's like the wind
That rustles in the wheat!

Let those who will dwell in the ranks.
I want to go ahead
To where the new is unexplored,
And leave the old and dead!
I never saw a stream or road
But challenged me to go
And fare with them beyond the stretch
Of places that I know,
For there's so much to see and find
I do not want to lag behind!

Sonia Ruthèle Novák-Clary.

Something Smaller than God

By GEORGE F. WORTS and GEORGE K. END

THE Macedonian tobacco crop was late that year, and Michael Farley was obliged to wait at Kavalla for the harvest. Farley was young and impatient and Kavalla bored him, so he ran up to Nish, that old mongrel of a town in central Serbia. In Nish he met the Great R-r-rhoda. The Great Rhoda had been stranded there for a week when Farley arrived. And an hour after the tobacco buyer had registered at the Grand Hotel Amerikansky, he and Rhoda discovered each other.

That incident was perhaps the only amusing one of their strange, brief acquaintance. It began over a pig on the *teresa* of the *Kavana od Sleeva ee Beeber*, which is Serbski for the Café of the Prune and Pepper. The center of the café life of Nish fronts upon the dusty green of Park Obshtinsky. Peasants from the outlying districts use Park Obshtinsky as a grazing ground for the oxen and swine they bring to market.

The oxen are well-behaved beasts joined together in pairs by hand-hewn wooden yokes. They stand in the hot sun, inactive for hours at a time, blinking their big, sad eyes at the cruel insects. The swine, however, are more enterprising. They are not many generations removed from the wild boars of the Serbian forests and they possess something of the nomadic spirit of those boars. Beguiled by the odors from the café kitchen, they frequently break loose from their moorings in the park,

trot across the street and nose about for scraps of cheese, cigarette stubs and other delicacies under the café tables.

The Serbs encourage this practice by dropping tidbits from their plates. They love their pigs as they love their prunes and peppers; as the Tartars love their yaks.

Michael Farley did not resent the pigs scratching their spiney backs on the under side of his chair, but he strenuously objected when one of them attempted to climb into his lap. He cursed the pig, and the pig, with a snort of disgust, withdrew to more companionable quarters.

The Great Rhoda was sitting at a table in a shadowed corner drinking a large stein of *peeva*. He unfolded his gangling length and moved over to where Farley was angrily brushing mud from his freshly laundered white duck trousers.

The tobacco buyer looked up into hollow, startling black eyes.

"There's only one country in the world where the word damn implies so much," Rhoda said with a strange, rumbling laugh. "The first time I was attracted. The second time my doubts began to slip. And the third time I was convinced. My name is Rhoda. I am generally known as the Great R-r-rhoda." He rolled his eyes with his r's. "I hail from San Francisco. It is a pleasure to meet a fellow countryman in this insufferable Balkan hole."

The Great Rhoda was perhaps forty, perhaps fifty. His suit of bog-green tweed seemed to be draped in loose folds upon his lanky frame. All the lines of his face ran downward and were carved deep. His black eyes dreamed out from the crumpled folds of their lids under brows black and brushlike. Clumps of thick black hair, peppered with gray, trailed out from under his sun helmet. The impression he gave Michael Farley was one of fierce nervous energy and brooding melancholy.

He shook the man's cold, large hand, said that he was killing time in Nish at the expense of the Interstate Tobacco Company of New York and Virginia, and wondered why it was that the Americans one encountered in out-of-the-way places were often such freaks.

Rhoda's companion joined them. She had been sitting in blue shadow, and when the young American glanced away from Rhoda and saw her standing beside him, his voice stopped and his mouth dropped open with incredulity. He had never, he exclaimed to himself, beheld such appealing sorrow in a girl's looks, or such vital beauty. Large dark eyes interrogated him sadly from a slender face that recklessly reminded him of alabaster and rose petals. Her teeth later made him think of pearls, her hair of drawn copper, and her eyes of bottomless moonlit pools. There was very little of the poet in Michael Farley, but the little there was came singing to life in the moment that his eyes first rested upon Marcene.

From his amazed tanned face the girl glanced stealthily at Rhoda. Her hands were small and strikingly white. They moved restlessly. They seemed to flutter. They reminded Farley of something imprisoned; moths fluttering against a wall seeking some avenue of escape. The impression was somehow painful to him. The great sad eyes, the unhappy mouth, the fluttering hands shocked him. No woman had ever moved him so.

He heard Rhoda informing him that this was his daughter, Marcene, but his camaraderie of a moment ago was gone. He was not proud, as any father might well have been, to present a daughter like Marcene. Resentment roughened his voice, and there was disapproval in his attitude.

The dark eyes slid back with their tragic appeal to Farley's. She did not smile or move to offer him her hand. He was grinning boyishly now and blushing with embarrassment. Marcene Rhoda's lips were set, as if a seal had been placed upon them. She looked up at him and did not even murmur. It was embarrassing.

He uncomfortably asked her to join them, but she turned slowly away and, without glancing again at her father, started toward the hotel.

Farley did not stir until she had vanished beyond a brick wall. Then he sank limply into his chair, conscious that his forehead was prickling with perspiration and that the Great Rhoda was studying him with brilliant, hostile eyes.

The tension was eased by the arrival of their waiter with cordial glasses and a black jug of *shlivovitza*. When he went away, Rhoda bent forward and began to talk rapidly in a low, agitated voice.

It seem that he was in great trouble. His good luck had all gone bad on him. He was at his wits' ends. Stranded in a place like Nish! It was simply unbelievable. He became incoherent. He mumbled. His eyes filled. And Michael Farley, with his thoughts on the white tragic hands of the incredible girl, sipped his prune whisky and hardly listened. People had a way of confiding in Farley. Even now, when he was not listening, he appeared to be intelligently interested and sympathetic.

The Great Rhoda sighed mournfully.

"Mr. Farley, let me assure you that those Orientals could teach me nothing. All I gained was a trifling variation of my old trunk trick and a phylactery that they could not explain themselves. It was a great disappointment. After looking forward all those years— I was crushed."

Farley gazed wistfully into the pale afternoon sky at a pair of tragic eyes shining from an alabaster cloud tinged with rose.

"All my life I had dreamed of studying under those wise men of India. They had no new tricks in their bag at all! I had them standing on tiptoe—all over India! They tried to hypnotize me. Hypnotize the Great R-r-rhoda! Imagine!"

The young man wagged his head with polite amazement. He was hearing only a word now and then of what the Great Rhoda said. He was wondering if he would see that red-haired girl again. Nish had been invested with a graciousness like that of springtime.

"So I came here, playing the important towns along the way. I did fairly well in Constantinople, but there was no appreciation in Salonica, so I made up my mind to risk everything on Belgrade. Well, those Greek tax collectors got busy and taxed me into poverty. You see before you, Mr. Farley, a stripped man!"

Michael Farley was now alert. Not until the Great Rhoda had mentioned taxes, however, had he realized where this mournful recital was leading.

"I am destitute, Mr. Farley. You will pardon such candor from an utter stranger; but when a fellow countryman in distress—" He stared hungrily at Farley, but that young man had lost all his sympathetic symptoms. He was growing angry.

"I would not have dreamed—"

Rhoda ceased and with an outflung, dejected gesture of his left hand covered the glass of *shlivovitza*. Farley attended him suspiciously. He would not have been surprised to see the cordial glass transformed, perhaps, into a white mouse. But the magician lifted the glass to his lips and drained off the liquor at a sustained swallow.

He replaced the glass and raised his hand to his forehead, the heel of his palm resting on his nose, and let it linger there. It was then that Farley observed the ring on the magician's little finger. It was a shell cat's eye mounted on a smooth band of ivory. For an illusive moment the stone became a third eye in the center of the Great Rhoda's forehead.

It was ovular in shape and perhaps three-quarters of an inch in length. Its fawn-brown color on one side shaded into the *vert antique* of its convex pupil. On the under side the green fused into a white crescent. There was no line of demarcation visible between the stone and its setting. Its changes of color, as Rhoda's hand trembled, made of it a living thing.

Affected by any one but a man of his stamp the ring would have seemed ostentatious and cheap. He assimilated its showy ugliness, made it a part of his mysterious and unhappy personality.

He lowered his hand impetuously and Farley's fascinated eyes traveled down with the ring as it flashed to the table.

"I suppose you are wondering why I do not pawn this ring if I am stripped."

"I might buy it," the young man suggested.

Rhoda inclined forward with a mocking grin.

"How much?" he whispered.

"Oh—fifty pounds?" On the Rue de la Paix, Farley knew, it would bring a hundred at least.

Rhoda sank back. "I am not offended, Mr. Farley. I have refused five hundred.

I would refuse five thousand. I would starve!"

He was smiling sardonically.

Farley stifled a desire to laugh in his face. The man's salesmanship was crude. "It must be charmed!"

"It is cursed," the magician solemnly corrected him. "It is the one worth while thing I took out of India. It is the one thing I found in India that baffled me. *It is the only magical thing I have seen in my life that defies a natural explanation.*" A bitter smile twisted his lips. He slapped the table indignantly. "It is not for sale." He rose wearily. "Well, we will see each other again, under more favorable circumstances, let us hope."

The deep lines on either side of his nose and mouth were filled with black shadow. Farley beheld him, in a fugitive glimpse as the magician stood up, as a man composed largely of black shadows—black shadows in the hollows of his cheeks, black shadows in his cavernous eyes, and black shadows in his unhappy heart.

II.

THE tobacco buyer was sipping his black coffee that evening in the dining room of the Grand Hotel Amerikansky when a waiter brought him a note penciled hastily on the hotel stationery.

"I would be," it informed him, "so grateful for a moment of your time." A brief consideration of the initials M. R. sent him hastily into the lobby.

Marcene Rhoda was waiting for him under the great smooth stone archway at the balcony entrance, a dark romantic figure with a scarf of white voile resting lightly on hair and shoulders.

He was alarmed and nervous. The tragedy of the Rhodas seemed to reach out and infold him. Since the magician had left him at the Café of the Prune and Pepper he had been unable to drive the ugly ring and its owner from his thoughts. His uneasiness abated, however, when the girl lifted her face and the light from a pulsing lamp bulb flooded it. She had been crying. Her nose was pink and her eyes were still wet. He was surprisingly relieved. She had left an impression stirring and mysterious with him; tears had softened her, and he could think again.

She moved back into the shadow once she saw that he had recognized her, and from there her voice came out to him, full and musical, not tearful but tired. He had been waiting to hear this voice for hours. And it reminded him of ivory, fine and mellow and tinted with contacts in many climes. It was as sweet as an old bell.

"I had to talk with some one. I hoped you wouldn't mind." She hesitated and added thrillingly from the darkness: "I have been so lonely."

Her face emerged into the light again, bearing a faint smile. She was charming. And Michael Farley was still young enough to have hoped that some day a beautiful woman might use those very words.

"Let's go onto the balcony and talk about it," he said.

She confided her hand to his arm, and they proceeded slowly between the pillars and out upon the balcony beneath which the lights of Nish mysteriously dotted the night to the edge of the Nishava. They stopped at a low stone rail of diminutive arches, and Farley blissfully contemplated the stars and the thin slice of new moon. It was there, in lavender moonlight, that Marcene Rhoda's eyes reminded him of bottomless moonlit pools. She withdrew her hand from his sleeve and seated herself on the stone rail, appealingly wistful.

"He is ill again," she said. "His old fever brought on by the shock of disappointment. He had such hopes that you were going to help him—become his impresario."

The young man was bitterly disappointed. To be sure, he might have known that this was not to be the delightful adventure it had fleetingly promised to be. Daughters of traveling magicians were not innocent and naïve. The Rhodas were desperate, and they were permitting no opportunities to pass by.

"My business is tobacco buying," he said roughly. "I know absolutely nothing about the—theater."

"Of course!" she agreed with childlike eagerness. "And I told him that in al-

most those very words. 'Mr. Farley is not a showman, papa,' I told him. 'He is in Serbia buying tobacco.' How nice it would be—for us—if you were in the show business!"

Farley looked at her doubtingly, hardening himself against a more subtle approach. The girl was gazing sadly toward the Nishava.

"Since we went to India he has been so changed. He was always so self-reliant, so proud, so strong. And so kind and gentle. Since our Indian trip he is all twisted. He was just a child before; and now he is—just weak." She stopped, then added with a gasp of incredulity: "He hates me!"

Farley's suspicions were being lulled to slumber again.

"That's incredible!"

She glanced up at him.

"To me, only that ring is incredible. You would not suppose that anything so small could do such harm. He hates me because I hate that ring. I wish he would lose it in a river a thousand miles deep."

Farley slipped down beside her.

"I offered him enough money for it to put him on his feet. He said he would starve before he would sell it."

"And let me starve, too!" she cried. "Oh, that evil ring!"

"You don't mean that you believe—" he began disappointedly.

"No, no, no, no! They tricked him—they tricked him with his eyes open! Him—the great R-r-rhoda!"

She began to laugh, thinly, discordantly.

"Don't!" he begged; and her laughter stopped.

"One of his sayings is: 'The wise ones are always easiest.' And now—how it fits himself! He told you, did he not, of his great disappointment at those fakirs' tricks? Why, he made them blush for shame! They had no trick he could not duplicate. And he simply astonished them. A fakir in Calcutta gave him the ring—and in the morning the fakir was dead.

"It was enough to make any one wonder. He had told my father he would be dead in the morning—if he gave the ring away—and they showed us the marks of a cobra in his heel. The fakir had sworn that he would die when the ring left him, and that he would die by a cobra. I have never seen my father so upset by anything. The fakir was actually dead—actually killed by a cobra in the night, as he had predicted."

"Another man," Farley hinted.

"Ah-h-h—no! It was the same man. There could have been no substitution. He was the man, the old fakir, who had given my father the ring. And he was very, very dead. Well—I will not describe him."

"You should not have seen him!" Farley protested.

"I have seen many things," Marcene Rhoda said mysteriously. "Let me tell you how I saw them trick my father with that ring. I saw them become more disappointed, more ashamed, as he guessed their tricks. Have you been in the Far East? Do you know the meaning of 'face'? At all costs, you must always save face. They did. They were willing to make a terrible sacrifice to save face. Can't you guess?"

Farley nodded breathlessly.

"Father had seen through their tricks and shown them others that they could not understand. Some little variation of his old trunk trick was all they could give him—that and the ring. In the end they made a fool of him, sacrificing that old fakir to save face. He was mystified by the ring. They told him it was cursed and that any man would die when it left his hand. And he believed them—the poor Great R-r-rhoda!"

"Ridiculous!" Farley snorted.

"Ah, no, *mon vieux*—tragic! For it did exactly what they had expected. It saved face. The fakirs had shown him a wonderful, unexplainable trick! They succeeded. They ruined his life. Oh, you would not say ridiculous if you had to live with him. I ridiculed the ring, too, at first—and he grew to hate me. We do not mention the ring any more; but he hates me just the same. He knows I have nothing but hatred and contempt for the ring; and as my contempt grows, his belief grows. Nothing can come between him and his belief in the power of that ring.

"It is more than a fetish. I know that he prays to it, and that he is in constant fear that he will lose it from his finger be-

cause he has grown so thin. No, he is not insane; he is a ring worshiper.

"He was so wise before—so sure of his belief in God. And now he is an old, old broken man. The Great R-r-rhoda! What a fool any man is to worship something smaller than God! An ivory ring! How God must laugh!"

She stared broodingly into Farley's eyes. And suddenly her chin started to quiver, and her eyes filled with tears. Her hands did not stir from her lap. She did not bow her head. She looked up at the young man's alarmed white face, blinking the tears in her eyes until they overflowed and wetted her cheeks and trickled down to her lips. Grief so heroic, so unashamed, was more than Farley could endure. Gritting his teeth, he turned his head away.

Marcene dried her eyes with one end of the voile scarf. A soft sigh reached him. A warm breath of flowers crept up about them. He turned.

"Look here," he said determinedly—"can't something be done to cure him of this fool belief?"

She bobbed her head with girlish eagerness. "If some one would only offer to be his impresario—for just a little while."

"Tell him," Farley said gruffly, "that I will help him. I haven't much—perhaps two hundred pounds." He stopped.

Marcene had seized his hands, was smiling up at him; and it was then that her teeth reminded him of pearls. It was the winsome smile of a happy, normal girl.

"You are so kind!" she cried. "So good! Oh, I like you so very much!"

He stiffly withdrew his hands. It was ignoble to suspect any one so childishly naïve as Marcene Rhoda of guile, yet what he had sternly promised himself would not happen had been somehow brought about.

He was going to finance the Great R-r-rhoda!

III.

His suspicions were dulled in the morning when, after a sleepless night, he sat at the magician's bedside. Rather, they were displaced by a sweeping tide of compassion. Rhoda was a very sick man. His intense black eyes were feverishly bright, and his cheek bones held hectic spots. He was not grateful for Farley's assistance, but he accepted it with enthusiasm.

"We can make a killing in Nish, Michael. There are eighty thousand people in Nish and the environs of Nish, and none of them has seen a show like mine before. They will pay fifty *dinars* at least. Well, let us decide on two nights here and then a week in Belgrade. I will leave all the arrangements to you and Marcene. Do not stint in your advertising, and we must have a theater with ample seating space. Four days from now I will be on my feet. These attacks run their course in four days. Have no fears on my account. Marcene!"

The girl came quietly to the bedside and looked down without emotion into the thin, flushed face.

"Yes, papa?"

"You will tell Michael all that is to be done. The performance is to be advertised for Thursday and Friday nights. I will do the trunk trick."

"Papa!"

"I will do the trunk trick," he reiterated, and moved his right hand to fondle the ring.

"Very well," said Marcene indifferently.

While the Great Rhoda tossed in his bed and between naps saturated himself with quinine wine, Michael Farley straightened out his affairs. It was not the first time he had helped fellow countrymen in remote places who were stretching their credit at native hotels and waiting, or pretending to wait, for funds which rarely arrived; but never before had that seasoned young traveler encountered so complete a bankrupt. His trunks—thirty-five of them—were scattered in all parts of the city. Some were held at the *stanitza* for the payment of excess baggage charges; others were in the keeping of the Café of the Prune and Pepper, held as security against Rhoda's bar bill. But the majority of them were being watched over by the management of the hotel.

Farley redeemed trunks and crates as well as a miscellany of starving animals. There were half a dozen rabbits and an assortment of white mice and snakes.

Despite his inexperience as an impresa-

rio, preparations for An Evening With the Prince of Magic went forward smoothly. He rented a huge barnlike structure which had been erected by the Germans during their occupation for use as an auditorium; hired men to paste up hundreds of lurid lithographs—depicting a satanic Rhoda surrounded by a group of winged green demons—and Marcene wrote advertisements and publicity for the Nish journals.

Farley soon forgave her for having beguiled him and his two hundred pounds into her father's services on that starlit night on the hotel balcony—if she had beguiled him. He could even glean some pleasure from the probability. If she had gone about deliberately to ensnare him, she deserved great credit, did she not, for her success against such seasoned experience?

She was, in all her father's business transactions, clever and shrewd. She drove bargains with the greediness of an Armenian; she saw through trickery with the clairvoyance of a Greek; she had an eye for details and a resourceful imagination. But with Farley she was a wistful, mysterious child. She was wonderful.

He soon passed through the early stages, the painful stages, of infatuation, to a calm and orderly realization that Marcene was indispensable to his happiness. He envisioned their life together—an adventure of never ending delight in the remote places of the world. It was amazing. No woman had appealed to him in this way before. They had bridged the gap from strangeness to friendship in hours! They were, it seemed to him, quietly happy and contented together. They understood each other perfectly.

Their evenings they devoted to strolling about Nish, poking into interesting corners, talking. Talking! He likened it once to the union of two responsive chemicals—fizzing endlessly. They thought and reacted similarly. Occasionally they longed for the orderly, automatic luxury of America. Occasionally they longed for deserts and mountains and seas. And on the night before the Great Rhoda was advertised to perform Farley took his life in his hands—and kissed Marcene.

They were strolling down an empty street toward the Nishava. The moon, fuller, brighter than it had been on that other night, sifted a lavender and silver haze upon the expanse of motionless water. They stopped in the moonlight to admire the enchanting beauty of this view, and the moon silvered Marcene's wistful profile; her straight, proud forehead, her lashes, her small Irish nose, her pouting lips, her resolute little chin. He studied her tenderly, his thoughts drifting to distant scenes, cities bright with music and laughter. Nish was a gloomy place for lovers.

Beyond a wall gypsies began to play violins and a *zymbalon*. The eerie music of the wind-swept Hungarian plains throbbed in the still street. The tempo quickened to a *chardash*. It plucked at them insistently, as if defying their pulses not to beat faster, their eyes not to shine; then it became softer, hesitated, dreamed off into the sadly appealing strains of the Volga Waltz. Farley was enchanted—intoxicated.

"It is stirring and sweet," Marcene said.

He could no more have prevented himself from swinging her into his arms than the Nishava could prevent itself from swinging into the sea.

He kissed her and held her, looking down into her frightened eyes. He held her firmly, sternly, as if to shield her from the harshness of life, from the imponderable hate of that dying man with the blackness in his heart.

IV.

THE Great Rhoda remained in his bed until the very last moment. Marcene and Farley insisted on this, and Farley marveled at the man's courage. The fever had wasted him; he was almost too weak to stand.

The peasants from miles around had swarmed into Nish as American farmers swarm to town when a circus comes. Entire families debouched from ox-carts, some from villages as far as twenty miles away. They were decked out in all their homespun, home-dyed finery. They began to gather outside the auditorium three hours before the show would start. They waited patiently, nibbling at large chunks of goat's-milk cheese and sipping wine from gourds.

When the doors were opened the auditorium was filled in a single orderly surge. The stage was brightly decorated. Green plush rugs covered the rough boards. Taborets with nickel trimmings and the paraphernalia for the Hundred and One Conjurations were scattered about. There was no applause when the Great Rhoda appeared—only a sudden hush.

Children asked their parents how it was that the *Amerikansky* had only to pass a shiny black stick over a flower pot to make roses instantly bloom, when in their own gardens months were required to encompass the same phenomenon. Their elders would have liked to know themselves; and they wondered how the magician, terrifying in his gauntness, could toss a white rag into a silk hat and extract rabbit after rabbit. There were other amazements—as, for example, when the gaunt, black-eyed man discharged a revolver at a glass jar which promptly filled with white mice.

Farley was in the reconstructed piano box that served as a box office, still selling tickets, when Marcene deserted her post at the door and begged him to go inside.

" He is preparing to do the trunk trick now. He seems to be exhausted, but everything has gone smoothly so far. He is going through with it, I think, only because you will be watching. It is the one, you know that led to the ring."

When they entered the theater Rhoda and the electrician were dragging a large square black trunk toward center stage. Rhoda raised the lid and went through the conventional pantomime mechanically. Once he wrestled with a Serbian idiom in an attempt at rousing a laugh from his stolid, undemonstrative audience. But those peasants had long since had the impulse to laughter crushed out of them.

Ten Serbs were prevailed upon to mount the stage. At Rhoda's request they examined the trunk. While they were awkwardly inspecting it a native policeman handcuffed his wrists behind him and bound his ankles with rope. He hopped to the trunk and vaulted into it. He crouched down with his haunted black eyes sweeping the rows of dark faces. His shoulders, then his head, disappeared.

The lid was closed and locked, and the key was tossed into the audience. A black velvet sheet was spread over the trunk, and the Serbs joined hands in a circle surrounding it. The lights were switched off. In the darkness Marcene fumbled for Farley's hand and pressed it.

" The handcuffs and rope, of course, are easy," she whispered. " I know there must be a hinged panel, set in very cunningly, and opened by pressing at a certain spot.

" I have pressed everywhere, but I couldn't find the place. That was the trick the fakirs showed him; and he won't tell me. When the lights come on, Michael, he will be standing on the trunk, draped in the velvet robe. It is old, but always effective."

Minutes passed. Twelve hundred Serbians waited in skeptical silence. Once Farley heard a scuffling from the direction of the trunk, then a scratching sound. Then silence again. He grinned nervously. When the lights came on, the Great R-r-rhoda would be standing there on the trunk, smiling his sardonic smile at those dumfounded peasants!

" Past time for the lights," Marcene murmured.

He shouted: " Lights! *Lumière!*"

" *Videlo!*" some one boisterously translated.

The lights winked on. The Great Rhoda was nowhere to be seen. The black trunk stood where Rhoda had placed it, and the black velvet had not been disturbed. The men forming a circle about it were blinking their eyes and grinning.

Marcene was clutching Farley's hand, digging her nails into his palm.

" Stay here," he said, and ran down the aisle to the stage. The circle broke. Time was lost in finding the present owner of the key.

The Great Rhoda was crouched in the trunk. The handcuffs lay beneath him. The ropes were in a loose tangle under his feet.

One of the Serbs called softly to a friend. The message rippled in a wave of sibilance to where Marcene was standing.

Those phlegmatic peasants were not as-

tonished. The foolish *Amerikansky* had been locked into an airtight box, bound and handcuffed so that he could not possibly extricate himself, and naturally he had perished. They left the auditorium in orderly files, and Farley somewhat later heard the mournful notes of their songs above the shrilling of their carts.

It was not until the next morning that he found the ring, lodged between coils of the rope. It had fulfilled its destiny. The Great Rhoda had lost it, and his death had shortly followed. Those were the simple facts. He had writhed loose from rope and handcuffs, and in his contortions the ring had slipped from his finger. In the darkness of that cramped space he had been unable to find it. The shock presumably had killed him.

In a hollowed space under the cat's-eye and securely fastened to the ivory Farley found coiled a resilient steel wire about an inch in length. Some time later he took the trunk apart and ascertained that this wire was the key to that cunningly concealed panel.

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CONTINUED!

I'D like to take the man who writes
  The news we readers pay him for
In subway trains on crowded nights
  And watch him turn the pages o'er.

I'd laugh, when steeped in column one
  His eye took in a villain's fate
To find his boldest deed was done
  Beneath a want ad on page eight.

I'd chortle when on column two
  He scanned a golfer's record drive,
And had to turn with much ado
  To find the distance on page five.

I'd wipe my eyes when column four
  Allured him with a fleeing queen,
With all details worth looking for
  Continuing on page thirteen.

On column seven (I see him twist),
  A liner hits a berg at sea.
Those who are saved? Alas, the list
  Is half on one and half on three.

If brevity's the soul of wit,
  Verbosity's the soul of news:
There's only one way out of it:
  Read headlines and reserve your views.

Percy Shaw.

Sundown Cafe

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Queen of the Night," "Desert Voices," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II.

HERZOG, crafty landlord of Sundown Café, in the marsh country of southeastern Texas, has stolen and hidden the mummified body of Mate Grimpen, who was killed in a brawl, in the vacant tomb of the Mexican General Papaquillo, hoping to extort money from kinsmen of the dead seaman. Grimpen was of the noble English family of Glamours. Cora, his wife, convinces the highly superstitious Herzog that apparitions from the deep will haunt the café until the mate's body has sea burial. Then she maliciously steals the key of the tomb, so he cannot get at it.

Al Boscoe, the café's new barkeep and bouncer, who is in love with Cora, is interrupted in process of terrorizing sailors in the bar by a mariner with sea green eyes who overawes him. This man, Glamours, nephew of Grimpen, has come to commit the body to the sea. His efforts to discover the corpse are interrupted by the arrival of Modesta, a beautiful Creole harpist, who comes to mourn on the anniversary of the martyrdom of her grandfather, General Papaquillo. Her playing first soothes the café loiterers; then—when she sees Glamours—maddens them. Herzog urges Boscoe to kill Glamours, whom he fears.

CHAPTER X.

"YOU'LL BE FLOATIN' IN THE BAYOU."

INSIDE of the gambling den the ring of brutish seamen sat silent and worshipful around a haloed picture. Glamours musing upon the loveliness of the girl at her harp, as he sat before that drab and ferocious background, felt a sinister thrill; such a thrill as one might feel when a too beautiful and brilliant crimson suggests blood, or when a vivid poppy suggests death.

"A Spanish girl—or a Creole as these thugs around here call her. Damme if she hasn't some fire under that skin." He had the impression that if he touched her, as Cora had suggested, upon that dusky shoul-

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for May 3.

der, his palm would burn. "Of course it's the atmosphere," he said to himself. "If the blowsy old den stays ugly it's all right, but once you get a thing as beautiful as that to set it off, it makes you look for a knife whizzing at you from any corner."

A sailor slouched down audaciously into a seat at the same table—the very seat which Cora had occupied but a short while before. Glamours gave him a look which had in it something of injured pride, something of amusement. What the hell did the fellow want? A second look cast begrudgingly over his shoulder assured him that this was the man who had been asked to "drink" chile and beans.

The fellow stuck out his huge elbow and nudged Glamours without further ceremony. Then putting the back of his hairy hand against his lips he began an affable and friendly conversation: "You made the lummox drink lemonade, didn't you? It paid him back for what he did to me, too, b'gosh. The bunch of stewed kelp! I'll crack him one myself when I get a chance. You called him for it and I'm thankful."

Glamours had not paid any attention. The chatter of this hairy fellow who had rolled in the sawdust but a short while before was not a fitting obbligato to the harpist's music. It came in fact as a distinct jar. "What does the smelly old cove want to meet *me* for. If I had known he was going to swank around bothering me I wouldn't have mixed in." But the other was still emitting a flow of hissing whispers out of a side of his cut mouth. "You stood by a sailor, b'gosh, and I ain't forgettin' it. I'll pay you for it." Glamours turned upon him.

"What do I want to be paid for?"

"Now, then, have a drink with me. The music will last. Turn around and listen to me instead. I've got something with more of a punch to it than them chanties—as one mariner to another."

The other turned, but with a threatening gesture.

"What's the music to *you?*" the fellow was saying. "You got other things to think about."

This caught him. "Do you want to talk to me?" Glamours asked impatiently.

"No, I don't. I'd rather drink than talk, but it's my duty, mate. I feel I owe you a turn."

"After the music."

"Can't wait."

The other darted him a glance. "In trouble, are you? No more fighting."

"No more fighting?" the sailor laughed. There was hissing from those about. "You ain't started on the fighting *you* are in for!"

"Now what?" Glamours asked angrily. "Who's after me?"

"The management. And it ain't only to fight you. It's to come aboard you. You'll be floatin' in the bayou—nosin' around with the bull frogs if you don't punch yourself. Mate, they're after you. They're goin' to kill you. I heard from somebody. One of my shipmates heard something through that there porthole which opens out on them tables under the trees. The innkeeper wants you. For what, I don't know—"

Again Glamours caught the girl's eye. A feeling of drunken abandon, ecstasy, went through him as if he had quaffed a goblet of hot wine. The music gripped him—she herself was playing with a fervor, an abandon, that fired every listener. She smote the strings, she tore at them, she clawed them. Her body was convulsed with a beautiful and rhythmic ferocity.

Al Boscoe was the first to succumb to it.

"I'll stop at nothing!" he said to himself. "I will have what I want. I will kill! I am power. I am unbeatable!" He reached out to Cora, who was standing near him, and gripped her wrist. She turned, surprised at his agitation.

"Say, look here—"

"Do you hear that woman?" he asked. "That's love! That's what I feel for you! No man that loves thataway will stop till he gets what he wants!"

"Pouf! What do you — a N'Orleans barkeep—know of love?"

"Me? N'Orleans teaches the world how to make love. That Creole girl there —she's got it!

"Look how she's tearin' into them strings, climbin' all over 'em, like a puma! Mourn-

ing, is it? Wow! It's celebratin', that's what — it's dancin', it's love! She ain't playin' for no grandfather. She's playin' for her lover—not for ancestors, but for her progeny to come!"

Al Boscoe roared at his joke. "And look at that Mex over there," he went on, "grabbin' his *señorita* by the neck. And that docker kissin' the hand of a quadroon. They're all beginning to burn—fire, b'God—that's what she's pourin' out to us. And there's a flossie *señorita* leadin' two Cajans on with her oglin'. Which one of 'em will use his knife?"

"Say, let me go!" Cora interrupted. "What sort of a barkeep do you think you are? My wrist ain't a tap for you to twist! I ain't made of mahogany for you to rub with that paw! Leave off!"

But Al Boscoe, as well as all the mariners of the Sundown Café, had felt the witchcraft of Circe. He whirled Cora into his arms, and at the same moment, in a far corner of the gaming room a *señorita,* tussling with her too ardent lover, screamed. In another corner two bargemen fought for the hand of a dark-eyed quadroon: a knife whizzed; Cora and Herzog fled for cover. Al Boscoe caught a man by the collar and yelled: "You spat. I seen you spat! You spat tobacco right while the lady was finishing her chantey!"

The man fell under a stroke that sounded like the back of an ax on a beef's head. The Sundown Café came once again into its own, its epic glory!

What had Modesta brought upon herself! Was it possible this saint in falling in love was no longer immune to the advances of men?

"Santa Maria!" she cried. "This is a house of blood! I have finish!"

She stood up by her harp, astounded at what had happened, terror stricken, looking mutely for some way to turn and flee—for some one to save her from that brawling gang.

Glamours leaped to her side. His doubled fist crashed into the teeth of a drunken stevedore.

"Get the bloody old Englishman!" Herzog howled.

"He's the one that started it!" cried Al Boscoe. "Come on, men! We'll smash him!" Two men preceded Al Boscoe in the attack.

Glamours swung. One tumbled headlong into the sawdust, the other fled before a brandished chair. Al Boscoe's nerve turned. He saw the circle widen about the mariner as he stood there poised to crash to the ground any man who advanced a step. The whole den quieted; lesser fights were forgotten as they sensed the fact that a champion was holding a gang at bay.

Glamours took the girl's arm and a lane opened before them as they went to the stairs. Again there was the solemnity of a ritual. Al Boscoe swallowed his curses as did Herzog. Glamours and the girl reached the bottom of the stairs unmolested, and there she lifted her face to his.

"To-night—in my sala—alone!"

Glamours watched her disappear into the shadows above. Then he looked back. Those mephitic mists that wreathed about the ancient priestesses of Hellas could not have veiled the background of brutes and wenches more pleasantly than the tobacco smoke in Herzog's gambling den.

If he had been with her out there in the patio bathed in the warm beams of the moonlight—in the throbbing light of the fireflies! No, it was not such a moment as that. She had not spoken of love. Glamours had rather the whimsical impression that she had spoken of death.

He did not have time to answer. The crowd bustled back to the tables; that hideous little pack animal, her mozo, labored and groaned under the weight of the harp.

What she had whispered to Glamours came with a peculiar sting—not like the sting of a scorpion, but— There is no analogy! It surprised, then numbed, then pleased, then excited. Yes, they say down there that the tarantula has that effect; but Glamours was too much fascinated with the beauty of the girl to make such an odious comparison. He was left in an ecstasy, and yet he thought surely they were going to kill him.

Having recovered from the shock of that whispered invitation, he decided definitely he would not obey it. To go up to a re-

mote room in that café with this strange unearthly being? It would have been better to throw himself into the ship channel with a millstone around his neck. He had not come to the Sundown Café to commit suicide—and to remain there any longer seemed to be equivalent to that.

The place had quieted down. Al Boscoe's victim had been packed away into another room. Al himself remained in his *sanctum sanctorum,* wiping the bar with a threatening sweep. He looked from face to face, firm in the conviction that no one in that crowd dare come near him as he stood there alone, colossal, triumphant in his brutality.

"Looks as if the bally ass will start amuck and brain the whole crew," Glamours opined to himself. The entire scene had crumbled to something bestial after the Creole girl was gone. It was no more now than a den of thieves. Her very absence was dramatic. Her effect had been like a fresh but very momentary breeze, like the forerunner of a thunderstorm. Circe had vanished, leaving her mariners to wallow in a pig sty.

Glamours, needless to say, could not get her out of his mind. He asked one of the gamblers: "What is this room they talk of—where the old general lived?" It was a place in a far corner of the house—thick bars, windows barred with filigreed iron, a retreat, a place to hide gold, the abode of owls and bats. No one ever went in there, the gambler said—not even Herzog himself, because he was afraid of ghosts.

"Stay out of the bloomin' glory hole, mate, if you want my advice."

Glamours needed no such advice—at least not at that very moment. But the picture itself stuck in his mind, lured him. The Creole must have desired to see him on a very confidential matter, indeed. This, of course, did not lessen the remote possibility that her intent might be very much to his personal discomfiture. Yet the very picture of her trying to imprison or to do away with him was ridiculous.

What were her reasons? Yes, she might be in league with Cora. Cora wanted money—would do anything for it. How would she go about it—being a woman wise in the manners and morals of sailors' lodging houses. She would entice him to a private room, using a pretty girl as a decoy. But the whole thing was preposterous. Glamours went to the staircase. He imagined he could scent the freshness of that presence in the murk and degradation about him. His head throbbed with the thickness of the air. That peculiar sting he had felt when the girl invited him to see her alone—he could describe it now: it was like the prick of a needle which engenders a numbness, a bewilderment and an ecstasy.

He went up the stairs.

CHAPTER XI.

"WITH HIS NOB IN GORE!"

DIRECTED by one of the habitués, Glamours found his way to the farther end of a wing of the hacienda. After the manner of Spanish structures this wing shut in one side of the patio. The hall was dark, with a hanging lamp of filigreed iron shining upon battened doors, dank sweating walls and the brilliant, startling sheen of a parrot's wing.

"Avast there, Lord Stinko!" the bird squawked. It flapped its wing like a toreador throwing out a red zarape, and then sang a line from that chantey which Herzog, its master, was in the habit of screeching:

> "The skipper lay with his nob in gore—
> Squawk! Squawk! Squawk!"

A hysterical flapping of wings. Glamours cursed. He caught sight of the farther door—the one to which he had been directed—a warped oak, ravaged by ants, battened across with rusted iron hinges. Probably in the Spanish days this was a chapel — or was it a prison? Glamours paused, feeling himself a fool. Why throw one's life away because of a beautiful face —an ancient trick. Glamours was a ship's officer. There was nothing particularly romantic about the habits and morals indulged in before the mast. *He* was not drunk. But then again he realized he was drunk in a certain way.

In a dark corner he felt the nearness of an animal—precisely like some great watch dog asleep at his foot. The truth was he smelled the presence. He had no time to knock on the door, no time to ponder over the hare-brained act of following that strange Creole woman into this fastness.

The door opened—shoved open, he judged, by that bestial doorkeeper. It creaked horribly, and revealed a picture of unforgettable beauty. Across the theshold Glamours caught the general effect of decay and splendor. There was a moth-eaten banner and coat of arms upon which the moonlight shone through the window, catting a parallelogram of light crossed with bars. There was the flashing of some ancient, gorgeous silk as startling as the parrot's wing. There were spurs, elaborately tooled reins and deftly hammered bits.

Cora had often wanted to sell the entire contents of the room for junk. But it seems there had been something in the deed. The place was dedicated to the memory of General Papaquillo. The great bed, the richly carved oak with its dusty canopies, the candelabrum, the old military papers—everything remained undesecrated. This was the background—red faded to old rose, cobwebs, banners, arms.

Candles illuminated Modesta's figure. This, of course, was part of her own ritual. She was wrapped within her shawl so that it tightened about her slim shoulders, gathering in the dark curls and outlining the grace of that sinuous back. The shawl was of a size sufficient to cover the rest of her dress, revealing only the neck, the gleam of copper colored arms encircled with jet bangles. There was still that dominant tone of faded purple embroidery harmonizing with the golden flesh. Sad eyed madonna that she had been, playing those sweet tristes on that harp, she seemed for a moment capable of a terrific—a murderous love.

She motioned for him to come in. He looked about at the musty old place, receiving the impression of entering a room that had been closed for a century—some such place, for instance, as the tower in the fairy tale in which the Sleeping Beauty had been imprisoned. He looked about at the dank, rain-stained walls, the ragged banners, the painting of a rather homely Castilian with white beard and much gold embroidery. Ants had eaten away the gilt of the frame and built their little mud roads downward on the adobe wall.

The door closing softly behind him reminded Glamours of the nearness, the intimacy of that girl. A fragrance thrilled him. He looked at her as a man will look at an exquisite poisonous flower blooming in the fetid dankness of a jungle cave. She saw him—as she had seen other men stand before her undecided whether to put a hand upon her. Again Glamours had that definite impression that if he touched her skin his palm would burn.

"Here I am, *señorita,*" he said in a voice rich in humility as well as expectation.

Why did she send for him? Apparently she felt no immediate necessity of telling him that. She started on another topic: "You, too, have come here to venerate your dead."

Then Herzog or his wife had already made public that news! It was to be expected. There was no secret. He had made his mistake by starting in on the other direction — enveloping his mission with mystery.

"Yes, I have come here in search for my uncle's body. I have already told the innkeeper's wife that. She said she would help me, a matter which must not be taken too literally. On the other hand—I need help—badly—*señorita.*"

The girl waited, looking at the mariner with as much outward interest as he exhibited toward her. She looked up to his mouth, she studied his eyes, she moved closer and put her hands up with slender fingers intertwined, and covered her bare throat. "*Señor,* we have the great bond."

He had thought of that himself. It created a sympathy, but, he mused, it was not a reason of sufficient importance to ask him up here. Was she going to make love to him first, then—yes, that was the accepted way in sailors' lodging houses! The end of this sort of affair was Shanghai. And the damnable part of it all was that he wanted to crush her in his arms as she stood there near him. Perhaps she realized

this. She backed away gracefully and sat in one of those mission chairs which the Long Gowns had brought in the Spanish days. She was like a queen before whom a knight had come to petition a boon.

He answered her: "Yes, I have come for a reason which is in some remote respects similar to yours. You have come to revere your illustrious kinsman, who, I understand, died this night many years ago."

"You, *señor*, have come to do honor to a dead *pariente*. Ees your uncle. *Bueño*, my frand—"

He accepted the queenly hand, kissed it. Her eyes kindled. The dark skin of her cheeks warmed with a flush, giving her the appearance of sudden anger, excitement. "Ees good, *señor*. We will revere our dead together with each other."

But Glamours interrupted rather hastily.

"I must say first, *señorita*, that my kinsman has not exactly the romance nor the heroism attached to his memory as yours. My uncle was buried in—"

She caught his hesitation. "In potter's field. What of that? If your uncle he ees the great man, ees no great difference where he is bury. My ancestor—" she paused assuming a tone that was pregnant with tragedy and pride—"he is burn' at the stake."

The other was fired by the superb enthusiasm of her voice as she spoke those words "burn' at the stake." He felt himself on a tangent. What did she really want of him? Any man would have been flattered and would have been convinced that she had fallen in love with him. Glamours tried not to believe it. As he spoke he was drinking in her beauty.

"Now, *my* kinsman," he was saying, "was knifed in a waterfront brawl in this very tavern."

"My kinsman he too died fighting," the girl said, with a very generous interpretation of Glamours's announcement.

"Fighting, yes, there might be a bit of glory to that. But his fight was like the fight you just stopped down below and he ended his career in death's back door—potter's field."

"My ancestor—in the mud of the bayou. If he was the great man there is no difference. Death she is not mortal, but the deed she is greater than death."

"I must confess," Glamours said, "that I have not come here to revere my uncle's memory."

The other looked up with that expression of pain and bewilderment.

"Then why?"

He was about to answer but he checked himself. He stepped back as if he had seen a knife blade flashing in her hand. Was it possible that this girl suspected that there was some intrinsic value to the body of Mate Grimpen? Perhaps. The word had gone around that with Mate Grimpen there had been buried jewels, papers and perhaps a map of buried treasure. Why not tell her the actual facts? It would reveal no secret. It would incriminate nobody. The girl might even help.

"I came here, *señorita*, to find the body of my uncle. I went to potter's field. I found the place where he was buried—empty. There were no clues. The rest was guess work. The ship on which Grimpen was mate had sailed away. No one knew him hereabouts except Herzog and his wife. There was a slight chance they knew something about that desecrated grave. They wanted money perhaps—I was right about that part of it."

He told how he had virtually accused them in that little dice game of his and of the paper with the words "The body of Mate Grimpen."

"I thought by that means I could catch the little cove in a fright. It might have worked but his wife stuck her hand in—slippery old balmy that she is. She read it—did not bat an eye."

He paused, studying her carefully and pondering upon the discretion of telling her still more. She would have made a fine accomplice in criminal work. She had a look of spotless innocence intermingled with a blush of glowing fervor. I am not going to tell her everything, he said to himself, but this much he avowed:

"I saw you. I heard you speaking through that music. I said: 'Here is a den of cutthroats and in it a woman: I will ask her to help!'"

She rejoined with a disconcerting question: "This body she is worth ver' moch? People will come from distant parts. Others will kill."

"The body being of a very evanescent substance," Glamours replied, "it is naturally worth nothing."

"There are papers, jewels, secrets?"

He covered his trepidation with a laugh. "There are no papers. There are no jewels. Nothing about it is a secret. It's the body of my uncle. Lost. He died under another name—Mate Grimpen. To establish his death it is necessary for me to identify this Mate Grimpen as my uncle."

"You have come so far—jus' for that?"

He hesitated, answered with difficulty: "No. There was another reason—the real one. Hang it all—you wouldn't understand."

He laughed in discomfiture, but caught her eyes studying his with a curiously intent fervor. "And yet," he went on, "I rather think you might—you came here believing your ancestor's spirit still hovers over the place!"

She answered eagerly. "*Si, señor.* There is no doubt in my heart."

"Well, then perhaps you won't think me such a balmy coming on this quest. It's more to satisfy my family at home. They're a superstitious crowd. There is a tradition that goes back a jolly good bit of time—that all the mariners of our family must be buried at sea."

"Ees the desire of every mariner in the world they say—" the girl added.

"We go a step further: One of my forbears was warned once of the curse that would befall our family if we ever ignored that tradition—even once. Bally rot, of course; but we've been having a blasted run of ill luck, disease, death, losses at this and that. Extraordinary coincidence. But to satisfy the clan I swore, silly ass that I was, that I would find the uncle called Mate Grimpen and bury him at sea. I, being a skipper and the head of the family on the sea, felt it my duty, y'know. A damned nuisance and all that. But I'm in for it. I am determined to see it through—"

"This Mate Grimpen, your uncle," the girl said afire with interest. "How can you tell it is he—if being so long dead—his face—"

"There you've clicked! But if there's anything left of his skin—there's a mark—our family crest y'know that will tell every thing. It is a tattooed design on his shoulder like this."

He threw back his pea-jacket, baring his great bronzed shoulder where the girl saw the tattooed coat of arms—heightened in color because of the dank heat—a red shield with bend sinister and a unicorn combatant.

She studied the mark, then looked up into his eyes again. "You come so far for this pilgrimage. Ees *bueño!* But I have hear the news in this house. Señor Herzog spik many things. He is possess' with many fears. The mate he make the dying wish. He wanted to be bury' at sea. That is the resting place for the mariners. I have heard when the sailor he is cast into Gulf of Mexico his body floats slow, sure, back to his own country."

Glamours assented to this. "I did not know you would understand such things. I have heard my uncle make that wish many times. It was an obsession with him—a superstition. It is a common thing for a man to desire a good kind of burial. I came to fulfill that too."

"*Bueño!* It shall be fulfill'. Now I will tell why I beg for you, *señor,* to come here. It is in a word. This Herzog is afraid of you. He is craze', this *posadero.* He thinks you, *señor,* are *diablo* incarnate. He makes the plan. My mozo knows many things. He listens in the patio. He hears the voice of death. To-night you will be knife'. Ees horrible. Fly, *señor,* away. I will help you. You are a great man. You are a *caballero.* You are a *hidalgo!* Before those hombres, *señor,* you are the king."

Glamours felt that a terrific load had been lifted from his back. An almost ungovernable impulse overwhelmed him—to catch the frail girl up in his arms. But again he was aware of that intangible aura of mystery about her, protecting her—as there is about a strange tropical plant that might poison the skin. She might be

concerned for his safety—why, he did not know unless the girl was absolutely in love with him. This brought its thrill, but it also reminded of the other part of her warning, he would be killed by the superstitious and hysterical Herzog. As he stood there on the verge of reaching for her, he checked himself.

"*Señorita!*"

He was uncertain what words to choose. A new feeling welled up within him. He felt himself in the presence of that same saint-like figure who had first come down the stairs to soothe the savages of the ship channel waterfront. He knew that something had changed her—something vital and consuming. He blamed himself.

"I have come here to your chamber, *señorita*. It is long after midnight. If they find out—you are compromised. I have soiled your name."

"No—I sent for you!"

"I heard the call—not when you put it in words but when you were playing upon that harp. It was clearer than any words could be. They warned me I would be killed—but I came. How could any man have refused? What is a life to a moment like this?"

He imprisoned her hand. She was too frail and too bewildered to resist; the grip was inexorable.

"What a death it would be!" he whispered exultantly. "I thought perhaps there might have been an assassin crouched behind that bed. How puny, how inconsequential, how meaningless death is when there is—love!"

He drew her to him, she put her fingers over his mouth. This was no time, no place—in the room sacred to her ancestor—to speak of profane things.

But he was not to be silenced. "You sent for me—I heard your voice in those chords! Everyone in the den there understood. You want me!"

Again her fingers were upon his mouth, playing upon it. He was reminded of that impassioned sonata. Here was a song played upon his lips—she was not silencing them. He had the thrill—a sensation as if she had thrown herself upon him with the same fervor, with the same ferocity, with which she had played of love upon that harp.

Then capriciously she wanted to be free. She fluttered or rather writhed. He felt the futile but exquisite struggle, the grace, the heat, the moist shoulder. He bent to kiss her, but her palm stopped his mouth. It was not as she had warned, the hand burned when he kissed it.

Footfalls echoing down the long black corridor, the grunting and sniffling of the mozo, the conflict of subdued but angry voices, and there came a knock on the batten door.

Glamours broke from the girl's throbbing embrace.

"I'll keep this a secret," he said.

The window gave upon a hooded balcony, masked in filigreed iron, hidden darkly by palmetto, fern and vine. Over the sill Glamours climbed and swung himself below, dropping upon the flagstone walk of the patio. As he swore to himself that that tryst would be forever unknown to all but the girl, the mozo and himself, he was aware of an aroma sweeter and more suffocating than that fetid swamp air which clung to the garden. A woman's voice—at once harsh and wheedling—was breathing into his ear:

"That hundred dollars you mentioned, mister—"

A parrot laughed raucously:

"Avast there, Lord Stinko! The deck's awash with blood!"

He turned, too surprised, maddened, to vent the oath in his throat.

Cora was standing there in the patio just behind his shoulder, lurking suavely, complacently in an aura of fragrant moonbeams, pepperwood and pomade. Her palm thrust into the full glare of a binnacle lamp.

Glamours cast a shuddering glance at it. A palm ravishing to the touch had just been upon his lips. Here was a ghostly contrast, a hand without life, without warmth, a pudgy mass of wrinkles which no palmist in the world could read!

In that one glance at her palm, Glamours saw the history of thwarted love, of crime, the slack of passion, the bloodless flesh of life, a palm kissed no longer except by the lips of coin.

"Pay me!" were the usual words, and the itching was assuaged.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HEROD OF THE MARSH COUNTRY.

OF all the characters in the Sundown Café who were at that particular moment in jeopardy, little Herzog was the most perturbed. He had the definite impression that some hovering fate had stuck a finger in the stewing pot of humanity in that gambling house, stirring up a brew of combat and tragedy.

Outwardly the scene before Herzog's eyes should have pleased him. The joint was crowded with water front people drinking heavily. Tidewater boatmen were lavish with their money. Cajans were noisy, guzzling, scrapping, swearing oaths of love, friendship or revenge. They sang breezily, in partial unison with the rattling player piano. Bad wine flowed with its countercurrent of hard cash. The fiesta was in full swing. Shrimpers and swamp angels were convivial and happy, but the proprietor was tortured in his mind by that old and dreadful catechism: "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

Herzog realized that at that very moment—when the merriment was at its height, the piano thumping a lively fandango, the chips rattling merrily, the dice clicking enticingly, Cajans singing, couples out on the floor dancing—Al Boscoe was searching the house now, sent by Herzog himself, to kill a man.

It was a terrifying knowledge the little rat eyed, leather faced fellow had, seeing all that merriment downstairs and feeling the tragedy of a murder imminent behind any one of those walls. Of course he had no idea what was happening. That made him all the more uncomfortable. At any rate, murder was afoot. Perhaps Al Boscoe would fail. Then what? That strange mariner with the sea green eyes was in search of a body, which he—Herzog—had hidden! This man was yet to play his card!

Those were engrossing fears, but there was another more tangible, more imminent one—a fear of the law. The management might not be responsible for the acts of its own barkeeper, but this was no time for the law to come to the Sundown Café. Then again the other victim of Al Boscoe's hatred might have kinsmen down there in the swamp. They would not stop to find out who was responsible. They would tear the whole place down about Herzog's ears.

The distracted innkeeper paced from one room to the other, kneading his dry, scaly hands behind his back, wandering from the gaming room to the café, from the bar to the patio. The noise in these rooms accentuated the dreadful quiet upstairs.

"Upstairs? There's another trouble—the little witch to deal with. If she finds out I have opened up her ancestor's tomb she will conjure up all the devils of the Seven Seas to torture me."

He thought on this train, jumping at every click of the dice, at every oath, at every flutter of the pigeons on the floor. He stopped the piano. At least the peculiar musical sense the little wretch had in his system need not add to his other castigations. As he went from one room to the other his mind wandered from one fear to the next: the green eyed devil from the sea, Al Boscoe whom he had incited to commit murder, the ghost of Mate Grimpen out there beyond the palmettoes, and finally the witch in General Papaquillo's room.

"At least I can get her on my side. I ain't said nothing to anger her—not yet. She don't know about the tomb." He paled.

A silence had fallen on the assembly. The girl herself, in response to Herzog's call, had come down, and she was standing on the staircase.

"I'll offer her gifts for her playing. I'll make a great boast saying she can have everything. Like as not she will ask me for a magnolia—that's what she has always done in the past—a magnolia or a candle to burn before the old Mex general's portrait. B'gad, I'll give her enough candles for a bonfire—enough to stoke a steamship, b'gad! She'll be on my side. She ain't goin' to conjure up no ghosts to make me crazy. Let Papaquillo rest. Let Al Boscoe be damned. Let the mariner be heaved to the tide. Let Mate Grimpen—ah—"

That was a stumbling block indeed. Mate Grimpen was in the tomb and Herzog had no way of getting it open short of dynamite. He relieved himself by going to the girl. She was as beautiful as she was strange and unearthly. She would be an angel to him. To be near her would charm away his delirium.

"Look here, *señorita*," he said in a loud voice, "all these gents are listening to what I'm saying. You've blessed the old Sundown Café—boilin' old hell hole that it is. You've brought us peace. Once a year you come and clean out the foul air by just breathing upon it. What do you want? I'm here, old Herzog, the owner of the joint, and I'm saying here before every one I'll give you anything your heart desires—to the extent of half the old place."

It was not at all probable that Herzog had ever heard of that uncomfortable position in which the ancient King Herod had placed himself by making just such a promise. But the scene there in the gambling den of the Sundown Café was an exact counterpart of that famous tragedy.

The girl had come and entertained this crew of water front characters. The host was pleased, as were his guests. She had found favor in his sight, as had Herodias' daughter before King Herod and his lords.

"When the daughter of the said Herodias came in and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel: Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he sware unto her: Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom."

The daughter of Herodias had asked a terrible thing. *"Give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist!"*

Down there in the swamps in a gambling den a Creole girl asked for something in just the same way. Herod, to comply, was damned. And so was Herzog.

"Give me," the girl said, "the key to my ancestor's tomb."

When Modesta asked for that key she united herself with the mariner Glamours. From then on their quest was the same. This Creole girl—an embodiment of the spirit of the glorious Spanish days, the splendor of Papaquillo's battles, the blood of the conquistadores might have said: "Give me the key so that this English mariner and I may be as one!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE KEY TO PAPAQUILLO'S TOMB.

WHEN King Herod consented to grant the request of Herodias's daughter, he did so because he had made a promise before his lords and guests. Of course little old Herzog had no such compunctions. He had made a promise before his guests, but he was the last to worry about such a thing. And yet standing there blinking, and working his Adam's apple underneath the wrinkled folds of his neck, he found himself in a situation which was fully as uncomfortable as Herod's.

The ancient king was probably not in the habit of shrinking at the execution of his prisoners, but the particular prisoner whose head Herodias's daughter wanted had a very disconcerting power. He was equivalent to that type of man whom the Indians down there in the southwest call a Cloud Swallower. John the Baptist was not a man who could be treated as you treat ordinary prisoners. In plain terms Herod was afraid of the supernatural. And so was Herzog.

The key. Yes, that was something about which, from Herzog's obsessed point of view, the whole universe resolved. It made him actually dizzy to think of that little old rusty piece of iron. No, it was not little as keys go. It was cumbersome, ornate with the same ornateness which characterized old Papaquillo's spurs. It looked like the key to a monastery, a dungeon, in fact, to a medieval tomb. It was not a thing that could be tucked away in your pocket. In fact, Herzog had hung it around his neck that day as a bell is hung about the neck of a cow. In one of his snoring siestas that wily and acquisitive pickpocket, his wife, had stolen it from him.

Now, asked for this preciously significant object at such a climax to the night's events, Herzog found himself succumbing to an overpowering, a maddening fear. He looked about in a daze at the circle of red faces,

at Al Boscoe, now standing at the door of the patio, at the grotesque mozo who had carried the harp, at the grave and bewitching face of the girl herself.

He imagined himself suddenly caught in a mesh of circumstances which he himself had woven. The Sundown Café was his trap. Sailors had lost their lives there, many others had been shanghaied, many, it must be confessed, had consorted with the devil there and had started on the road to damnation. It was the trapdoor to hell. One could imagine that that very door at Herzog's foot which led to the wine cellar opened into what John Bunyan might have termed a "byway to hell!"

And now a strange feeling of chagrin and fear enveloped Herzog. He had caught himself. He had worked his own ruin. He—like Herod—was damned.

"The key? Yes, the key, I know of that. It was left here—"

"You," the girl said softly, but with a tone that he interpreted as implacably cold, "you are the keeper of this key as well as this *posada* where it was left. I must go to my ancestor's tomb. I must confer with him. Something has come into my life tonight—a sin? No, it cannot be. Where to turn? What to do? I must go to the tomb."

As was a habit of his, Herzog dwindled somewhat after the manner of a mud turtle, the thick skin of his neck folding up as his head drew downward. The lower left hand corner of his mouth twitched and stretched as if to keep back the flow of tobacco. Again he managed to speak.

"Yes, the key must be got for you, *señorita*. I myself shall get it. Where it is right now I—yes, I know where it is, but I can't say, for it is a secret place where I keep my greatest treasures—" He went on mumbling to himself: "The damnable thing! If she finds Grimpen's body there—" He paled. "Yes, b'God, I understand everything now! It's Grimpen's body that's bringing all this trouble on me! Why else should she get this whim into her head. A capricious woman is all she is. No, she ain't a capricious woman. She wants to get into that there tomb *because something's callin' to her.*"

Herzog's one desire now was to get into the tomb himself and bring Grimpen's body out before any more attention was attracted to the place. Already he felt that for the first time in many years the eyes of the whole community were focused there on that forgotten pile of granite.

"You wait in your room," he urged the girl. "This is no place—a gambling den—for you. Go up there. I'll come to you—when I have the key. Don't think I'll keep you waiting. Don't think I'm stalling. I'll get it for you. Your wish must be granted, lady! Old Herzog knows that—s'help me!"

The girl obeyed. Herzog found himself beset with fears, not knowing which way to turn, baffled, frantic. His wife must be the one who had that key. She apparently had not been in the room during the scene. While Salome was asking the king for the head of John the Baptist, Cora was out in the patio where she had just extorted a hundred dollars from Glamours.

Glamours came now into the gambling den alone, sat at a table and started to lay out a pattern of cards. Partly to keep away from this man of the sea whom he feared more than he feared any one else in that house, Herzog sneaked out to the patio. There he found his wife. She was spitting on her thumb and rolling back the corners of the bills, an eager and triumphant smile twisting her mouth.

It was a delicate mission to perform. The key now had a tremendous value. It was worth more than gold. But to get it away from the old harridan Herzog knew that he must not emphasize its value.

"That key you filched from my neck," he said, "while I was sleeping—"

"Who filched what key from whose neck?" Cora asked.

"Somebody got the key to Papaquillo's tomb while I was taking my siesta. I want it!"

"For what?"

"Never mind that. You stole it, so come through. I have use for it."

"Use for the key to Papaquillo's tomb? Tell somebody that and let them search me. Tell somebody you want to get Mate Grimpen's body out of that there vault. Then," sarcastically, "they'll help you."

"I'll tell nobody. I'll get it myself."

"If I had it how would you get it?"

"That I'll show you."

"Main force, maybe? Is it worth so much?"

"It's worth nothing. But the key should ought to be in my possession. We'll leave Grimpen's carcass rest there. Who will care? But I'm going to get the key and watch it myself. No old hellcat like you can be trusted."

"I don't see that you're coming after it," she said tauntingly.

Herzog had the hallucination that his head was swelling. The cuevo, with which he had reënforced his nerves several times that day, had started his temples to throbbing. His eyes were blood shot, he saw red.

"All right, if you are looking for violence you'll get it," he threatened. "If you're taunting me I ain't the one to stand still without kicking. You come through with that key!"

He took her flabby wrists and gripped so hard as to frighten the woman at first. She writhed to relieve the twisting movement of his hold. Staring into his face with a pale blaze of hatred she seemed uncertain whether to scream, to spit at him or to start in kicking his shins.

"You give me that key you filched from me or I'll kill you here and now!" the baffled and frantic little man cried. "Think you can get something on me holding that back, do you? If you can keep Grimpen's body there so *I'll* be ha'nted, so I'll be damned— But I won't let you have it on me. I'll kill you first!"

Cora decided that to scream was the safest policy, but she was so frightened by the apparent mania her husband had developed that she was unable to voice her cry.

The inebriated Herzog released his grip upon the flabby wrists and transformed it to Cora's flabbier throat. His fingers sank into a disconcerting layer of cool, dry flesh. Whether this method of attack would have succeeded Herzog never ascertained, for he felt something sink into his collar just behind his neck, twist him backward, and whirl him spinning like a top across the flagstone walk.

He got his balance, turned about, his head swimming, the stars and fireflies whirling in an orgy of glorious and rhythmic movement. In the center of that gyrating universe of luminous bodies he saw the face of Al Boscoe, scowling, crowned with that massive patch of pomaded black hair.

Herzog did not look long. From somewhere in the direction of that hated visage there came a sledgehammer fist flashing in the light and seeming to dilate to a tremendous sudden size in that one instant. Herzog had the feeling of his jaw being smashed up into his brain. The lights spun, twinkled, scattered.

The little body of the innkeeper sank like a shapeless bag of cotton into the comfortable resting place of flagstone and fern.

CHAPTER XIV.

"STOW HIM AWAY!"

WAS it possible that anything other than hatred and murder could sprout in the garden of that patio? Could anything but crime thrill the hearts of those degenerate human beings, Herzog, his wife, her lover? It was a place where weeds belonged, not rubber plant nor palmetto. But down there in the Sundown Café the magnolia bloomed among horseweed and crab grass. Love blossomed in the rankness of Cora's life and of Al Boscoe's. As for Herzog, that little unfortunate wisp of humanity was in no condition then to thrill to any passion whatsoever.

He lay there among the ferns like a rank overturned barrel cactus choking the more delicate plants and flowers of the garden.

Cora bent down to examine him while Boscoe still stood like a champion in a prize fight waiting for the count to be tolled off.

"Al, you've come aboard of the old man if I know anything."

This rather serious comment did not seem to have its needed effect upon the slower mental processes of Al Boscoe. The latter was engrossed then in the pride of victory, of the rescuer gloating in the presence of the rescued.

"Do you hear me?" she went on, clutching the barkeep's arm. "You've murdered the old man. It was too much for him—that blow. Like as not you busted one of them blood vessels that's always stickin' out on his face. He's done for. You've come aboard of him—"

"I've come aboard of nothin'," Boscoe said scoffingly. "Back in Baton Rouge I socked a river boatman like this and he was under for a good hour. Don't throw a fit over this bird. Besides, what if he is packed away? Served him right. And," he added softly, "*it leaves you free.*"

It was most assuredly a sudden shifting of the point at issue. It might have shocked some women—but it could not shock a woman like Cora. Both the bouncer and the innkeeper's wife were drugged with the balm of that air. The patio seemed to retain all the warmth and pungency of the hot day that had long since passed. It was in fact like a closed room—a room filled with the odor of many flowers, that admitted no sunlight, no breeze.

Al Boscoe lit a black cheroot with a scratched hand that showed no trace of trembling. Cora felt the nearness of great power as well as of a heroic audacity. To all but kill a man and then over his prostrate body to make love to his wife! There was a spirit for you! Cora herself had felt the bewitching power of Modesta's music. The chords still hummed in her ears although they had been played a long time before. The still air retained the strange arpeggios as it retained the fragrance of the day that was gone, the warmth of the sun that was set. They were minor chords that belonged to that patio just as the rhythm of breakers belongs to a sea shell.

Modesta had not softened Cora as Orpheus had mollified the savagery of beasts. She was made more savage, her fire, it seemed, had long burned itself out leaving her heart like grey cold slack. But it was kindled again.

"Say Al—" She looked at him, feeling that Herzog should lie there where he belonged, "what did you do this for anyway—yes, of course you're going to say, 'for me.' I know. I've had 'em pull that there tremolo stuff before. *You* don't talk tremolo. You bust out and snort like a horse. You're great. You're big. You can beat anybody. Never saw the like of you."

"I can if there's something in here that starts me," he said, patting his white jacket just over the heart. "Something has started me to-night, I'll tell you. And once I'm started I ain't goin' to stop. Not till I get what I want. Which it's you. You need me here to take care of you. You can't run a place like this with a ole man with varicose veins calling himself your master. Look at me. I fight. I strike. I ain't peaceable. But I don't fight women, do I? I pick out every man who looks bad to me and I socks 'em. Women! It takes a hero like this bunch of rags and bones in the grass to pick on a woman."

It was very true. Cora responded to that idea. Her husband was a brute. He had gotten what he deserved. She looked down at the motionless figure, touched it with her toe as you will poke a frog to make it hop.

"Throw some water on him," Boscoe suggested, "and forget him. Give him an hour or two."

"If he don't come then—"

"Hide him."

"You'll have what you want then, won't you?" she laughed dryly. "You'll be the master of the Sundown Café. I reckon that's all you want of me."

That was a bitter, a pessimistic remark, but it had in it the elements of truth.

"I want *you*," Al Boscoe objected. He took her in his arms. Again the smoldering fire burned in Cora's veins. Here was no feigning of love; it was genuine. A fine example of that buoyant doctrine that the basest and vilest thing in the world has good in it. Yes, Cora reacted to a fervor about which there was nothing of the sham innate to her practice. It was as true as the hatred she had for her husband. Cora Herzog had been touched by the spell of Modesta's music. She was in love.

The chattering and singing and carousing still flowed out of that gambling hall door, intermingling with the more constant fiddling of the locusts. The mechanical piano

sustained its unemotional and unvaried ragtime. Each half hour guests reeled off into the fragrant night of the bayou, taking the waterfront road and disappearing in by-paths among the cane-brakes and swamp mire, their forms fading away in the miasma. Others were left. Basque sailors made love to large-eyed and golden-skinned quadroons; Thomas Glamours, waiting for what none knew, continued laying out his pattern of cards.

Still in the patio the white giant form of the barkeeper, the woman merely a vision of a whitely powdered face and a vivid smear of red, which was her mouth, the sack of bones among the ferns,—this was the cast of characters in the scene.

"Enough of this soft stuff," that large fleshy thing in the sky-blue robe said. "What are you going to do with Herzog? He's dead!"

"Dead, nothing!"

"What if someone finds him here and it turns out he *is* dead?"

"Hide him then, I tell you."

"Hide him where? Not in this inn. They would search everywhere for him."

"If he *is* dead," the other whispered, "then the bayou."

"Too many people going home."

"For the time being," Al Boscoe went on, his low voice gathering in intensity, "stow him away anywhere."

"You ain't afraid of the law?"

"I never mixed with the law yet. What I do is to get a woman on my side—a woman who is in love with me. No man need be afraid then."

"I'll help you, Al. You are a great man. No woman can spurn a man like you. You're a man they're all afraid of. That's what we women wants! And I want you! I've got you! But I won't have them catch you in a murder."

The other sobered. "Well and good. What shall we do with this here—" He pointed his thumb at the sack of bones. "With this here sleepin' stiff."

"Sleeping?" the woman gasped. "You still think then—"

"No, he ain't dead yet. Give him time. But stow him away."

"There is a place—somewhere that no one can get into without they use dynamite." She leaned toward him. The two figures, standing close together in the corner of the patio, still gave the one undubitable impression that they were lovers speaking softly, earnestly to each other. No one could have guessed what they were talking of.

"If we hide 'im in that place it's absolutely safe—for the time being, anyway. Then *if* he dies, we wait until the last guest is gone and then—the swamp. We'll take him in a pirogue past the mud flats into the tulies where boats can't go. Where there ain't nothin' but pelicans—and once in a while a buzzard."

"Sounds all right. But where's this place we're to hide him?"

"In the old tomb back there in the canebrakes."

"How do you get there? The moon's shinin'. I'm liable to be seen?"

"They would see you if you crossed the road to the bayou, but this here tomb is back of the café. You don't have to cross a road to get there. It's a furlong or two directly behind us over them palmettoes."

Boscoe thought a moment, studying the prostrate form of Herzog. It would be a simple matter to carry him a mile—there was no doubt about that. But there might be other objections. "You said something about dynamite. If it takes dynamite to get into the tomb—"

"I've got the only key," Cora said conclusively.

"That's different. Give it to me."

Cora reached to her bosom, but the very sound of those words seemed to startle her. She had heard those words just a few moments before uttered by her husband. "Come through with that key or I'll kill you." Those were his words. Here was Al Boscoe asking the same thing.

"Ain't you afraid of a tomb?" she asked.

"'Fraid of a tomb! What for?"

"Might you will find a body there."

"That would not be so stupefyin', bein' it's a tomb. That's where a body belongs."

"This here key is worth something. If I give it to you, it means I am trusting you only as a woman trusts a man she loves—

no other way. No other man could get this key from me. *He* tried it." She pointed to the ferns. "No, there ain't no treasure in that tomb—don't think that. But the girl Modesta—it's her ancestor's grave. If she knows—"

"Do you reckon I'd hide a carcass there which I'm responsible for and then give the key away?" Boscoe snorted.

This was certainly an unanswerable argument. Why not trust this man with the key? He would most certainly guard it with his life. Besides it meant she had a man—a powerful, heroic man—for an accomplice. She handed it surreptitiously to him as one will pass a bribe. She must have feared that those patio walls were watching the deed. But as soon as his hand had closed upon the rusty bit of wrought iron she reached again with the impulsive desire to beg it back.

"No, give me the key. We can find another way. The key—"

It was futile. To beg it back now would make it worth that much more to him. Perhaps he would never return it. She held her peace while he was engrossed with the business at hand. He reached among the ferns and tossed the sack of inert flesh and bones upon his shoulder.

She watched him stride off into the canebrake. A binnacle lamp cast a shaft of light on his broad back as he labored through the thick underbrush. And then she saw him in the miasma like a huge gray image with a hump on its back, fading away until he was part of the dark.

It was the entrance of the parrot that brought Cora back to the colorful existence of the Sundown Café.

"*Dead and be damned!*" the bird squawked. "*The scullion's axe his cheek had shore.*"

Cora hurried back into the café, masking her face in a bland, ingratiating business-like smile.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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HESPERIDES

BEYOND the blue rim of the world.
Washed round with languid-lapsing seas,
Where the wind's wings were ever furled
The ancients dreamed Hesperides.

Ship after ship each age sent forth
To find the islands of the blest;
The loosed winds drove them south and north—
Yet west they weathered, ever west.

Sky after sky they dropped behind,
Those heavy-handed, bearded men,
Till, seeking what they might not find,
They rounded upward, home again.

A desultory waif of time,
Flying adventures from my mast,
'Twas thus I voyaged every clime
To come back to myself at last.

Harry Kemp

The Elusive Mule

By EARL WAYLAND BOWMAN

"This is the story of Ah Fong—
A Chinaman until his death;
But laws we enacted completely extracted
All of the kick from his breath!"
Songs of the Expiring Eighteen.

IT was a sultry Friday afternoon and August the thirteenth, too; and the entire human equation of the two hundred and seven citizens, one borax mine, seven saloon metropolis of Red Bluff, out in the supreme penultimate of southwestern Nevada, felt that it was being eliminated by the process of perspiration.

The Barstow-Red Bluff stage, drawn by six leg weary, dust encrusted equines, one of which limped slightly in his left front foot, toiled miserably across the virtually incomprehensible expanse of desolation. On every side tremendous areas of sun-blighted vacancy innoculated the typical desert with a sensation of indivisible dryness.

Within the stage sat one lone passenger. He was a Chinese, ancient, shriveled, wizened and withered; his name was Ah Fong, over his right eye he wore a black cloth patch; his destination was Red Bluff.

At this pre-Volsteadian period Red Bluff was in full possession of all her faculties. These faculties included not only Wong Gee's Oriental Café, Hop Sing's laundry, all seven saloons, the livery stable—with polecats thereunder—the blacksmith shop across the street, Mother Skillern's two story frame hotel but, as well, many other vital and equally essential industries.

Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith, the venerable prospectors who first discovered the borax mine, sat on the porch of Mother Skillern's hotel, in the very heart of the business section of Red Bluff, and watched the distant cloud of atomic particles which whirled and eddied with a slow, undulating movement far out on the horizon line and marked the gradual approach of the stage in question as it drew nearer and ever nearer.

Half way up the street, next door to Saloon Number Four, Wong Gee, proprietor of Red Bluff's exclusive Chinese restaurant, stood at the front entrance of his establishment and also gazed into the quivering heat flashes where the dust haze rolled languidly onward, pausing occasionally to smash a fly on the partly opened screen.

Solemn Johnson squinted his keen gray eyes, mopped the little rivulets of moisture from his steaming forehead, tugged uncomfortably at his grizzled beard and said:

"It's hotter than double-barreled hades, ain't it?"

"Well, of all things!" Dirty Shirt Smith cried with seeming irrelevance, sweat beads oozing down his leathery, sun-tanned cheeks into the tangled growth of brick-red whiskers on the lower part of his face. "What do you think of that? Yonder comes the stage!"

"It's hotter'n seventeen burnin' hells." Solemn reiterated, glancing with a queer shudder toward Wong Gee, while a note of disgust crept into his voice, "and I et boiled pork and cabbage for dinner!"

Dirty Shirt registered immediate interest.

"At Wong Gee's?" he asked, incredulously.

Solemn Johnson nodded his head gloomily.

"You et boiled pork and cabbage for dinner!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed, as if he couldn't believe it, "who ever heard of the like?"

There was a moment's silence.

Solemn appeared reluctant to continue the conversation.

"You et boiled pork and cabbage for dinner!" Dirty Shirt repeated, musingly. "Well, in that case, I reckon we'd just as well go over to Saloon Number Four and get a drink, hadn't we?"

"I reckon," Solemn replied, indifferently, "but I don't see what in Sam Hill makes it so hot! Especially after me eatin' that boiled pork and cabbage for dinner—"

"Probably it's a coincident," Dirty Shirt interrupted, sympathetically. "Boiled pork and cabbage is pretty oily!"

"It was fat!" Solemn said drearily, without emotion.

"Very fat?" Dirty Shirt queried, rising.

"Awful fat," Solemn replied, also getting up; "fatter'n usual!"

"That accounts for it!" Dirty Shirt retorted quickly. "Wong Gee's up to them tricks!"

"It was terrible fat—" Solemn began plaintively, "Wong Gee's a Chinaman!" he cried with sudden passion.

Dirty Shirt glanced around.

"That's exactly what he is!" he almost shouted, "Wong Gee's a plumb Chinaman! He ain't got no sense of proportions at all —not a danged one!"

"Nor of justice, nor eternal fitness, nor nothin'!" Solemn added vehemently as they moved slowly toward Saloon Number Four.

Out yonder the dust cloud, hovering above the approaching stage, drew inexorably nearer. Wong Gee, rigid and motionless, still stood in the doorway of his café. His eyes searched the far horizon; his gaze did not waver but followed the thick dust-fume as it crept over the skyline above Hellfire Basin. Even when the stifling mixture of exudations from the mineral kingdom seemed lost in the depths of Rattlesnake Cañon, Wong Gee continued to watch with almost fascinated intensity.

At last Wong Gee's vigil was rewarded. The stage clattered across the gulch; swung into the southeast end of the wide, single-sided business street of Red Bluff; the worn horses staggered to a stop in front of the postoffice and "Keno" Wilson, the tired driver, flung the mail pouches to Colonel Spilkins, Red Bluff's scholarly postmaster, justice of the peace, *et cetera*, who stepped forward to receive them.

A moment later the door of the vehicle opened and Ah Fong, the single passenger, climbed stiffly down, lifted his blue canvas traveling bag and with the black cloth patch still fluttering over his right eye hobbled toward where Wong Gee waited at the door of the Chinese café.

Ah Fong glanced neither to the right nor left, but as he passed the postoffice Colonel Spilkins heard him mutter:

"All samee one dam' hot joltee lide!"

Wong Gee rushed forward, embraced the ancient Celestial, murmured greetings in his native tongue and with his arms about Ah Fong led him into the restaurant.

At that instant, unconscious of what was occurring down the street, Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith leaned thoughtfully against the polished hardwood bar in the fourth resort for the thirsty. There was a brief silence.

Sweat still poured, more insistently than ever if possible, from Solemn Johnson's brow. Dirty Shirt looked with considerable anxiety at his partner.

Solemn was first to speak:

"Ed," he said in a low voice to the bartender, "have—have you got any—any—lemon sody?"

Dirty Shirt Smith looked in astonishment at Solemn.

"If you have," Solemn continued, "give me some, but "—and the prospector's eyes blazed with determination—"give me a hell of a jolt of Scotch first!"

Dirty Shirt sighed deeply and grinned.

There followed then another short period when nothing was said. Presently Dirty Shirt Smith began to speak:

"I was just thinkin'—" he began, sententiously.

"Fer Gawd's sake," Solemn ejaculated, "what with?"

Dirty Shirt ignored the interruption.

"I was just thinkin'," he resumed, "how funny it is that I ain't never seen a dead mule!"

Solemn fastened a look of peculiar intensity on Dirty Shirt.

"In all my life," Dirty Shirt went on, musingly, "I never did observe a dead mule!"

"Has anything happened to Versus?" Solemn asked anxiously.

Versus was Solemn and Dirty Shirt's mutual mouse-colored burro, with long ears; companion of many blistering journeys across the far-flung desert, co-discoverer with them of the borax mine east of the gulch.

As if to answer Solemn's question, Versus herself at that moment stuck her head in the front door of the fourth alcoholic reaction, blinked her eyes, and whinnied.

Solemn was relieved:

"She wants some beer," he said, simply. "Give her some, Ed!"

The bartender complied.

Dirty Shirt rested his elbows carelessly on the bar.

"All my life," he repeated, dreamily, "I've been curious to see a dead mule, and I ain't never seen one nor even seen anybody that ever has seen one!"

Solemn remained discreetly silent. There was something almost sinister in the drawling manner in which Dirty Shirt Smith was speaking.

Dirty Shirt paused, drew a long breath and continued:

"I reckon there ain't nothin' much scarcer than a dead mule," he muttered, gently; "even when I was in Los Angeles that time I didn't see no dead mule! I looked all around, but there wasn't a solitary dead mule in sight.

"But I saw a dead cat in New York one time!" he exclaimed with nearly boyish enthusiasm. "It was down on Sixth Avenue, right opposite Jefferson Market, out in front of a restaurant. It was black and was layin' on its stomach! But there wasn't no dead mule!"

Solemn Johnson sniffed contemptuously, but said nothing.

"Did you ever see a dead mule, Ed?" Dirty Shirt asked, looking wistfully at the bartender.

Ed shook his head.

Dirty Shirt turned his brown eyes triumphantly on Solemn.

"I heard there was a dead mule in Nogales once," Dirty Shirt murmured, reminiscently; "I heard about him. They said people come for miles to look at him! They kept him two weeks. They only retained that dead cat out in front of the restaurant in New York for five days, but they kept that dead mule in Nogales two weeks!"

Solemn Johnson cocked his head to one side and squinted suspiciously at Dirty Shirt:

"They kept that dead mule two weeks," Dirty Shirt repeated doggedly; "it was terrible."

"Kept him two weeks?" Solemn snorted, involuntarily.

"Yes," Dirty Shirt answered gently. "I was sorry I didn't go see him! They kept him two weeks."

"Just to exhibit him, I reckon!" Solemn sneered.

"Not especially just to 'exhibit' him," Dirty Shirt replied meekly, a note of restraint in his voice; "it took that long for his hind heels to get calm!"

Solemn Johnson flushed a dull red:

"Got any more of that lemon sody, Ed?" he snapped, "give me some, but—"

"For them reasons," Dirty Shirt broke in, his brown eyes twinkling a trifle, "I figure there ain't nothin' in the total universe as seldom as a dead mule!"

Solemn glared belligerently at Dirty Shirt.

"There's something scarcer than a dead mule," Solemn began coldly, deliberately; "something that you won't find one of to where you'll probably find forty dead mules; something no man has ever discovered: something I've been pinin' and hopin' to see from time immemorial; something—"

"Well, of all things!" Dirty Shirt interposed abruptly. "Who ever heard of the like? Solemn Johnson says there's somethin' rarer than a dead mule. I'd just like to know what's more inconspicuous than a dead mule!"

Solemn flung his lance defiantly:

"A Chinaman with only one eye!" he cried unexpectedly.

Dirty Shirt flinched in sudden confusion.

"Aw—what th'—aw—" he floundered.

"A Chinaman with only one eye!" Solemn Johnson repeated, gloatingly. "That's what's seldomer than a dead mule, or a million dead mules, for that matter! Did you ever see a Chinaman with only one eye, Dirty Shirt Smith? Did you ever even hear of a Chinaman with only one eye?

"Did you ever go as far as to imagine that a Chinaman with only one eye was possible? Just stop and think and answer me that!"

Dirty Shirt was speechless.

Try as he would, he couldn't remember ever having seen a Chinese with only one eye. What was worse, what made him feel still more helpless, more utterly impotent, he couldn't recall a single instance wherein he had heard of a Chinese with only one eye.

Dirty Shirt's brain seemed numbed. He felt as if he had never until that instant realized that it was possible that a Chinese with only one eye might have been omitted from the great cosmic scheme of things.

Solemn Johnson took instant advantage of the embarrassing position in which he had placed Dirty Shirt Smith.

"Show me a Chinaman with only one eye," Solemn cried, exultingly; "show me a personal Chinaman with only one eye! And I'll show you something scarcer than any dead mule ever dared to be!

"Did you ever encounter a Chinaman with only one eye, Ed?" he asked the bartender. "Did you ever even hear of one?"

Ed's silence was eloquent testimony to the scarcity of a Chinese with only one eye.

Solemn followed up the attack:

"No!" he shouted. "You bet you never saw no Chinaman with only one eye! Nobody ever did. Colonel Spilkins never did; Chuck Roden never did; Mother Skillern never did—she'd just laugh if you asked her!

"Did you ever experience a Chinaman with only one eye, Dirty Shirt Smith? Answer me that interrogation point! Did you ever get even the slightest trace of one? I doubt if Wong Gee himself ever saw a single ultimate individual Chinaman with only one eye."

"Well, of—of—all things!" Dirty Shirt managed to gasp, "Who ever heard of the like? Who ever heard of a Chinaman with only one eye bein' as hard to obtain as a dead mule!"

After which the argument proceeded.

Gray shadows, weird and ghostly, had flung themselves across the dismal depths of Sodamint Cañon; only the dim outlines of Dead Angel Mountain could be barely discerned; the prowling vandal wolves had long since begun their evening serenade around the lonely Joshua tree out at Arsenic Springs in the midst of the unspeakable desert far from the habitations of man, when Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith, still discussing a Chinese with only one eye *versus* a dead mule, emigrated from the fourth oasis—otherwise Saloon Number Four—and journeyed to the door

of Wong Gee's café at which point they paused for a moment.

"A Chinaman with only one eye may be terrible scarce," Dirty Shirt persisted stubbornly, "but when it comes to a show down they're probably thicker than horntoads out in Hellfire Basin, if a man just knowed where to go to look for them. But, on the other hand, where can anybody, man, woman or infant go and locate a dead mule—or even a piece of one?"

"That's just it," Solemn snarled, balancing himself carefully before entering the restaurant; "you're always jumpin' at conclusions! You imagine everlastingly that you know everything! But I'll bet seventeen lemon sodies that I'll show you six dead mules within forty eight hours every time you show me one isolated never-to-be-forgotten Chinaman with only one eye!"

"You're liable to have the liberty to buy them lemon sodies or show them six dead mules," Dirty Shirt shot back, wickedly, "No man knows how soon he might negotiate a Chinaman with only one eye."

"Produce your Chinaman with only one eye!" Solemn snapped. "Just produce him! Produce him, I tell you and I'll buy them lemon sodies; I'll take the liberty of showin' you those six dead mules! I'll show you them six dead mules or—or—" a familiar odor wafted from the kitchen of Wong Gee's cafe and a sudden wild recklessness possessed Solemn.

"I'll show you them six dead mules," he repeated, "or—or I'll eat boiled pork and cabbage for dinner every day for a solid week, no matter how hot the weather is! That's my sacred word—my sacred word an' honor. Six dead mules within forty eight hours for every Chinaman with only one eye, or boiled pork and cabbage every day for dinner for a total week."

The words froze on Solemn's lips.

Dirty Shirt clutched Solemn's arm.

"Well, of all things! Looky yonder!" he exclaimed.

Wong Gee, immaculate in white apron, *et cetera*, had stepped forward, smiling brightly as Solemn and Dirty Shirt came into the room, and behind the counter, Ah Fong, a pie poised in his hand ready to be deposited on the pastry shelf, the black cloth patch dangling pathetically over his right eye, looked around at that instant and grinned.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt slumped into chairs at the nearest table.

"Who—what th'—who's that extra Chinaman?" Solemn spluttered; "where—where'd he come from and what's that—that—black rag over his face for?"

Wong Gee chuckled softly.

"Him Ah Fong," he said. "Velly nicee ol' man! All samee uncle—fathel's blother. Livee in San Flanciso'. Losee Angel's, all alound clountry. Nicee ol' man. Come on Blastow stage today! Pletty soon all timee help Wong Gee washee dishee."

Ah Fong paddled around from behind the counter and stood beside Wong Gee.

"But—but—that black rag?" Solemn stammered uneasily. "What's under it?"

"Nothin'," Wong Gee laughed. "Used to be eye! Not any more—him gone. Ah Fong show!"

Ah Fong lifted the black cloth.

The grim, sunken socket that once housed the right hand window of Ah Fong's soul yawned pitifully empty from beneath the concealing curtain!

"Fer—fer—Gawd's sake!" Solemn choked.

"Six dead mules in forty eight hours," Dirty Shirt Smith snickered, "six dead mules or—or boiled pork an' cabbage for an absodamnedlute week."

"Shut up!" Solemn barked. "Ain't you got no idea of decency or humor or anything?"

Wong Gee and Ah Fong exchanged significant glances.

"How—how did it—it happen to you?" Dirty Shirt whispered.

"Long time ago," Wong Gee replied, "in Losee Angel's. Ah Fong him workee in chop suey place down on Spling Stleet. One night plenty bad man—velly damn bad—come! Him dlunk! Gettee mad—knockee Ah Fong down—steppee in his eye. Light away eye gone! Him plenty bad man—what you calle 'damn tough guy!'"

"Didn't Ah Fong have him arrested?" Dirty Shirt asked.

"No good have him a'lested," Wong Gee grinned; "Ah Fong eye al'leady gone!"

"But didn't they do anything with him at all?" Dirty Shirt persisted.

"No use do anything with him at all," Wong Gee replied softly. "Him dead! Ah Fong killee him las' Fliday! Him allee samee 'damn tough guy', but never any more stepee in China's boy's eye."

Wong Gee paused.

"Well, of all things!" Dirty Shirt gasped. "Who'd a thought a Chinaman had that much sense of proportions!"

"Or eternal fitness or anything," Solemn added, admiringly.

Ah Fong silently dropped the black cloth patch into place over the hole where his right eye once had been; grinned happily, with bland, childlike innocence and toddled toward the kitchen.

"What you wantee to eat?" Wong Gee asked, suddenly; "Got some nicee boiled po'k an' clabbage—"

Solemn Johnson groaned.

"Bring me a he-man order of ham an' eggs," he cried, "and bring some pickles or something sour with it!"

"Solemn's got forty eight hourse grace," Dirty Shirt chuckled, "before boiled pork and cabbage!"

"Shut up again!" Solemn growled, angrily. "Nobody invited you to make a speech!"

"Why, Solemn Johnson!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed in a hurt voice. "Ain't you goin' to live up to your sacred word? Ain't you goin' to pay your bet? I've showed you a Chinaman with only one eye and now I'm anticipatin' six dead mules or else—"

"My sacred word's give, I told you!" Solemn interrupted viciously. "I'll either compensate that one Chinaman with only one eye with six dead mules, or eat those boiled pork and cabbage according to schedule. Don't worry about that! But for the present shut up and stay shut. I want to think!"

Dirty Shirt subsided.

The meal was eaten in silence save for an occasional snort from Solemn and suppressed, half-smothered chuckles from Dirty Shirt.

Little indeed did Solemn Johnson sleep that night. While Dirty Shirt Smith slumbered soundly and in peace, with a small smile playing about his lips, as if he dreamed dreams that were pleasant and full of interest, Solemn walked alone out on the desert beneath the pale white stars, his brow furrowed by lines of anxiety and worry, his head throbbing with the burden of intense concentration.

It was Friday, August 13th, at eight thirty P. M. when Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith beheld, for the first time, a Chinese—poor, decrepit, emaciated Ah Fong—with only one eye. Within forty eight hours, that is by 8:30 Sunday night, Solemn must lead Dirty Shirt to not less than six dead mules, or he would be honor bound to serve a seven day sentence of boiled pork and cabbage! Failure to produce the dead mules or in lieu thereof absorb seven consecutive shots of boiled pork and cabbage would be a violation of Solemn's sacred word and such a contingency was unthinkable.

Too late, Solemn Johnson realized his rashness. He racked his brain relentlessly trying to think where it would be possible to make connections with even one dead mule, much less a total of six dead mules in a solid cluster. Nowhere was there a ray of hope! Oh, why had he made such a foolhardy pledge?

Stalking gloomily across the crunching sands, while the distant wailing of the vandal wolves out at Arsenic Springs drifted dismally to his ears, Solemn's spirits sunk to the lowest ebb; yet, with fine courage, with grim determination he muttered:

"I'll find them six damned dead mules, or else eat that boiled pork and cabbage even if it makes me sweat pure hog grease while I'm doin' it!"

In the gray dawn Solemn came wearily back into the deserted street of Red Bluff. Exhausted, trembling, his head pierced by flaming arrows of agony, he dropped down upon the front porch of Mother Skillern's two story frame hotel, almost in the exact spot where he and Dirty Shirt Smith had sat the afternoon before and watched the fateful cloud of dust kicked up far out on the desert by the Barstow-Red Bluff stage and which, unknown to Solemn or Dirty Shirt, was bearing poor, feeble Ah Fong, a Chinese with only one eye, to Red Bluff.

Scarcely was Solemn seated before he lapsed into the heavy stupor of utter unconsciousness. The sun was just beginning to hurl his blazing, scintillating shafts across the awakening earth and tinge the distant peaks of Tombstone Range with the first old rose and gold of the newborn day, when Solemn's fitful slumbers were disturbed by the slow, low-toned drawl of voices faintly, dimly heard. Indistinct and far-away they seemed. Yet fragments of sentences penetrated to Solemn's drowsy ears:

"M-m-m-m—Devil's Gorge—terrible—m-m-m-m—th' hell!—m-m-m-m—yesterday afternoon—m-m-m-m—dead—m-m-m-mules—"

At the words "m-m-m-m—dead—m-m-m-mules" Solemn Johnson was electrified into wide awake alertness. He sat up, held his breath, and strained desperately to locate the speakers or to grasp the trend of their conversation.

With the suddenness of a radio outfit when it decides to function, the sounds became distinct. Solemn recognized the smooth, velvety rhythm of Colonel Spilkins' refined tenorlike tones, answered occasionally by monosyllables in the deep and powerful voice of Old Jeff Andrews, official scrubber-out, potato-peeler, backyard butler of Mother Skillern's hotel.

The speakers were in the lobby of the hotel; Jeff was evidently giving the office spitoon its morning ablution; Colonel Spilkins, always an early riser, had paused as was his custom for a brief chat with the interesting though erratic personality who lived as a semi-pensioner on Mother Skillern's bounty.

"Whar th' hell 'd y' say it was, colonel?"

Solemn recognized the heavy rumble of Old Jeff's voice.

"Out at Devil's Gorge," Colonel Spilkins spoke clearly, in fine, well-chosen phrases. "Heterogeneous Saunders drove in from the construction camp last night and brought the deplorable intelligence."

Old Jeff dropped the brass cuspidor. The clatter broke the silence. Solemn listened tensely to hear more of what Colonel Spilkins was saying:

"It happened yesterday afternoon," once more the colonel's voice was audible, "right close to camp. It was the most distressing episode that has occurred since work was started. Six entire mules were killed and—"

Solemn waited to hear no more. His keen brain unerringly comprehended it all.

Two minutes later, Dirty Shirt Smith felt a strong, rugged hand, grimly determined, clutch his Adam's apple, another closed firmly over his shoulder and shook him.

"Wake up! Get out of this! Come on!" Solemn yelled.

"What th'—Well, of all things!" Dirty Shirt grunted, protestingly. "Well, of all—"

"Get your pants on while I get Versus!" Solemn commanded, "We're goin'."

"Goin'?" Dirty Shirt grumbled. "Where th'—"

But Solemn was already outside, flinging the pack on Versus, their mouse-colored burro with long ears. His fingers trembled as he diamond-hitched the outfit on her arched and rope-scarred back.

Dirty Shirt appeared at the door, rubbing the side of his face where his whiskers had become cramped during the night.

"Where we goin'?" Dirty Shirt demanded. "I ain't goin' to no place unless I know where the dog-goned place is! You can't shanghai me into no sudden action like that!"

"We're goin' to Devil's Gorge—" Solemn began.

"Devil's Gorge?"

"We're goin' to Devil's Gorge," Solemn repeated, "and we're goin' quick! We're goin' to get there before eight thirty P. M. Sunday evening, before my forty eight hours to find them six dead mules has elapsed."

"Dead mules?" Dirty Shirt interrupted. "What about any dead mules?"

"There's dead mules over at Devil's Gorge," Solemn explained, "six of 'em—just waitin'—and you're going to behold them six dead mules before my boiled pork and cabbage time comes!"

"Hell, it's a two day trip to Devil's Gorge!" Dirty Shirt protested, "And my head aches to start with—"

" I don't give a darn if it's a two months' trip," Solemn snapped, " and I don't give a cuss if your blamed old head busts! We're going to arrive at them six dead mules prior to the clock strikin' eight thirty P. M. Sunday night! Come on! Get up, Versus!"

" Six dead mules," Dirty Shirt muttered, falling into step behind Solemn. " Who ever heard of the like? But in that case I reckon we'd just as well go see them! I always wanted to see a dead mule and mebbe—"

The thump of the " get up " stick on the shaggy ribs of Versus submerged the rest of the sentence.

Sixty miles in thirty six hours with a burro—with Versus of all burros—across the blistering, heat-soaked sands of the almost measureless desert out in the transcendant penultimate of southwestern Nevada, is a gargantuan task. Yet, Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith did it!

Devil's Gorge sweltered at eight nineteen P. M. that unforgettable Sunday as Devil's Gorge had never sweltered before; it was hot—close, sticky, eternally, infernally, relentlessly hot—when Sid Monarch, foreman of the construction camp where the Santa Fe was tearing out a road bed for the new cut-off between Pimento Siding and Despair Buttes, having at that moment stepped from the door of the mess shack, saw staggering across the gorge a small mouse-colored burro with long ears, followed by two almost hysterically warm human beings.

The mouse colored burro with long ears was Versus; the two reeling, swaying, stumbling wayfarers Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith. Sid paused until the trio drew near.

" Where be they?" Solemn Johnson panted as Versus stopped and dropped her nose down close to the ground to smell of an empty tomato can lying beside the cook-shack door.

" Where be what?" Sid said, eying Solemn and Dirty Shirt as they leaned, almost ready to collapse, one against either side of Versus.

" Them mules!" Solemn half whispered, a sinking sensation coming over him.

" What mules?" Sid asked.

" Them—them—" Solemn stammered, helplessly.

" Them dead mules!" Dirty Shirt interrupted, impatiently, " We've come plumb from Red Bluff since yesterday morning A. M. just to see them six dead mules. Now show us their corpses!"

A peculiar smile flitted across Sid's face.

" Wasn't six dead mules killed here in Devil's Gorge last Friday afternoon?" Solemn questioned, uneasily.

Sid nodded his head.

" Yep," he murmured, rolling a brown paper cigarette; " six mules—darned good mules—sure were eliminated right across the gorge there at about four P. M. o'clock Friday, according to the best information I could get! Six mules sure was killed, I reckon!"

" Then where be the remains!" Solemn yelled. " We've got to see them six dead mules right away! It's mighty nigh eight thirty P. M. now."

" Where be they, stranger?" Dirty Shirt pleaded, " Where be them six dead mules?"

Sid stood silent, apparently lost in deep thought.

" Where — be — them — six — dead — mules?" Solemn Johnson repeated slowly, threateningly.

" Nobody ain't seen 'em," Sid murmured, lighting a match deftly on the nail of his thumb, " nobody ain't seen them six dead mules, and nobody ain't ever goin' to see them!"

Sid paused; Versus nosed the vacant tomato can; Solemn and Dirty Shirt stood uncertainly speechless, feeling that something was seriously wrong, that disaster was impending.

" No—nobody ain't seen them—" Solemn began hesitatingly.

" Nope," Sid resumed, " nobody ain't seen them six dead mules, and my guess is that nobody ain't ever goin' to see them six dead mules."

" Wasn't they killed?" Dirty Shirt stammered.

" They sure as hell was." Sid replied.

" Then where be them six dead mules!" Solemn snapped impatiently.

" Them six dead mules ain't come down

yet," Sid answered, gently. "They was hitched to a wagon loaded with two tons and a half of nitroglycerine!"

Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith stumbled into the stuffy, suffocating, meltingly hot tar-paper cook-shack, and dropped despondently down on the bench along the oilcloth covered mess table. Sing Low, the Chinese cook, stepped to the kitchen door.

"Wantee slupper?"

Solemn and Dirty Shirt nodded.

"Pletty latee," Sing Low said, mopping his streaming brow with a corner of his apron. "Eight thirty o'clock. Gottee nuthin' lef' but some nicee boiled po'k an' clabbage!"

Solemn Johnson shuddered; his great frame seemed convulsed; there was tightening of the muscles of his throat. A slow grin spread over the sweat marked face of Dirty Shirt Smith.

Never yet had Solemn Johnson broken his word, failed to pay a bet; it was too late now to begin to be a welcher; his voice husky with emotion, he muttered:

"Fetch it!"

Next Week: ROMANCE ROCKS RED BLUFF

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THE RURAL BARD

BY heck, I reckon I was born a poet,
I allus feel the signs when spring comes round,
But by the time the autumn's here I know it,
When viewin' nature's lyrics of the ground.
I ain't no hand for tunin' up a lyre
To sing about the moon and stars that shine,
But, dern it all, thar's something to inspire
The way the punkin's gildin' up the vine!

The poppies look real purty, I'm allowin',
But, gosh, that's all the pesky things kin do,
And when the furrers of my thoughts I'm plowin'
I want to sing of things that's *useful*, too:
So what's the matter with the punkin' meller—
A dipperful of sunlight from the sky—
A lyin' here and gettin' fat and yeller
To later make an epic of a pie?

Folks say I'm plumb poetic when they know me,
And I opine I kind of got the knack,
But I am from the grand old State of Show Me
And like my poems flavored some with fact;
And though them city poet fellers spurn it,
And sing of bird and bloom and dronin' bee,
When I start out to write an ode, gol dern it,
The humble punkin's good enough for me!

Ella Bentley Arthur.

The Roaring Forties.

By ARTHUR HUNT CHUTE

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LOVE REMAINETH.

SHORTLY after the Valkyrie had been reported safe, there came a letter to Mary Williston from Australia.

With that letter every doubt was chased away. Richard told of how he had been shamed into standing by, by Captain Forbes.

"Much as I wanted to come to you, at the last minute it dawned upon me that I must stand by my ship."

Mary pondered here for a long time. Then she exclaimed aloud: "Yes, if he had done anything else, I could not have admired him half so much. Of course he had to stand by."

The letter went on to speak lightly of struggles in the roaring forties, of the dismasting, of days and days under jury rig. Of the way they had come, in dire extremity, to the Crozets. Of how they got provisions placed there for distressed ships. Of how after endless months they had at last made Port Phillips Head.

With the news from Richard a new day dawned for Mary. She had been like some one in mist and gloom, living in hope of what might be beyond. Now the stars had broken forth, and she was supremely happy. Everything again was buoyancy and hope.

Donald MacKay smiled as he watched her from his model room, sailing the Alcala with all the joyous abandon of her former self.

During that agonizing time she had never once ventured out upon the water. It had seemed too hateful. But now, laughing,

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 19.

and rejoicing, she was back again with her old playfellows, the wind, the sunshine, and the sea.

MacKay was never too busy over the blue prints to notice his niece on the bright occasions when she flashed by in the harbor below, expressing her very soul in the joyous abandon with which she sailed the Alcala.

"I wish I could get a captain and a clipper as well mated as that yacht and that girl," said Donald MacKay. "They were made for each other."

One afternoon MacKay had reason to revise his judgment. The Alcala was slow in stays, there was an unresponsiveness in the way she ate to windward, her ghosting qualities were lost. Donald MacKay left his blue prints and came over to the window with questioning gaze.

"What in the world can have happened?" he exclaimed. "I never saw such lubberly conduct before aboard the Alcala. It seems as if she's being profaned. Surely Mary can't be making such a mess of sailing."

The old man peered intently as the yacht passed athwart of his shipyards, then as her cockpit flashed into view, he burst out:

"I thought so. I thought so. Nat Gertridge steering for a change. His spirit and that yacht are about as well mated as an ox and an eagle.

"Beats all about the mystery of steering; it seems to be blown into the very soul. There's Mary, a mere girl, who can steer as if the winds were whispering to her. And there's Nat, in the shipping business, and yet he never dreamed of sympathy between man and ship. Is it any wonder that I've had my days of trouble with such as that to contaminate my clippers?"

A few minutes later, when the Alcala bore down the harbor, Donald MacKay laughed loudly. Mary was steering once more. They were thrashing to windward in a stiff, choppy breeze, and Nat Gertridge, in spite of himself, was being deluged.

Donald MacKay laughed hugely. "Serves him right. A lubberly chap like that's got no business in the same boat with a girl like Mary. Getting just what he deserves.

"That's right, soak it to him, Mary." MacKay clapped his thigh with satisfaction as the girl treated Nat to another drenching.

As the Alcala passed out of sight, MacKay fell to thinking of his niece. "Aye, she's a strange lass, is Mary. Believed all the time in the Valkyrie, just like her Uncle Donald. A regular little brick. Bowled the tar out of the whole crowd up there at the church. Never dreamed it was in her. But I guess the old blood is there. Ever since the days of the old chief at County Ross, the MacKays have had a strain of the seer. But there's lots of the livin' devil in her, too. Up in the church the little prophetess, down at the harbor the little vixen. She'll lead some lad a dance all right!"

At that very moment Mary Williston was indeed leading the pertinacious Nat a merry dance.

The heir to the house of No Loss & Great Gain Gertridge had at length bestirred himself to offer his heart.

Nat had handed the tiller over, and sitting on the weather side of the cockpit, he struck a soulful attitude.

"Do you know what I'm going to say to you this afternoon, Mary?"

"Don't ask me," replied the unromantic Mary, tossing her head in the wind.

"Well, I'm going to say something I've wanted to tell you for a long time."

"Oh, don't. Please spare yourself the trouble."

"But I must."

"Rubbish."

"But if you only knew what was in my heart, Mary."

"If I knew I'd keep it there."

"But I can't, Mary. The time has come for me to tell you that I love you— Ugh! Ugh!"

Nat's wonderful speech was cut short. He was half drowned by a deluge of icy water that Mary shipped at that particular moment for his benefit.

He paused, shook the water off, and continued.

"I love you, Mary. I have always loved you— Ugh! Ugh!"

This time he had taken a seat on the rail to leeward. Mary bore hard down upon

her helm, and with the added pressure the seas came creaming clear up to the cockpit, submerging Nat's seat completely.

In violent alarm he leaped to weather, while Mary, bearing up for the lower buoy, soused him properly in flying spray.

By this time Nat's teeth were chattering from the cold. Do or die was his motto.

"Mary! Mary! Ugh! Ugh!"

A couple of short slaps at the helm and two more freezing douches.

All the way down the harbor Mary parried this persistent suitor. Her sword arm was the sea, but Nat Gertridge was not to be held up even by such thrusts.

"I think you're teasing me too far, Mary. But I've always been patient. Why? Because I want you— Ugh! Ugh!"

"Why don't you wear oilskins, you darn fool?"

"I know, I know why you've treated me so cruelly, Mary. Ugh! Ugh!"

"Why?"

"Because I believe there's another."

Mary's eyes suddenly became grave. Nat's word had finally gone home.

"Yes, I knew it, there's another, and I know who it is. It's some one who is unworthy of you as he can be. You have done nothing but try to make a fool of me to-day, Mary. But you won't do that always.

"Now just answer me this one question. If the Valkyrie had gone down, would you have married me?"

"No, never! Never! Never!"

That evening, after his chilly sail, Nat Gertridge returned home subdued, chagrined. Then and there he decided to change his mode of attack. In a flash it suddenly dawned upon him that if he would vanquish Richard Dunbar he must drown soul as well as body.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FROM PAGODA ANCHORAGE.

MARY received wonderful letters from Richard, and sent wonderful letters in return.

For her sunshine had come again. She was enthralled by Richard's pictures of the China coast. Her day dreams were charged with shadowy visions of strange lands, of ancient temples, and of pagodas, always with Richard beckoning to her from the mysterious and alluring background.

Whenever a ship came in from the Far East, Mary was beside herself in impatience for the expected message, and she was never disappointed. Whatever might have been the apparent lapses of Richard, he now missed no opportunity to keep Mary posted as to his far off voyages.

They had refitted at Melbourne, had gone from there to Newcastle, New South Wales, with a general cargo.

Richard wrote, "You will be relieved to learn that the Valkyrie was in no way injured by her tough time off the Crozets. We all feared, because of spreading her butts, that her racing days were over. But after being on the marine slip for repairs, she has proved herself as fast as ever.

"We ran from Melbourne to Newcastle in very fast time—in fact, the record between those ports. On this passage large runs were not expected. But one day she made three hundred miles, and showed the same fast average in moderate weather.

"She's the greatest ship in all the world, Mary. Captain Forbes has got her in fine trim, and we are all spoiling for next spring's tea race, when we hope to add to the fame of your scarlet burgee.

"We expect to be trading in the China seas for nearly a year. Till then we shall have coasting charters for intermediate voyages. But next May we hope to beat them all out of Foo Chow with new teas, and to be the first in London River.

"Of course this is not going to be easy. Times are changing. The English tea clippers are coming up. As you know, they have won the races for the past two years. There are several of their new birds lying in the harbor here beside us, some of the prettiest and speediest looking models I've ever laid my eyes on.

"The Britishers say that they are going to beat us at all costs, so I expect that we will have a ding-dong fight.

"There was the greatest possible excitement at the treaty ports when it became

known that the Valkyrie was on the China coast. Every port that we came to we were thronged with visitors. No one ever had any firmer friends than we. And no one ever had any keener enemies.

"Just wait till next spring, then keep your eye on Bully Forbes."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A GIRL IN A FAR EAST GARDEN.

MARY had heard in the repeated gossip of her mother how the way of the East was easily downward. Mrs. Williston was wont to tell of this one and that one who had gone to the devil in those shameless ports where the decalogue was undiscovered.

"I don't know what gets into some of our men. When they strike the China seas they seem to become just like the heathen. I didn't dream how much bad there was until those years I spent out East.

"Here every man's got a fence around him. But out East there are no fences, and even for the best there is no limit.

"It's a bad place. I'd never want any boy of mine to spend long in such an environment. The drunkenness and the dope are vile enough, but there is something there far more deadly."

"What's that, mumsie?"

"The women.

"It's not fit for you to hear, my dear, but you should at least know that, bad as the men are, the women are worse. With them it's the old-fashioned game of the spider and the fly.

"One of our boys, fresh from home, the idol of his mother, happens to take an evening's stroll ashore. It's so strange, and of course curiosity leads him everywhere. There is a voluptuousness about the East that cannot be denied, and of course the boy ashore is easily enticed.

"I remember a young fellow named Colter, one of your father's officers, who was lost in the treaty ports more effectually than any ship that was ever lost at sea. The first night he went ashore, the young fool met his fate. He was as good and true a boy as ever bid good-by to any sweetheart. He was engaged to a beautiful girl back in Boston. But a night's stroll down by the old sea wall at Whampoa was his finish. He met one of those Eastern charmers in the moonlight, and for the rest of our stay at Whampoa he was bewitched.

"On the night when we were due to sail, he vanished, and never another word of him from that day to this, although his Boston sweetheart, now getting gray, still hopes for his return. But little she knows, poor thing. As your father used to say, 'When they've gone to hell on the China coast they never come back.'"

In spite of herself Mary kept turning these stories of her mother's over and over in her mind. The China coast, for her, ceased to have its halo of enchantment. It became a place of unspeakable dread, a port of missing men.

Often she would lie awake for hours, pondering her mother's words, and wondering what might become of Richard in that awful place.

"The roaring forties were bad enough, but I guess from what mumsie says, the China coast is worse."

There was a strong strain of the Puritan in Mary Williston. Every night she used to pray that Richard might be kept from the lurking perils of the East.

As a result of her mother's persistent talk, there came moments of haunting fear, when it seemed as though mysterious and unseen hands were reaching forth to tear away her lover.

Just when Mary's faith in Richard seemed invincible, like a bolt from the blue came the news of Wanda MacBayne.

And with that news came a cruel and sudden shattering of hope and faith.

The one and only thing that could have come between Mary and Richard had come in spite of all her prayers. Another woman had intervened.

This tragic news came in a letter from the sanctimonious Pugsley to Donald MacKay. This letter was not meant for Mary, but by strange mischance she found it upon her mother's dresser. The China postmark caused her to read from curiosity. The letter told in blunt language how Richard Dunbar had succumbed to the temptations

of the East. It was a story of places of shame, backed up with a tale of that most shameless charmer, Wanda MacBayne.

Pugsley told how this mysterious girl, half Manchu and half Scot, had got Richard Dunbar into her toils.

> There are some bad places out here in this God-forsaken coast, but there are none worse than the place where Wanda MacBayne hangs out. She's got Dunbar body and soul. I must say myself she's a comely dame to look upon, and of course that's what turned Dunbar's fool head.
>
> Last night I saw that wicked hussy kiss him.

Mary Williston read no further. A low, plaintive cry escaped her, while she swayed like some frail sapling riven by the blast.

"Last night I saw that wicked hussy kiss him."

These cruel words seemed to burn themselves into her inmost being. After the first shock there came over Mary Williston a quick revulsion.

"I hate him! I hate him! I hate him!" she exclaimed aloud in a raging paroxysm.

That night when Nat Gertridge came to take Mary for a walk he was amazed at her deportment. As they strolled together down the shadowy street, Nat inquired:

"Why so grave to-night, Mary? It doesn't seem like you not to be laughing and dancing all over the place. Is there anything on your mind?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I am thinking about my future."

Nat jumped for his opportunity. "You've been awfully cruel to me, Mary, but I really and truly think that you love me underneath. Won't you marry me, Mary?"

There was a pause.

Nat hardly believed he heard aright, as in a voice scarcely audible, Mary answered:

"I will."

With the joy of conquest, Nat bent to kiss her, but she withheld him.

"One promise, Nat?"

"Anything, anything in the world, Mary."

"Well, promise me if I marry you, never, never speak the name of Richard Dunbar."

"I'll swear by my life never to mention that name, Mary."

"But why?"

"Because I hate him."

After that night there were no more letters from Mary Williston to some one on the China coast. Letters which came to her from there were promptly burned without even being opened.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHEN CHINA STILL WAS CHINA.

ON the other side of the world, Valkyrie followed the narrow seas, serene and lofty. Her scarlet burgee had become the pride and glory of the hongs. There was a touch of mystery about that soaring clipper that claimed kinship to the East. Many a crew of a wallowing junk, at sight of her tall leaning spires of canvas, fell down and worshiped.

Here was the old East untouched by West. Here gray and hoary with antiquity, the China of thousands of years remained unchanged. Once a month the treaty ports received letters recalling bright visions of a place called "home." Then, for a brief moment, Europe and America revived, only to fade again in shadowy memory.

Was it any wonder that customs and lives were changed in such a strange and distant world?

The East India Company, with its pomp and grandeur, had passed away, but comfort and luxury remained, with a lofty race of whites that still refused to tie their own shoe-strings.

When Captain Forbes came to a berth in the bluest of seas, under the brightest of skies, at Pagoda Anchorage, gazing at the lofty trucks of the Valkyrie, against that oriental setting, he exclaimed:

"Aye, this is where her heart belongs."

It might have been observed of Forbes that his heart belonged in many places wherever the women were fetching.

No sooner was he ashore than he began to reveal his one and only weakness. On the broad cool veranda of the clubhouse, and in the great hongs of Adamson, Bell; Gilman & Company, and Jardin Matheson, was received with a welcome becoming such a famous captain.

But before the day passed he had forsaken the haunts of the Europeans. He had been taken unto the bosom of China.

It was Wanda MacBayne that caught his roving eye, as he came ashore at the landing. Later he saw her again as he reclined upon the club veranda under a slowly swinging punkah, drinking iced tea, and smoking a fragrant cheroot.

Forbes had just settled back for a long chat with a group of friends when he saw the passing girl. Without a word he bowed himself from the society of the club and started shamelessly after the retreating charmer.

Wanda MacBayne enticed the stranger to precincts remote from the gentry of Foo Chow. Following her up the terraced slopes, beyond the town, Forbes disappeared as effectually as though a grave had closed upon him.

As the days went by, the agents of the Valkyrie began to express increasing alarm. They were reassured by Pugsley.

"He'll come back, all right, don't you worry. Nothin' can happen to the likes o' him. He'd be at home in the cellar of hell, only his company might be rough on the devils."

With no more signs of Forbes, the prefect of the province of Fuh Keen was appealed to, but the search of the police was in vain. The watchman at the City Gate was the only one who could give the slightest hint. He had seen him going back toward the mountains. He was alone?

"Yes. But some one was ahead, it looked as though he were following her."

In due time Valkyrie was loaded with poles for the intermediate passage to Shanghai. With the blue-peter at the fore, she lay there ready for sea, and yet no sign of the missing skipper.

Acting on the scant information of the watchman by the gate, Richard Dunbar set out on a mule to travel back on the mountain road with the hope that he might discover some clew.

Late that night, he found himself utterly lost, approaching a little village surrounded by the terraced fields of the tea planters.

Just at the entrance to the town, Richard encountered a man, incredibly old and hoary, reading by the moonlight. He attempted to ask a question in Chinese, and to his surprise, received a reply in his own tongue.

Dunbar's amazement was still further augmented at the stranger's dress. Here was an unmistakable Highlander in kilts and pig-tail. Richard could hardly believe his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he inquired of the old man.

"Married," was the laconic reply.

"Well, who are you anyway?"

"One Lung MacBayne. One Lung is me missus, MacBayne is meself. The old lady, rest her ashes, has gone to the Gods, so I'm still living on her acres."

"But how did you come to marry her?"

"Ah, my friend, in China every woman gets a man, and one of 'em got me."

While they were still talking Richard was distracted by the sight of a girl, in strange costume, romping with a Scotch collie. One Lung MacBayne noticed Richard's eyes wandering.

"Ye dinna miss ony o' 'em, eh?"

"What do you mean?" said Richard.

"The lassies."

"Who's the young lady?"

"My daughter. D'ye like the look o' her?"

"That's a funny way to talk about a girl."

One Lung MacBayne laughed hugely. "Only a piece of goods to be bought and sold. But she's a nice piece of stuff at that. I expect afore we're through ye'll be wantin' to buy her too."

"Why, is there some one else here already?"

"Yea, some old seafaring devil."

"What, Captain Forbes?"

"Dinna ken what they call him; frae the way he walks, and frae the way he tosses his head, the natives are sure he's one o' the gods."

"That's Forbes all right, and whatever brought him here?"

"Same thing as brought ye."

"What's that?"

"Woman, and fate."

The eye of the old man shone with a canny light.

" Ye come frae the West, where ye think ye master the issues of life. But here, in the East, we ken the issues are beyond us."

One Lung MacBayne held up the book which he had been reading in the moonlight. " What d'ye think this is?"

" I couldn't say."

" Well, this is the Book of Marriage, for all places under heaven. In me pocket I hae red cords, with which the fates tie together the feet of those who are destined to become man and wife. When this cord has been tied, though the parties are o' unfriendly clans, or o' different nations, their lives are fixed.

" A man o' the East and a woman of the West tied wi' that red cord are tied forever. Will ye be tied to me daughter? Will it be yon captain? Will it be anither? Only the fates can say."

Dunbar was still incredulous. " Whatever made you, a Scotsman, come to such ideas?"

" I came here in a ship frae Aberdeen, long syne. One night I went to a fortune teller, who was reading the Marriage Book in the moonlight. ' Your future wife,' said he, ' is the child of the old woman who sells vegetables in yonder shop.' Upon hearing this, I started off in search of the old woman, and found her possessed o' sic a hideous bairn that, lest the prophecy should o'ertake me, I hired a man to kill the bairn.

" Years after, when I had accepted the Chinese faith, the prefect of a neighboring district, gave me in marriage a beautiful young lady, whom he affirmed to be his ain daughter.

" Me bride always wore a flower over the left eyebrow. One day I asked her why, she replied, ' I am the daughter of the prefect's brother, who died when I was an infant, leaving me to the care o' an auld woman who sold vegetables. One day when I was out wi' her, a ruffian struck me, and made sic a scar that I hae to wear this flower to conceal it.'

" On hearing this, I recognized the immutability of fate, and syne then I hae acknowledged that the East is wiser than the West."

That night, Richard Dunbar slept in the home of One Lung MacBayne. He saw no further sign of the daughter until the morning, when she came in gayly, leading Captain Forbes. At sight of Richard Dunbar, they both stopped in amazement.

Richard noticed that the girl wore pantaloons instead of a petticoat, Everything about her was rich and gorgeous. She was indeed pleasant to look upon, the face told of the blending of Manchu and Scot, seeming to reflect the best of the mingled strains. Her bright coloring belonged to Scotland, but her eyes belonged to China.

As the morning meal progressed it was apparent that Captain Forbes, that past-master with the ladies, in spite of an extended sojourn, was yet completely baffled.

The uncertainty and unexpectancy of the girl exercised a strong fascination over Forbes. Boldness and strength were here captive to beauty and mystery.

After the morning meal, when the girl had retired, Dunbar attempted to persuade the captain to return to Valkyrie, but he was like a man drunk with strange wine. All reasoning with him was vain. As Dunbar regarded his hypnotic condition he realized something of the power that had caused One Lung MacBayne to turn his back on his old blood and his old faith.

Finding that it was useless to appeal to Forbes, Dunbar at last turned to MacBayne to help him to prevail upon the skipper to return.

" What can I do?" answered the old man, with resignation.

" What can I do? Aye, and what can he do? What will be, will be. Ye'll hae to appeal, me lad, to the fates that brought him. He came by the fates, and if he goes, he'll go by the fates."

Forbes did go that night. He went in the ecstasy of opium, with Wanda MacBayne leading him out, even as she had led him in, ten days before.

" Why d'ye take him awa'?" inquired the old man, at the gate.

" He's not for me, father," came back the reply.

That trip back to the Valkyrie remained in Richard's mind like a journey of enchantment. He knew that the same subtle power of the girl over Forbes was being exerted over him. She had pleaded with him to take some opium. He had refused.

But there was intoxication in her very presence.

All through that long journey Richard heard the girl, though she never spoke. He felt her, though she never touched him.

Before the dawn broke, they arrived at the landing in Foo Chow, and by some secret fiat the girl had a sampan in readiness to row them out to the Valkyrie, whither she accompanied them.

The minute Forbes put his feet upon the deck of his clipper he was his old self once more.

But Richard Dunbar, his young blood thundering in his veins, still felt the lure of mystery, and beauty.

They were standing there together looking at the dawn coming up behind Pagoda Anchorage. With the day coming on, the mystery girl spoke, aloud.

"I must go. You must come with me."

"No."

"Why? Anyone I ask to come with me, always comes."

"But I cannot."

The girl did not speak. Yet the voluptuousness of her presence ran riot through his blood.

"Why can't you come?"

"Because there's some one else on the other side of the world."

"There are not many like you that tarry on the China seas," she exclaimed with approval, and kissed him in the morning light. Then startled, she fell back, watching warily over Richard's shoulder, with the inscrutable eyes of the East.

Richard turned to see her point to Pugsley, gazing down upon them from the poop.

"A spy," she whispered, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TEA CLIPPERS.

NO race was ever sailed on blue water like the China contest of that year. America, at the zenith of her shipping glory, was represented by the Valkyrie, the fastest ship in the world, and three other Yankee cracks. Great Britain had five contenders, including the rarest creations from the yards of Aberdeen and Clyde. Two years before, the Britishers had won their first victory, on account of the loss of the Yankee ship, Typhoon, in the English Channel.

Last year the Lord of the Isles sailed four days ahead of the American, Maury. Both arrived in the Downs the same morning, and passed Gravesend within ten minutes of each other. But the Britisher managed to make dock first.

It was felt that neither of these victories had been conclusive. But this year a decision was to be attained. Naval battles of history might wait upon this struggle, for the true supremacy of the sea was that maintained by its mercantile marine. At this moment England and America were both striving their utmost for maritime supremacy.

Regarding these rivals De Tocqueville observed: "The Anglo-Americans were born to rule the seas, as the Romans to conquer the world."

Late in the spring, in the season of new teas, the racing fleet began to assemble off Pagoda Anchorage. Excitement at Foo Chow was at fever heat. Every day some new queen stood in majestically from sea. At length nine matchless clippers swung to their anchors in the swift current of the Min. Every one of these famous heelers bore a name which was a household word at the firesides of England and America.

All that was best in Union Jack and Stars and Stripes seemed to be gathered up in that fleet that rode off Pagoda Anchorage. These ships represented the most beautiful fabrics ever created to please the nautical eye. They were the crowning glory of man's handiwork upon the sea.

It was a timorous soul that did not feel a thrill as Valkyrie, the last of the clippers to arrive, let go her anchors with a roar just off Pagoda Rock. She came to her berth with a dash that caused a cheer to pass along the rival ships.

Forbes had his queen tuned up to the nines. All the way down from Shanghai he had kept his crew working double watches, until now, in the morning sunlight, her yards shone like silver and her decks were white as snow.

Each clipper had her especial backer who, with sporting blood aroused, was willing to go the limit. Never before had the wagers been so high. Never had a tea race abounded in more dark horses.

Let one crew boast about the good qualities of their ship, and they were sure to be offset by advantages of a rival. Every designer had his peculiar excellence. Donald MacKay's creations were at their best in full gales and heavy weather, while Steele's cracks were light air ghosters.

The Valkyrie and the Westward Ho left England outward bound at the same season. Valkyrie showed up at her best in the roaring forties, while Steele's Westward Ho did two knots to Valkyrie's one in the light airs of the tropics.

The Westward Ho, Dorothea, and Lothario, with their single topsails, were at best in light breezes. The Challenge and the Wanderer were good, wholesome all round vessels, very fast when hard sailed, as was bound to happen on the homeward race, since MacDuff and Ferguson, their captains, were famous drivers. Lothario was one of the fastest of the lot in moderate breezes, but she had not the power to stand driving in heavy weather. Slogett, her captain, a blusterer ashore, was a " whipper in " at sea.

The California could outweather and outsail the fleet on a wind, but she was not so fast running. In hard breezes Valkyrie was unquestionably the fastest ship of the fleet, but in light weather the Wanderer and Steele's cracks could beat her.

The fitful uncertainty of the monsoons in the China seas, with an occasional typhoon thrown in, made this voyage a chance run even for the best.

Great indignation was expressed in the British hongs on account of the boasting of Bully Forbes.

" That kind of tall talk will hardly do out here," said Captain Ferguson of the Wanderer in disgust. " It's all right to make promises for an Australian or a Californian voyage, but it's everybody's bet from China."

Because of his cocksure manner Forbes was not at all popular with the other skippers. As though to fan the fire of jealousy, Forbes presented to view one morning a large notice board in his rigging, announcing:

THIS SHIP WILL BE THE FIRST IN LONDON RIVER

There was method in Forbes's madness, as it was always his policy by such methods to concentrate attention on his own particular clipper. As a result, on this occasion, he received seven pounds per ton from the shippers, the highest price paid that year. All the others received six pounds per ton. Because of this piece of advertising shrewdness Forbes of course increased his unpopularity among the fleet. Not content with the taunting sky-sign, he placed another sign at the landing, announcing:

VALKYRIE WILL BE THE FIRST IN LONDON RIVER

Many a British skipper, gazing at this early specimen of American publicity, was seized with incipient apoplexy. Captain Ferguson encountered a dozen prime British shellbacks gazing at the sign. With a show of passion he exclaimed:

" How can you stand that, and you Britishers?"

" Well, it's a bit cheeky, maybe," returned one of the jacks, " but how can we help it?"

" That's what I've come for," returned the skipper of the Wanderer. " You're looking for berths, aren't you?"

" Yes."

" Well, I've a full complement already a good crowd, too. But come with me as a sort of extra watch, and we'll see if we can't bustle the bounce out of the Yanks."

With this appeal to their sporting blood the men shipped forthwith. To add to the zest of the contest, the crew of the Wanderer bet a month's pay against the crew of the Valkyrie.

Not to be outdone, the agents announced that the rivalry between the Wanderer and the Valkyrie had waxed so sharp that the owners of the respective clippers had arranged that the loser should be forfeit to the winner.

Beyond this there was an extra premium of ten shillings a ton to the first ship to de-

liver her teas, and a wager of twenty thousand pounds a side between England and the United States. Never before had the stakes been so high.

The Valkyrie lay below the rest of the fleet, close to Pagoda Rock. She was generally recognized as the likeliest winner, and as such was favored by the shippers. On the 22d of May the first lighter of new tea came down the river, and Valkyrie stowed her flooring chop of three hundred and ninety-one chests and two hundred and twenty half chests.

The 24th of May, the queen's birthday, was supposed to be a holiday, but all through that day Pagoda Anchorage presented a scene like that of a battle fleet coaling before action.

On Saturday, the 26th, Forbes drove his gangs like mad. Sunday was his lucky day; by that time, at all costs, he must be ready for sea. With sixteen lighters alongside, he set a pace that surpassed all others. At 2 P.M. Saturday, Valkyrie's last chest was handled. She was the first clipper ready. At 5 P.M. she unmoored, and with a tugboat alongside dropped well below the shipping and anchored for the night. Everything was ready to sail at dawn.

Early Sunday morning, with a clear lead of all the fleet, Valkyrie began to single out her lines preparatory to standing out to sea.

Richard Dunbar and Second Officer Pugsley walked up and down impatiently, waiting for the final order.

"Where's the old man? He's a long time showing up this morning."

At length, with the sun peeping above the horizon, Dunbar went down to the captain's cabin to rouse him. A moment later he came rushing up, pale and startled.

"What's up?"

"The captain's missing!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A LOST CAPTAIN.

ALL day Sunday Valkyrie lay idly fretting at her mooring chains, while her rivals one by one finished loading, broke out their anchors, and passed down river. About the middle of the morning Guthrie's darling, the Dorothea, went by, her crew jeering and taunting the impotent Valkyrie. The California and Lothario finished loading and got away together. About noon the Wanderer catted her anchor.

With increasing impatience Dunbar watched the rival clippers dropping down to sea. Frantic messages had come from the hongs ashore. But no sign of Forbes. His disappearance was a complete mystery.

The theory was that Forbes's boasting had so incensed his rivals that they had caused him to be kidnaped at the last moment. It was impossible, however, for Dunbar to fancy any one kidnaping Bully Forbes.

Early that afternoon, in a six-oared gig, with a crew of stalwart Chinamen, he started off up river on his own accord, himself holding the yoke lines, taking none into his confidence.

The scenery along the Min was magnificent. On each side of the river hill rose above hill cultivated to the summits, by means of terraces so steep as only to admit of stunted fir.

Along the banks quaint Chinese villages, forts and joss houses were scattered, while the river was crowded with junks and sampans. Through this crowded traffic Dunbar urged his crew at a fast clip. Arrived at the landing, he instructed the boat crew to await his return.

He made straight for the tea plantation of One Lung MacBayne, where he arrived late that night. The old man, as usual, was reading in the moonlight.

"Ha, ha—the fates hae brought ye back," he laughed.

But on this occasion Richard did not tarry.

In the garden, according to expectation, he encountered Wanda MacBayne and Captain Forbes, seated together in a lovers' nook.

Forbes's eyes, ecstatic, glazed, spoke of an advanced stage of opium. He looked at Richard blankly, but saw him not.

But Wanda MacBayne came toward him rapturously.

"So the good boy has come back to me!"

"Only to get my captain."

"Ah, I will let him go. But you must stay."

The moon, riding high, suffused the garden in a mellow glow. Far down the terraced cliffs the river wound its way like a silver serpent through the night. The myriad lights blinking below seemed like stars from other worlds.

"Stay with me?"

Wanda MacBayne, the charmer, was whispering again.

There was something in the air of that Far East garden that acted like an opiate upon the soul. Here ambition seemed to fail. Here restlessness and striving ceased. Here was Nirvana. Here was a realm where one could bathe forever in the moonlight of forgetfulness.

"Stay with me?"

Wanda MacBayne was yet whispering, and even when she did not speak her whole being was pleading.

But for Richard all was not forgetfulness. The silver streak of the river, Valkyrie, the open sea, and something far beyond, were also whispering in that moment.

The eyes of the East, gazing into Richard's eyes, saw the look of indecision.

"No, no, you do not want to stay. You are listening unto other voices. You were not made for me."

Richard did not answer. In the peace of that Far East garden speech seemed to fail.

Wanda MacBayne was gazing at the silver winding of the river. Perhaps she, too, heard something of its far-off call. For it was she who finally roused Richard from that soul's sleep that was stealing over him.

"No, you are not for me. You must pass on. You must forget. Come, I'll help you take your captain."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

RACING BEFORE A TYPHOON.

"ALL hands on deck!"

There was no mistaking that voice, ringing loud and sharp above the jargon of the river. Forbes, lion-hearted once more, was pacing the weather poop, in company with the pilot. China was behind him, its lapses a vanished nightmare; in his heart the running tide, and that long, strong call from the open sea. The master had come back to the Valkyrie.

"Man the capstan!"

The swift current of the Min seemed to pause at that thrilling note.

What magic spell was here? Why such light in the eyes of sailormen? Why such eagerness in swift and restless feet?

"Ah, we have it, they are going home! Home!
Hark! the tramp, tramp, tramp on the fo'c's'le head—"

and—and—the chantyman gives answer to the call of the running tide.

"We're homeward bound, oh, joyful sound!
Good-by, fare ye well!
Good-by, fare ye well!
Come, rally the capstan, and run quick around,
Hurrah, my boys, we're homeward bound!

"Our anchor we'll weigh, and our sails we will set,
Good-by, fare ye well!
Good-by, fare ye well!
The friends we are leaving, we leave with regret,
Hurrah, my boys, we're homeward bound!

"Oh, heave with a will, and heave long and strong!
Good-by, fare ye well!
Good-by, fare ye well!
Oh, sing a good chorus, for 'tis a good song!
Hurrah, my boys, we're homeward bound!

"We're homeward bound, may the winds blow fair,
Good-by, fare ye well!
Good-by, fare ye well!
Wafting us true, to the friends waiting there,
Hurrah, my boys, we're homeward bound!"

A few miles down stream the swift flowing current of the Min had caused a jam of three of the clippers—the Lothario, Wanderer and Challenge.

It was now dead low tide, and the pilot refused to go on until there was more water, so there was nothing to do but to anchor.

At nine o'clock on the following morning

Wanderer, Challenge and Valkyrie all got away on the same tide. An hour later Valkyrie hove to outside the outer knoll to drop her pilot. But the wind was blowing so strong from the northeast, and the sea was so rough, that the pilot boat was unable to lie alongside.

Finally, Valkyrie, in lowering one of her own boats, capsized her, and Forbes had the greatest difficulty in saving his boat's crew. As the weather was growing worse, with heavy squalls, he decided to spend no more time in this fruitless effort. At the prospect of being carried on to England the pilot was beside himself, but Forbes, having once determined that he could not land him, was adamant.

Meanwhile, Valkyrie was finding it no easy job to get her anchor, with such a strong northeaster blowing. Finally, with everything set up to her mainskysail, foretopmast, and lower stunsails, she sped away, dead before the wind, at a tremendous clip. Forbes was in his element. All his vexations were swept away. He was going to sea with a gale in the making—his highest heaven.

Before nightfall he overhauled the Lothario. Slogett was carrying what he considered a heavy press of sail, whole topsails, and courses, with outer jib, while two other ships in company were close reefed. But the Valkyrie coming up on the opposite tack, so as to cross Slogett's bows, was actually carrying three topgallant sails, and flying jib.

Captain Slogett looked at the approaching cloud of canvas with amazement. Indeed such cracking on would not have been possible, but the Valkyrie had the run of the sea abaft the beam, whereas the other ships had it before the beam.

As the two rivals converged they began signalling. This nearly led to disaster aboard Lothario. Her steersman, watching the signals, allowed his ship to come up to the wind, and get caught aback; in a flash Lothario had heeled right over, and was within a ace of being dismasted.

So close were the two clippers that the crew of the Valkyrie could see everything. They saw Captain Slogett knock the careless steersman senseless, and snatch the wheel; they saw the watch below come flying on deck in their shirt-tails. They were smart as paint in whipping the sail off her, and as soon as she was relieved, the Lothario brought her spars to windward and stood up.

"A close shave!" muttered Forbes, but soon this exciting episode was blotted out by his own headlong pace.

Gazing after her, aghast, the more prudent clippers beheld the great Yankee flyer, carving a wake of living lightning across the darkling water. Then, like a child of the furies, she vanished into the thick gloom of the howling night.

The glass had not yet begun to fall, and no one had the slightest expectation of what was in store. Captain Forbes, in ecstasy, listened to the ever increasing chorus of the winds, thrumming through his shrouds. Boats were got on the skids and lashed in chocks on the deck. Extra lashings were put on spare spars, and extra gaskets aloft.

By midnight with the spars creaking and groaning from the terrific strain, Forbes gave the order.

"Take in the royals."

At length, when a fiercer squall had all but plunged their lee yards into the mountain of seas, Forbes examined his barometer.

"We're in for it," he muttered to himself, and then with a rush he reached the poop, shrieking to his first officer.

"Get the sail off her, as quick as you can!"

In another instant all hands were racing aloft. Only a tea clipper crew could respond like that, for shortening sail.

Over the ceaseless cannonading, the voices of captain and mates sounded like pigmies shrieking at a giant.

"Let go!"

"Let go!"

"Clew up!"

"Let go all!"

By the time the foresail and mainsail were in, the upper topsails were blown to ribbons.

By four bells, they were scudding under main lower topsail, but the wind had increased to such an extent that the mainsail, in spite of extra gaskets, was blowing adrift.

Forbes kept his ship dead before the gale, and with the head sea Valkyrie began to rear and plunge like a frenzied stallion.

The captain then gave the order to take in the main lower topsail, the only rag still set, and as soon as the sheet was started, the lower topsail gave one shake, and was gone.

By daylight Valkyrie was running due south under bare poles with two men at the wheel. She was plunging to the foremast, but shipped no water aft.

The sea, in Forbes's phrase, was "a succession of earthquakes and volcanoes." The rain fell in solid sheets, while the wind roared behind with infinite vexation.

The men at the wheel had been lashed to the after bitts. In order to get aft to see the course steered, the officers were compelled to lie down flat, and crawl along the deck. After one of these journeys aft, Mr. Pugsley as he raised himself was picked up by the wind, and hurled bodily forward, crashing into the after rail.

Richard Dunbar, who had come on deck in only a shirt and trousers, had the shirt ripped off his back, and whirled away into the scud-filled sky.

Valkyrie ran clean round the circle of the storm. Although the sea was heaped up in mountain peaks on every side of her, she was as lively as a kitten, seeming even in the fiercest onslaught to find delight in flitting away before the furies.

About daylight Valkyrie, which had been steering southwest when the typhoon began, was steering northeast and at eight o'clock she was steering north. With the glass beginning to rise, Forbes decided to bring her to.

As she came up to the wind she lay over so far that Dunbar exclaimed:

"If we'd hove her to before, it would have been the end of us."

When she came head to the sea, the lookout, who had not been called off the fo'c's'le head, was washed aft, and bringing up against the foremast, with the terrific force of the sea, had his back broken. The poor fellow died before they reached him.

The typhoon, though it did not last long, tried Valkyrie to the extreme. Beyond the loss of her sails, which were blown out of the double gaskets, the clipper did not strand a rope yarn.

For some time Captain Forbes gazed at his gear aloft, searching every spar and shroud and stay. At length beside himself with admiration, he exclaimed:

"Donald MacKay said there was not wind enough in all the oceans to test your strength aloft, my beauty, and now I know he's right."

CHAPTER XL.

CLASSIC OF THE OCEANS.

AMONG the tea clippers there were many ways of achieving success. Some captains invariably made good tracks, others prided themselves on their daring navigation in cutting corners and in dashing through narrow rock studded channels after dark. Of this latter type was Bully Forbes.

Three days after Valkyrie ran through a typhoon, she overtook the Wanderer, the great white tea clipper, known as the pride of England. For some time the two famous cracks kept company. The exhilarating influence of the presence of the English clipper had the effect of putting Valkyrie's crew upon their toes.

"Don't forget that that's the Union Jack aboard that white clipper over yonder," said Forbes.

This speech on the part of the skipper was hardly needed, for the Valkyrie had a prime racing crew, every man an A. B. in the truest sense, and every man with a month's pay wagered. Under such conditions there was no need of urging.

The crew of Valkyrie were possessed of that finest of all racing qualities, *esprit-de-corps*. Let the order be given for shortening sail and at any hour of day or night the watch below would be on deck in an instant. Because of this smartness, Forbes was able to carry sail to the utmost limit.

No man-o'-warsmen ever went to stations more rapidly than the Valkyrie's crew went to their appointed tasks. With all hands going about, they would have the ropes coiled up, in ten minutes from the "Ready About."

For a week the white clipper and the

Yankee flyer fought it out tack for tack, without the slightest gain to either. Sometimes one, sometimes the other, would steal a berth to weather, only to find the rival there again on the next shifting. The two vessels traveled half the length of the China coast in company, until one evening found them becalmed off the west coast of Borneo.

Both ships stood in to get the land breeze, until at eight P.M. they were so close up on top of the land, that the Britisher went about, and stood out to sea again.

But Captain Forbes, the sly fox, putting out his lights, held on, and with his lead going, crept nearer and nearer to the shore.

In the thick blackness, the voice of the man in the chains had a weird disturbing sound, as he reported ever shoaling water.

"Sixteen!"

"Fifteen!"

"Twelve!"

"Ten!"

Pugsley, always there with caution, could not stand the pace at which they were rushing into what seemed to be an inky grave. Forbes did not even deign to answer him. He was listening only to the long, timing cry of the leadsman.

At midnight there came a startled shout.

"Nine!"

Almost instantaneously they felt the first puff of the land breeze. Forbes had found what he had been seeking for. Over the thrumming of the gear his voice rang out.

"Ready about!".

Like maniacs, the crew leaped to obey. The next three casts of the lead gave:

"Six!"

"Five!"

"Four!"

Forbes was obliged to keep off a bit, but all the time the breeze was freshening, and as he stood away on his course he was rewarded for his daring by a last glimpse of the Wanderer's port light, as she lay becalmed in the offing. The fading of that light, after such endless striving, brought a lusty cheer from Valkyrie's crew.

On the twenty-fifth day out Pulo Glass was reached, and on that afternoon a large ship was sighted close to the Island of Banca, and inside the coral reef.

Captain Forbes studied her for nearly an hour through his spy-glass. Finally he inquired:

"What do you make her to be, Mr. Dunbar?"

"I don't know, sir. What do you think?"

"I surmise it's the Dorothea."

Forbes at once made a desperate decision to follow her inside the reef, in spite of the great risk involved. With the rumor passing among the crew, that one of Guthrie's darlings was ahead, the excitement was feverish.

Pugsley, as usual, was there to start a debating society. Forbes answered: "We're playing for mighty stakes, and we're taking mighty chances."

The danger lay in the fact that the reef had to be crossed by a narrow channel through which a foul current was running very strongly.

Having once made the decision to risk everything upon this stroke, Forbes himself took the wheel. In the moonlight, the drawn face of Pugsley gaped with terror, as he watched the tide swooping over the fatal reef.

Not a word was spoken aboard Valkyrie. Every man held his breath, and waited, while the great clipper swept on toward what appeared certain doom.

The passage was so narrow that half way through they suddenly touched the reef on both bilges! Pugsley let out a shriek of alarm, and the crew started for the boats. However, there was plenty of water under her keel, and she scraped through. By midnight, she was up alongside the ship ahead, which proved to be the Dorothea. Her captain hailed Forbes and asked him if he intended beating through Macclesfield Strait that night.

Forbes replied, "Sure thing! Why would I wait?"

The Dorothea of course had to do the same, which rash move unfortunately led to her destruction.

Macclesfield Strait, which lies between Banca and Pulo Leat, was one of the favorite short cuts used by racing skippers. Forbes knew the passage well.

All that night the wind blew fiercely from the southwest, and both skippers hardened their hearts for a thrash to windward, under

all sail, Valkyrie slowly gaining on Guthrie's darling, until she lost sight of her in a heavy squall.

That squall was fatal to Dorothea. Being forced into shallow water, she let go both anchors, but in spite of this, she began to bump on the hard coral bottom, and a hole was soon stove in her.

At daylight she was boarded by plundering Malays, and her captain was forced to abandon his ship, setting off in boats for Gaspar Island.

Meanwhile, Valkyrie had made a wonderful passage to Mauritius. After getting into the Indian Ocean, Forbes had a man stationed on the fore royal yard. The timely warning of this look-out enabled him to keep the horizon between Valkyrie and her rivals.

Between Anjer and Mauritius, bowling along before the steady southeast trade, Valkyrie made her fastest time. Every kind of flying kite was set, and hung onto till the last minute. These were days of famous going.

From Mauritius to the cape all kinds of weather was encountered from light airs to heavy storms.

Just before making the African coast, Valkyrie spoke the Wanderer.

A mighty cheer arose from each rival as they ranged alongside. The two clippers kept company for several hours. This was perhaps one of the most thrilling moments, with the leaders of England and America ramping along together, midway upon their world wide race course.

Valkyrie, steering in toward the Natal Coast to make the most of the Agulhas current, actually sighted the cape, but the Wanderer, farther to the south, was luckier in her winds, and closed on the Yankee flyer.

The Challenge, which had gained on them both, converging toward the cape, was steering a more southerly course, got caught by the westerlies, and had to tack up north again in order to get a favorable current.

Off St. Helena light airs prevailed, and the Wanderer passed Valkyrie logging two feet to her one. With a continuation of baffling breezes northward to the equator, the Valkyrie watched Westward Ho and Challenge steal ahead, in light air ghosting.

Crossing the equator at fourth place, Forbes' spirits kept descending, while the dread of light weather continued.

As the ships neared the Western Isles, with strong breezes the ranks continued to close up, and on the twenty-seventh of August, the first four ships of the China fleet passed Flores within twenty-four hours, the Challenge leading, Wanderer second, Valkyrie forging ahead at third.

The most remarkable incident of this stretch was the wonderful sailing of Valkyrie, which had made up three days on the leaders.

From the Western Isles, the racers had fresh southwest winds, in which weather Forbes, passing farther west, lost sight of his competitors.

Six day's later, at midnight, Valkyrie's lookout sighted Bishop's Light, and with all sails set they tore along for the mouth of the channel.

At daybreak, a vessel was seen on the starboard quarter running in for the Lizard, under a tremendous press of sail.

By instinct Forbes muttered:

"That's the Wanderer!"

The two rival clippers were about five miles apart, beam and beam, steering on slightly converging courses.

It was a glorious September morning in the channel, with a strong southerly wind, and both ships were driven at utmost speed.

Forbes did not need the example of Captain Ferguson in order to send his ship along at her best speed. He had been driving her to the limit for ninety-eight days and ninety-eight nights, with sleepless and unending vigilance.

As the two rivals raced up channel passing the various headlands, they presented an immortal picture. Now one, now the other gained a slight advantage.

At three A.M. when nearing the Pilot Station at Dungeness, Captain Forbes began to send up rockets, and burn blue lights.

At four A.M., after shortening sail, he hove to. An hour later the British clipper was close astern, also signalling for a pilot. To the consternation of Valkyrie's crew,

the Britisher kept forging ahead, with the intention of passing them.

Forbes, catching the purpose of Captain Ferguson, bore up athwart his hawse, determined at all costs to prevent his rival from working in and getting the first pilot. After another hour's delay both vessels were boarded by pilots. The moments of greatest strain had come.

Captain Forbes from the wheel reminded his jacks that twenty thousand pounds was hanging in the balance, and with it the supremacy of the Yankee clipper.

As if to mock his words, the winds, which had been strong, began to moderate, and Wanderer began to forge ahead, passing close by the Yankee flyer, with the same cheers with which they had greeted them on their last meeting far down in the Indian Ocean. But this time there came back no answering cheer from Valkyrie.

Off Deal, the Wanderer was still leading. But here, just when things look blackest, it was Valkyrie's turn to crow, for the best tug coming out far behind the Ness, sent her tow-line aboard the nearest, which happened to be Valkyrie.

Wanderer had to put up with a poor tug, which was waiting in the Downs.

Meanwhile, another of the racers was close upon the heels of these continual rivals. Whilst the first two ships were racing, neck and neck, along the English Coast, MacDuff with the Challenge had been tearing up the French side of the channel. Passing through the Downs almost at the same time, the Challenge joined the other two in the last frantic spurt for London River.

At nine P.M. Valkyrie, leading the fleet, arrived outside the East India Dock Gates and was greeted by the superintendent.

"Welcome, Captain Forbes. Well done, sir! You're the first ship of this season in from China."

Twenty minutes later the Wanderer reached London Dock, and at eleven-thirty the Challenge just managed to scrape into the West India Dock, as the gates were being closed.

Surely this was a race for the ages. Leaving the Min River on the same tide, after a race of sixteen thousand miles, Valkyrie, Wanderer, and Challenge had docked in London River, on the same tide! All three clippers were commanded by Scots, Forbes, Ferguson, and MacDuff!

As the Valkyrie came into her berth at the East India Dock, with the awful strain over, Richard Dunbar was conscious of a a still greater strain, as he scanned the faces waiting on the dock.

In that wild, shouting mob, there was only one face that he longed to see. Was she there? He hardly dared to voice the wish, but from his heart there came one cry.

While he was yet hoping against hope, Richard in ecstasy caught sight of Mary Williston, waiting at the pier head.

In spite of himself, tears of joy welled up into his eyes. Of course she was there for him.

During the time they were making Valkyrie fast he could hardly hold himself to his post of duty. At length, with the moorings secure, he leaped ashore. But Mary had vanished.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

BERTILLONED

YOU have broken my heart,
But I do not regret,
For you loved me a while—
Ah, I cannot forget!
I will treasure the scraps
Of the poor broken thing,
For your finger prints from them
Can never take wing.

Margaret G. Hays.

The Eye of the Camera

By LEIGHTON OSMUN

WHEN Alec Bonwell, director, reached the studio of Acme Pictures, Inc., he found that the street scene which he had taken the afternoon before had been ruined by static—a condition of the atmosphere which gives to the negative the appearance of a photograph of forked lightning. He had already retaken this same scene three times; he was disgusted. He cursed his luck under his breath, then turning to his assistant director, gave the order:

"Well, get the people together again."

"Same bunch, chief?"

Alec Bonwell hesitated, then answered moodily:

"I suppose so, they're not any worse than the usual crowd of extra people Haswell manages to dig up."

"Right, chief."

Fred Thorne went off to the office of Bert Haswell, the casting director, and Bonwell continued a gloomy way out to the lot where the street scene was set up.

II.

WHEN Myrtle Skinner reached the store where she worked, she found nothing but a heap of smoldering ashes out of which rose twisted girders and smoke blackened walls. The People's Emporium of Los Angeles had succumbed to fire during the night. Once more Fate had dealt her a blow.

Life had been a succession of blows to Myrtle. Her father had died leaving her and her mother very poor. Her mother had died leaving Myrtle poorer yet. For a while she had lived with an aunt, but the aunt was taken to a hospital with an incurable disease, and Myrtle was left alone to fend for herself. Some one had got her a job as cash girl in the People's Emporium—that was five years ago. Since, she had

risen to the position of saleswoman. She was now seventeen years old. Myrtle stood staring dully at the ruins.

"Gee, Myrt, what you gonta do?"

"I don't know."

"It's somepin fierce gettin' a job this time of year."

"I know it."

"Wonder how long it'll be before they open up again somewheres."

"I don't know."

"Gee, somepin's always handin' us somepin!"

"I know it."

"Well, guess I'll blow along, and rustle up somepin to fill in with. 'By."

"Good-by."

Several other girls asked Myrtle what she was going to do, and revealed plans of their own, but to all of them her replies were monosyllabic. It was one of the characteristics of Myrtle Skinner which repelled people. She couldn't or wouldn't talk. No one liked Myrtle—no one could—no one knew her.

Her small world in ruins, Myrtle took the Pacific Electric back to Hollywood where she lived. She didn't know what she was going to do, nor what steps to take, if she had known. She had no initiative—a little drab moth in a world of color and action—unarmored, unweaponed.

"If you had any looks, Myrt, I might get you in the movies. "This from the girl with whom she shared a room on Melexico Street, a shabby little thoroughfare hanging to the outskirts of opulent Hollywood, like a secret patch on a gorgeous robe.

"I know I haven't any looks," Myrtle answered apathetically.

"You ain't, and that's a fact. Gee, it's too bad. If I make a hit in this picture I'm in, Fred Thorne says that maybe Bonwell will use me in his next one too."

"That's fine!" Myrtle brightened, she was a sympathetic, loyal little thing in spite of her seeming coldness and apathy. There was no room in her heart for envy, there was for admiration; she admired tremendously the dashing, smartly dressed Love Dora—a stage name—with an admiration well mixed with wonder that Love Dora should allow her to share her room, and be a small part in her vivid life. Love Dora was only an extra now, but some day she might, probably would be—Myrtle believed loyally—a star.

"Come on, Myrt, I'm going over to the lot now. Another retake on that street scene. Fred Thorne just telephoned me.

Myrtle accompanied her gratefully. Myrtle was always grateful; the slightest thing aroused her gratitude—she was grateful to the world itself, for tolerating her.

"Gee, Bonwell's certainly had a bad break on that street scene—bum start for his new picture."

Myrtle made a sympathetic noise for Mr. Bonwell.

"Bob—he's the camera man—must be sore as a pup about that static. I got a theory about static. I was saying to—"

Love Dora's theory about static brought them to the studio—a long, low building extending the length of a block. They went into the outer room of the casting department. Love Dora swept up to the window and addressed a young woman, the assistant casting director.

"Greetings!"

The young woman smiled. "Hello, Love."

"They sent for me for that retake of Bonwell's."

"I think he's all ready to shoot now." The young woman touched a button, a gate clicked.

Love Dora pushed it open, and went through.

"See you later, Myrt," she called back over her shoulder. "Wait for me."

Myrtle sat down on the bench running around the room, among others whose eyes followed enviously the triumphant ingress of Love Dora. Then Myrtle relapsed into dreams.

Myrtle led two distinct lives. The outer life which came in contact with the material world was shadowy, vague. Even her duties at the store had scarcely seemed real—she had gone through them mechanically.

"Yes, ma'am, that 'll wash. No, ma'am, we haven't any of that left. This a better grade? I don't know, ma'am—shall I call the floor manager?"

Only her inner life was real. Now, while she was sitting here, the outer periphery of her brain only—this is metaphorical not physiological—was concerned about the concrete, it worried dully about her uncertain future, and through her ears, dimly took note of the conversations going on about her—the gossip of extra people awaiting a chance to display their wares before the eye of the camera. She barely noticed the flurry when a director or a star passed through the hallway adjacent to the waiting room—seen through the open door.

"Yeh, that's him. He's shooting Palworth's new picture. Say, did you hear about her new contract? Million a year, they say."

"Oh boy!"

"Yeh. Look, there's Olive Hendon. Say, look at that coat! Well she can afford it, even if her last picture was a flop. Never can tell what the public wants. I said to Pop Andrews, I said: 'Pop, maybe this one'll take, and then maybe again it won't—looks highbrow to me.'"

But all this was merely an obbligato to the dream life going on deep in the girl's mind. Myrtle's mother must have said a thousand times before she died: "Myrtle, do stop your dreaming" or "Child, you must try to be practical." Myrtle had never stopped her dreaming, nor had she learned to be practical.

So she sat, her hands folded in her lap, alone—apart, finding refuge from the world of actualities in a land of dreams.

III.

Alec Bonwell had come into pictures from the stage. He was a serious, middle aged man, an intelligent, capable director, a man of vision, and if he had to shoot a good deal of stuff demanded by thousands of exhibitors all over the country, and consequently by the New York office, he did it to the best of his ability, and tried to keep his tongue out of his cheek.

At the present moment he was regarding doubtfully the small group of extras who were to people Main Street in a long shot he was about to take, and then be used—some of them—as atmosphere throughout the picture.

"Look here, Fred, I know I've passed on these people three or four times before—maybe I have a grouch this morning—but they look too hanged sophisticated for a village. What do you think, Kenneth?"

The star looked them over. "A little peppy, Alec."

"Fred, take a run in, and ask Haswell if he can't dig us up some people who have at least seen the country in a picture book. Tell him to take only those who have actually seen a cow."

"Right, chief." Fred Thorne hurried off.

"You're out—I'm sorry." Bonwell waved a deprecatory hand at Love Dora.

"That's all right, Mr. Bonwell. Better luck next time."

She bobbed her head at him, turned with a flirt of her skirt, and swaggered off.

"Where do they get it?" He inquired sadly of the star.

The star answered, apparently irrelevantly: "When you and I were young, Maggie."

Bonwell ran his hand over his bald head. The star touched a patch of gray in his own hair. They both looked after Love Dora, and sighed mentally. Then they grinned at each other.

The property boy asked: "Mr. Bonwell, shall we hop onto that interior while we're waiting? We've only one scene in it, and then they can strike the set."

"Jimmy, your middle name's efficiency. I suppose we might as well. What do you think, Kenneth?"

Kenneth Denton objected. "Let's wait and see how long it's going to take Haswell to collect his people. Tell you the truth, Alec, I'm getting superstitious about this street scene. Like to get it over and done with. My Lord what's Fred bringing with him now.

It was Myrtle.

IV.

Myrtle had been dreaming her nebulous dreams, when Haswell in company with Fred Thorne had hurried out of his office to look over the available material in the waiting room. Like a still pool into which

a rock has been hurled, the room awoke to feverish ripples, that is, all of it except that part which was Myrtle. Haswell's eyes ran around the collection of eager faces, seeking the prototype of something he had in his mind—something not so eager, not so ambitious, not so tense. He found it in Myrtle's face.

"Here you—what name?"

"Myrtle Skinner."

"You're from the country, aren't you?"

"Yes. I was born in the country."

He winked at Fred. "Ever seen a cow?"

"Yes."

"All right, Fred. Take her along as a sample. I'll get the Covington girl on the 'phone—she lives only a few blocks from here. And, Miss Downing—" this to his assistant—"You run through your lists for people close by, and send out the S. O. S. Wait a minute, Fred. See if you can't get Bonwell to shoot that number 124 interior first; that will give me a little breathing space."

"All right, only Kenneth Denton is goofey about this street scene. Heard him say so this morning. Old actor stuff—superstitious. Wants to kill it first."

"Well, try anyway."

"Right. Come on, Miss Skinner."

Myrtle followed Fred. She wasn't excited. Only her dreams ever excited her. They circled a small plot of ground, and then went across acres of glass inclosed stages. Myrtle looked absently at various sets as they passed—the interior of a miner's shack next to a ballroom, a slum attic just beyond a silken boudoir. In some of the sets they were shooting. She heard:

"Lights!"

There was a clatter like a machine gun operating without cartridges as the battery of Kleigs went into action.

"Camera!"

The rhythmic whir of the turning crank.

"Cut!"

The whirring stopped.

"Numeral."

A property boy darted out with a slate on which was written the number of the scene and whether it was "take" one, two or three. He held it before the camera which muttered a few uninterested turns.

"Lights off."

Again the clattering of the Kleigs.

"Rotten! For Heaven's sake Miss Reynolds, grab him! He isn't a stranger you've just met—he's the guy you're engaged to, just came home from nearly getting shot. Don't you know how to go into a clinch? Here, I'll show you—"

Myrtle passed out of earshot.

Fred Thorne left her a little way from the director's platform, and went on to Bonwell.

"There's one of them. Haswell sent her out as a sample. Born in the country, seen a cow, everything." He grinned.

Bonwell, being a kindly man merely grunted. "Does she know about make up?"

"I'll see to that—shall I fix her up?"

Bonwell stared at Myrtle who was sitting on a prop garbage can, her eyes staring into vacancy.

"Well, I said no pep, and Haswell's certainly filled that part of the specifications—oh, all right—get her ready."

He sighed, and launched into a conversation with the star.

V.

THE picture which Bonwell was shooting was an adaptation from a novel, a Middle Western story, full of adroit characterization. It had been purchased by the New York office for twenty-five thousand dollars, and sent to the Coast to be made into a picture. The scenario department tore its hair, and emitted loud squawks. The plot of the novel meandered amiably along, a mere thread on which to hang clever insight into simple, quiet lives. But the camera cannot take simple, quiet lives, so there was nothing to do but insert action.

"The good old bank robbery," the head of the scenario department had said to the continuity writer assigned the task of adapting the story and writing the scenes. "That'll do as a motive for the bank's going blooey, and the hero's going to smash—get it?"

"I've got most things around this joint—I don't know why I shouldn't get this."

"Well, it isn't my fault."

"Nor mine—and Tuesday's pay day."

"That's the spirit." Ironically.

"Thanks." Ironically.

The scenario writer went back to his desk, and the head of the department dictated a polite letter to the New York office, congratulating it on the acquisition of the novel "Village People," and noting the suggestion that the name be changed to "Village Passion."

VI.

THE street scene which Alec Bonwell was preparing to shoot, was merely a plant shot to locate the various points so that the audience would understand the locale of the story.

Bonwell addressed the new lot of extra people Haswell had summoned.

"Now you folks are merely walking down the street intent on your various errands. This is a long shot fade in, following the first sub-title. Don't notice Kenneth Denton, except as you would any neighbor. He'll be coming out of the bank. Those of you who pass him, just nod and go on. There is no excitement in this scene, and nothing particular to register, so please don't try to register anything, and above all don't try to act. You over there, Miss—"

"Skinner," Fred supplied.

"Miss Skinner, you will come out of the grocery store with a package under your arm. You will be thinking of anything which interests you. We'll say—" a slight smile raised the corners of his mouth—"of a nice young man—eh? Now you—" this to a heavy brunette—"are thinking that you'll have to hurry to be home in time to milk the cows, and you—" He completed his directions. "Now, Fred, get them in position, and let them run through it."

Bonwell had to have them run through it five times before he could get the simple effect of people merely walking down Main Street at midday. All of the extra people except Myrtle were intent on making some impression on the camera so that their work would stand out and catch the eye of the motion picture public, or some one higher up in Acme, Inc. Myrtle, doing as she was bidden, thought of a young man. She didn't know any real young man, so she raked one up out of her dreams. He wasn't a prince or a millionaire or of exceptional prowess in any line. He was just a nice young man—probably a clerk or something like that. He wouldn't marry her, never probably even kiss her, but he would be a friend. That was the extent of Myrtle's ambition in the masculine line—to have a young man for a friend.

At last however, after five rehearsals, Bonwell felt justified in saying:

"Camera!"

The scene began. Kenneth Denton came out of the bank of which, in the story, he was president, bowed to one or two people he passed and walked sedately down the street. Myrtle came out the store dreaming of the young man. The other extra people did reasonably as they had been told.

"Cut!"

The scene was over.

Bonwell turned to the camera man. "Get it all right?"

"I'm afraid we got a bad shadow when Mr. Denton came out of the bank, Mr. Bonwell. Jimmy—set a spot in the doorway to kill the shadow."

The property boy dragged a spotlight into the doorway, and switched it on.

"Better try the amber diffuser, Jimmy."

"All right, sir."

On the next try everything appeared satisfactory. Then they took it again in order to have two negatives from which to choose the better, and then once again for the foreign release print. The next scene would be an interior between the star and the heroine—the extras would not be needed. Bonwell said:

"Fred, have these people back on Thursday for the church sociable."

"Yes, chief." He turned to the extras. "All you people get dresses suitable for a church sociable? No? You surprise me. Well, see the wardrobe department. Oh, you have."

"Yes," Myrtle said.

"All right—better bring it over before Thursday and let me take a look at it."

Myrtle nodded.

Fred dealt out pay checks. Myrtle looked at hers—for five dollars. She was very grateful, and said: "Thank you." Five dollars meant another week's room rent and meals—some meals. If she got another five on Thursday she would be affluent. The world was very kind.

Bonwell watched her go, then turned to Fred Thorne.

"It's all right for this picture, but after this please remember that we want live people for our sets, not dead fish."

"All right, chief. It was that cow thing got me." Fred grinned.

Bonwell turned to Kenneth Denton. "Well, barring some more static or the studio burning down or some little thing like that, we've killed our famous street scene."

"I've got my fingers crossed," the star replied.

VII.

"HELLO, Myrt—where did you disappear to? Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I was in a picture."

"What!"

"Yes."

"What picture?"

"I was in that street scene for Mr. Bonwell. I got five dollars."

This was an extremely long sentence for Myrtle. Love Dora stared at her, then collapsed in laughter on the bed.

"You in the movies!"

"Yes."

When Love Dora regained her breath she asked:

"What did you do?"

"I came out of a grocery store."

"Well, you never can tell! Ain't it the truth!" Love Dora was again shaken with laughter.

Myrtle wasn't hurt. She thought it was quite natural that Love Dora should laugh.

On Thursday she was one of the extras used in the interior of the First Baptist church set up on one of the stages inclosed in glass. Here, as in the previous scene, she figured only in a long shot, or rather, this being an interior, a full shot. She was assigned a young man, and told to appear diffident and embarrassed. This was easy for Myrtle to do as she felt both of these emotions. She had never been in a young man's company so long or so closely before. He was a friendly young chap, and tried to engage her in conversation.

"New on the lot, aren't you, sister?"

"Yes."

"Well, we all had to start some time."

"Yes."

"If you ask me, this picture is a piece of cheese—friend of mine read the script."

"Oh."

"Yeh. They don't make pictures any more—only money."

"Oh."

The young man gave up.

After the church sociable was shot, Bonwell selected those who would be carried over for the auction sale. Not so many would be required—at least half were dismissed. He was about to release Myrtle when he found himself feeling vaguely sorry for her, so he didn't. So she was again on the lot on the following Tuesday.

The auction scene—the hero's house and personal belongings being sold to satisfy the deficit in the bank caused by the robbery, was an interpolation of the scenario writer's in the original plot of the novel. In the script it was played for pathos alone. Bonwell, however, thought he saw a way to retrieve it from utter banality. He said to the extra people:

"Now, look here, you folks, there are two emotions in your minds. You are sorry for the hero, you know the bank robbery broke him, and not any doings of his. But you are secretly glad to be able to buy some of his stuff for a song. You"—to Myrtle—"are feeling very sorry for him, but at the same time you have your eye on that grandfather clock which you covet. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Myrtle had always admired grandfather clocks—she used to stand and admire them—or rather their reproductions—in the store, so she didn't have to call up any dream feelings to make her look at this one covetously, and the same time she felt so sorry for the poor banker that tears stood in her eyes.

Bonwell happened to glance at her once during the scene and was not entirely displeased, which is usually as far as a director goes with an extra.

Later on he said: " Fred, have the dead fish back for the funeral scene—she ought to be thoroughly adequate for that."

So Myrtle was in the funeral scene, and cried heartily and frankly. Funerals had often figured in her dreams. Again Bonwell was not entirely displeased. But in the projection room, when the print was being run, he did not notice her. She hadn't been in any close-ups or semi close-ups, always in full or long shots, so he did not distinguish her except as a part of the background. Then he forgot all about her. This was in the summer.

Bert Haswell, however, had her name and address in the casting files, and used her occasionally. She was always ready, and always prompt, and she never smiled at him, and asked him to remember her in the next picture. Sometimes she worked one day a week, sometimes two, sometimes only once in three weeks — but she got along somehow.

It seemed cruel that ambition should have selected Myrtle's soul for a lodging place at this time. It was a very small ambition, but it took firm root. She began to try to act before her mirror. The results were not encouraging—a negative, if not positively homely face, looked back at her from the glass, but she persevered.

Love Dora had moved away. She wanted to be nearer Universal City, where she was getting more work than at the Acme in Hollywood, so Myrtle was alone. One day she met Love Dora on the street.

" How are you getting along?" Love Dora asked.

" All right."

" Still at it?"

" Yes."

" Well, don't let the wild life of Hollywood get you." Love Dora laughed and went on.

Myrtle felt a warm glow at her heart. It took even this little to call her gratitude into being—she was grateful to Love Dora for her interest. At this time Myrtle hadn't had any work for a long time, and she hadn't had a real meal in longer yet. She was thinner, paler—more of a shell than ever. But underneath her dreams were unimpaired, and to them had been added those dreams connected with the day when she would be a real extra—her services often in demand.

Then she was brought to Bonwell's attention again by Haswell's sending her out to him as a type for a slum picture Bonwell was shooting. She looked so pathetic, so undernourished, so anemic, that she was precisely what he was looking for.

" Fine, Miss Skinner—you're just what I want."

The scenario writer had opened this picture with a sub-title which, divested of florid wording, meant that it was night in New York, and to prove it, had written a number of shots showing life after dark in the great city. In one of these—they had no further connection with the picture—Bonwell thought he could use Myrtle.

So Myrtle appeared at the window of a slum room in a long shot. The camera, apparently in the street below, was in reality on a platform outside the window. She was silhouetted against the light from a lamp. Her action was that of setting a potted geranium on the window ledge.

At the end of the scene Myrtle came to herself with a start. She had been dreaming a dream of dire poverty. She looked apprehensively at Mr. Bonwell, hoping he had not noticed.

Bonwell frowned, and stroked his chin. He hesitated, then said: " What do you think, Kenneth—shall we try a semi-close up of that?"

The star shrugged. " Might be worth a try."

The camera was moved forward to the four foot line. The Kleigs were massed inside the window and out. Spots and Lilliputs added their quota of light.

" Lights!"

" Camera!"

Myrtle set the geranium on the window ledge. Again the dream had gripped her. She felt it was the only friend she had in the world. She bent over the plant with a soft caress of her fingers.

" Cut."

Bonwell looked at the star, but he had turned away.

"All right, chief?" Fred Thorne asked.

Bonwell sighed. "Let it go." He started to shake his head, then remembering that Myrtle was looking at him, and feeling sorry for her, wriggled his neck instead as if his collar annoyed him. Then he told Fred to dismiss her for the day. But at the last moment he became soft hearted, and said to her:

"You might drop around to-morrow morning, Miss Skinner. I may be able to use you."

"Thank you."

Bonwell was at the studio early the next morning to see the daily run of the day before. These were always run off in the projection room for the benefit of the directors so they could check up on their work. The scenes were pieced without rime or sequence just as they came from the developing and printing departments.

Bonwell was in a very bad humor. On arriving at the studio he had found word awaiting him that his next picture was to be a western with the exteriors to be taken in Arizona. Bonwell hated westerns, and he despised Arizona. He said to Fred Thorne:

"Look here, Fred—after this, cut the dead fish out. She can't act. That window scene was putrid. I was a fool to let her do it. The Lord only knows why I'm forever feeling sorry for that girl—I'm not for anybody else."

"All right, chief—nix is the word."

But fate had already attended to Myrtle's case. At that very moment she was on the table at the Sisters' Hospital in Los Angeles, being operated upon for appendicitis. Myrtle had been in pain all the day before, and at night a girl who roomed opposite, heard her groaning and went in to find her unconscious. A doctor, hurriedly called, dispatched the patient to the hospital.

"Ready for the daily run, chief?" Fred Thorne asked.

"Go on—shoot."

Fred pressed a button. The film began to glide by. Suddenly Bonwell straightened up in his chair.

"Bush that button, Fred."

Fred pushed the button, the film stopped. The projecting machine operator stuck his head through the aperture by the machine.

"What's wrong Mr. Bonwell?"

"Rewind, will you, Lawrence, and run over."

"The whole thing, Mr. Bonwell?"

"The last fifty feet—no, wait a moment. He took up a phone. "Mr. Britton, please—this is Alec speaking. Ed, come over to the projection room, will you? I've got something I want you to see." He put down the phone.

"What's the idea, chief?"

"Didn't you notice anything, Fred?"

"Good light effect, that window thing."

"Anything else?"

"Well, it's funny, but that girl, Myrtle Skinner—" he hesitated—"no good of course— but kind of got me in that shot—first time we ever saw her in a close shot isn't it, chief?"

"Yes."

"Of course," Fred apologized, "her acting was rotten."

"Oh, yes," Bonwell conceded, "the acting—rotten."

Britton, the studio manager, arrived at the projection room within ten minutes, a short, stocky man with a perpetual worried expression. It is no joke to be studio manager of a big organization devoted to making pictures with an efficiency expert in the offing.

"Well," he asked, "what is it, Alec?"

"Sit down, Ed."

VIII.

MYRTLE came out from under the anæsthetic. She was suffering intensely, but she made no sound.

"You're a model patient, Miss Skinner," the surgeon said cheerfully. "We'll have you right as a trivet in no time."

"Thank you."

Myrtle closed her eyes, and tried to bear the pain bravely. She summoned her dreams to aid her, but they would not come. This was the morning she was to have reported at the Acme, a personal request from a director. She knew what happened to extras who failed to report or

send word—barred from the lot. In other words, her moving picture days were over.

She knew she would never have the initiative to seek another studio—they wouldn't give her any work if she did. She tried to remind herself that the People's Emporium had been rebuilt, and she could probably regain her old position, but slaughtered ambition stabbed her.

But finally she fell asleep bitterly ashamed because tears insisted on forcing themselves from her eyes. She hoped the nurse would not see. She had—everybody had—been so kind.

When she awoke, the nurse was smiling at her.

"You're to be moved into a private room, Miss Skinner."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. A phone has come from your studio—you didn't tell me you were an actress."

"I'm not."

"You are Myrtle Skinner, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you're the one. The Acme telephoned, speaking for Mr. Britton."

"Mr. Britton!"

"Mr. Britton orders you put in a private room and given every attention."

"There's some mistake."

Her protests were overridden. She was placed in a private room—quite the most beautiful room Myrtle had ever been in—with flowers on the table.

Later in the day, the nurse told her: "A Mr. Bonwell called up to see how you were getting along. I told him finely."

"Thank you." But Mr. Bonwell!

"I told him he could see you day after to-morrow."

"But he doesn't want to see me."

"I think he does."

Myrtle could not understand it.

Bonwell, two days later, came into the the room with an expression of real concern on his face.

"Now, this is too bad, Miss Skinner, and they tell me you weren't feeling well that last day you worked. You should have told me."

"Thank you."

Then Myrtle took in a rush what she had planned to say: "Mr. Bonwell, I didn't mean to be moved in here. There was some mistake, and—"

He interrupted. "I was wondering what you would think. The truth is, Miss Skinner, we want to sign you up on a contract—a very small contract, you are only a beginner, you know. But if you'll take my advice, you'll sign it, a sliding scale, eighty a week the first year, one hundred and twenty-five the next, then two hundred and fifty. One of the inducements, I hope you'll consider it an inducement, is that you are to be under my personal supervision."

"But I don't understand."

He smiled. "Perhaps you'll let me do the understanding for you."

"But why—why—?"

"My dear girl, the camera plays queer tricks sometimes. It does not always give to her who hath, nor take away from her who hath not," he smiled.

Myrtle stared at him. "But—"

He interrupted. "If you will take some more of my advice, you won't ask any questions but just—"

He drew out a legal looking document and a fountain pen.

Myrtle signed.

When Love Dora heard the news, she was astounded, she couldn't understand it. No one could. It was a mystery until the first pictures in which Myrtle had a real small part was given a prevision in the Acme projection room.

A small, eager, wistful face looked out from the screen.

"Who's that?"

"Myrtle."

"No!"

"Sure it is."

"It isn't!"

"It is, too—Myrtle Skinner."

Love Dora said to Myrtle: "Gee, kid, you cert'ny give my heart a twist. I could kick myself for not seein' before what you had in you."

But it wasn't Love Dora's fault. It had taken the eye of the camera, accurate, focused, searching to see in the outer shell, the reflection of the real Myrtle of a land of dreams.

A Stranger in Town

By J. U. GIESY and JUNIUS B. SMITH

Authors of the Semi-Dual Stories, "The Wolf of Erlik," etc.

CHAPTER X.

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT.

FOR a moment after Blumefeldt paused no one spoke. The argument appeared to have run around in a circle and arrived once more at the starting point. It flashed into Eddie's mind that the man having put the hundred-dollar bill into the hands of a stranger that afternoon was not so strange after all. He was a psychologist, at least in practice if not in theory. Even now, when he stood in the position of an escaped criminal, he was the coolest of any one in the room; he was cool enough to trade on his knowledge that these men would be swayed first and last by a consideration of self. And to such a man it would have been plain that a total stranger, finding himself in the sudden possession of a hundred-dollar note, not his own, and smarting under the sting of an unmerited blow, would act very much as—well, as he—Eddie Harmon—had done.

And then Welter sneered. "That's right. He's got th' goods on us, Irak, an'—what's it to us if he wants to fix it so he'll get his money. Whose fault was it we couldn't get his price in th' first place? Who was it suggested our using them notes? Wasn't it th' guy that spread enough of them while we was rottin' in stir to make

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up what he lost on our flivver three years ago? You know it was. Well, then, ain't it time we was lookin' out a little bit for ourselves?"

"Sure," said Murgson, drawing a kerchief and wiping his sweat-beaded face. "We've protected him as long as we can. We took our medicine an' kept our mouths shut, an'—it's his fault we find ourselves in th' shape we stand at present. It was his notion to rush that hundred thou' across with Blumefeldt. Now let him make good if he can."

"And now you're talkin' sense," Blumefeldt declared, tossing away his cigarette. "So—you go get him, Murgson. You can take Joe's cab an'—"

Murgson stared. "What do you know about *him?*" he said, in what was evidently fresh suspicion.

Blumefeldt smiled. "Well—say—how do you suppose I found you to-night? D'ye think I wasn't watchin'? I know a lot of things."

Murgson gulped. But he only nodded. Plainly he was suffering from an acute discomfort. And Irak and Welter were staring at Blumefeldt in none too confident a fashion.

Still—there was nothing else for it. They were going to do it. Eddie felt his nerves tighten. They were going to bring their backer here to deal with Blumefeldt direct since that was the only open course remaining. They were going to do that—and—he would see the man. He and Portia would see him—would be able to identify him later. Murgson was reaching for his hat, and—

He paused. "I'll go get him," he said slowly, and turned his eyes toward the bed, toward Mildred Elton and Harmon, "but we can't bring him in here with them."

Blumefeldt nodded. Plainly he understood without any explanation. "Say," he said again, "what's the matter with you fellows? Didn't it ever occur to you that you haven't done a thing until you've done it? Wasn't that what let you out of clink this afternoon? They was sure you meant to do it, wasn't they—but you hadn't. Well, you ain't defaced government paper, have you, till th' thing's accomplished? What could these two youngsters swear to outside th' fact that he come down here this evenin' an' closed a deal with me for bleachin' India ink? What's that but a commercial process? I ain't supposed to know whether he's going to let you use it for illegal purposes or to wash out Japanese prints."

He was clever—oh, yes, Blumefeldt was clever. Eddie saw what he meant. He saw it and glanced at Mildred, and discovered a most peculiar expression in her eyes. Only he couldn't read it, and he felt his own spirits sink. Of course Blumefeldt's course was peculiar—the man's *sang froid* was immense. But what he said was perfectly true. Even if he sat here and saw the deal concluded, an initial payment made, the formula handed over, he couldn't swear from his own knowledge that it had been anything more than the sale of a process for bleaching India ink.

Of course there was what Murgson and Irak and Welter had said about the past. There were their remarks concerning the future. Those things showed intent. But, intent was not commission, and he couldn't even swear the unknown man who was coming was the one who had been passing counterfeit bills while they were in jail, except as he had heard them declare it. And if he told that, they could deny it. It would be their words against his. His evidence wouldn't rank as much more than hearsay after all. Was there ever such a mess before—a situation that could develop so many unexpected kinks? He noted Irak grinned in a crafty fashion. And then he began to speak:

"That's all very fine on th' face of it, Blumefeldt, but I reckon almost any jury would convict us if we got grabbed, just th' same. They got our number—and they wouldn't feel too much upset about puttin' one on him."

"Then," Blumefeldt said, "if you feel that way about it, and know th' keeper of this joint, why don't you fix it to slip 'em into another room?"

For the first time in many minutes Murgson grinned. "Now *you're* talkin' sense," he rejoined. "I'll stay here an' fix it. Let Irak go get our man."

"Yes, an' I'll bring him," Irak declared. "Come along an' let's get some action." He joined Murgson, and the two men left the room.

Eddie's spirits sank still farther. The course of affairs seemed to be still turning. And now he wasn't going to get a chance to see the unknown backer when Irak returned. Before that he and Mildred would be packed off to some other apartment and afterwards they wouldn't be able to do a thing. Afterwards — all at once he was vaguely troubled. Just how would Murgson and Irak and Welter seek to dispose of the two wholly useless human beings they had on their hands—himself and the girl beside him who knew far too much for the safety of their plans? To his credit be it said that his trouble was mainly for Mildred.

The vague mystery of the oriental reached out grim and laid hold upon him. Himself he was a man, but there were stories—too many to lack some truth in fact—of women who had last been seen in a Chinese quarter and had disappeared. He glanced about the room and back to the girl beside him. She was pale, set of lip, still with that strange, unreadable expression in her eyes. But she was beautiful—beautiful—and what would befall her after Blumefeldt had completed his deal and gone?

Blumefeldt. He turned his troubled eyes toward him and Welter. Neither man was speaking, and Blumefeldt was smoking again, now and then turning his gaze in speculative fashion toward the man and woman seated side by side on the tumbled bed.

Then, as Eddie encountered his eyes, he spoke to Portia: "Just how were you induced to come here, Miss Elton?"

Welter threw up his head. "Keep your oar out of what don't concern you, Blumefeldt," he growled.

Blumefeldt eyed him. "I'm not sure that it don't concern me," he returned. "You folks appear to have had a sort of brainstorm this evening, or Harmon and Miss Elton wouldn't be here. I'm anxious to know how many loose ends you've left lying about. An' now that they are here, how do you expect to get rid of 'em, Welter? Goin' to leave town?"

And Welter didn't answer. Instead he frowned. His brows drew together on either side of his high-bridged nose. He opened his lips and closed them. One would have said he was asking himself Blumefeldt's question and finding it hard to solve. He glared at Eddie and the girl beside him.

Murgson returned.

"That's fixed," he announced in a tone of what seemed relief, "and Irak's gone."

"So far, good," said Blumefeldt. "But I was just asking Welter what you meant to do with these two young people after everything's over."

Murgson's air of satisfaction vanished. Like Welter, he stared at the man and woman he could not help but regard as an uncomfortable problem. His breathing quickened.

"Damn it all, Blumefeldt," he began.

And Blumefeldt smiled. He seemed somewhat amused at seeing the men who had sought to double-cross him in such palpably hot water through no one's fault but their own. "Go on, Miss Elton," he prompted.

Mildred complied. "And when I got down to the cab, Mr. Murgson was there, and I tried to draw back, but it was too late. Mr. Murgson caught me by the throat before I could cry out."

Eddie clenched his hands. Murgson—the large man now so visibly harassed, as he had been the major part of the time since Blumefeldt had arrived — had done that. His heavy fingers had choked any cry for succor inside Portia's rounded throat. Oddly enough he recalled Irak's words that the man would know how to "keep her quiet if she squawked."

The thought waked once more the fires of rage that peril and suffering had banked for the time being in his breast; made him long to fasten his own fingers in Murgson's perspiring neck.

"And the message—did you keep it?" Blumefeldt asked.

"I—left it with my roommate."

"But she didn't know where you were coming?"

"No-o-o-o," said Portia slowly as one who weighs the consequences of an answer.

Blumefeldt laughed — actually laughed. "Then the best thing, considering the fact that your being brought here was a mistake, and that you haven't been injured, is for you both to forget where you've been and what you've heard."

As he spoke he held his eyes steadily on Miss Elton, and it seemed to Eddie that the lid of the one turned away from Murgson and Welter drooped slightly of intentional purpose—as though, most unbelievably, Blumefeldt winked. He wondered if Portia had seen it, and turned his own eyes toward her to find an expression of deep consideration on her face.

Yes, Portia was considering Blumefeldt's suggestion if he was any judge—was weighing what was no more than a suggestion that they should agree to keep silence—to buy their liberty by what would amount to the compounding of a felony at least. And she was a lawyer, she must appreciate all the man's words meant. But she was considering his proposition none the less.

And she was speaking. "Very well. The message merely said Mr. Harmon was arrested again, and asked me to come to him. My roommate need never be the wiser."

And Murgson was staring, a look of relief on his florid face, and Welter was grinning in a sneering sort of fashion. Eddie experienced a feeling of acute relief himself, not unmixed with a subtle disappointment. Of course Portia was a woman, and he couldn't blame her for getting herself out of the predicament in which her association in his troubles had placed her, but—

"Good," Blumefeldt accepted. "Murgson said you were a lawyer, and I see you can look on both sides of a case. We seem to all be in about the same sort of fix if you'll notice. This whole deal has come down to a matter of *sauve que peut*—which means save yourself if you can, in French. I'm glad you're exhibiting sense."

"Darned if you ain't right," Murgson exclaimed. "It's got to be every feller for himself in this business, all right, Blumefeldt. That's it. You've found th' way out of what was beginnin' to look like a pickle for us."

"Well," Blumefeldt returned, "in a way I was partly to blame. I didn't mean to get Harmon this far into it when I used him this afternoon, and I never dreamed of your bein' fools enough to drag in a woman."

"But we was goin' on the theory that they'd know where to find you," Murgson said, his expression one of heavy chagrin. He broke off as the door opened and two Chinamen entered the room.

He gestured toward the bed. The two orientals approached. Each took one of the two people toward whom they had been directed by an arm.

Eddie and Mildred rose. It was clear that these men had come to escort them to the other room until the transaction between Blumefeldt and the other men's backer was completed.

The Chinamen led them through the door into a dimly lighted hallway, its floor boards covered with a worn linoleum, and along it and up a flight of stairs to the door of another room. They unlocked it and thrust them inside and locked it again. In its general details the room was like the one they had quitted. Mildred sank into a chair and sat staring straight before her. Eddie sank into another and took his head in his hands.

What a night—what a night. The thought kept repeating itself over and over in his brain. Arrest, jail, freedom, the budding of love, unconsciousness, captivity and seeming peril, threats of torture and now prisoners, they two, led here, locked in by yellow hands. It was all unbelievably weird, like some wildly fantastic story. Almost without intent he uttered a sound half between a curse and a groan.

Mildred stirred. "Hadn't you best lie down, Mr. Harmon?" she suggested.

Eddie shook his head and winced. "No thanks." But her interest roused him. "Miss Elton—Portia—can you ever forgive me for getting you into all this trouble?"

She smiled in a rather forced fashion. "There isn't anything to forgive. You couldn't help it—and I'm not forgetting your desperate effort to defend me, Mr.

Harmon. The whole thing is as remarkable as anything of which I've ever heard —that a perfect stranger should have been drawn into such a mass of plot and counterplot is little short of amazing."

Eddie found himself thrilling at her mention of his attack on Murgson. It stirred him deeply. It struck him he ought to do something.

He got up and moved about the room. There were two windows. He drew up the shades and stared out. There was nothing to see; that is, there was no way of escape. The windows were above what seemed a sheer drop. He completed the circuit of the room and tested the door, while Mildred Elton watched.

"There isn't any chance of getting away, I'm afraid," she told him.

Eddie went back and sat down. "No. They picked a room without any fire escape outside its windows. They don't mean us to get away till they're ready."

And all at once he found her eyes upon him. "You were surprised at my accepting Blumefeldt's bargain, weren't you, Mr. Harmon?"

"I—" Eddie stammered. "I guess it was the only sensible thing to do."

"Still it surprised you after my high-flown words in the café this evening. I hardly know why I did it, except that Blumefeldt is different from the others, and he seemed concerned about our safety—and we didn't really know anything more than we had known before, and were not to be permitted to see their backer when Irak returned."

She was right. Eddie knew it. She was a wonderful woman. She had kept cool and used her head all along.

"Of course," he said. "I can see it now, though I couldn't see it then. The trouble with this entire affair is that no matter what happens, it isn't what it seems. Murgson and his bunch tried to fool Blumefeldt with a bundle of counterfeit bills. Even their deal was phony, and then Blumefeldt comes back when they were trying to find out where he was, and hazes them into a corner. Lord, what a mess!"

"It is ridiculous some ways, isn't it?" said Miss Elton.

Eddie assented. "Yes, I suppose it is. It's certainly been a remarkable start to my vacation.

And suddenly Portia was smiling. There was a twinkle in her eye. "One might call it a counterfeit vacation, Mr. Harmon."

Counterfeit vacation. Eddie stared. Shut up, locked in this room, in an unknown house in the Chinese quarter, the prisoner of unscrupulous men, this girl was joking. She had admitted herself that no one knew her whereabouts since she had left her apartment. They were lost in so far as either knew save as in themselves they could work out their own salvation, and yet she could sit here and pun. He made an effort to match her humor.

"Counterfeit vacation," he repeated. "Well, yes—" and stiffened as a sudden sound of commotion filled the room.

He sprang up. Portia, too, had risen. They stood there in startled terror while somewhere below them the thing went on—as a muffled uproar—the shouting of men —the sound of running feet, and rending wood—a shot!

Once more something unexpected had happened in this strange course of events. That was the thought that struck Eddie as the first hint of fresh trouble for the men in the other room broke out. And to judge by the noise, it was something of a major importance. But what? He looked into Portia's eyes and found them wide, dark, staring. And her slender body was rigid. One hand had crept up and lay against her breast, and she seemed to be holding her breath.

Then her color drained from her as the sound of the shot cracked out. Suddenly Harmon realized in a flash that despite all her seeming coolness—all her efforts to lighten the situation—this little Portia he had come so strangely to know inside the span of a few brief hours was afraid.

She was afraid—afraid. His manhood flamed at the knowledge. Once more, as earlier this evening, she was just girl—just sweet, adorable womanhood incarnate. And what had happened—what? So many things could happen.

The situation they had left in the room below them had been pregnant of so much.

Irak might have come back with the man he had gone for—and Irak was crafty. On the way they might have formed a plot. Blumefeldt had practically sent him and Portia up here—and that had left Blumefeldt all alone. And against him had been odds of four to one. Was that it? Had Blumefeldt been attacked? Was that the meaning of that shot? And if so—if Blumefeldt had been killed—

He sickened at the thought. If Blumefeldt had been slain! If tragedy had stalked at the termination of his meeting with the counterfeiters' backer—what then—what of Portia and him? What good would their agreement to keep silent about the events of the evening be now to the trio of crooks who held them, if those crooks had also a dead man's body on their hands?

Was fresh peril creeping upon them? Eddie asked himself the question, and glanced at Portia—little Portia, who had drawn instinctively closer to him, this girl of all girls to him now. He put out a hand and touched her. She turned her face toward him. While the sounds beneath them died away after that single shot, and silence came down, filled with unknown things—more suggestive of unknown danger creeping upon them through the night than the noise of conflict, even—they looked into one another's eyes very much as they had looked in that moment after Eddie's attack on Murgson.

And almost without knowing that he meant to do it, Harmon reached out swiftly and drew her into his arms—drew her and held her, and found her strangely yielding, found her leaning against him—found her face lifted to his—pallid under the murky light.

"Portia," he said, his voice husky with the wonder of her pliant life—oh, Portia, I love you. No matter what happens, dear—I love you!"

For the sounds that had died away—that shot in the room below them—had made tragedy seem close again to Harmon. It tinctured his avowal. And yet—and yet—it was a wonderful night—a mad, wild, wonderful night. He sensed it as he held the girl and looked down into the wide, dark, steady pools of violet fringed by curving lashes—at the soft curve of her mouth. It was a wonderful night in which he had found her and come to know and love her.

And she was clinging to him. He felt the grip of her hands. She was not resenting his words or actions. He lowered his face toward the face beneath. He kissed her.

Footsteps came along the hall. Harmon flung up his head. It was coming now—whatever they had to face—together. A voice mumbled.

"Hurry up!" another barked in authoritative fashion.

A key rattled in the lock. The door swung open and—

Special Agent Marvin appeared.

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER SHOCK FOR EDDIE.

MARVIN! Eddie recognized him in a brain-whirling flash. He had hoped never to see him again when he left him this evening—hours ago. And yet now he was glad. Marvin stood for law and order—for the power of the Federal government behind him. But—but—it was all very strange. It was all as strange, as unexpected, as unbelievable as everything that had been bobbing up unexpectedly all evening.

It was the last thing of which Eddie had dreamed—that Marvin should be here—inside this house. Eddie gulped. His arm fell away from Mildred's waist. He stared at the I. D. man—and then his lips came open.

"Marvin!" he mouthed.

Marvin nodded. "Hello, Harmon," he said briskly. "Weren't expecting me, I take it. Well, neither were the others. But—the unexpected bird catches the worm—sometimes. You two are all right, though, I guess."

He smiled. And Mildred flushed. Marvin had undoubtedly gained at least a glimpse of Eddie's arm about her when he came through the door. And all at once Eddie understood the whole situation.

There had been another raid!

And this time Marvin must have bagged his quarry, or he wouldn't be talking as he was—he wouldn't be grinning. He gulped and stammered a comprehending question: "You—got them?"

Marvin nodded. "You bet we got 'em, m' son."

"Murgson and Irak and Welter, and their backer?"

"Tally," said Marvin.

"And—" Eddie asked another question. Everything was all right now—most wonderfully, most amazingly, all right. Murgson and Irak and Welter and their backer were in the hands of the authorities, and Marvin was here. Murgson and Irak and Welter and their backer. It was a clean bag—or almost. "Blumefeldt?"

Marvin gave him a glance. "Blumefeldt got away again," he said. "Maybe you heard a shot?"

Eddie nodded. Blumefeldt had escaped for the second time then. The man bore a charmed existence. And all at once Mildred Elton began to laugh.

She didn't laugh loudly. There was nothing unnatural about it. And yet one felt that her merriment came from an overtaxing of nerves—that it was a reaction. And then she spoke in most surprising fashion:

"Oh, Mr. Marvin! I'm—glad."

Marvin gave her a searching glance. Eddie didn't wonder. Portia's pleasure in the escape of the man who had tried to conduct so nefarious a transaction as that Blumefeldt had intended was scarcely moral. And as though the Federal agent had asked a question with his lips rather than with his eyes, she answered: "He—he had us sent up here. He was interested in our welfare."

Well, that was the woman of it, Eddie found himself thinking. And of course—of course Blumefeldt had tried to smooth things for them in the only way he could if one wanted to be fair about it.

"Come along," Marvin prompted. "I reckon you won't object to getting out of here."

"Well, no." All at once Eddie chuckled. Once more everything had turned around. They were going out—he and Portia. They were going out with Marvin. They were actually under way. Because Marvin was moving toward the door. Eddie took Portia by the arm and they followed, back along the dirty hall, and down the stairs, and along the lower hallway past the room where Murgson and Irak and Welter had held them, and down another stairs and to a waiting cab.

"Where are we going now?" Eddie asked as he helped Portia to enter ahead of Marvin.

"Down to the station, of course," the Federal agent replied.

"Th' station?" Eddie paused with a foot on the step. They were going back to the station. And—and—Marvin was pleasant enough about it, as he would be, having filled his net with a pretty large, a pretty important catch. Only—Marvin hadn't said a word about his status in the further course of this matter. "Oh, but Marvin—" he faltered in protest.

"Go on. Get in," the I. D. man interrupted. "You're delaying us."

Eddie entered the cab. He sat down at Portia's side. He found her hand and took it into his own and pressed her fingers and felt the pressure returned.

Marvin followed. The cab got under way. The Federal agent lighted a cigar.

Eddie cleared his throat. They were going to the station.

"See here, Marvin," he broke out, "if Blumefeldt hadn't got away again, he'd tell you he didn't know me—and had never had any dealings with me. He told those three you've got now as much this evening. That's why we were upstairs. They wouldn't consent to bring their backer down to meet him while we were present."

Marvin nodded. "Don't worry, Mr. Harmon," he accepted Eddie's statement. "Your room at the Fairview was searched this evening—almost as soon as we knew you had one."

"Searched?" Eddie repeated somewhat stiffly. For an instant his resentment flared. They had entered his room and searched it. Not that it made any difference, but it smacked of an actual infringement of personal rights. It was a pretty high-handed proceeding.

Marvin's reply, however, rather took the sting out of the concrete fact. "Yes. On the basis of what we found, we sent a telegram or two, Mr. Harmon. You needn't worry. You're in the clear."

He was in the clear. They had searched his room, and telegraphed—to Chicago, of course. That was the way they worked. For a moment the vast activities of the secret service reached out in a sort of alluring picture before Eddie's eyes. Silently—unknown—unsensed, yet ever a moving force, the work of gathering knowledge, of combating criminal impulse and endeavor and action, went on from year to year. Men were watched, checked up. You might think you had never come under the eagle eye of suspicion, and yet—you might be surprised to know how well your character, your probity, or the reverse, was known. Only, you wouldn't know it unless the need arose. It was a wonderful system, and if a man were what he should be it would put him in the clear.

He pressed Portia's fingers again—and again the pressure was returned. Still—all at once Eddie couldn't see the sense of their present destination.

"Then why—are we going to the station?" he demanded.

Marvin chuckled. "Because, Mr. Harmon, it's a poor rule that won't work both ways. This thing has all been more or less peculiar—more so to you, I suspect, than to us. We weren't sure of you this afternoon when we turned you loose; and so, as well as having your room searched, you were watched. Blumefeldt used you this afternoon to throw Jenkins off the trail, and—we used you, Harmon, ourselves."

"Used?" said Eddie. It wasn't a very nice sounding word. It held nothing to give a man of his age and experience any sense of satisfaction. It suggested things one did not like to think of.

And Portia laughed again. "Of course. Don't you see it? They turned you and Murgson and Irak and Welter all loose, so they could watch you, and they did."

"Exactly," Marvin agreed. "You were picked up the moment you left the station, Mr. Harmon, and—er—well followed. And so were the others."

Sudden light stabbed into Eddie's mind. "Then—then you knew what happened to me," he began in some excitement. "That is how you knew where to find the others—how you came to make another raid. But—but—what made you wait so long?"

Once more a sense of injury was upon him. Marvin had said he had been used, and—most certainly he had. He had been sandbagged and dragged into a room in the Chinese quarter and held prisoner and allowed to lie there unsuccored. And Portia—she had been unfairly treated, too.

Marvin tossed his cigar out of the window of the cab before he answered.

"It takes time, Mr. Harmon, to organize such a raid as the last one—one in which every avenue of escape is guarded—so that there isn't any chance of a bungle such as occurred this afternoon. And it isn't always best to spring your trap until the quarry is inside it."

As an explanation it struck Eddie as a poor one. He sniffed. "That's all very well, Mr. Marvin, but—I notice Blumefeldt *did* get out of your watertight trap."

"Well, yes," Marvin admitted. "But—we got the backer. We got him out into the open, outside the cover he's been hiding behind for years. Oh, I know you don't understand the thing, Harmon, but we're pretty well satisfied with this night's work. We've got what we were after—and one reason why we're going to the station now is that you may understand this whole affair a little better. You've earned it, and you won't misuse the information, I believe."

Marvin was satisfied. He had accomplished what he wished. He had captured Murgson and Irak and Welter and their backer. And—he was the man they had been after. He was the big fish. And if Marvin was satisfied, there wasn't any reason why Eddie shouldn't be satisfied, so far as he could see.

He hadn't wanted to be mixed up in the thing at all, had been drawn into it wholly outside his purpose or intent. But out of it he had gained the knowledge of the woman by his side. He had found the—*the* woman. And that was wonderful indeed—as wonderful as the unplumbed mystery of

woman must always seem to the undisillusioned mind of man. So, no matter what Marvin was going to make plain at the station, no matter what new kink in the course of the whole affair was going to be straightened out, it didn't really matter. He sighed. A sudden contentment stole down upon him. He was content to be here, with Mildred close beside him. His head was throbbing dully, but—yes, he, too, was satisfied.

"I won't misuse anything you care to tell me, Marvin," he replied, because he felt he should say something. "And—see here. I was glad when they were hazing me this evening that I didn't know what they were after. You know things looked pretty squally up there for a time before Blumefeldt appeared. I suppose you knew he was there if you were watching."

"Yes," Marvin said, "we knew he was there."

"And yet you didn't get him?" Eddie chuckled. "He's a rather peculiar chap."

Marvin did not reply to the comment. "We were hoping he would act about as he did," he said instead. "So we waited until Irak came back with the man he went after, and pulled the raid as soon as they were inside."

The backer. There he was again. They had him. Well, there was reason there, of course, for Marvin's satisfaction, even if Blumefeldt had escaped. At least he had served as the means for getting the unknown man they had been after.

"But can you convict him?" he queried. "How are you going to prove he's the man who has been floating the counterfeits in the last three years?"

For a time Marvin made no answer, and then, "Through Irak," he said at last. "You remember I told you this evening that he had driven a bargain with us before, and he's at it already again. Irak's a good deal of a rat. When he's cornered he's the sort that squeals."

So that was it. Once more Irak was going to get off with the minimum penalty for his misdeeds, because what he knew was needed. The man was worse than Marvin had called him. He wasn't a rat: he was a snake. And—well—Marvin had offered to bargain with him himself the past afternoon, and he would bargain with Irak in order to put the man who had conspired with him against the integrity of the nation's currency behind the bars.

"Is he a man of any prominence?" he asked.

"He's just about what we thought, Mr. Harmon," Marvin replied. "He was a man who for years had been connected with the bank where Murgson used to work. He put up the first twenty thou', and Welter used it to open his account; and, as Miss Elton suggested this afternoon, he's been gradually putting out counterfeit notes in an effort to recoup himself during the last three years. It was that very thing that maintained our interest in the case."

Eddie nodded. It was all a very sordid affair; just a jumbled mass of treachery, and betrayed trust. All along all the actors had been more or less handing each other the double-cross. It was nothing more than a vivid side light on the worst phase of human nature—this thing in which he had been involved and out of which he had drawn the greatest adventure of his life, and the sweetest discovery, incarnated now in the form of the girl at his side.

He lay back against the seat and sensed her nearness while the cab rattled over the pavements. Once she swayed against him. He felt the silken caress of a strand of her hair. Salt tanged air drifted in through the open window and he sniffed it. The thing was ending, ending now so far as Marvin and the crooks he was after and himself were concerned. But it was just beginning with himself and her.

Back there in the room where they had waited Marvin's coming, without knowing it was the thing they waited, fearing anything else in all the world save that he had told her that he loved her, had held her a moment in his arms, and—she did not resist. She had lain against him, clung to him. Her lips had not shrunk from the swift pressure of his kiss.

What a night! What a night! Once more he found himself thinking the words with a vastly different meaning from what had inspired them first. What a night—in which minutes had been as hours, as days

—to draw them together—in which their two souls had run a gamut of emotions, close crowded into a few hours, yet as vital, as surcharged with intimate results as are sometimes embraced in the course of an entire life.

The cab stopped. Marvin opened the door. They got down and went back inside the station, to the door of that room where he had talked with them before.

He opened it, and they passed through it. A man was sitting there before them.

He rose. He was tall, lank, as he turned toward them.

It was Blumefeldt!

Eddie Harmon stared. It was Blumefeldt there, very much at ease and smiling! Blumefeldt—who Marvin had said had got away. Blumefeldt here in the station! It couldn't be Blumefeldt! But it was. And once more Eddie's head began going round and round. He glanced at Portia. He wondered if she saw Blumefeldt, too—or if—if Welter's blow had affected his brain. Because the thing didn't make sense at all unless—unless—Eddie Harmon had a most remarkable thought.

"Blumefeldt—are you a crook—or—what?" he gasped.

It wasn't either a very elegant or a very comprehensive sort of question. But Blumefeldt seemed to understand.

"Was a crook, let us say, Mr. Harmon," he responded. "Thanks to to-night's events, I'm cured. So far as I'm concerned—never again. I've waked up to the realization that being crooked never pays."

"But—I thought you'd escaped. Marvin said so." Eddie turned to their companion of the cab.

"I did, Mr. Harmon. I escaped and came right over here. Mr. Marvin knew I would be here. I suspect that is why he brought you over. When we were talking earlier this evening I told him I was sorry to have got you mixed up in my trouble—and as for Miss Elton, I deeply regret the annoyance I was instrumental in causing her."

"When—when—you were talking with him—this evening?" Eddie faltered. Blumefeldt was a crook, or had been. He had just admitted it—and yet he had been talking things over with Marvin this evening—with Marvin who had said he didn't know where to find him when Mildred Elton and Harmon had been here in this room before. And yet now he said they had talked it over—and Marvin had known he would be here when they arrived, had brought them here to meet him. The thing was utterly crazy! He glanced at Portia—and once more he surprised that inscrutable expression they had held when she had sat on the bed in that other room. A feeling of wholly baffled understanding came upon him. He turned a bewildered face to Marvin and back to Blumefeldt.

"I'm afraid," he said in a rather uncertain tone, "that I don't understand."

"Tell him the whole works, Carl," Marvin urged. "I think it's due them both."

"So do I, Andy," Blumefeldt smiled. "Sit down, won't you, Miss Elton, and you, Harmon, while I tell you something not overly much to my credit, that will make things plain."

CHAPTER XII.

THREADS UNTANGLE.

EDDIE waited until Mildred had taken a chair and found one for himself. He felt a trifle like a person coming out of a daze. He watched Marvin and Blumefeldt take seats.

And then Blumefeldt began: "Mr. Harmon just asked me if I was a crook, and I replied in the past tense that I was. That's the literal truth as it happens. I made my slip and I've taken my medicine, and now as Marvin assures me, I'm in the clear again. I'm a chemist. For quite a number of years I've been in government employ. My natural bent for chemistry gave me my first start in the wrong direction. I was employed in the Washington district. I got a chance to investigate the methods of handling government papers.

"Curiosity at first got the better of me. I tackled the secret of bleaching India ink, known only to the department, and worked it out. It's the truth when I say it was only curiosity prompted my investigations at first. But I've always been a man in

moderate circumstances, Harmon, and once I had solved the problem I saw a fortune within my grasp. I'm not trying to excuse myself, either. I was tempted and I fell—only before I could put my plans into operation, I was—as Marvin here would say—grabbed."

"You mean they caught you—the department agents or somebody like Marvin here?" Eddie leaned forward, intense interest on his face.

"Yes. It was done very quietly, however. You see, while I had been working, I had been watched. I was simply visited by a man assigned to the task and warned that what I had done was known, and I was given a choice. Either I could win immunity and rehabilitate myself by assisting the department with some of its other work—or I would lose my position and continue to be watched—remain under surveillance for the rest of my days. I—well, I elected to accept the former course—and I was asked to help Marvin on this case."

"But, hold on!" Eddie exclaimed. "If Marvin knew you—what in the name of time did he mean by thinking I might be working with you?"

His eyes widened. If Blumefeldt was telling the truth, then his last statement made the Federal agent's action of the past afternoon as crazy as everything else from first to last.

Blumefeldt, however, nodded. "I get your point, Mr. Harmon, but—I think you've had some experience to-night with what we commonly term the double-cross." For a moment he paused, and his face grew somewhat weary—a trifle worn. And then he went on:

"You mustn't forget that technically at least I was a crook—and that I was watched. I was supposed to be working with Marvin but—I wasn't trusted any too much. In the eyes of the department I was a thief—a man who had stolen something that must be kept at any cost—a man who had betrayed a trust. I was told to get into touch with Murgson and Irak and Welter and try to learn the identity of their backer, and I found them a pretty gun shy bunch of crooks.

"In the end I arranged the deal of this afternoon, and you'll have to take my word for it when I tell you that the raid was as much a surprise to me as it was to them. It wasn't even intended, Marvin tells me, until he thought I'd gone wrong again, and was about to put a trick of my own across. You see, they couldn't trust me, as I've pointed out."

Marvin interrupted. "Well, Carl, it certainly did look funny when you took their money and started to write out the formula for them."

Blumefeldt smiled rather wanly. "I know it. Th' trouble was you didn't know that I knew they'd slipped me bogus money—and was up against a fence unless I played a bluff. Still, your raid sure did muss up my plans, and resulted in getting Harmon into the mess.

"You see, Mr. Harmon, I spotted the hundred thousand as counterfeit the moment I touched it, and I'd failed to get the name of the man behind them, even though I'd got them to tell me the entire history of the rest of their past work. But the mere fact that they had given me counterfeit money gave me another plan. I would have given them a faked formula which they wouldn't know was as spurious as their money until they tried to use it, and then—I'd have used their money against them as a club."

"Just as you did to-night," said Miss Elton, speaking all at once.

Blumefeldt nodded, smiling.

"Do you know, I thought there was something more behind your coming there to-night than appeared," she said laughing softly. "And when you winked at me—I—I felt sure—though even then I didn't dream what it was. I suppose I was too much disturbed to understand."

Eddie turned toward her. "So that's what gave you that funny look in your eyes?" he exclaimed.

"Did they look funny?" She narrowed them now as she made rejoinder, but she smiled.

Eddie nodded. "They did, and I couldn't understand it. I knew you were thinking something, but I couldn't imagine what."

"She was pretty near to the truth, I believe," Blumefeldt said. "Anyway, when Marvin butted in this afternoon he spoiled my plans and I had to make my esc pe.

"It came over me in a flash that he hadn't understood—and that I hadn't been trusted—and so I didn't dare be taken by the police—because if I was, if I was arrested before I had managed to complete the task assigned me, I couldn't prove *what* I had intended doing—but if I kept my liberty and the hu. dred thousand in bills, and my standing with Murgson and his associates as a man of their own stripe, I I still saw a way in which I could make good. Now, maybe you begin to see."

Eddie nodded again. All at once he grinned. "And so you jumped out of the window after tipping over the bleach, and hopped off the roof on top of Jenkins and ran up the street and saw me, and slapped my face."

It was all quite remarkable—like a story—but Eddie saw it and some one had said a long time before that truth was stranger than fiction.

"Just so," said Blumefeldt.

"But—what made you give me that hundred dollar bill?"

"I guess that was a bit dramatic," Blumefeldt explained. "And maybe it was just my fool sense of humor. I knew at a glance you were a stranger in town. You were standing there with your mouth open, trying to see to the top of the Call tower, and you were wearing a gray suit of clothes. I had the bill and it occurred to me what I'd do myself if I was in your shoes and somebody shoved it on me and hit me and said he owed me both the bill and the blow.

"I knew you'd run after me if you had a spark of manhood in you, and I knew if you did, you'd probably lead Jenkins off. Then, too, if he pinched you and you got into trouble, I figured you might need something for expenses, and—it wasn't my money, anyway. The government was financing my work. Besides"—a slow grin creased his features—"I figured it was worth a hundred of anybody's money to a man's pride to have somebody he didn't know run up and slap his face."

"You'd have found what I thought it was worth if I'd caught you before Jenkins overhauled me," Eddie said with an unmistakable meaning.

"I know it. You didn't lose any time getting into motion." Blumefeldt laughed. "But the thing served my purpose, and I made my escape. I lay low till I got a chance to get hold of Marvin and explain my real standing in the case. After that we doped it out that Murgson and his crowd would be crazy to get at me before I discovered what they had done—as you know they were."

"Rather." Eddie's agreement was emphatic. "If you had a lump the size of a goose egg behind your ear, you wouldn't doubt it. They wanted to reach you. That's one thing in which they were sincere."

Marvin chuckled. "They were so sincere that they overlooked everything else. Honestly, Harmon, they were so busy with you and Miss Elton, trailing you, I mean, and then getting you down to that room of theirs that they went and rented for the occasion, that I bet they practically forgot they might be trailed themselves."

And Eddie echoed his chuckle. Everything was all right—most amazingly all right. As Marvin had said, he was in the clear—and the lump behind his ear would disappear after a time, and quite suddenly Marvin and Blumefeldt didn't seem a potential enemy and a crook, but just a couple of friends.

"I gave Miss Elton that bill at her suggestion in case anything more came up in the matter—and she'll return it to you, of course."

"I don't want it," said Blumefeldt, smiling in a somewhat grimacing fashion. "I'm going back to work. They're going to let me have my old job. I told you I thought maybe you'd need something for expenses. Use it for attorney's fees."

Eddie looked at Portia. All at once he felt himself again and very, very bold.

"The attorney's fees will be attended to," he declared. "But—since you suggest it—we'll keep it, and have it framed."

A glance passed between Blumefeldt and Marvin, and Portia flushed the least bit.

"Well—all's well that ends well," Marvin said. "Only, if you do decide to frame it, I'd advise you to screw it fast to your wall."

Then it was all over and Eddie and Portia found themselves once more outside the grim gray stone building. Only now Murgson and Irak and Welter were no longer on their trail. They were sure of it as they set out side by side to find a taxicab. In fact, they were sure that they simply walked alone, under a sky now clouded by fog curling in from the bay, against which the lights of the city threw their ruddy glare.

They walked alone, just a man and a woman who had been strangely thrown together—so strangely thrown together that inside the span of some half dozen hours they had gone through acquaintanceship, mutual understanding, unexpected hardship, and if only as it now appeared in seeming, peril of bodily integrity and life. It was all very strange, and already looking back on it, Eddie found himself once more comparing it to the figments of a vivid dream. Only—out of that dream had come the girl beside him—vibrant with young life, trim and slender, a creature of dreams, with her brown hair and her steady violet eyes.

He cleared his throat of a strange huskiness as he steadied her over a crossing. "Mildred—Portia," he stammered. "I—you—remember what I said, back there in that room, after we heard—that shot? I—you—you believe it—don't you—Portia?"

She paused and turned toward him. There wasn't a soul around—not even a belated roisterer in all the stretch of deserted pavement. She lifted her eyes and her voice came softly:

"Yes—Eddie—I believe it."

"Of course," Harmon said, "I'm a stranger—"

Swiftly Mildred's hand flashed up and lay against his lips. She laughed—a little gurgle of tender amusement in her rounded throat.

"Wait—boy," she checked him. "Don't say it. You aren't a stranger here any longer. You're — you're — pretty well known."

Eddie caught her hand and held it. It was a wonderful night.

"All right," he said. "Then suppose we turn my vacation into a honeymoon?"

THE END

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WEALTH

"THAT is a clump of silver oak,"
Said he.
"No—it's the Forest of Arden!"
Breathed she.

"That is a squatter's cabin—
Shiftless folk—"
"The witch!" And dimples glimmered
As she spoke.

He shrugged. "You waste time dreaming!
How can you
Expect to make your fortune
While you do?"

She sighed—"Is poverty as poor
As it seems?
Are you more rich, with leaden facts,
Than I—with golden dreams?"

Theda Kenyon.

"Z"

By HARRY ADLER

AS I rang the bell of the tall, old-fashioned house in Washington Square no faintest premonition stirred within me of the mysterious entanglements and the life of amazing adventure upon which that door was to admit me. I was here on the quite unromantic, prosaic mission of applying for a job.

The applicant's specifications, as listed with the agency that had sent me, were, it is true, strange. Strange, too, was the name of the person sending in the call to the agency. Z. Zea, read the name on the note of introduction I carried, matching the inscription on the old-fashioned plate on the door. Z. Zea! To what sort of person could that bizarre cognomen be attached?

The position, rather vaguely described, appeared to be a sort of personal secretaryship. The applicant must be a young man of pleasing personality, of good breeding and refinement. He must be capable of mixing easily either in the tea room of the Ritz or among the stevedores on the docks. Evening clothes or corduroys must drape his form with equal ease. He should be a college man, in first class health, and athletic. Great stress had been laid on the applicant's alertness and keenness of perception. Surely a strange list of qualifications needed to perform the duties of a secretary.

Yet, their very strangeness was my hope. For the ordinary secretaryship I had little to commend me, having just emerged from college with the doubtful attribute of an A. B. degree. The purposeless son of a supposedly wealthy father, I had sauntered indifferently through college, to be brought up with a shock some eight months ago by my father's sudden death and the subsequent discovery that unfortunate speculattions in his last years had wiped out his fortune, leaving barely enough to permit me

to struggle through to my degree. I was the only member of the family left, and it was therefore strictly up to me to work out my own salvation. The realization of this fact had impelled me to acquire a quick smattering of shorthand and typewriting, which was my sole business accomplishment.

The door in front of me swung open and a thin, severe, elderly woman motioned me to enter.

"I wish to see Mr. Zea," I announced, stepping into the high gloomy hallway.

"*Mrs.* Zea is upstairs," she corrected severely.

A woman then! Wonderingly, I mounted the steps behind the servant and was ushered into a room lighted by two large windows at its end. Near these windows a woman, the room's sole occupant, sat in an invalid's wheel-chair. She was a pleasant, friendly faced woman, about forty, I should judge. Her brown, bright hair was brushed softly back. Despite the general cheeriness of her look, there was about her lips the indication of firmness and decision, and the line of her chin was forceful.

It was her eyes, though, that caught and held my attention. They were dark gray, set deep. As I stepped into the room I had the impression that those eyes had swept in every detail of my appearance and analyzed and catalogued it. They were not unkind or in any degree repelling eyes—but there was a keenness about them that a stranger could feel bore into his soul with an almost physical impact.

"Z. Zea?" I interrogated, stepping forward with my letter of introduction in my hand.

She nodded briskly and motioned me to a chair opposite her.

The servant had withdrawn and while Mrs. Zea scanned the few stereotyped lines I cast a swift glance about the room.

At the woman's side was a business-like, newspaper littered, flat-topped desk, in distinct contrast to the old-fashioned sofa that stood along one wall, and the heavy, dark, mahogany chairs that were scattered liberally about. On the desk, strangely out of place, was also a microscope. Filled bookcases ranged round the walls and in one corner was a big globe, mounted on a revolving stand, giving a sort of schoolroom touch to the chamber. A roll top desk, with a typewriter on its side leaf, occupied another corner.

Mrs. Zea spoke, and her voice was cheery, big sisterly.

"Tell me about yourself, Mr. Cosgrove," she directed.

A nice, easy order to fill! I stumbled through such autobiographical essentials as seemed relevant.

She nodded her head, as if in satisfaction.

"Your general qualifications seem good," she said. "I desire a college man for the mental activity his schooling should have stimulated, although I prefer a man like yourself, who has simply gone through the arts, without having specialized to the extent of acquiring a mental bias in any particular direction. The biggest thing in your work with me will be to keep an absolutely open mind for the reception of impressions and observations and facts."

Her eye slipped over my body.

"You certainly look healthy," she commented. "How about your athletics in school?"

"I was on the wrestling team two years," I informed her, "and on the swimming team one year. I have dabbled in nearly every form of sport."

"Are you much of a boxer?" she queried. "Your work will require, at times, that you go into districts and among people where it will be a handy thing to be able to protect yourself."

What a requisite for a secretary, I marveled!

"I have done enough boxing to take care of the average fellow on the street. Besides," I added, "I am a pretty fair jujutsu artist, which is a better reliance in such situations."

She picked up a sheet of paper from the desk at her elbow.

"The most important thing in your work," she stated, "will be your keenness of observation, your ability to observe details that the ordinary, careless eye passes over. Here, for example—" and she handed me the paper; "what is wrong with this? Or is there anything wrong with it at all?"

I stared mystified at the sheet between my fingers. It was an ordinary, white, letter size sheet of paper, perfectly blank, with nothing so far as I could note to distinguish it from thousands of other such sheets that I had seen. I held it up against the window; the water mark was that of a well-known brand.

" There is nothing wrong with it, so far as I can see," I at length confessed.

Mrs. Zea smiled and handed me a second sheet.

" Fit the two together," she directed.

I did so and at once saw that one of the edges of the first sheet had been cut on a bias—a thin bias, to be sure, yet sufficient to destroy the evenness of its parallelogram. I held it up alone, and now perceived that there was a quite discernible variation from the regular in its outline. My perception had been clearly at fault.

Chagrined, I laid the papers down on the desk.

" Let us try another."

My strange employer handed me a lead pencil. " How, if at all, does this pencil differ from the common article as you see it every day?"

It was, apparently, a common, yellow, hexagon pencil, new and unsharpened. I turned it carefully between my fingers. I was determined that this time I would not fail. Yet, I had almost reached the point of giving up in despair before an impression did make a faint stir in my brain.

" Why," I said hesitantly, " it seems a bit short for a new pencil."

Mrs. Zea nodded approvingly in the brisk manner that I was to learn was characteristic of her.

" Correct," she answered. " It is short. But there is yet a second point of distinction."

Again I applied myself to the problem, but after some minutes I was obliged to confess defeat.

The woman leaned forward and pointed to the gold stamping of the manufacturer's name and the grade of lead.

" This stamping," she said, " is at the *point* end. In a normal pencil it is at the eraser end. I transferred the brass eraser holder to the wrong end, then cut off the end close to the stamping, so as to remove the marks of the holder and also to shorten the pencil."

Of course, the moment she called my attention to it, it was perfectly apparent; it seemed unbelievable that I had been stupid enough to overlook such an obvious thing.

" One last experiment," Mrs. Zea announced. " Coming into this room and examining it, what would strike you as odd and to what conclusion as to my profession would it lead you?"

I stared about the room. I rose to my feet awkwardly and wandered aimlessly about. My hopes of this strange job went glimmering.

I stepped to the bookcases and stared at the backs of the volumes within. An Encyclopaedia Britannica, a big atlas, and then volume after volume on toxicology, ranging from the most profound, medical treatises to popular household pamphlets on poisons and their antidotes. My interest aroused, I moved along. Books on criminology came next, and books on every conceivable phase of criminal activity. Famous historical crimes, ancient and modern; a shelf of criminal insanity; complete, bound copies of police reports of the larger cities of America and Europe; and row after row of big, canvas scrap books, filled, I found on looking into them, with newspaper clippings of sensational crimes and mysteries. There was a fair representation of psychology and sociology, of penology, and considerable history; but the collection of criminal literature stood forth as surely the most astounding library every collected.

And suddenly the answer to the test struck my consciousness. I turned to Mrs. Zea.

" There," I declared, pointing at the bookcases, " is what I would class the most peculiar item about this room. And as to your occupation—" I grinned; " you must be either a professional murderess or—or a detective."

The woman laughed, but I noted the gleam of approval that shot into her eye.

" Good," she approved. " Your guess is correct—I am an investigator of mysteries, criminal and otherwise—private detective,

I suppose, is what it might popularly be called."

I gaped.

"A detective!" I stammered. "A woman—and—and an—invalid!"

She smiled.

"That is where you come in," she said. "I am a helpless paralytic below the waist. I cannot move from this chair, except when Hester lifts me at night into my bed. You must be my legs and my eyes, going out and collecting those observations and facts that I am unable to acquire myself. The experiments I have tried here with you will, perhaps, give you a hint as to my method. The rest must come with experience. But, above all, remember this: let no suggestion as to the *apparent* solution influence your collecting *all* data, however insignificant the detail may appear."

And so I became Z. Zea's secretary and, to be always immediately available, took up my residence in the Washington Square house.

The first few days of my incumbency were occupied with nothing but dull, routine labors: filing clippings, *et cetera.*

Then, early one morning, Hester—our maid, cook and general servant—admitted into the study Captain Wigginton, of the detective force. He and Mrs. Zea were apparently old acquaintances.

"This is Mr. Cosgrove," Mrs. Zea introduced me; "my new secretary. Mr. Rutgers"—my predecessor—"has had to go West for his health."

Captain Wigginton acknowledged the introduction and seated himself.

"I suppose, Z,"—I was to learn that this simple, single initial was the usual term of address used by those who came in considerable contact with my employer—"I suppose you have read about the Frayne murder?"

Mrs. Zea nodded. We had been clipping the articles as our visitor had entered.

"It seems a clear enough case," the captain went on, "and yet there are some points about it that are puzzling." His brows wrinkled worriedly.

"From the newspaper accounts, of course," Z remarked, "it looks very much like Mrs. Frayne."

"Yes—in fact, there is no doubt of it, really—and yet— Well," the captain plunged into the recital, "here are the facts. The Fraynes have been married about a year. They lived in a flat with Frayne's mother, who did the housework. Frayne was a traveling salesman—optical goods—and was away from home a considerable part of the time. He returned from a trip yesterday morning and spent the day at his company's offices.

"His mother's story is that when he returned home, before dinner, he and his wife, Georgia, retired to their bedroom and the old lady heard sounds of violent quarreling. They went through dinner without speaking to each other and after the meal Frayne went into the bedroom and slammed the door. His wife went out, telling her mother-in-law she was going for a walk.

"The old lady cleared off the table and went into the kitchen to wash the dishes. Shortly afterwards she heard her daughter-in-law enter the flat and saw her pass by the kitchen door towards the bedroom.

"A few minutes later she heard the two again quarreling. She could not distinguish the words—her hearing is weak—but their voices were raised and angry. She was on the point of going in to try to quiet them when her son's voice rose suddenly in a frightened shriek: 'Don't! For God's sake—!' His cry was cut short by a pistol shot, followed by a scream, his wife's. The old woman dashed into the bedroom and found her son lying on the floor, a bullet through his head. His wife was standing at his side, staring down at him, This gun was lying on the floor."

He handed Z a small, pearl handled revolver. She took it carefully by the end of the muzzle.

"You needn't be careful about finger prints," Captain Wigginton reassured her. "We examined it thoroughly, but there isn't a mark of any kind."

Watching Z, I saw a little flicker of interest light her eye at the officer's statement. However, she laid the weapon down on the desk beside her without comment.

"The bullet entered his brain, death being instantaneous, as the gun was five or six feet from the body, that would seem to

eliminate suicide; besides which, there is his cry, that the old lady heard," Wigginton remarked.

"So far the case seems plain enough," Mrs. Zea observed. "What is there queer about it?"

"Well," the captain said hesitantly, "I can't understand Georgia Frayne's attitude. She says absolutely nothing. She won't deny she did it, yet she won't admit it and explain her reason. She refuses to see a lawyer. She is booked on a charge of murder and she knows it and we have made it clear to her that it looks like an open-and-shut case against her; yet she offers no defense. If she didn't kill her husband, what possible explanation can there be for her not denying it? It seems useless to waste any time in any other search, although, of course, we have followed the usual routine. There is a fire escape running by the bedroom, but we've been unable to find anybody who saw anything suspicious. I brought the girl with me—also the old lady. They are downstairs now, with a couple of officers. I thought you might want to talk to them."

"Good," Mrs. Zea said. "Let me see the wife first."

Captain Wigginton left, reappearing in a few minutes accompanied by a young woman—or, rather, a girl. Admitting her to the room, he left, closing the door behind him. He seemed to know my employer's methods thoroughly.

Georgia Frayne was appealingly pretty and wistful. Her face, at the present time, bore a look of deepest tragedy, the more pronounced, perhaps, from the dryness of her eyes. It was evident that she was enceinte, within a few months of motherhood. She was dressed simply in a blue suit, the coat of which was thrown back.

At Z's cheery invitation the girl seated herself; but her look went through and past both Mrs. Zea and myself.

"My dear," Z began gently, "of course, you realize the seriousness of your position."

The girl brought her brown eyes for an instant to attention on Mrs. Zea's face.

"Of course," she said simply; then her gaze melted into abstraction.

"Won't you tell us something about it? Surely you owe it to yourself—to—to the baby whom you will soon hold in your arms."

The quick intake of Georgia Frayne's breath showed that the appeal had struck a response. For a moment she struggled; then shook her head decisively.

"I have nothing to say," she declared, with dull finality.

Z turned to me.

"Will you help Mrs. Frayne downstairs?" she directed. "And ask Mrs. Frayne, senior, to come up."

I led the girl down to the gloomily furnished living room that served us as sitting and reception room, and delivered her into the custody of Captain Wigginton and the two uniformed officers with him; and I brought back to the study the murdered man's mother.

A big fleshy woman, this Mrs. Frayne was, weeping noisily and calling upon the heavens for vengeance; despite which, a tragic figure in the bereavment of motherhood.

The story she recited, between eruptions of sobbing, agreed with that told us by the captain.

"Had your son and his wife quarreled much since their marriage?" Z inquired.

"No," the woman replied. "They never quarreled at all; maybe little spats, like all couples have, but no real quarrels, you might say, till last night."

"You don't know the cause of this quarrel, do you?"

"No, I don't. Georgia went out visiting in the afternoon and when she came back she went to their room and put in the rest of the afternoon crying, and when poor Charlie came home and went in to her she shut the door and started in on him."

"You say she went visiting—do you know on whom?"

"A friend of hers, a Mrs. Burberson."

At Z's nod I made a note of the name and the address that Mrs. Frayne gave.

"Did your daughter-in-law wear gloves yesterday when she went out for her walk after dinner?" demanded Z suddenly.

"Gloves?" the woman repeated blankly. "No—I don't think so. No, I'm sure she didn't."

"When you entered the bedroom after the shot and found her standing beside your son's body—she didn't have gloves on at that time, did she?"

"No, she didn't have any gloves on," Mrs. Frayne cried impatiently. "What's that got to do— She murdered my poor boy," she broke forth in wild lament, "and here you sit and want to know what clothes she had on!" Her sobbing filled the house.

Mrs. Zea ignored the outburst.

"You saw her go past the kitchen door," she continued her examination; "could she have gone to any other place than to the bedroom—are there any other rooms in that part of the flat?"

"Just my room," came the muffled answer. "There's just those two rooms past the kitchen."

"I believe you said your son shut the door of the bedroom when he went into it after dinner. Was the door closed during their dispute when Georgia returned?"

"Yes; I'd have been able to understand their words if the door was open."

"Did you hear Georgia open the door and close it again when she went in?"

The woman's head came up at this line of questioning.

"I didn't pay any attention particularly," she answered.

"Then you didn't actually hear the door?" Z persisted.

"No, I didn't!" Mrs. Frayne cried. "Why would I be sitting listening to doors!"

"You didn't see enough of Georgia as she passed the kitchen door to see whether she appeared particularly agitated, did you?"

"No. She just went right past. But she must have been real excited. Why, her voice was so twisted, she was so angry and excited, I wouldn't have recognized it!"

"Twisted—how do you mean?"

"Well, you know how a person is when they're awful angry, how their voice changes— Well, hers was so changed that if I hadn't known it was her I wouldn't have recognized it."

"Had you ever heard her voice in anger or excitement before?"

"No; as I said, she and Charlie had never quarreled. Of course, before dinner they quarreled in their room, but not so bad as later on. Her voice was quieter the first time and not twisted like it was afterward."

"When you rushed out of the kitchen after hearing the shot you didn't see anybody in the hall or outside the bedroom?"

"No. There wasn't anybody else in the house. I ran into the bedroom and found her standing next to him."

"The bedroom door was open?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice whether the door of your bedroom was open?"

"I didn't notice. Usually it's open."

"Did you rush in immediately following the shot?"

"Well, for a few seconds I was stunned—I didn't realize what it was. Then, of course, I rushed in."

"There was the sound of their arguing, your son's sudden exclamation, then the pistol shot and Georgia's shriek, and then you heard no further sounds?"

"Well"—Mrs. Frayne knotted her heavy forehead puzzledly—"it did seem like I heard somebody running a few steps, and there was a loud bang, like—well, like furniture being bumped together, or something like that."

"You mean like furniture being turned over in a struggle?"

"No. There was only one bang, like you'd hit something once, hard. The furniture in the room was all right when I ran in. But it was all sort of indistinct and blurred. I guess it's just my imagination."

"Perhaps," agreed Z mildly. "Was the shriek after the shot in your daughter-in-law's natural tones, or was it still in that changed, excited voice?"

"Well, it was more like her own voice. Of course, I wasn't paying attention to details like that, but as I think back now, it seems like it sounded more natural."

Mrs. Zea reflected a few minutes. Then she turned to me.

"I think Mrs. Frayne has given us all the help she can at the present time, Mr. Cosgrove."

Mrs. Frayne rose. She removed her handkerchief from her tragic, wet face.

"My poor boy is gone!" she cried. "It's too late to do anything for him. But I'm going to see that he has his revenge. I'm going to see that his murderer pays!"

When Captain Wigginton and his party had left, Z turned to me.

"What do you think of it?" she asked.

"Well," I hesitated, "it certainly looks clear enough to me. Georgia Frayne quarreled with her husband, went out after dinner, bought a revolver, came back, resumed her quarrel and shot him."

"Then why her attitude of silence now? Why no attempted defense?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Consider it from the other viewpoint," I suggested. "Certainly there would be no reason for keeping silent if she were innocent. Perhaps she is intentionally making it seem mysterious and doubtful. Besides, who else could it be—surely, not his mother."

"Oh, no, no—I'm not questioning her story—at least, her sincerity in her interpretation of what happened. Anybody can see her grief is genuine. Those aren't crocodile tears she is shedding."

She picked up the revolver from the table.

"How do you explain the absence of finger-prints or other marks on the reolver?" she demanded. "Yesterday was a warm day and she had just been out walking. Her palms would certainly be moist enough to leave a mark on that polished butt. Yet, it is perfectly clean—the police can be trusted to make sure of a routine fact like that. And she was not wearing gloves to protect her fingers."

Her eye, resting on the weapon, lighted suddenly in quick interest.

"Look here," she cried.

I bent over. The nickeled piece at the base of the butt had become jarred at some time or other and projected beyond the pearl side piece in a sharp edge. In the crack thus formed was wedged a small wisp of rough, brown, woollen thread, and it was this at which Z was staring with such an intense interest, although to me it was utterly barren of significance.

"Typical of the police," Z said, shaking her head. "They examine for finger-prints, which the careful criminal can avoid, yet overlook all those clews which the accidents of life, unforeseeable and unpreventable, scatter all about. Well, we'll see what we can develop. First, though, there is work for you. I want you to interview this Mrs. Burberson. Get from her what transpired during Mrs. Frayne's call on her. Then go to the scene of the murder and examine the flat thoroughly. Be sure not to overlook any detail, no matter how insignificant, apparently. Drop in on Captain Wigginton, first, and get a police pass. There is probably an officer on duty at the flat."

My emotions as I set forth upon my mission can easily be imagined. Here I was, an eager, adventurous youth, thrust into the midst of an affair of this nature. True, my part so far had been a very inactive one and, in fact, was to remain so for the rest of this affair. But the promise of high adventure that my newly acquired job held out for the future sent me forth in soaring spirits.

Mrs. Burberson I found to be a woman several years Georgia Frayne's senior. She led me into her flat and seated herself opposite me with an air of self-righteousness.

"Georgia Frayne," she said, "and I have been friends since we were girls and when she called yesterday I told her what I thought she ought to know. God knows I didn't intend it to turn out this way, but I couldn't know, could I, and I thought I was doing it for the best."

She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Mr. Burberson," she continued, "is a traveling man, too. He got back from a trip a couple of days ago and told me he ran across Charlie Frayne in Chicago, in a cabaret one night. Mr. Burberson was there entertaining a good customer of his, like a salesman has to do, you know. Charlie Frayne was—well, had been drinking, and he had a woman with him and it was easy to see what kind of woman she was. When Georgia was here yesterday I thought it my duty to let her know."

"Of course," I murmured, inwardly curs-

ing all virtuous, meddling tattlers of her breed.

"Mrs. Frayne took it rather hard?" I asked. "She had had no suspicion before?"

"Of course not. She thought Charlie was wrapped up in her, the way he pretended to be. She was terribly upset when she left here, but could I have any idea—"

I left after a few minutes, there being nothing further to learn here. But the information I had obtained seemed to me but to confirm my theory of the tragedy.

I called on Captain Wigginton and obtained my pass; then proceeded to the flat of the Fraynes. It was, as Z had surmised, under guard, but the uniformed officer readily admitted me and showed me about on presentation of my pass.

The bedroom, scene of the tragedy, was at the rear of the flat and across the little passageway was the smaller room, used by the senior Mrs. Frayne. Access to either of these rooms would be impossible without passing the kitchen door.

Outside the bedroom window, as the captain had said, ran a fire escape.

"Was this window open or closed when the murder was discovered?" I asked the officer.

"The room was just the same as it is now," he informed me. "Nothing has been disturbed, except the body, of course, has been taken away by the coroner."

I lifted the window. It opened readily. I was about to vault out onto the fire escape, when some marks on the window sill caught my attention. A light film of dust covered the sill, evidence to the quality of the elder Mrs. Frayne's housekeeping. Dimly defined, yet clearly enough discernible under close examination, were two marks in this dust film: one clearly the print of a heel, the other what must have been the mark of a knee. Some other man had passed across this sill.

Glowing with pride at my discovery, I made a careful sketch of the sill and the two prints.

A light rain during the night made an examination of the fire escape futile; all marks had been washed away.

I made a diagram of the position of the body and the revolver, as described by the officer, and then proceeded to the coroner's, to view the corpse.

Charles Frayne had been a dashingly handsome young man, with a touch of insolence about his lips. The marks of self-indulgence were clearly visible, even on his dead mask. And there still lurked about his mouth a look of cruel viciousness.

The bullet had entered his forehead just above the inside corner of his left eye and had passed backward and toward the left side of the head, remaining imbedded in the brain, just inside the skull.

Shudderingly I made note of these gruesome details; then hurried back to Washington Square.

Z listened carefully to my report of my activities. My proud production of the sketch of the prints on the sill excited the interest I had expected. She made me describe several times, and sketch on an anatomical chart, the path of the bullet.

She leaned back in her chair. For a few moments she was silent. Then, quietly, simply, she announced:

"The murderer was a woman dressed in man's clothing; and she was left-handed."

I gasped. Out of this meager little collection of evidence, to me so barren of meaning, she had evolved this astounding conclusion, producing it in such a colorless, matter-of-fact manner.

"You—you are joking!" I stammered.

"By no means," she replied. "The evidence is perfectly clear. This unknown woman entered the window from the fire escape and carried on a quarrel with Frayne, ending in her shooting him. Georgia Frayne was in her mother-in-law's bedroom, having gone there when she returned from her walk; she knew her husband was in their bedroom and, due to what Mrs. Burberson had told her, she was too angry to talk to him. She heard the altercation between her husband and this other woman; heard the pistol shot, and screamed. She rushed across the hall—these being the steps Mrs. Frayne, Sr., heard—and flung open the door. The door flew back against the wall with a bang, the noise the old lady could not account for. The murderess, in the meantime, had dropped her weapon in her excitement and fled, her

footsteps being covered by Georgia Frayne's, and the sound of the window slamming shut being smothered in the bang of the door."

"But surely," I cried, "this is all purely artificial guess work."

"Not at all. It is the only explanation that fits the facts. How else would you explain the running footsteps and the sudden bang? How else would you explain the marks in the dust on the window sill? If Georgia Frayne entered the bedroom and closed the door behind her, then engaging in a dispute with her husband and killing him, how would you explain the fact that the door was open when the old lady dashed in? Note, also, in her excitement Georgia's voice was 'changed' to the point of being unrecognizable—yet at the crisis of excitement, when she screamed, her voice suddenly returned to normal. And, anyhow, the shot, as I said, was fired by a left-handed person."

"Perhaps Georgia Frayne happens to be left-handed."

"But she happens not to be," Z replied with assurance.

"How do you know?" I challenged.

"She sat in that chair with her left side toward me. I remember seeing the glint of the point of the bar pin at the throat of her blouse. Consequently, she had pushed the pin through with her right hand. A left-handed woman would have done it the other way."

I was completely silenced. I was speechless in the face of this amazing faculty of observation and analysis.

"Perhaps you know, too, the identity of the murderess?" I at length ventured.

"No," she smiled. "I'm afraid I can't supply that. But you remember the old problem of Mohammed and the mountain? Possibly we can get this Mohammed to come to this mountain. Write out this advertisement and have it inserted in all the important afternoon papers. Ask the editors to have the advertisement run in modest display on the same page with the Frayne case. Not too bold a display; that might excite suspicion. But it should be so placed that any one reading the Frayne story would be almost certain to see the advertisement. Use a blind box number for reply."

At her dictation I wrote out the following advertisement:

> WANTED—Young lady capable of male impersonation to leave city at once with lyceum act; no cheap variety performer; good amateur of refinement preferred; troupe consists of family group, including children.

Z leaned back in her chair, hands limp in her lap, and closed her eyes. It was her favorite position of reflection.

"That ought to do the work," she murmured, more to herself than to me. "First of all, she is sure to read eagerly all that the papers carry about the murder, so she will be pretty sure to see the ad. Her disguising herself as a man before calling on Frayne, and her care not to leave any finger prints on the revolver, indicate that she is an extremely cautious person. She has no desire to be caught. Consequently she must be anxious to leave the city. Georgia's scream told her there were others in the house; she must be fearful as to what they heard or saw and what the authorities know that they have not divulged through the papers. She, therefore, is probably afraid that the police are watching all departures.

"We can help this along by your asking the editors to include in their write-ups a vague line or two to the effect that the police are working on several other valuable clews and all railway stations are being watched. Passing through the station, though, as a member of a respectable lyceum troupe, she would be above suspicion. Although she may never before have tried masquerading as a man, her one attempt will give her assurance enough to claim experience. The ad, therefore, will seem to her a godsend simply made to order for her desperate needs."

"Which," I broke in dryly, "is exactly what it is."

"Of course," Z smiled. "The line about the cheap professionals is to cover the unusual procedure of running a display advertisement for a job of that kind, instead of going to the theatrical agencies. The part about the children is purely a shot

in the dark. The case has all the earmarks of the usual one in which a baby is involved. In that case it will at once appeal to the woman that here is an opportunity to take care of her baby likewise."

The letter of introduction that Mrs. Zea gave me to the various editors procured me immediate attention and acquiescence to my requests.

There was nothing to be done now until the answers to the advertisement should come in the following day. About mid-morning I made the round of the newspaper offices, collecting the bales of replies, and carted them to Washington Square.

Z seized the pile and shuffled through them swiftly. Without opening them, glancing merely at the superscriptions, she tossed them onto the desk in swift succession.

Midway through the pile she gave a quick exclamation of satisfaction. The envelope she held in her hand was a common, white one—the kind that is sold by any neighborhood stationer at ten cents a package. To me it was quite commonplace and indistinctive.

"Here is our lady, unless I am very much mistaken," Z declared. "Notice that peculiar back-handed swing—certainly the writing of a left-handed person."

She ripped open the envelope and drew forth the sheet within. The note read:

> In reply to your advertisement I would appreciate most highly an interview. I have never acted on the professional stage, but I have on occasion dressed and passed as a man, with great success, and feel absolutely certain I could satisfy you. I am anxious to leave town at once and will be very reasonable as regards salary. Please phone me at the above address for an interview.

Z looked up triumphantly. "Note the eagerness to leave town, to the point of making salary secondary. She does not claim to have had even amateur theatrical experience, but observe: 'I have on occasion *dressed* and *passed* as a man, with great success.' Oh, this is the person we want, I feel certain."

She drew the telephone toward her and called the number given in the letter. In a few moments she had arranged for the unknown to call at our study at once. And a few moments later she had also phoned Captain Wigginton, requesting his immediate presence.

The captain had barely entered the room and seated himself when Hester announced "Mrs. Raber," and ushered in a pretty, blond, bob-haired girl. Her youthful face was strained and her eyes were haggard. Every feature of her face and her tired, sagging body spoke of some terrible strain.

Z waved the girl to a chair. For several seconds silence hung heavy above us all. Then Z spoke.

"Mrs. Raber," she asked gently, "you probably had your own good reasons for shooting Charles Frayne—he may have deserved it—but was it fair of you to let Mrs. Frayne bear the blame?"

A terrified gurgle came from the girl's throat. Her face went gray and her eyes popped. She half started to her feet, then sank back limply.

"Deserve it!" she cried. "He deserved a thousand deaths!"

Her face dropped into her hands.

After a few minutes of unrestrained sobbing, she calmed, and her face lifted a bit defiantly.

She looked from Wigginton to me questioningly.

"I suppose you're detectives," she said.

"This is Captain Wigginton," Z introduced the officer.

"Well," the girl began, "you are right. I killed him. My name is Ethel Raber. Three years ago I met Charlie Frayne in Troy, and he urged me into marrying him, but insisted we keep it secret. When he got things settled in New York, he promised, he would bring me here to live. His family was opposed to his marrying, and there was an estate involved that he might lose if it became known. Some stuff like that he told me.

"Well, things drifted along, I seeing him only when his business brought him to Troy. After a while there was a baby. The marriage being secret, I had to get away from my friends; so I disappeared, going to Albany, calling myself Mrs. Raber.

"From then on I saw there was no chance for me. He had always been fairly

generous with money, but, after the baby, he began to cut down. I saw him less and less, and finally he quit coming altogether. I was desperate. I was a young woman with a baby, and I wanted my lawful husband.

" Finally I determined to trace him and force him to do his duty. I found him here in New York, and learned he had got married a second time. I disguised myself as a man, in case anybody should see me, crept up the fire-escape to the flat where he lived, hoping for a chance to catch him alone. It was just getting dark, so I thought nobody saw me. I was lucky. He was sitting in the bedroom, with the door shut.

" I pushed up the window and entered. I cried and pleaded with him to come to me and give me and our baby the home we were entitled to. He sneered in that cold, cruel way of his, called me terrible names, threatened me. Then I saw red. I don't know how it happened, but next thing I knew he was lying on the floor, the revolver was on the carpet at my feet, and I was standing, staring at him.

" A woman screaming in the next room brought me to. I sprang for the window, climbed through, slammed down the window, and ran down the fire-escape. I saw nobody, and I thought nobody saw me. But, before God, I swear I would never have let them convict Mrs. Frayne. If it had come to a serious point with her, I could have come forward and given myself up. But in the meantime I had my baby to think of. I don't regret what I did. He was the kind of dog that goes through the world breaking women's hearts, and the world is better off without him."

" Wasn't he afraid you would expose him as a bigamist?" inquired Z.

Captain Wigginton spoke up: " I've been looking him up. I discovered this morning that about two years ago he got a divorce from Ethel Frayne."

" A divorce!" the girl gasped.

" The papers gave your last known address as Troy. As you had disappeared, service could not be had on you and the suit went uncontested."

" And the cur was enjoying so much seeing me beg and suffer that he wouldn't cut short his pleasure by telling me about the divorce—telling me I didn't have any hold on him!"

She rose wearily and turned to Captain Wigginton.

" All right, captain," she said quietly. " I'm ready."

When they had gone Z turned sadly to me. " That is the saddest part of my work," she said. " Only the consideration that I am saving an innocent person from an unjust accusation and serious danger makes it bearable. Well, with the justification she had, her punishment will undoubtedly be light; surely society is under no necessity of exacting a heavy penalty from her."

" That explains," I murmured reflectively, " Georgia Frayne's peculiar attitude. Being in the next room, she heard the argument and learned that she was legally merely Frayne's mistress and that her baby would be illegitimate. Rather than explain this and bring this disgrace on her child, she was willing to take the blame and the penalty for his killing."

" Fortunately, her marriage now stands as legal. The divorce will stand, even though obtained under fraudulent conditions; there being no estate, no question will be raised."

I was still revolving in my mind the amazing conclusions, now proved to be correct, that Z had drawn from such meaningless clews.

" Tell me," I broke forth, " how in the world did you ever solve the mystery? It still is an absolute mystery to me."

Z picked up the piece of thread that she had taken from the crack in the revolver butt.

" This thread," she said, " was undoubtedly torn off by the sharp nickeled edge of the gun when pulled from the pocket. Where would a woman carry a gun concealed on her person?"

" Well," I hesitated, " probably in her blouse."

" Certainly. Would a silk blouse give a heavy yarn like this? This is from the cloth of a man's tweed suit."

" But," I objected, " it might have been caught there some time ago and not been noticed."

" By examining this under the microscope, you will see that the fine hairs making up the yarn are crisp and fresh. If the yarn were old, it would have been pressed and become limp and lost its life. Besides, there was the print of a knee on the window sill. A skirt would not leave a clear print like that."

" Then that would indicate a man, but why a woman disguised as a man?"

" That is the loose reasoning of the average person," chided Z. " That would indicate not necessarily a man—merely a man's clothing. Lacking other evidence, of course, we would assume a man; but in this case we do have other evidence. There is the pearl handled revolver—surely not a man's weapon. But more certain evidence, we have the woman's voice in argument with Frayne, heard by Mrs. Frayne, Sr. We therefore have as a certainty a woman —but almost as certainly a man's clothing; therefore: a woman disguised as a man."

" And the left-handedness?"

Z handed me the revolver.

" The shot was fired at a distance of approximately five feet. Stand five feet away and point the revolver at my head, holding it in your right hand. What direction would a bullet take, striking me above the inner corner of my left eye?"

Of course, I saw at once she was right. The bullet would certainly travel across the brain toward the right, instead of to the left, as in the case of Frayne.

" His head may have been turned slightly at the moment she shot," I still objected.

" Mrs. Frayne heard him cry out in fright immediately preceding the shot. He must have been staring directly at the gun."

I laid down the weapon.

" Q. E. D.," was all I could murmur.

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F E A R

I HAVE heard the siren shrieking in the blackness of the night:
" There's a U-boat near the convoy off to port!"
And soon the guns are stabbing at the darkness with their light,
As the crackle of the wireless makes retort.

I have heard the order given, " Stations, men, and make it quick!"
As we stumbled up the hatchway in the dark,
And I know I gave my orders in a voice a trifle thick,
For the launching of a lifeboat ain't a lark.

I have smelled the mustard spreading, as the shells kicked up the loam,
And we squeezed our shoulders closer in the ruts;
I have heard a picket challenge, as he shoved a cartridge " home,"
And its long steel nose lay pointed at my guts.

Some men are bloomin' heroes—never know the sort of fear
That makes your gizzard wrestle with your heart—
But I'm willing to admit it, and I'd like to make it clear,
That I never won a medal for my part.

Still, the clammy sort of terror that I've bumped against before
Was as nothing to the quaky kind of dread
That the " boss " instills within me when he has me " on the floor "
And is rapid-firing questions at my head.

Frederick S. Foltz.

The Pirate Who Grew Up

By W. T. WHITEHEAD

ALL his life Sanderson Blake, whom his fellow workers in the shipping department of the National Hardware and Machinery Company, where he marked destinations and routes on crates and boxes, called "Sand," had been getting it in the neck; fate, if it was fate, seemed to take a delight in disappointing him.

When he, with one hundred other comrades, had stepped three paces to the front in Brest, France, when the commanding officer had asked for men to go to Plymouth, England, and serve as an escort of honor to the President of the United States on his trip across the channel to France, and when arms had been distributed on the ship, and they turned out to be coal scoops, and the ship a collier, he was convinced that the part of the A. E. F. of which he was a member, was in league with fate.

Blake had just put down his lampblack pot and brush after assigning a consignment of window weights to Russia, which he had wanted to bet a man with a hand-truck would be made into shrapnel within six weeks, when he was touched on the elbow by an office boy who said Mr. Wright wanted to see him in his office.

When Amos Wright, head of the company, wanted to see a member of the shipping department in his office, it meant that he didn't want to see them in the establishment after that day.

His fellow-workers had christened Blake "Sand" just as much for the reason that he seemed to have that human quality

which men call sand, as they had for a desire to shorten up his name.

After placing the lampblack pot where there was a likelihood of some one stepping into it, he turned and followed the boy to Amos Wright's private office.

"Blake," said that person from the other side of a flat-top desk, "several complaints have come in from customers to the effect that crates and boxes that have been shipped to them from this establishment have been marked up with burlesque drawings.

"One of our best customers for farm hardware writes in from Saginaw, Michigan, that he recently received a box of one dozen garden sprays which was adorned with one-legged Venuses. Another customer down in Orlando, Florida, writes in to say that a crate of cultivators, shipped from here, was decorated with crude pictures of Santa Claus.

"Now this is an established business, Blake, that has been built on square and dignified dealing, and we can't have it wrecked by some one in our shipping department who thinks he can draw pictures. Just step out to the cashier; give him this slip and he will pay you off."

Young Blake reached over; took the slip and went out in the main office and up to the cashier's cage.

The cashier, who was a bald-headed, bespectacled little man who had to stand on the rungs of his stool to look at the man in front of the cage, took the slip, looked back at Blake and said:

"Leaving us, Mr. Blake?"

"Yeah," said the young man. "The old man's sending me out to learn how many wealthy farmers have rakes in their families."

The little man frowned; pushed twenty-five dollars across to Blake, grunted and settled back on his stool.

Back in the shipping room where he had gone to get his coat and hat, Blake was bombarded with questions by his fellow-workers who wanted to know what was the matter with the old man.

Blake met all questions with one answer. Mr. Wright had wanted him to take charge of the business, but as he wanted his evenings to himself, he had refused to consider the proposition.

From there Sanderson Blake started for his room on the upper West Side, where he was going to change his clothes—do Broadway, and eat in a real restaurant, preparatory to going to his room and to bed for the night before getting up and reading the Help Wanted columns in the morning paper.

When he arrived at his room he found a telegram had been stuck under his door. He threw his hat on the bed, let the window shade go up, and sat down to read the urgent message.

It was brief and to the point.

Father stricken with paralysis this A.M.
Come. MOTHER.

One hour later young Blake had settled with his landlady, and was on his way to Ferndale, New Jersey, to a farm lying close to the New Jersey-Pennsylvania line where twenty-five years before he had first seen the light of day.

The train he traveled on seemed to him to be awfully slow, and perhaps it was just as well; it gave him time to do some much needed thinking.

The more he thought the more convinced was he that he had not used the old folks just right. Not that he had done anything to make them ashamed of him. For he never had.

He and his father had quarreled because his father wouldn't sign for him when he wanted to get into the big war, he being under age. He had run away and by what he considered telling white lies had got into the United States army under the name of Blake Sanderson. When he had been put where he could depend on remaining for a reasonable length of time, he had written to his mother telling her what he had done.

Like most mothers Mrs. Blake hadn't wanted to lose her boy, but when she learned that he had passed through with only a few body wounds, she was glad that her boy had run away to fight for his country.

His father, a stern, lank New Jersey farmer, had been different; he didn't care whether the boy ever came back. He had disobeyed him before he had come of age.

Noel Blake said some rash things about his son, but his mother knew that he didn't mean them, so what did it matter?

Thought Sanderson Blake to himself as the train lumbered toward Ferndale:

"I am twenty-five years of age. I have seen my share of the world; I have gone through the biggest war of all time; I came out of it with only a few body scars, a fair record and the right to sell pencils or court plaster without the ignominious necessity of having to pay a license for a permit. The governor has now passed into a useless state as far as farming goes, and dear old mom has got to be looked after as well as the governor. Verily it is time we settled down, boy. Let us consider our days of irresponsibilities at an end."

It was late night when Blake got off the train at Ferndale, but knowing the road well, in less than half an hour he was holding a sobbing old woman's form in his arms. Pa had been stricken while milking the cows that morning; he hadn't regained consciousness yet; Dr. Lambert wasn't sure that he ever would.

Sanderson had come home to stay, hadn't he? He wasn't going to leave his mother ever again? Of course he wasn't, he had run away to go to the war because he knew his mother would have felt bad with other mothers' boys going and hers hiding behind a few months of age. He had gone and he had come back and he wasn't ever going to leave his dear old mother again. The way that boy hugged and lifted that nice old lady seemed a shame.

She took him upstairs and to a door where in the dim light he made out the form of his tall, stern father, lying still beneath white bed clothes. On the other side of the bed he made out the features of a man he knew to be Dr. Lambert.

Later, downstairs he heard from Dr. Lambert:

"I had hoped that only one side was affected, but it looks very much like complete paralysis; both sides seized. This is my fourth visit since this morning, and he seems not one bit different than he did when we carried him in from the cow barn. You are going to remain, aren't you, Sanderson?"

"I sure am. Were the cows milked this evening, mother?"

"Yes, Mr. Phillips, our neighbor on the west, and his hired man came over and stripped the herd."

When Mrs. Blake had returned to her stricken husband, Dr. Lambert, who had brought Sanderson Blake into the world in that very house, felt privileged to talk to the young man as he would to one of his own.

"You know, boy, it is up to you to keep the Blake farm functioning now that your father has been made useless; if I remember right the old school gang of your time used to call you Sand; oh, I know, my Billy used to tell his mother about what a brave pirate Sand Blake was going to be. I believe he was to have been a member of your crew. It is my fondest hope, Sand, that you have enough of that gritty commodity in your makeup to keep things moving as your father had them moving. You have a fifty acre farm here to keep going. You are at the age where the average man who amounts to anything settles down. If there ever comes a time when you have reason to think Dr. Lambert can be of any assistance, all you have to do is to tell Dr. Lambert your troubles and ask it."

"I thank you, doctor, and if such a time ever comes you can depend on my bringing my troubles to you. Yes, I am going to settle down; I have been unsettled only three years. I went away right after my seventeenth birthday. After the armistice I was shifted over to a division that was sent into Germany where we remained until 1921. I reason that every day that I was in the army I was settled; at least the War Department knew just where it could put its finger on me. After I took my discharge —which by the way was an honorable one —I spent my two and a half years of unsettled life on, over and under the sidewalks of New York. You can depend on it, I have settled down.

"By the way, doctor, on my way along the Ferndale turnpike from the station last night, I kept running into depressions and piles of dirt. What are they doing? Fixing the old road up?"

"Since you have been away, Sand, the Ferndale turnpike has been converted into

a State and county highway, and is now known on road maps as Trunk Six or Jersey Highway. It is eventually to be ninety miles long and of concrete; Ferndale's part of it is to be constructed this summer; it is to be five miles long, ten inches thick and twenty feet wide."

"You seem to know all about it, doctor."

"In view of the fact that my son-in-law, Grant Rice, who I believe was to have been another member of your pirate crew, and who last year finished his engineering course, was three days ago put in charge of this work by the Keystone Construction Company, and who with Elsie, his wife, is living at our house, I should think I'd know a trifle about the details. Those piles of dirt you say you ran into are gravel for the concrete that has been hauled a distance of twelve miles. I understand from Rice that sand and gravel is the jinx on this job; says it is going to cost the company so much for these materials that it is going to eat way into the profits of the job."

"And why is it necessary for them to haul gravel twelve miles?"

"For the reason, my boy, that there is none to be got any nearer. That a good reason?"

Young Blake nodded, and pinched his chin with the thumb and index finger of the right hand.

"I guess I'll go up and have another look at your father," said the kind-faced old doctor, as he went gently up the stairs.

Shortly afterwards Blake heard his mother shriek and then break into a sobbing cry; he knew that his father had passed over. He hurried upstairs, took his mother in his arms, and caressed her as only a son knows how to caress a mother in times of sorrow. He looked down at the kind, yet stern features of his father; swallowed a lump in his throat as he had done many times in France, and lifted his mother gently up and carried her downstairs to the living room, where he sat her down in an easy chair and cried with her.

Dr. Lambert came down shortly after; went to the telephone and called Undertaker Millspaugh, whom he knew was the mortician the family would want. Then he summoned one or two of the near-by neighbors, that the mother and son need not be alone with the dead, and set about making them both understand that it was God's way, and to begrudge Noel Blake the happiness that must be his would appear to be selfish.

The son who had seen men he had breakfasted with ripped into eternity before noon by unseen contrivances; who had seen gaps torn in the ranks of his advancing comrades, only to be immediately filled with other men ready to go the same way if they must, responded to the old doctor's kindly reasoning; but mother and wife had not beheld wholesale sorrow and could not adjust herself with any ease to her loss.

II.

On the fourth day, following a large country funeral, Sanderson Blake set himself about taking his father's place on the Blake farm.

He had hired a farm hand to take charge of the small herd of cows, and, as his mother believed, was busying himself with preparing for the early spring plowing, harrowing and planting. To the casual observer he seemed to be doing just this; but he was doing nothing of the kind.

When Dr. Lambert had told him of the twelve-mile gravel haul the Keystone Construction was being compelled to pay for, and when he had noticed a fleet of twenty five-ton trucks making five round trips, carrying four yards of gravel each trip, he had remembered something.

At the rear end of a medium-graded valley that ran through the centre of the Blake farm, and hidden from the road, there were five acres of land running to a height of twenty-five feet, on which his father had never been able to grow anything; it had been useless as a place for sheep to graze on. Nothing grew on it but poke weed, thistles and wire grass; and very little of either.

As a boy he had seen his father, in the old days when every landowner along the turnpike had either to keep the road skirting his property in condition or pay the town road commissioner for having the highway

fixed up, take loads of gravel out of the side of this useless land.

He toted a sand-screen and a shovel from the tool house to this gravel bank, where he had screened a quantity, and placed it under a magnifying glass, and had satisfied himself that his father had left something valuable behind.

The screened sand had shown itself, under the glass, to be what contractors want for concrete work; it was not globular or perfectly round like sea sand, but was what is known among builders as interlocking sand; a material that when given its wet cement, didn't lay one particle against the other, but interlocked and made a compact finish. Unscreened it was a perfect gravel, having the proper proportion of different sized particles.

Blake's mother had shown him his father's last will and testament. It was dated two years before, was brief and to the point:

> To my wife, Elizabeth Sanderson Blake, I leave all of my earthly possessions. At the death of my widow whatever is left is to pass on to my son, Sanderson Blake, if living. If not, whatever is left is to go to the Ferndale M. E. church.
>
> (Signed) NOEL BLAKE.
>
> (Witness) Mark D. Lambert.
> " Martha E Lambert.

Sanderson Blake had said:

" Ma, I'm your farm manager, am I not?"

" You are our farm manager, dear. It is our farm; yours and mine. Why do you ask?"

" Oh, just because."

And just because the mother thought she knew her boy, she didn't press him for the reason.

That afternoon, when he felt sure of himself, having been taught in the army never to jump until he was certain of the depth of the water, Sand Blake walked up the road under construction to the shack office at the roadside used by the construction engineer, where he found Grant Rice poring over a blue print on a hemlock table that was supposed to be a draftsman's board. Rice looked up; stared, stuck out his hand and said:

" Damned if it isn't our old pirate captain, Sand Blake; heard of your loss, old man; sorry, but we have all got to expect that sort of thing. Home for good now?"

Blake said he was, and after shaking hands for two or three minutes and taking Rice's proffered cigarette, he went at the mission he had come on:

" Say, Grant, your father-in-law, Dr. Lambert, tells me that you are compelled to have your sand and gravel hauled a distance of twelve miles, and I noticed the fleet of trucks trailing past our place. What's the idea?"

" Why, we can't get it any nearer; all of the banks in this vicinity seem to have played out. Ralph Marsden, the engineer who provided the estimate figures which our company used to land this contract, somehow made a bad bull with his sand and gravel figures; he was to have had charge of this job, but he and one of the company had a run in over something, and Marsden got the gangplank; I haven't got the particulars yet. Haven't been in the Philadelphia home office for six weeks; was sent here from a job I was on down in Maryland.

" Yes, we are using twenty five-ton trucks at a cost of thirty dollars a day. Twenty-five for the truck and five for the driver. They make five round trips daily, delivering twenty yards of material, four yards to the load, at a cost of fifty-five dollars. The gravel costs us one dollar and twenty-five cents a yard, and the sand, which we use in surfacing and for bridge and culvert work, costs one dollar and fifty cents a yard. Oh, it will eat into the profits awfully. But what can we do? This five mile stretch has got to be completed by November 1st of this year.

" And the worst of it is that we are going to be jacked up for this sand and gravel until the gravel is costing us one dollar and fifty cents a yard and the sand a dollar and seventy-five "

Sand Blake had to put his hands in his pockets so that Rice would not be apt to see them tremble and think that he was suffering from shell-shock.

" Yes, we're in a hell of a fix; you see ours is a Pennsylvania concern, and there

isn't any one that we know of in New Jersey who is going to throw any somersaults over our getting a New Jersey contract and try to bury us in sand."

Blake had got his hands still, and after trying out his voice by saying, "Hell!" several times, finally inquired:

"What could you afford to pay for sand and gravel if you could get it within one mile of where we are?"

"Why, we could afford to pay the dollar and twenty-five and dollar and fifty that we are paying, if we could cut the cost of our trucking in half. Say, what the hell are you talking about, Sand? Do you know something that no one else knows? Why, the Johnston Supply Company we are buying our sand and gravel from will make over a half a million dollars off this job. What do you know, anything?"

"Spare half an hour to come with me?" asked Blake.

"If it's about sand and gravel, I can spare the rest of the week. Here, Walls," he called to his assistant, who was passing the open door, "take charge of everything until I return," and he and Blake started off down the road in the direction of the Blake farm.

They jumped a stone wall, and effected a short-cut without having to pass the house up the valley through the center of the farm.

When they arrived at the place where Blake had dug into the bank and screened the pile of sand, Rice placed his hands on his hips; looked the bank up and down, and exclaimed:

"Who the hell put this back here! Why, damn it, Blake, you can stand right there with your hands in your pockets and get rich. How far back does that thing go?" He scrambled to the top, where after looking the surface over, he did a hula hula dance that executed in a public place would have caused his immediate apprehension.

"Why, Sand, there's a million yards piled here; it's gravel clear back to the slope in the woods," and he slid down the gravel bank like a little boy who had just discovered a bird's nest.

"Will it mean anything to your concern if you can buy the gravel for a dollar flat a yard and a dollar and twenty-five cents for the screened sand? Will it mean any feather in your helmet?" asked Blake.

"Say, Sand, if I can send in a report that I can do that, I can depend on feathers enough to fly with; oh boy, but you sure are a welcome pirate this day of our Lord. When can we begin hauling from here; I will provide the labor for excavating, screening and loading, until you can install an excavator, screener and conveyor at just what we hire them for—four dollars a day of eight hours—and which you should be able to do in two weeks. We pay every Saturday night for the sand used that week. Start to-morrow?"

"If you want to, but you have a contract with the Johnston people, haven't you?"

"No contract, just get what we want every day. They wouldn't make a contract with us; that wouldn't do. It wouldn't be so easy to jack us up until they have our socks. If it wasn't so late in the afternoon, I'd put a gang in here to-day, with your sayso, and lay off half the trucks. But we'll let it go until morning; I'll get a couple of sand screens, put twelve men in, two to screen and ten to excavate and load."

They walked back to the road, where Grant Rice indulged in more vigorous hand shaking, and went off in the direction of his construction work.

Blake went to the house along the footpath, where he told his mother of their good fortune. Mrs. Blake poured cold water on the proposition by going to her late husband's desk and bringing back a letter which she handed to her son. He read:

NOEL BLAKE, Ferndale, N. J., R. F. D. No. 3:

Sir—It has been brought to my attention that you are contemplating giving to one Ralph Marsden a lease permitting said Marsden to remove sand and gravel from one part of your land. As mortgagee, I wish to call your attention to the clause in the mortgage which prohibits you from leasing any part of the mortgaged land to any one or ones who intend to remove therefrom any land, lumber or stone, without the mortgagee's consent. This I shall refuse to give.

EZRA WATSON.

Cherry Ridge, Pa.

Young Blake looked up from the letter, and said:

"Why, mother, I had no idea there was a mortgage on the farm; I always thought that dad was comfortably fixed. How big is this mortgage and when is it due?"

"It is for one thousand dollars, and is due to be paid off or renewed on November 1st of the present year. I know you had no idea of the mortgage, son, neither have a lot of people we know. After you went away your father let a man interest him in an oil stock affair; told him that by investing ten thousand dollars he would get back three times ten in one year's time. He did not and the mortgage is the result. I wanted your father to get Dr. Lambert to take the mortgage, but he didn't want the doctor to know of his difficulties, and thought it would be better to go to some one outside our community. I meant to tell you before, son, but never thought of it until you just told me what you have."

"Let me see the mortgage, will you, mother?"

After reading it carefully over three times, young Blake's face lighted up.

"It is true; that clause about leasing any part of the land for the removal of land, timber or stone is here, but there is nothing that says that father couldn't remove any of those materials himself. Have you still faith in your farm manager, mother?"

"All the faith in the world, Sanderson."

"All right. We go into operation tomorrow morning. Remember, you have given a lease to no one, your manager is doing whatever is being done."

III.

Noon the next day saw one hundred yards of gravel, at a dollar the yard, carted out of the Blake bank.

Four o'clock the same afternoon found Ezra Watson and his lawyer at the Blake home, wanting to know if the Widow Blake had read the mortgage over.

She had. So had her manager; she would send for him. He responded on the run. Oh, yes, he had read the clause over three times; had Mr. Watson?

Here is Rutherford Stanton, his personal attorney, who had prepared the mortgage; talk to him.

Yes, he had prepared the mortgage, and it specifically specified that no land, timber or stone could be removed without the consent of the mortgagee. He remembered that particularly, because his client had it incorporated in all of his mortgage holdings.

"Well," said young Blake, "you may have fully intended to have incorporated that clause in this particular mortgage, but you didn't."

"Let me see it," said Stanton, with a flourish of authority.

Blake got the document for him, and watched his face cloud as he read it through.

"This has been altered or my stenographer has left out a word or two. We will take it back with us and rectify it. I will mail it so that you will get it back in tomorrow's mail."

"You will like hell, you'll hand it right back," said Blake, who, noticing that his mother was temporarily out of the room, thought it well to let both these men see that they weren't dealing with a woman.

"And who may you be?" asked Stanton.

"I may be any one, but just now I happen to be Sanderson Blake, and I want that mortgage back, and back quick."

"Come," said the lawyer to Ezra Watson, as he made to put the mortgage in his inside coat pocket, and strode toward the door. Blake thought for a split second, and deciding that outdoors would be a better place for his purpose, stood back and allowed Watson to pass out after Stanton.

Blake was out after them and at Stanton's side in a few seconds. He took the lawyer by the shoulder, swung him about so that they faced each other, and said softly but sternly:

"Give me that mortgage!"

"Like hell I will," said Stanton, as his right hand slipped into his overcoat pocket.

Blake grabbed Stanton's left wrist; there was a glint of gun-metal as an automatic shot through the air, and Stanton landed on his back, as Blake took the much-wanted document from his pocket.

"You'll suffer for this!" declared Ezra

Watson as Blake pocketed the automatic, and Stanton scrambled to his feet.

"Off this land!" ordered Blake as he pointed to the path, at the bottom of which Watson's car stood. "You may have a mortgage on it, but you don't own it. The mortgage will be paid when it falls due. Now get off and get off fast."

Back in the house Blake found his little mother all flustered up over the excitement; she had never been used to seeing rough stuff applied, and wasn't quite sure whether she should be angry or pleased with her son. She compromised by letting him take her on his lap in a rocking chair and kiss her until she wasn't quite sure what was going on.

"They did my dear old dad in oil, but they're not going to do my dear old mom in sand," said the young roughneck as he set her down on her feet on the floor. "I'm going back to the gravel bank. If you want or need me before supper time, just send Elmer to the brow of the hill to whistle for me," and he went off to his Eldorado.

At the bank he found Grant Rice, whom he told what had happened.

"Are you sure that mortgage is worded as you say it is?"

"Absolutely!" answered Blake.

"Then you have nothing to fear. I don't mean by that that they won't try to frighten you. I mean that if they pull you into court, you can beat them to a frazzle. Come up to the house to-night. Betty Lambert's been asking about you. Remember Betty, don't you, the spindle-legged girl who sat across from you in school who wouldn't tell the teacher on you when she saw you scatter Limburger cheese in the aisle? You remember. Betty and Helen were twins; I married Helen. If the information's any good Betty is still unattached. The doctor can probably give you some good information about this Ezra Watson. He knows a lot of people over in Cherry Ridge, which is only about ten miles from here."

"I'll come, may I bring mother with me?"

"Do. You may need a chaperon. Betty's just as nice as she always was, only a little nicer. Don't fail now," and Rice moved away to direct an excavation activity.

True to his word, that evening young Blake, with his mother, arrived at the Lambert home, about a mile distant. While Mrs. Lambert was consoling with Mrs. Blake on the loss of her husband, Grant Rice and his pretty wife had taken Blake in the library, where they showed him Betty Lambert,. who was reading a book, and then thoughtfully went out in the living room.

It didn't take long for the young man to attract the young lady's attention, after which they shook hands, blushed and stammered until both could recover their equanimity.

The girl was the first to speak.

"So you ran away to get into the war. Well, Sanderson Blake, I am glad to see you safely back."

"And I, Betty Lambert, am glad to be seen."

The girl replaced a wisp of vagrant black hair, which had fallen against her pretty oval face, and looked tantalizingly at the young man in front of her.

"You didn't carry out your intention of being a pirate captain, did you, Sand?"

"No, couldn't get a crew. If I remember right, you applied for the place of cook on the ship, didn't you?"

"Yes, and you said that girls never made good pirates, and refused to consider me."

"Say, Betty, you remember those notes we used to write each other and pass back and forth across the aisle?"

"Gracious, Sand, do you remember those things yet?"

"Remember them! Why, I have some of them tucked away in my old school books at home yet. Of course, I remember them, I don't want to forget them."

At this point Dr. Lambert brought his smiling self into the room.

"Well, young folks, I see you have renewed your acquaintance. Hope you don't disappoint my little girl again the way you did when she came home crying because you wouldn't let her go as cook for your pirate crew. Speaking of pirates, I understand you have been having some experience with Ezra Watson and his shyster barrister, Stanton. If ever there was a man who

made a financial success of land pirating, it is Ezra Watson. Rice tells me that you have the edge on this affair. I hope you have."

"I think so, doctor. I have brought over Watson's letter to my father regarding the giving of a lease, and the mortgage. Read them and see if you do not think I am right."

Blake took the papers from his coat pocket and handed them to the physician, who adjusted his spectacles and sat down to read them.

"Right as a trickit, boy," he exclaimed when he had finished both. "If you need any financial aid to go after this sharper, come to me."

"I thank you, doctor, but I don't think I shall require any. All that I hope ever to ask you for will be your daughter and your blessing," replied the young man, coming to an unexpected point with his usual bluntness.

"Well, the army has certainly taught you to be polite, concise and to the point, young man. I can't ask you if you can keep my girl as she is used to being kept, because in a month or so you can be offering a doddering old doctor financial aid. I knew once that you and Betty considered yourselves school sweethearts, but I never dreamed it was as lasting as this. If my girl is satisfied, I have no objections, and I don't know that it would make any difference if I had. How about it, Betty?"

But Betty wasn't there; she had left the room when they had got to talking business. Seeing that they were alone, Blake took the opportunity of delivering a little monologue of his own.

"Ever since ten years ago, when we graduated together, it had been my determination to have your Betty—if she would let me, and I could afford to have her. When you told me down at the house that Grant Rice had married your daughter, you scared me worse than the Heinies ever did, I was so frightened that I didn't dare ask you which one of the two he had married. I found out later from Rice himself. Of course, I can't afford Betty just yet, but by the time the dress is made and the church is decorated, after I have shown my respect to my father with a mourning period, I will be well able to afford her."

Grant Rice put his head in at the door, and said:

"Sand, here's Marsden out here. Came over to see me about the job. He's been taken back by the firm; maybe he can tell us something. Want to talk to him?"

"Sure," said Blake.

Dr. Lambert left the library to find his daughter and ascertain her views on what he and Blake had been talking about.

Rice and Marsden entered and took seats while Blake related what had happened with Ezra Watson.

Then Marsden told his story:

"When a man arrives at my time of life; has a family and has made no particular headway, he begins looking about for loose ends that if followed, might lead to somewhere. I heard about your father's gravel bank, and thought it would be a clever move if I could get a lease on it, and sell the material to my company, which needed it badly. Somehow it got to the ears of Watson, who has a controlling interest in the Johnston Supply Company. Watson is also a stockholder in the Keystone Construction Company. His profits naturally would be greater from the Johnston Supply Company's sale of sand and gravel than they would be from the Keystone Company off this road job, so he wrote your father, Mr. Blake, that there was a clause in the mortgage precluding his giving a lease to any one who might want to remove the material. I had a hard time convincing our general manager, Mr. Woodhull, that I had been working for the interests of the company; in a way I had. I was going to sell the material for a dollar a yard; with a short haul this is reasonable, as Mr. Rice knows. I have been reinstated. I go to the Maryland job which Mr. Rice had charge of before coming here, which is why I came to see him to get pointers that never are written down. Yes, it was Watson who reported me to the general manager. I guess that's about all."

"That's sufficient," said Blake, as he shook hands and went out to look up his pirate ship's cook.

Amos Wright, head of the National

Hardware and Machinery Company, almost slid from his polished swivel chair six weeks later when he received a check and letter for a full equipment of sand and gravel machinery, excavator, screener and conveyor, from Sanderson Blake of Ferndale, New Jersey, carrying a one-legged Venus and a Santa Claus at the bottom of the letter, with a P. S. to " Rush shipment."

When the machinery had been installed and ten thousand dollars' worth of sand and gravel had been excavated and delivered on the roadside to the Keystone Construction Company, the grown-up pirate called at the Lambert house and informed a certain girl that the ship was ready to sail and that a cook just like her was badly needed.

And they still call him Sand, and he is still getting richer and richer from it.

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THE WEB OF LIFE

THERE is many a rose in the road of life,
If we would only stop to take it:
And many a tone from the better land,
If the querulous heart would wake it.
To the sunny soul that is full of hope,
And whose beautiful trust ne'er faileth,
The grass is green and the flowers bright,
Though the winter storm prevaileth.

Better to hope, though the clouds hang low,
And to keep the eyes still lifted:
For the sweet blue sky will still peep through,
When the ominous clouds are rifted.
There is never a night without a day,
Or an evening without a morning;
And the darkest hour, as proverbs say,
Is the hour before the dawning.

There is many a gem in the path of life,
Which we pass in our idle pleasure,
That is richer far than the jeweled crown
Or the miser's hoarded treasure;
It may be the love of an absent friend,
Or a mother's prayer to heaven,
Or only a beggar's grateful cry,
For a cup of water given.

Far better to weave in the web of life
A bright and golden filling,
And to do God's will, with a cheerful heart,
And hands that are ready and willing,
Than to snap the delicate minute threads
Of our curious lives asunder,
And then blame heaven for the tangled end,
And sit and grieve and wonder.

Betty A. Beall.
10 A

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