ARGOSY

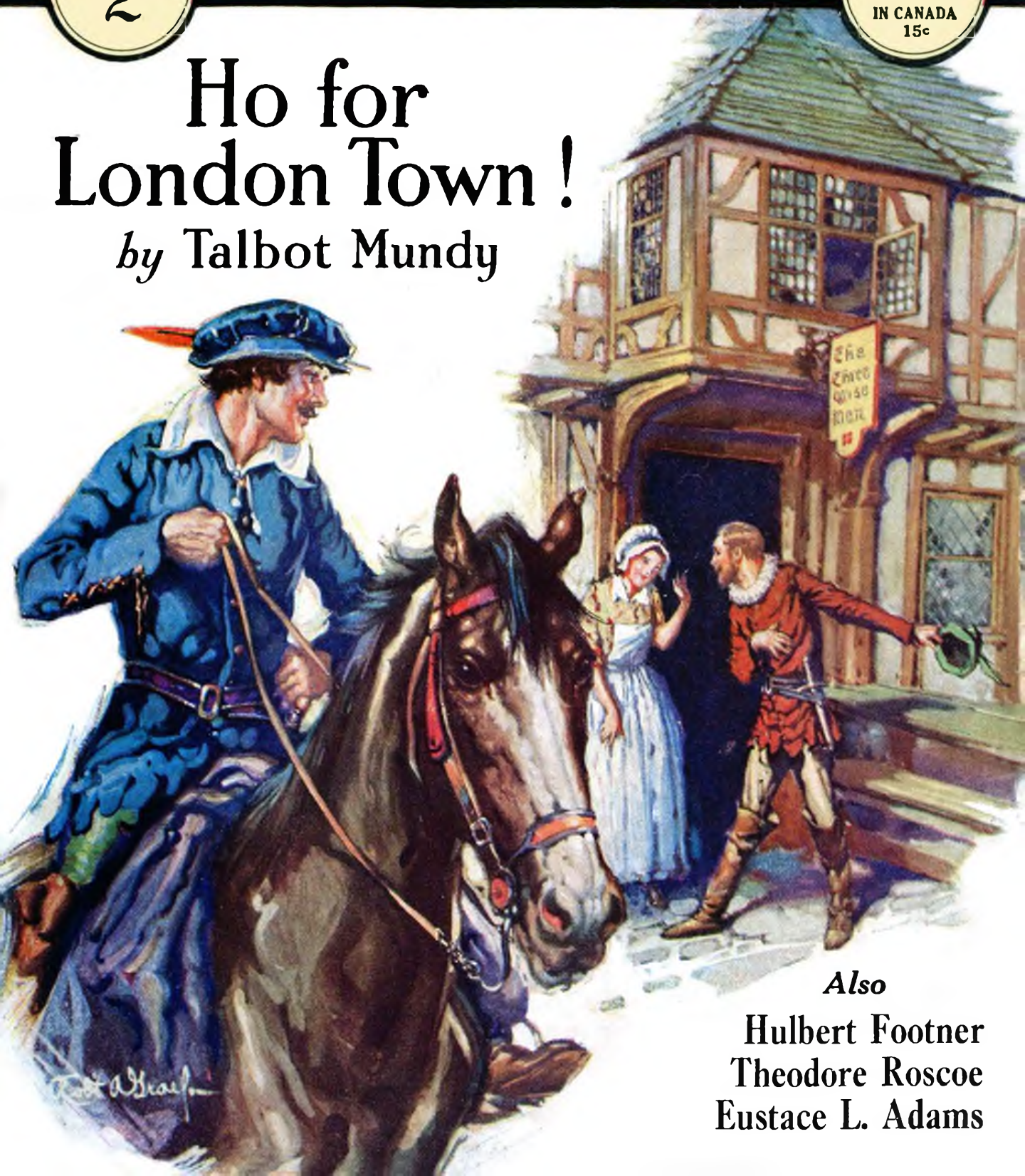
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

FEB. 2

PRICE 10¢ IN CANADA 15c

Ho for London Town!

by Talbot Mundy



Also

Hulbert Footner
Theodore Roscoe
Eustace L. Adams

Taste the Juice of Real Mint Leaves

MY VALENTINE
Roses are red--
Violets blue—
Wrigley's Spearmint
Is good for you!
Wrigley Rhymes

WRIGLEY'S SPEARMINT
THE PERFECT GUM
MINT LEAF FLAVOR
THE FLAVOR LASTS

It sweetens the mouth and breath—aids digestion. A lasting, cleansing flavor that gives prolonged enjoyment.

After Every Meal

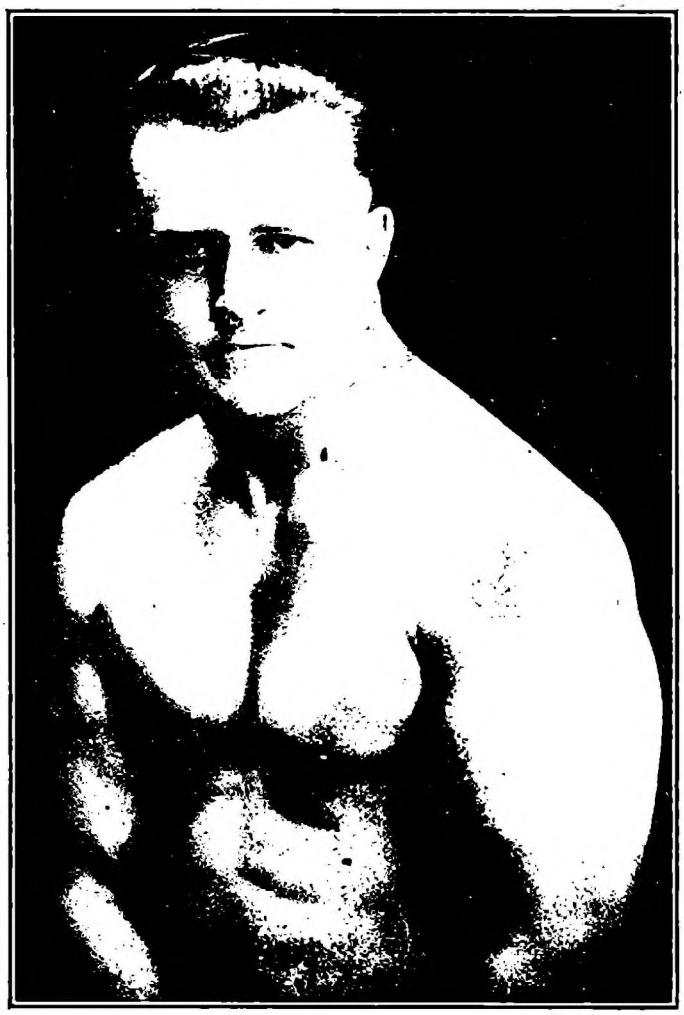
BE SURE IT'S **WRIGLEY'S**

The Man I Pity Most

POOR OLD JONES. I see him now, standing there, dejected, cringing, afraid of the world. No one had any use for him. No one respected him. Across his face I read one harsh word—FAILURE. He just lived on. A poor worn out imitation of a man, doing his sorry best to get on in the world. If he had realized just one thing, he could have made good. He might have been a brilliant success.

There are thousands and thousands of men like Jones. They, too, could be happy, successful, respected and loved. But they can't seem to realize the one big fact—that practically everything worth while living for depends upon STRENGTH—upon live, red-blooded, he-man muscle.

Everything you do depends upon strength. No matter what your occupation, you need the health, vitality and clear thinking only big, strong virile muscles can give you. When you are ill the strength in those big muscles pull you through. At the office, in the farm, fields or on the tennis courts, you'll find your success generally depends upon your muscular development.



EARLE LIEDERMAN, The Muscle Builder
Author of "Muscle Building," "Science of Wrestling," "Secrets of Strength," "Here's Health," "Endurance," Etc.

Here's a Short-cut to Strength and Success

But, you say, "It takes years to build my body up to the point where it will equal those of athletic champions." It does if you go about it without any system, but there's a scientific short-cut. And that's where I come in.

30 Days Is All I Need

People call me the Muscle-Builder. In just 30 days I can do things with your body you never thought possible. With just a few minutes' work every morning, I will add one full inch of real, live muscle to each of your arms, and two whole inches across your chest. Many of my pupils have gained more than that, but I GUARANTEE to do at least that much for you in one short month. Your neck will grow shapely, your shoulders begin to broaden. Before you know it, you'll find people turning around when you pass. Women will want to know you. Your boss will treat you with a new respect. Your friends will wonder what has come over you. You'll look ten years younger, and you'll feel like it, too. Work will be easy. As for play, why, you'll realize then that you don't know what play really means.

I Strengthen Those Inner Organs Too

But I'm not through with you. I want ninety days in all to do the job right, and then all I ask is that you stand in front of your mirror and look yourself over.

What a marvelous change! Those great squared shoulders! That pair of huge, lithe arms! Those firm, shapely legs! Yes, sir. They are yours, and they are there to stay. You'll be just as fit inside as you are out, too, because I work on your heart, your liver—all of your inner organs, strengthening and exercising them. Yes, indeed, life can give you a greater thrill than you ever dreamed. But, remember, the only sure road to health, strength and happiness *always demands action.* Fill out the coupon below and mail it to-day. *Write now!*

SEND FOR MY NEW FREE 64-PAGE BOOK

"Muscular Development"

It contains forty-eight full-page photographs of myself and some of the many prize-winning pupils I have trained. Some of these came to me as pitiful weaklings, imploring me to help them. Look them over now and you will marvel at their present physiques. This book will prove an impetus and a real inspiration to you. It will thrill you through and through. This will not obligate you at all, but for the sake of your future health and happiness do not put it off. Send today—right now before you turn this page.

EARLE LIEDERMAN
Dept. 1102, 305 Broadway, New York City

EARLE LIEDERMAN,
Dept. 1102, 305 Broadway, New York City

Dear Sir:—Please send me absolutely free and without any obligation on my part whatsoever, a copy of your latest book, "Muscular Development." (Please write or print plainly.)

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 201 | CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY 2, 1929 | NUMBER 2

SERIALS

COMPLETE STORIES

OTHER FEATURES

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday throughout the United States and Canada

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, and
LONDON: HACHETTE & CIE., 16-17 King William Street, Charing Cross, W.C. 2
PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE., 111 Rue Réaumur
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President and Treasurer RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Vice-President and Secretary
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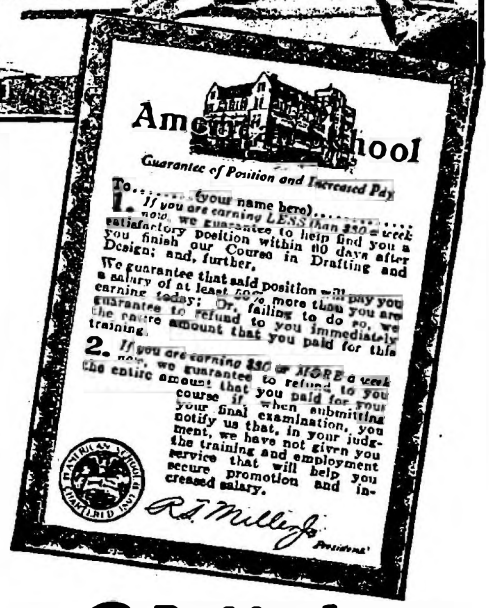
Single copies, 10 cents. By the year, $4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; $7.00 to Canada and Foreign Countries. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Currency should not be sent unless registered

Entered as second-class matter November 28, 1896, at the post-office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879

We have placed machinists, carpenters, masons, plumbers, railroad men, office clerks, farmers and even laborers in fine Drafting Jobs under this plan. Mail coupon for details of our remarkable offer.

Men Who Work With Their Hands *Make the Best* DRAFTSMEN



and We'll Back Them With This Guarantee of a DRAFTING JOB and RAISE!

"Only one other man and I, of six taking California State Board examination for Architect passed. Then I realized the thorough and practical training given by American School. In 18 months I have gone from tracer to Chief Draftsman, in charge of all architectural and engineering work in one of the oldest offices here." R. L. WARREN, Los Angeles, Calif.

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DRAFTING Is Logically YOUR NEXT MOVE!

Of course you realize the biggest handicap to mechanical work is that you're limited in earning capacity to the output of your two hands, as long as you live. Even the skilled mechanic earning $50 to $60 a week has reached his limit. He can never earn more and when he gets old he will earn less. So I don't blame any man for wanting to get away from his futureless outlook. For wanting to get into something where he can use his head as well as his hands—where he will be paid for what he knows, instead of only for what he does . . . You know enough about blueprints to understand that PLANS govern every move in factory and construction job. The Draftsman who makes them is several jumps ahead of the workman who follows them. And so I want you to know that DRAFTING is a logical, natural PROMOTION from mechanical and building work—better-paid, more interesting—just the kind of work you'd enjoy doing.

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The way to a fine Drafting job for you—is easier than you think. It takes no "artistic talent" or advanced education. Thousands of men no smarter than you, with no more education or ability have learned it quickly and you can, too. With the cooperation of some of the biggest employers and engineers in the U. S. we have worked out a plan to prepare you for Drafting work in your spare time at home—to actually place you in a fine position and to raise your pay. Backed by the guarantee shown above to refund the small cost, if we fail. Mail the coupon and I'll be glad to tell you all about this life-time chance to get into Drafting.

The American School

Dept. D-24, Drexel Ave. and 58th St., Chicago, Ill.

3 Drafting Lessons Actually FREE

To Show You How Interesting and Simple Drafting Is . . .

I wish I had the room here to tell you all about DRAFTING—how it has become the most important branch of every kind of manufacturing and construction work—how fascinating the work is—what a fine bunch of fellows Draftsmen are, the big salaries paid—how white Drafting is white-collar other work, it is closely hooked-up with big projects and big men. All that takes a 36-page book to tell and I'll be glad to send it to you *free*, and in addition I want to send you the first three lessons of our home-training so you can see how you'll like the work and how simple it is to learn. Coupon brings everything—mail it right away.

American School, Dept. D-24
Drexel Ave. & 58th St., Chicago, Ill.

Please send free and without the slightest obligation 3 Drafting lessons, 36-page book about the opportunities in Drafting and your Guarantee to get me a Drafting Job and a Raise.

Name.....

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City.....State.....

Age.....Occupation.....

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A NEW DEAL BY AN OLD HOUSE FOR MEN SEEKING BIG OPPORTUNITY AND PAY. UNION MADE-TO-MEASURE ALL-WOOL SUITS AT $23.50 UP. DOUBLE ORDINARY SIZE SAMPLES. BIG COMMISSIONS AND BONUS. WRITE FOR DETAILS or give experience and references for return action. PIONEER TAILORING CO., Congress & Throop, Dept. B-1009, Chicago.

Sell Things Needed Daily in Every Home—Soap, toilet goods, remedies, food products. Lower prices. Higher profits. Better quality. Quick sales. No experience needed. Spare or full time satisfactory. HO HO CO, 2702 Ho-Ro-Co Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.

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FREE SUITS EARNED BY 67 MEN PLUS CASH PROFITS of $75.00 to $425.00. Nationally known line successful 30 years. GREAT WESTERN TAILORING CO., Dept. 45, Chicago.

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WRITE THE WORDS FOR A SONG. WE COMPOSE MUSIC. OUR COMPOSER WROTE MANY SONG HITS. MONARCH MUSIC COMPANY, 236 WEST 55TH ST. (NEAR BROADWAY). DEPT. 309, NEW YORK.

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Plays, musical comedies and revues, minstrels, comedy and talking songs, blackface skits, vaudeville acts, monologs, dialogs, recitations, entertainments, musical readings, make-up goods. Catalog free. T. S. Denison & Co., 623 So. Wabash, Dept. 43, Chicago.

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NEW HOUSEHOLD DEVICE washes, dries windows, sweeps, cleans walls, scrubs, mops. Costs less than brooms. Over half profit. HARPERS, 101 Third St., Fairfield, Iowa.

I PAY MY AGENTS $90 A WEEK JUST TO WEAR AND SHOW MY BEAUTIFUL NEW FREE RAINCOAT AND GIVE AWAY FREE HATS. WRITE TODAY FOR YOURS. ROBERT KING, 230 SO. WELLS, DEPT. AA-3, CHICAGO.

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WE START YOU WITHOUT A DOLLAR. 150% PROFIT. SOAPS, EXTRACTS, PERFUMES, TOILET GOODS. EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY. FREE SAMPLE CASE. AUTO FURNISHED. CARNATION CO., 140, ST. LOUIS, MO.

AGENTS WANTED TO ADVERTISE OUR GOODS AND DISTRIBUTE FREE SAMPLES TO CONSUMERS; 90c an hour; write for full particulars. AMERICAN PRODUCTS CO., 2484, Monmouth, Cincinnati, O.

Don't Sell For Others. Employ Agents Yourself. Make your own products. Toilet Articles, Household Specialties, etc. 500% profit. Valuable booklet free. NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC LABORATORIES, 1961W Broad, Richmond, Va.

$50.00 WEEKLY. MEN WANTED TO DEMONSTRATE and take orders daily direct from motorists. Amazing Magnetic Trouble Light. Sticks anywhere! More orders, bigger pay. Write for demonstrator and particulars. THE MAGNO CO., 6 Beacon St., Dept. 342, Boston, Mass.

AGENTS: BUY FOR ONE CENT A PACKAGE FIFTY CENT SIZE: EXTRACTS, PIE-FILLINGS, TOILET ARTICLES. "HOLLAND," HARVEY, ILLINOIS.

$50 TO $100 WEEKLY SELLING ANTI-MIST. MAKES GLASS FROST—STEAM—WATER PROOF. SELLS ON SIGHT TO ALL STORES. GUARANTEED CLEAR VISION. SEND 35C NOW FOR SAMPLE CAN AND FULL PARTICULARS. EVANS & SON CO., Evans Bldg., Geneva, Ohio.

SELL OUR FULL LINE OF STORE, OFFICE AND GARAGE BRUSHES. All sizes and kinds. Cover regular route and make $5 to $15 on single call. Big sales easy. Line is flashy and prices well under competition. Write, THE BRUSH WORKS, 833-4th St., Fairfield, Iowa.

HELP AND INSTRUCTION

Government Jobs. $1260 to $3400 year. Men—women, 18—50. Steady work. Vacation. Many February examinations. Full particulars with sample coaching FREE. Write immediately—today. FRANKLIN INSTITUTE, Dept. M-1, Rochester, N. Y.

HELP WANTED—MALE

MEN—INTERESTED OBTAINING INFORMATION ABOUT WORK ROMANTIC, WEALTHY SOUTH AMERICA WRITE FOR FREE LIST. GOOD PAY. SOUTH AMERICAN SERVICE BUREAU, 14,600 ALMA, DETROIT, MICH.

MEN, GET FOREST RANGER JOB; $125—$200 MONTH and home furnished; hunt, fish, trap. For details, write NORTON INST., 1497 Temple Court, Denver, Colo.

FIREMEN, BRAKEMEN, BAGGAGEMEN (WHITE OR COLORED). Sleeping Car Train Porters (colored), $150—$250 monthly. Experience unnecessary. 836 RAILWAY BUREAU, East St. Louis, Ill.

HELP WANTED—FEMALE

WOMEN MAKE $9 DAILY WEARING AND SHOWING NEW INVENTION. Prevents shoulder straps slipping. Real comfort at last! For Particulars—Free Offer, write LINGERIE "V" CO., 16 Lake, North Windham, Conn.

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TOBACCO HABIT BANISHED. NO MATTER HOW LONG YOU HAVE BEEN A VICTIM, no matter how strong your craving, no matter in what form you use tobacco, there is help for you. Just send postcard or letter for our Free Book. It explains everything. NEWELL PHARMACAL CO., Dept. 812 Clayton Station, St. Louis, Mo.

Tobacco Habit Cured or No Pay. Any form, cigars, cigarettes, pipe, chewing or snuff. Guaranteed. Harmless. Used by over 600,000 people. Full treatment sent on trial. Costs $1.50 if it cures; nothing if it fails. Superba Co., N14, Baltimore, Md.

Classified Advertising continued on page 6.

Classified Advertising continued from page 4.

PATENT ATTORNEYS

PATENTS AND INVENTIONS

20 Selections on Any 10 Records

$1.98

Send No Money

All the Latest Hits to Choose From—Less Than 20c a Record

Have you heard of the truly immense sensation caused by our new super electrically recorded Records? They have a great big mellow tone, clear as crystal, which is absolutely unobtainable elsewhere. For example, take our superb songs and dances, Sonny Boy, My Angel, Girl of My Dreams, Ramona, My Blue Heaven, Wreck of the Old 97, May I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Ford Has Made a Lady Out of Lizzie, Among My Souvenirs, Rovin' Gambler, Jigs and Reels, When I'm Gone You'll Soon Forget, Casey Jones, Red Wing, etc. We will positively guarantee that you have never heard records of this quality, no matter what price you paid. They are literally miles ahead of old style records. The following list contains the "Cream" of our entire catalog. Every selection is a masterpiece of its kind. Nothing but the very best is included and we guarantee that you will not be disappointed. All records are in standard 10-inch size with music on both sides and play on any phonograph. Send no money with your order. See coupon below for terms. All records are strictly on approval. Please act at once, as this is an introductory advertising price which may be discontinued shortly. Simply write catalog numbers of records you want on coupon below.

10 Days' Approval

Popular Songs

2432 Sonny Boy
Dancing Neath Dixie Moon

2437 Rainbow Round My Shoulder
When You're Not Here

4228 Hallelujah I'm a Bum
The Dying Hobo

2423 My Angel (Angela Mia)
Believe It Or Not

4227 Climbing Up Golden Stairs
Lindy Lou

2426 Jeannine I Dream of Lilac Time
Come Back to Romany

2398 Ramona
Valley of Memory

4174 Casey Jones
Waltz Me Around Again Willie

2392 Laugh Clown Laugh
I Wanna Sail Away

4131 Wreck of the Old 97
Wreck of the Titanic

4170 Gypsy's Warning
Don't You Remember

4135 Rovin' Gambler
Little Log Cabin in Lane

2407 Girl of My Dreams
Dear Old Pal of Yesterday

4133 Jesse James
Butcher Boy

2386 My Ohio Home
Alice of the Plues

2381 Ford Has Made a Lady Out of Lizzie
Clancy's Wooden Wedding

2366 My Blue Heaven
Back of Every Cloud

4141 I Wish I Was Single Again
Want to Find Love

4160 Sweet Hawaiian Kisses
Blue Hawaiian Moon

4118 May I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight
When I Saw Sweet Nellie Home

2369 Among My Souvenirs
We Were Sweethearts

4117 Where River Shannon Flows
A Rose From Ireland

4171 Red Wing
Waters of Minnetonka

Popular Songs

4119 Hand Me Down My Walking Cane
Captain Jinks

2323 Get Away Old Man
Well I Swan

8101 Roll 'Em Girls
Save It for a Rainy Day

4030 Sleep Baby Sleep (Yodel)
Roll On Silvery Moon

4090 In Baggage Coach Ahead
Old Apple Tree

4086 Floyd Collins' Fate
Pickwick Club Tragedy

2338 Lindy Lindy How I'd Like to Be You
No, No Positively No

2344 Mo and My Shadow
Sweet Hawaiian Kisses

4122 When I'm Gone You'll Soon Forget
Father, Dear Father Come Home

2272 Rudolph Valentino
Little Rosewood Casket

4173 Boston Burglar
Cowboy's Lament

Hawaiian

4156 La Golondrina
Dreamy Moon

4023 My Old Kentucky Home
O Sole Mio

4084 Aloha Land
Honolulu Bay

4009 Palakiho Blues
One Two Three Four

Sacred Songs

4146 Silent Night
Christmas Chimes

4075 Church in Wildwood
Voice of Chimes

4046 Nearer My God to Thee
Lord Is My Shepherd

4069 When Roll Is Called Up Yonder
Throw Out the Life Line

4091 Old Rugged Cross
Beyond the Clouds

Comedy

4002 Flanagan's 2nd Hand Car
Hi and Si and Line Fence

4004 Flanagan in Restaurant
Flanagan's Married Life

4168 Jail Birds
Wedding Bells

4211 Andy Goes A'Hunting
Andy Gets Learnin'

Popular Dances

All with vocal chorus and all fox trots except where otherwise marked.

1541 My Angel (Angela Mia), Waltz
Coming Thru the Rye

7028 Varsity Drag
Sure Enough Blues

7029 Mississippi Mud Blues
I'm a One Man Gal

1540 Old Man Sunshine
Sidewalks of New York

1510 Ramona, Waltz
If I Didn't Love You

1463 My Blue Heaven
Best Gal of All

1497 After My Laughter Came Tears
Back to Connemara

1505 My Ohio Home
Like My Daddy's Gal

1508 My Melancholy Baby
Down by the Sea

Instrumental

4193 Whistler and His Dog
Powder Puff

4189 Drowsy Waters
Herd Girl's Dream

4162 Blue Danube Waltz
Skaters Waltz

4190 Sidewalks of New York
O'Leahy's Lullaby

4016 Irish Jigs and Reels, No.1
Irish Jigs and Reels, No.2

4138 By Waters of Minnetonka
Over the Waves

4068 Arkansas Traveler
Turkey in the Straw

4061 Listen to Mocking Bird
Song Bird (Both Whistling)

4161 Dixie Favorites (Banjo Solo)
Medley of Southern Airs

4217 Irish Washerwoman
Mrs. McLeod's Reel

4218 Merry Widow Waltz
Lullaby from Erminie

Blues

7023 John Henry Blues
St. Louis Blues

7025 Yellow Dog Blues
Hard Time Blues

TEAR OUT COUPON AND MAIL TODAY

MUTUAL MUSIC CLUB,
MU-42, 135 Dorchester Ave., Boston, Mass.

You may send me on 10 days' approval 10 records listed below by catalog numbers. When the 10 records arrive, I will pay postman a deposit of only $1.98 (plus postage from factory), in full payment. I will then try the records 10 days in my own home, and if I am disappointed in them or find them in any way unsatisfactory, I will return them, and you agree to refund at once all that I have paid, including my postage expense for returning the records.

1..... 6.....
2..... 7.....
3..... 8.....
4..... 9.....
5..... 10.....

(Write Clearly) (Write Clearly)

Write 3 substitutes below to be shipped only if other records are out of stock.

1.....2.....
3.....

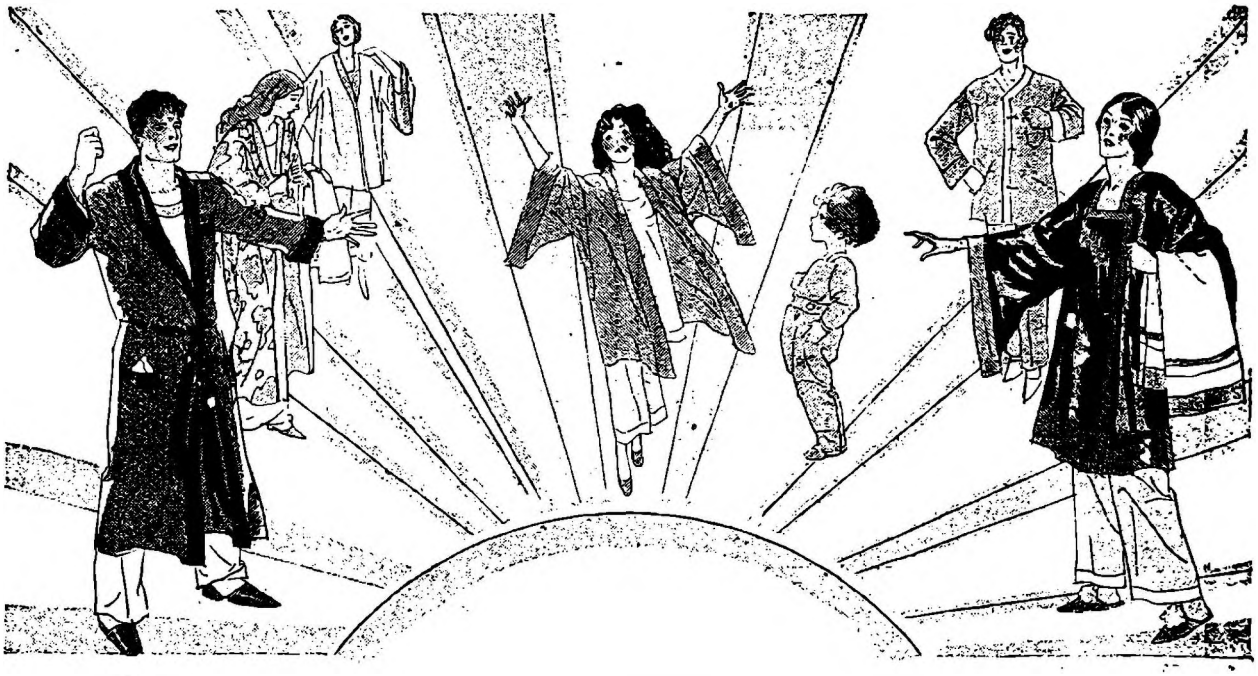
IMPORTANT ☐ Place crossmark in square at left if you wish three 10-cent packages of steel needles included in your order—recommended for these records.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....
(Write Clearly)

CITY.....STATE.....

In answering this advertisement it is desirable that you mention this magazine.



The sunny side of seven

When 7 o'clock seems to you like a dim and drowsy dawn, there's a quick, jolly way to scatter the night mists from heavy eyes—

Plop your sleepy self into the tub while a clear torrent rushes around you. If you are still drowsy after sixty tingling seconds and a gentle caress of Ivory lather—well, really, you should consult a doctor!

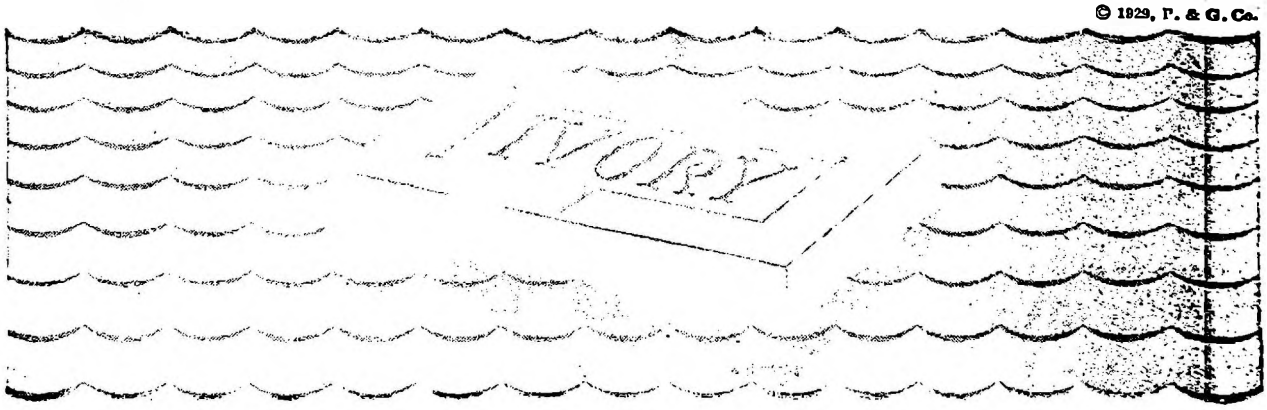
Your brush or sponge slips over the creamy smooth cake and works instant magic—light-hearted clouds of quick-cleansing foam. And then, when the shining bubbles have done their refreshing work, how gaily they rinse away!

If, in the course of this revivifying process, you should drop your Ivory, don't even look for it. In a second the gleaming friend of ten million bathers will cheerfully bob to the surface again.

You're clean now as a birch tree in the rain. And if you're brave, you'll run in water that's coolish—or cold—to bring youth glowing to eyes and skin.

This is the kind of tub that raises a smile to greet the sun, a zest to welcome breakfast—it's a flying start to an active day.

. . . kind to everything it touches · 99 44/100% Pure · "It floats"



ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 201 | SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1929 | NUMBER 2

The shrew flew into a passion, saying we should be haled before a magistrate and smartly whipped

Ho For London Town!

England was young and men were bold when Will Halifax and Will Shakespeare sought fame and fortune at Queen Elizabeth's court

By TALBOT MUNDY

Author of "When Trails Were New," etc.

NOTE.—The manuscript of this story was discovered in the cellar of a house in Bloomsbury, London, England, in course of demolition. Such learned authorities as have seen the document are unanimous in denying its historical value, on the reasonable ground that its author is otherwise wholly unknown and his statements are at times apparently in conflict with recorded facts.

Furthermore, they say, that period of which he writes—the date of the first events is given as 1585—produced more literary hoaxes than almost any other; and they add that many of his statements, though not actually contradicted by the files of history, are not susceptible of proof.

The manuscript is therefore hardly sacrosanct, since men of such authority and learning have denied it credit; it has accordingly been edited, its more archaic phrases being rendered into modern English, and for words that have dropped out of common use or whose meaning has changed in the course of centuries, more modern words have been substituted to convey the writer's apparent meaning. Many phrases, also, have been modified or totally omitted out of deference to modern taste—a taste that would have seemed inexplicable in the days of Good Queen Bess.

Due to dampness, rats, and the indifference of the workmen who came on the manuscript, some pages from the beginning and from the end are missing or so damaged as to be undecipherable, but the remainder is clearly written in an upright hand that certainly suggests its author may have been the man of character he represents himself to be. It begins:

CHAPTER I.

HOW MASTER WILLIAM HALIFAX SET FORTH FOR QUEEN ELIZABETH'S COURT.

SO I made up my mind I would leave Brownsover for good and all, for it offended me that such a coney-catching louse as Tony Pepperday should own my father's mansion. But I will say this for him: ill-favored caitiff though he was, he had the gift of self-advancement. He had first married into the gentry, which was marvelous enough; and then he served as bailiff of my father's estate until in the end he possessed the whole of it, and all that so legally that none, not even his grace of Leicester could deny him right. There was not a horn-book printed that could teach him anything.

But in those days I had so much yet to learn, that now, after a lifetime spent in courts and tented fields and on the sea, and where not else, I am left wondering how so raw a youth as I ever made my way. I was so callow I expected gratitude, and that from Tony, of all people in the world!

I had risked my father's anger—not a light thing, as they knew who ever gave him cause—by asking his leave to be betrothed to Mildred, daughter of Tony's wife by a former husband, Robert Jackson, who had lost his head and most of his estates befriending the Princess Elizabeth while Mary was queen. I had brought my father to my view of it, though he was a knight, and Tony had been no better than a hind until Mildred's mother married him for the sake of protection for her child. Tony had been one of the "heretic"-burning Bishop Bonner's men in Bloody Mary's Catholic reign; but now he was all for the new religion and the death of Jesuits.

Tony, you may doubt not, was well pleased to marry the step-daughter to me, for the sake of my position in the country—until my father met his violent death, and it transpired that Tony had bought up liens on all his land and goods.

And now word reached me through the village barber that the banns might be forbidden, and much mystery about it. But to Tony's house I went, in my second-best suit, on my good roan horse Robin, and I told him again how I loved Mildred, and she me.

Nor did I forget to jog his memory of how my father had befriended him; and I spoke with such rein on my temper that I said no word at all concerning how he had deprived me of my heritage—since in truth there was little I could say reasonably, my father having incurred great debts that Tony lawfully had bought up.

HAD I been a little wiser in the world's ways I might have wasted less breath and have been less astonished. Having all my father's lands, that miserable caitiff coveted my horse, too, though well knowing that the beast was mine. He beshrewed himself to think that anything of value had escaped his clutches. Me and my good name he valued now not at all, so swift is an ingrate's somersault.

First he visited his cellar to drink cordials, for he was naturally timid unless liquor fortified him. As soon as he came up into the room where he kept his books and papers, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand and stamping on the flags to warm his feet—for it was winter—he began to make too free with the name of Halifax, that but a week ago had been enough to make him doff his cap at mention of it.

"Will Halifax," said he, "you are a worse squibbe and spendthrift than your father was, although Sir Harry

was a brave enough knight, which I doubt you will ever be. I tell you, you shall have no girl of mine, nor any of my money."

I was sitting in a chair my father gave him, looking through a window at the good fat beeves Tony had acquired by virtue of a lien that he began to enforce the very day my father died. The hobbinoll's audacity so took my breath away that I could hardly answer him.

"I fear me, you will come to no good end," he went on, taking courage of my silence, "and shall I give my daughter to stand weeping at a gallow's-foot?"

Whereat, much wondering that such a coney-catching ban-dog should have bettered his station in life while many an honest gentleman went limping on a broken cause, I decided that patience no longer was seemly.

"If honesty is a cure for sin," said I, "you are like enough to roast in hell fire, Tony Pepperday, when your time comes!"

I would have walked out there and then to keep my fists from drubbing him, which I had promised Mildred I would not do, even though he should vex me out of countenance. But where he thought a bargain might be had, he recked little of hearing truths about himself, and doubtless he believed that all men itched after money as he did. He stayed me.

"I pity your need and will buy your horse," said he. "I will pay you a good price, although I doubt not you will squander it."

But I was not in mind either to walk to London or to mince my speech.

"It puzzles me," said I, "that such a long-faced, shamble-smelling miser as yourself could foster a sweet maid like Mildred! I had looked to get back by the marriage part of what you cozened from Sir Harry. You may set that rashness to my youth's account, and against it credit me a lesson learned; for by the stomacher of Good Queen Bess, when I have Mildred it shall be without your leave or your endowment! My father, Sir Harry, always told me gold is not a gentleman, and I perceive it keeps low company!"

WITH that I left him, honoring him too much with hot words wasted on ears that listened only for the chink of coin. He went hopping in a hurry to the milking room by the cow byre, crying to his daughter she should no more see me, and to keep herself within doors.

Not finding her, he followed footprints in the snow around the copse behind the house, until he came on Madge Ambleby, the maid of all work. And her tongue was brisker than his.

As I mounted my horse in the yard I could hear the two of them hard at it, he swearing she had purposely decoyed him and she bidding him remember his years and behave more seemly. 'Od's teeth! the frosty morning rang with the clap-clapper of their tongues.

I rode along the hedgerow, where the horses had trodden the mud of the lane and there was no snow left to show a footstep, only cat's-ice in the holes. And when I reached the clump of beeches by the frozen pond where the lane turns into the high road, there was Mildred waiting for me in her new red cloak, with its hood drawn up over her hair. She wore the Flemish stockings I had bought for her from Will o' Bruges at the last fair, and she had put on the little gold necklace that had been my mother's—something I had set aside before the sheriff's bailiffs came; and that, if Tony knew of it at all, had irked him little, since it came within his reach in any case.

By the whistling wind that blew across the common and shook the crisp snow from the elms, her hood was not much redder than her lips and cheeks. I lifted her up in front of me, and that which followed fired my blood.

I bade her look her last on Tony Pepperday—for we could see him in

the distance pegging around the yard with his stick and slamming shed doors, looking for her. I told her she should come with me to London, two of us on one horse. I would make her my lawful wife as soon as might be.

But she set a hand across my mouth to stop such talk. And when she had done twisting at the little new mustachios that I had grown to cut a figure with in London, and when I had boasted myself dry of lover's oaths and arguments—for love makes lawyers of us all—she slipped a purse into my hand. But whence she had the money she would not say, only this:

"All's fair in love, Will Halifax! My father cozened yours, and what he doesn't know won't rob sleep. Haste, and win a fortune! Ride straight, fight hard, and remember me!"

Forgetfulness was likely to come slowly limping after such a speech in any event; and I loved her, as I do yet. With her lips on mine I swore to myself not to be faced out of my livelihood by Tony Pepperday—nay, nor by fortune neither. I would answer her challenge with deeds that should make all England know me!

What with my horse Robin feeling the chill wind and kicking, and what with her pressing her fingers against my ribs where I am ticklish, she managed to free herself then; and right bravely she stood, smiling and waving to me, though the tears were like dew on her lashes and she trusted herself no more to speak.

SO I rode away, with very fierce determination, thinking of the dons whom I would beat to their knees and hold for ransom, and of the knighthood that Queen Elizabeth should presently bestow on me—for it was common talk that Queen Bess loved a man of mettle, and I had no doubt that I should bring myself by some means to her notice.

But what was passing in Mildred's mind I knew not, neither greatly cared, provided she were true to me, not having learned yet that a woman's wit has several sorts of merit. I loved, but without that disposition to be forehorse to a kirtle that has robbed some men I know of self-esteem and of the esteem of others.

I could see her standing there, her red cloak bright against the gray pond ice, until I topped the brow of the hill and paused to wave to her a last time. Then I turned my horse toward Walter Turner's house, to get my saddlebags.

For I had stayed with Walter Turner since my father's death, which was how it happened that I had a good new suit and a new hat preserved from the sheriff's men. Walter had begged the loan of them to wear at his cousin's wedding, and, by the same good stroke of fortune, he had borrowed my horse Robin.

Whether the sheriff's men heard of it and looked the other way from loving kindness, or whether they really believed my horse and German suit and hat were Walter's, is something that will not be determined this side of the judgment seat.

There was another reason, besides his being beholden to me, why Walter Turner was a comfortable friend to leave behind—he being recently betrothed, and much enamored of his sweetheart, as well as eager to pocket some fat rents that should come with her. It was with no small measure of confidence that I commended Mildred to his and to his sister's care, bidding them, whenever an occasion offered, to lend her their encouragement against old Tony Pepperday's attempts to marry her to some one else.

WITH good cheer then, when they had buckled on my saddlebags and Kate, at risk of greasing my best suit, had stuffed in two fat capons along with other eatables, I turned Robin's head toward London, making no more speed than was enough

to keep the frost out of his joints and mine, for the road was long.

I felt as full of spirits as the good horse capering under me, though without reckoning Mildred's purse, which I was minded to keep against dire extremity, I had little enough money.

"Naked and without a purse I came into the world," thought I, "and that journey may have been longer than this one, though I don't remember it. It shall go hard if I don't win fortune, and the queen herself shall have to use her very scepter to prevent me."

I little knew the strength of Queen Elizabeth in those days, nor would I have believed her courage, nor the skill with which she reined men to her uses.

I had a good short English sword, which my father began to teach me how to use before I knew my alphabet; and, notwithstanding I had heard the new Italian long swords were all the rage in London, I had no doubt of giving a handsome account of myself in that particular.

Nor did I lack for schooling, as so many did who went to seek their fortunes at the court. We have a school at Rugby, near Brownsover, which Master Laurence Sheriff, the alderman, endowed before he died; and if frequent soreness from caning is the measure of my scholarship, then few youths ever set forth better versed in Latin, to say nothing of the French and Spanish that had cost me no pain, having learned them from my father and from his foreign servants.

Circumstances had unfortunately robbed me of the favor of the Earl of Leicester, who was lord lieutenant of our county and a great man at court, but I thought there could be few things more likely than that I should find service in some nobleman's retinue. It was common talk, too, that the queen welcomed young men of good looks and breeding to serve as pages, and I knew I did not lack for manners nor appearance. Did not Mildred love me? That should put conceit in any man.

It suited me to be alone that morning; for a good horse snorting at the frosty air, his ears a-twitch to catch the roadside sounds, is better company than any chattering companion when a man sets forth to win his spurs and dreams of all the vanquishments he will accomplish. If a dream had only substance in it. I was general of armies, admiral of fleets, and Mister Secretary Halifax, Lord Councillor of Queen Elizabeth, that minute!

SO it sorrily displeased me when I saw a horseman resting at the sign-post where the road turns in from Stratford. He had saddlebags like mine, and a bulging roll of blankets that looked as if a farmer's wife had packed them full of all the stuff she had to market. He was dressed in good stout woolen cloth and wore an old felt hat with a goose-wing feather in it, so I took him for a farmer on his way to London.

I did not hail him and he let me ride abreast before he spoke, swinging himself into the saddle and smiling whimsically, as I noticed with the corner of my eye. I had a better horse than his, and I was better dressed. He had no right to speak to me.

"Well met, Sir Venturer!" quoth he. "I ride the same road. Though your horse's rump is comelier, maybe, than mine, 'tis not so comely that I yearn to see it all the way to London!"

It was his voice that pleased. It softened the edge of impudence. He was rather a swarthy fellow with a little chin beard and upturned mustachios, much shorter than myself, but of the same age. He had brown eyes, wondrous dark and mocking, with a sort of sadness brooding in their depths.

I yielded room beside me, and he drew abreast, gnawing a red apple. Presently he drew another from his saddlebag and offered it. Not willing to be churlish on a merry morning, I rubbed the apple on my sleeve and bit

deep. There was a worm in it. I showed him, and he laughed.

"What, again?" said he. "There is a canker at the heart of all things. God made apples, but the devil used one to tempt Adam. Adam ate it, and the worms ate him. Which had the best of it, God or worm? Or did God win, who made the worm, so to win whichever way the die falls?"

I had no answer ready, being neither puritan nor papist, but a man of sense. Moreover, I was well on guard against such dangerous talk with strangers; for the land was full of Jesuits and of spies out watching for them, so that far too many honest men were rotting in the prisons for a word let fall by way of hasty jest. I asked his name instead, and whence he was.

"Will Shakespeare," he said, "of Stratford."

Then I placed him in memory. He was the lad who had married Ann Hathaway, a woman older than himself, in such haste that there was talk of it on all the countryside. Some said he had been made to marry her, but I doubted that tale.

He was used to being whipped and stocked, either for killing deer or for writing saucy doggerel; which sort of man is neither easy to compel nor usually reckoned a good catch. He could have run away, there being nothing to prevent, since his father had come to poverty in old age, after having been alderman. If what I had heard was true, his home, like mine, had been sold for debt, and there was no more to keep him in Stratford than me in Brownsover.

I TOOK another view of the Ann Hathaway affair, the more so as I looked into the fellow's eyes. He was a man such as women throw their hearts at and go any lengths to snare—a witty-wise, good-looking fellow, with a devil-may-care spirit on occasion and a way of mocking at himself that gave the clew to catching him into the hands of any wench whose reputation was worth gossip.

Ann Hathaway had tempted him, I did not doubt, and had blamed him for it afterward; and he, with a mixture of self-mockery and dignity, had put his head into the noose to make her an honest woman.

But though I had a feeling for a fellow in adversity, I did not care to condescend to him too much.

"Stratford," I said, "is but a village by the Avon, where the middens stink in mid-street and the plague kills elders faster than the brats are born. No wonder you should leave the place!"

My words offended him. If I owned Stratford I would trade the whole place for a hundred rods of Brownsover, but I liked the fellow none the less for being angry. Good dogs love old kennels, though they stink. A good man boasts his township, even if the pigs lie ham-deep in the main street mud.

"From which Elysium are you?" he asked. "Does the garbage smell o' roses where you come from?"

I told him Brownsover. He laughed.

"None ever heard of Brownsover," said he, "until they started Rugby School—and such a poor school, and poor scholars, that a pair of barns was reckoned good enough. In Stratford we use the town hall; all the upper story."

"Aye," I answered, "where the beadle can better observe you, lest you go a poaching sooner than learn your conjugations."

So we bickered for awhile in mutual disparagement, each cock-a-doodle-doing his own barnyard, and not either of us offering his scholarship in proof. And in truth I was afraid to do that, having absorbed the most part of my schooling from a peeled ash sapling, which is excellent for horsemanship, making the roughest saddle easy, but not greatly sweetening irregular Greek verbs.

But by noon we were friends, and sat together on a rail beside the road

to feed our horses and ourselves. So better was my capon than the venison he carried that I could not help but offer him a drumstick; and when he had made short work of that I broke off a wing for him, whereafter we slaked our thirst with icy water from a near-by brook. By and by we grew so friendly that when we reached a tavern called King Harry's Head we had to stop to pledge each other in canary wine. Then on again, as chattersome as wenches at a Maying.

WE told each other all there was to know about ourselves. His wife Ann, so he said, unlike good wine, was hardly mellowing with age. She loved to sit in church o' Sundays and quote sermons at him all the week, so that he knew by heart so many sins as it would take a lifetime to commit the half of them.

For himself, he better loved to rest him merry and to write such airy nothings as imagination conjured into words, whereas Ann tolerated no such nonsense in the house, but used his scribbled sheets to light the oven fire.

"And it's bad bread that she bakes, Will." We already called each other Will and Will. "Bread as much resembling belly comfort as the unoathed, funless heaven that she prates about resembles good cheer for a hospitable soul."

He had a thought to go into the butcher trade, having learned that, for he had to kill his father's calves when the family fortune dwindled, and not knowing much else except how to shoot deer and dress the venison, which he confessed he could do far better than his wife could cook the meat, she burning it, he said, as if the hell she prated of were something near at hand.

But he was gentle-minded and not hankering for the Smithfield shambles.

"Ludd knows, Will," he said, "it is a pity we must kill the poor dumb brutes with their pleading eyes that look at us so soft and melancholy."

I thought him likelier to make a parson than a butcher, but I learned a little more of him that evening and changed my mind about the parsonage. We bedded at the Three Wise Men, a roadside-tavern, and a good one, kept by a one-legged rogue named Bellamy, who had owned a sixty-fourth share of a privateer that fell in with a Spanisher from the Americas, all loaded down with silver bars.

So, though he lost a leg, he sold it for a high price; and he had married as buxom a wench as ever sliced a loaf against her bosom. She was all the way from Bristol and, having neither kith nor kin to weep with when old salty timber-toe was in his cups, she laughed instead with any merry traveler who came along. Both I and Will were merry, being young.

So while we stalled our horses and scraped the mud from them—to save a hostler's fee next morning—I saw fit to drop a hint or two to friend Will. For it is a strange thing how a lover's loyalty can make him jealous of another's peccadillos. I have learned to rest well satisfied if my own behavior offends me not too much, and other men's incontinencies now vex me not at all. But I was young in those days.

"Will," I said, "our hostess hath a hospitable eye and you, a married man, must of necessity act seemly, being not so far from home, but that a rumor might reach Stratford."

For awhile he scraped his horse's fetlocks, whistling to himself to keep the dust out of his teeth.

"WOMEN," he answered presently, "resemble rimes and tunes in this: the easiest to catch are they that, as it were, impress themselves until they seem more inescapable than destiny. The dull tunes so obsess the memory that not the very lark's excited welcome to the spring can drive their limping measures out of mind. Shall a man not steep himself in merry music to forget care?"

"Then shrewish wives," said I, "excuse incontinence?"

"Excuse," said Will, "is coward's courage. He who makes excuse, defends himself against another's conscience, like a schoolboy stuffing pigskin in his breeches to defeat a teacher's cane. Foolishness and love, Will, go hand-in-hand to many a hey-day that the dry-wise never know. Did you not tell me on the road, in words as red and white as roses, of a maid Mildred? Do her gray eyes fade so soon from memory?"

I was offended, so I combed my horse's tail awhile, with an eye to his heels, he not loving to be handled when his nose was in the manger.

"Which has the better," Will asked presently, "the gallant with a rosebud out of reach, or he who treads a blown bloom underfoot?"

Whereat he went into the inn ahead of me, and when I reached the hearthside, he was seated in the best chair, with a mug of sack beside him, and the woman on her knees at the fire making toast, which any of the kitchen wenches might have done—and done better, for she burned it, what with listening to Will and looking sidewise at him.

I had lingered at the pump to wash myself and polish up my brass spurs, sticking the pheasant-feather in my new hat at an angle that matched better with my smart mustachios. But Will had let the woman wipe the road-muck from his boots before she made the toast, and presently she sat on the arm of the chair to stitch his sleeve where he had torn it, giving me her back to gaze on.

'Od's blood, how the fellow talked! I soon began to change my mind about Ann Hathaway: though she had been as virginal inclined as Queen Elizabeth, she must have lost her head and heart to him. I thought of old King Solomon, who had a thousand wives, and understood how he conducted all that courtship!

Will could make a verse offhanded when the sparks flew upward from a faggot; when the gusty wind blew smoke out of the chimney-mouth he likened that to dead men's spirits coming back for one last look at comfortable earth before they soared amid the melancholy loneliness of starry space.

She was soon as drunk with honeyed words as Titus Bellamy, her man, was drunk with spiced canary in the inner room. Bellamy's brain remembered feats of daring he had heard of, and, if any one believed him, he had sent more Dons to roast in hell-flame than the Smithfield butchers had killed Christmas beeves since the Lord Harry himself was King of England. If he believed himself he should have slept ill, thinking of his latter end.

Will and I supped, Dame Bellamy attending on us and loading a board before the hearth with fare that would have watered the mouth of a prince to smell of it—cold pigeon pie there was, with eggs, and fat ham, and a chine of pork, and sausage, and honied apple dumplings soused in cream, and Leicester cheese, and pickles; I forget what else. Thereafter I went into the back room to sit facing Bellamy before the fire and listen to him.

I would rather have listened to Will, but I was envious, and Mistress Bellamy thought nothing of my new mustachios. Nor had I any gift of speech to take the wind out of Will Shakespeare's sail and keep him from the port he had in mind.

CHAPTER II.

WILL HALIFAX BECOMES THE OWNER OF A "GIMCRACK" IN A RED BOX.

THAT whole night long I listened to Titus Bellamy. He grew more talkative the more he drank. And so I have no knowledge of what Will did, not though vinegary Ann should hale me before judges for a questioning.

In addition to me and Bellamy there were five men on the settles on either side of the fire in that back room, and by midnight four of them were snoring, doubtless having heard his tales a hundred times, but preferring to sleep before the fire because it cost less than a bed.

He who sat beside me was a leathery-faced and leather-jacketed, sharp-nosed fellow with a pair of merry blue eyes, Jeremy Crutch by name. I remembered having seen him at Coventry assizes, where they tried him for some felony and let him go for lack of evidence. I knew his reputation well.

Some said he was a Jesuit, although my father had gone bail for him when he was charged at Coventry, which I think he would never have done had he thought him a Jesuit, rash though my father sometimes was, and ready to befriend even masterless men—soldiers back from the wars, ruined land-holders, men without trade or money.

That had been the first time that a masterless man found bondsman while awaiting trial in our part of England, and there had been plenty to advise my father that a knight should risk his substance in a worthier cause. Truly enough, if Jeremy had chosen to abscond, my father must have fallen into bankruptcy, he being already deep in debt, as I discovered when he died.

However, Jeremy made no bid that night to claim acquaintance on the strength of my father's charity; nor had he the indecency to speak about my father's death, although he must have known the circumstances, which had been a nine days' gossip on all the countryside. He was thoughtful to give no offense, and he drank no more than I did—very sparingly, that is, since I take no pleasure in a next day's ride when half a merry morning goes to drive off fumes of wine.

Only when old Bellamy paused in his talk or lost the thread of reminiscence Jeremy Crutch would break his silence to ask questions—with a "by your leave," or "if your honor will permit," to me—to start the old ruffian off again describing doings on the Spanish Main or off the Portugals or on the road to India; for he claimed he had ventured all over the globe.

IT was talk to make a young man's blood go galloping if anything but ice were in his veins—tales of strange seas, and the Inquisition, and of gold and silver bars in heaps—of fighting out of sight of land for galleons deep-laden with the plunder of Brazil—of Captain Francis Drake, whom all the world had heard of, and of mermaids and sea-monsters, and of John Hawkins and his traffic in black-amoors stolen from the Portuguese off Africa and sold, as many as lived the voyage out, to merchants in the New World.

No man ever heard more exciting tales than that old timber-toe could reel out through his shaggy beard; and not the half of them were half true, as I discovered later.

Crutch and I sat sleepless, hardly noticing each other, covering the pot-mouths with our hands when the yawning tavern-wench made shift to fill them. But Bellamy drank as a drain takes water and then roused the girl with sailor's oaths because she nodded in a corner when his mug was empty.

There was word once or twice of a robbery, one Joshua Stiles, a London merchant on his way to Bristol, having yielded up his purse to some one in the dusk, three nights gone. Old Bellamy bragged loudly of the gibbet at a crossroads near by, where he swore they should hang in chains all such miscreants as did on land what honest men might do at sea with God's approval.

And he added something about a gewgaw or gimcrack that the merchant prized more highly than his purse, having been sorely grieved to part with it to a thief who would never know its value.

"Master Stiles swore to me," said Bellamy, "that he would rather have that gewgaw back than hang the thief, though I forget how he described the thing. It may have been some box for sibbersauces for a woman's complexion, or a crucifix perhaps. But he's no papisher, not Joshua Stiles! He's a good, God-fearing, loyal subject of the queen's most gracious majesty—I heard him say it! Saving, I don't doubt, when her excisemen stick their pimply noses in among his bales."

He would have talked more of the gimcrack, only that Jeremy turned him off to boasting of the loot he had seen in strange ports. Toward morning he grew stupid in his cups and returned to the gimcrack and the tale of the robbery, but then Jeremy got up and left us. By that time it behooved me to go out and feed the horses.

There were heavy frost and thick white fog, so I found a lantern first and trimmed the wick before making my way to the stables; and Jeremy, who seemed to know his way too well to need a lantern, rode off like a specter as I crossed the stable yard, none giving him Godspeed, nor he so much as whistling. He wore a hood like a friar's drawn up over his head. The mare he rode was shrouded in the fog, but she looked like a beauty, picking up her feet over the mixen.

IT was warm within the stable, so I took my time, and what with watering and feeding both the horses and repacking my two saddle-bags, the cocks were crowing when I came out and there was a right godly smell of eggs and bacon frying.

I was wondering what all that good fare would be like to cost us when Will Shakespeare put his head through the kitchen door and catching sight of me, came out to meet me. Whereat I told him what was in my mind about the reckoning.

"I have paid the shot for both of us," he answered.

I demurred, well knowing he had little money in his purse and not yet realizing how an empty poke can sharpen wit. Will took my arm and answered:

"Study to live courteously, rendering to Cæsar what is Cæsar's; but to them whose hearts are golden, seek to add no gilt, lest Satan mock thee! Why flout such trash as money in the face of kindness? Only they who know no other measure should be paid in minted money, that an hostler spits on or a tavern toss-pot flings into the sawdust on the floor! Here is such hospitality as only loving-kindness can requite."

We lined our bellies well with eggs and bacon rashers fried by Mistress Bellamy, who bussed us both and thrust good bread and cheese into our saddle-bags, beseeching us to come again; though me she urged, I knew, only to keep herself in countenance.

She stood and watched us ride into the fog until we turned the corner of the road, her breath steaming upward like a kettle's, and I, to keep myself from asking questions, looked to my pistol priming, thinking that the night air might have damped it. It was well I did. Dry priming has emboldened more men to preserve themselves than ever bullets slew.

Most of that country was open common, but here and there was a hawthorn hedge seen dimly either side the road, soft-gray under the hoarfrost, with now and then the breath of a group of steers uprising on the far side. Trees loomed now and then like ghosts. There was hardly a sound except the ringing of our horses' hoofs on the frozen highway.

We came before long to a gibbet that was used for sign-post where a road turned southward, and from there on, perhaps because the gibbet lent a melancholy hue to thought, reminding us how cold it was, we let the beasts trot, cuffing our ears and clapping hands to make the blood flow, wishing that the struggling sun might suck the mist.

And of a sudden my horse shied; so unexpectedly that I was hard put to it to keep in the saddle. I almost unhorsed Will by bumping into him.

A man had come spurring from behind a hayrick set close to the road where there was a wide gap in the hawthorn hedge, and no rail. Either the rail was broken, or he had removed it. He drew rein nigh on top of us and I could see his pistol-muzzle—that and his mare's head, not much more, for the fog was thick.

"Buy your lives!" he bawled out.

I knew his voice. I recognized his mare's head. I bethought me of dry pistol-priming. Also I was envious of Will for last night's victory, and minded to persuade him there were times and places where my prowess might surpass his.

Priming nerved me, but my sword came first to hand. I was at the fellow, point first, sooner and more sudden than he looked for. He drew trigger and the flash and the report scared Will's ill-humored horse into the ditch, but the bullet missed me, though I felt the wind of it. The next the fellow knew, my point was at his throat and my left hand had his mare's head by the bridle.

Then in turn he knew me. "Halifax!" he muttered.

"JEREMY CRUTCH," said I, "that name of yours rings ominous! Belike you'll need a pair of crutches if I break your bones! Is this your gratitude for what my father did?"

"Unhand me," he answered, and there was more than disappointment in his voice. He felt shame. "Had I known it was you and your crony you should have passed and never seen me."

I took his sword and, grasping it between thigh and saddle, passed his rein over my arm, not having all that confidence in men's professions that had wrecked my father.

"I expected two of the Earl of Leicester's men," said Jeremy. "Such capons travel well lined."

"All that desperate?" I asked. "You'd better rob the queen's men. She might send to bid the Lord Lieutenant to his duty, but the earl would clap a hundred riders after you for saucy interference with his pig-sty cleaner."

He laughed. "Let come a thousand," he retorted, "they should never find me. There is a ship in Plymouth Harbor, ready to weigh for the Spanish Main, and my mother's cousin sold me a place on board and one quarter of a sixty-fourth share; but it took all the money I had. A purse or two, to buy my share of liquor for the ship—"

"You might have sold this mare," I answered, eying her. She was a beauty. "Be you minded, Jeremy, to walk to Plymouth?"

"No," said he, "for by the rood I'd rather hang! I'll give you better, though."

With that he put his hand inside his leather jacket, squinting down his sharp nose at my sword-point, for I trusted him not at all.

"There was mention of this last night," he said, and pulled out something in a leather pouch, of a size to lie snugly on the flat palm of the hand.

"I risked my neck for it," he went on, "and you heard what Titus Bellamy said about its owner putting a high value on it. 'Od's blood, I would leifer have a purse of money, gallows risk and all! Have it. It has brought me ill-luck—it may serve you better."

I took it, hardly looking, needing one hand for my sword and both eyes for Jeremy's face, although Will Shakespeare dragged his horse out of the ditch and was standing near. Will had drawn his hanger, but I had my doubts that he could use the weapon half as well as Mistress Bellamy had used a toasting-fork.

"Now let me go," said Jeremy, "and I will make all haste to Plymouth."

But I saw that Will's horse had been lamed by falling in the ditch—a sorry beast, more eager for oats than work, and one that I doubt not had lazied many a league through knowing that Will's compassion was his weakness.

"You are like to miss your ship, Jeremy," said I, "for you have lamed the lazy beast that you shall ride. Get down off the mare and change saddles."

He made a wry face, offering me money rather, so that I knew it was a lie about his wanting to buy liquor for the ship. I quoted to him Will's words concerning knaves who measure kindness by its weight in coin, and then, discovering I lacked Will's gift of making words fit circumstance, I changed my argument:

"If I spare the hangman trouble, as my father already did once in your case," said I, "I think the hangman will hardly thank me, since he needs bread like the rest of us."

Whereat he got down and began to change the crupper buckles, his mare being smaller than Will's sorrel; however I bade him leave the bridles as they were, his being the better and its bit more suited to the mare's mouth.

THEN I took away his powder flask and bullets, but I let him keep the empty pistol to shoot Dons with on the Spanish Main, assuring him that the Dons would live an hundred years apiece unless he practiced to aim straighter. As for his sword, it was more like a butcher's knife than any proper weapon, so I gave that to Will Shakespeare, for use if he should go to sticking beeves in Smithfield.

Then I bade God-speed to Jeremy, he needing it, or the devil might set the hangman on him after all. And, when we had watched him ride away on Will's lame horse toward the cross-road where the gibbet was, we two rode on toward London, I well satisfied with having repaid Will the tavern reckoning. It pleased me mightily, and I began to whistle "Mary Ambree," which was a tune much favored at the time.

Will said nothing until I piped a false note—something he endured less meekly than the bruise he had from falling in the ditch.

"That's a sharp wind, Will! Save it for the puritans,!" he said quickly, sucking at his teeth as if he had just bit a sour gooseberry. "You have made an enemy; why whistle up the devil with a witch's discord to avenge him?"

"Enemy?" said I. "I spared a rascal, though the law of England would have let me kill."

"Leave the law to lawyers," he retorted. "Those have made trouble enough without your aid. You shamed a rogue, and he will bear so dark a grudge against you as shall gnaw until he thinks he does God's service by ridding your soul of its body some dark night."

"Then would you have killed him?" I asked.

"He should have had my purse," Will answered. "God knows, there is not much in it, yet enough, maybe, to buy a *laissez passer* from a thief."

I mocked him at that for a lack-spunk who would spare a louse for fear the louse might call him to account. I said that shame, and plenty of it, was the proper physic for whatever remnant of a soul a cut-purse had.

He answered: "Are we preachers, Will, and ride we two to London to beg benefices, greedy for the burial fees and tithes, proposing to ourselves to live in dread of hell-fire while we prate about a sour-swill heaven?"

"Give him back the mare then!" I retorted angrily.

"Why, how so?" he answered, smiling. "I am not offended that you took his beast. I' faith, he staked it on the play of destiny and lost. But did you wisely when you stripped his self-esteem and left him naked to the frosty winds of conscience, that will freeze a

merry fellow's soul until it better fits a caitiff's rind? You might have had the rogue's mare and his good will with it."

"Sweeter his spite than his love!" I retorted. "Do you choose your friends among the highwaymen?"

Whereat he told me the old nurse's tale about the fox and sour grapes—a silly enough fable, since a fox eats meat, nor never have I seen the fox that would as much as sniff up-wind for cabbages or any other fruit, were it ripe or out of reach or not.

He could mock at angels like a small boy stoning geese and yet I think he seldom spoke but that he felt his words were being written in the Book the Angel of Judgment keeps.

Who could answer him? The man had music in his marrow and it flowed forth to a tune that made the hearer dumb, so, whether Will was right or wrong, he seemed to have the right of it.

He did not rant, as did the strolling players I had seen in Brownsover, when we boys played truant at the price of caning and helped afterward to pelt the players out of town. There, of course, the player who could rave the loudest was the most admired.

Will spoke honiedly, as if the import of his words were not in need of bellowings and windmill posturings to lend it weight. Nonetheless, he made my vanity shrink small in me, and that is discontenting of a frosty morning when a man rides hoping to win fortune for himself. I drew the little leather package forth that Jeremy Crutch had parted with, and opened it, thinking to change the flow of talk into a shallower channel wherein haply I might hold my own.

INSIDE the bag there was a small, flat box with what I took for golden hinges, though it may be they were brass. The wood was harder than my nail's edge, lacquered with a sort of carmine-colored glaze as smooth to the feel of a finger as window-glass. There was a knob to press on, causing it to open like an oyster, and within was silk, more yellow than the rarest gold, whereon there lay a little figure of a demon, marvelously wrought of green stone, smooth and soapy to the touch.

It was a comic gimcrack, making us both laugh, although I thought of witchcraft on the instant. It had the trunk and features of an elephant, and yet the posture of a seated man, withal fat-bellied and seeming to ooze benevolence. Before he had more than glanced at it Will pulled out his purse and offered to buy the thing.

Whereat when I had quoted to him in contempt of money his own words, he offered me the mare instead, which led to bantering.

I let him hold the thing, he turning it to make the sun's rays glimmer on the green stone, showing cloudy depths in it like shoal water off the Devon coast in summer, and revealing all its skill of workmanship. He sighed at last and gave it back.

"There, pouch it again, Will," he said, "for I have seen too much."

Thereafter for awhile he rode in silence, turning something over in his mind, his forehead bowed, now frowning and now smiling as he moved his lips—in the way, it might be, that his father used to taste the ale at Stratford in his first public office.

It was a magic morning. We began to sing, we two; for Will's moods were as changeful as our English weather. He could take the barytone and carol that, against my booming bass, until the horses ambled with a rare will and the frozen blackbirds chirruped back to us.

And he could make a song to any olden tune—such foolishness as lovers sing or nurses put the children off to sleep with, until we wearied of an air, and Will set new words to another, first repeating them until I had them well by heart.

That one I liked best was the drink-

ing song he made up out of nothing but the hope of coming on a well-stocked tavern, though we came on none that tempted us to linger. I have sung it since a thousand times—aye, have sung it to the queen herself when she was moody and craved something else than pick-thank praises or the importunities of statecraft. I will set down here one verse of it:

Troll the bowl—troll the bowl!
Oh, the mead, it payeth toll,
(Not with groat)
Ere the throat
Let it by, oh, let it by!
It shall pay, oh, it shall pay,
For it slaketh care away,
Paying toll
To the soul
That was dry, oh, that was dry,
Of the merry, merry drinker that was dry!

CHAPTER III.

HOW HALIFAX AND SHAKESPEARE LODGED AT ROGER TUNBY'S HOUSE NEAR CHEAPSIDE.

WE slept that night at Oxford, at the Crown Inn, kept by a merry man named Davenant, whose wife, I thought, was as like to lose her heart to Will as Mistress Bellamy had been. But Davenant had not been married overlong, so that his wife was foremost in his mind as yet and there was nothing to arouse Ann Hathaway's jealousy—not that time.

After supper Will called for my gimcrack to amuse them, and he wove such tales around it as put all the chap-book writers out of countenance. I vow there never was such tongue as Will's, nor such imagination—no, nor such a voice to pluck at heartstrings, conjuring a sudden smile from tragedy and cloaking laughter with the mask of grief, until we knew not whether we should laugh or cry.

And so to bed at midnight, sheeted, nor no extra penny for the laundry, thanks to friend Will's entertainment.

So well we liked the Davenants, and they us, that we would have dallied at Oxford but for the shallowness of our exchequer, which persuaded us to journey on to London in one day, by way of Uxbridge, where it was market day, with a host of people.

There, because all men were in fear of horse thieves, with such a ready market for stolen horses in Antwerp, we earned enough to pay for the bait for our own mounts by standing guard over about twenty others while their owners did sundry errands; and by that means there entered a thought into Will's head that served him to good purpose later.

We lingered not long by the triple tree of Tyburn, where felons hung in chains from all three beams and great ravens perched above. There was an inn near by, with benches from which those who chose to buy ale at a penny more than custom might watch the hangman do his work.

Will grew gloomy, I remember, at the sight of that grim fruit on Tyburn Tree.

"Heaven looked on," he exclaimed, "nor took their part, nor pitied them!"

I wondered at him, being minded that a felon earns a felon's fate. But I have never ceased to wonder at Will Shakespeare's sentiments, that never ape the general. He has a way so versatile that none knows which side of an issue he will take.

AND so, nigh sunset, to the house of Roger Tunby, where I made bold to expect such hospitality as oftentimes my father had received from him, and he from us, for it had been my father's wont to entertain such reputable merchants as might come to Warwickshire from London.

Nor were we disappointed of good victuals, though the old chuff put the two of us to sleep in one bed and had us send our horses to a baiting stable, where we must pay the reckoning. But, as it transpired later, that was fortu-

nate, although at the time I thought a pox on such a starving tyke of a niggard host.

The old man bade me welcome and accepted Will as being a friend of mine; but even his apprentices could see the spice of hospitality was lacking, and that he no longer thought it a privilege to have a Halifax of Brownsover beneath his roof, but thought the cat now jumped the other way. He made short work of telling me it had been common talk in Paul's, and in all the taverns, these many days, how my father had slain one of the Earl of Leicester's followers and himself had been slain by another.

"And they say, Will Halifax," said he, "that Sir Harry slew his man to silence a witness who might have tipped the scale against him in a lawsuit for recovery of debt."

I wasted no breath on denial, though I knew my father's innocence of such foul motive; it was not his nature to act cowardly, nor had he ever cared enough for money to besmirch his knighthood on account of it.

The shoe was on the other foot. The Earl of Leicester had dispatched two men to seek a quarrel with him, knowing that my father had been privy to certain doings that it were highly inconvenient should reach the queen's ears. Nevertheless, I had no proof of that, and he who had slain my father had been sent in great haste by the earl into the Low Countries. Nor did I know exactly what the secret was that had cost Sir Harry his life.

I said to Roger Tunby while we sat at meat:

"I will clear my father's name in good time, he having given me a good enough one when he caused me to come into this world. And I have his kindness to remember, which shall spur me to the duty that I owe him. Nor will I reckon that debt paid before I make the author of the foul rumor eat his words."

The old man screwed his mouth up. He was used to domineering his apprentices, and took it ill that I should offer to him, in his own house, what might sound like a reproof. He drummed his knife-butt on the tablecloth.

But the serving wench mistook that for a summons, and when she came he changed his mind about answering me scurvily. Mayhap some memory of services my father did him crossed his thought. And perdy, he looked right venerable with his white hair falling to his shoulders and his velvet coat, with silver buttons, showing from under the napkin he had tucked around his neck.

"MORE ale, Jane!" he commanded. "Less attention to a guest's good looks than to his comfort, or the 'prentices will take you for a vulgar trullibub!"

When the maid had served to turn his temper he addressed me fatherly:

"Will Halifax, you will best let bygones be. My own son Edward thought to merit fortune by being, as it were, the echo of myself, even as you aspire to be your father's echo and to do as he did. So at last I told him what I will now tell you:

"'*Like father, like son*, Edward,' said I, 'is a false wise saw. It's a sucked egg. My own name's good enough for me,' said I, 'and if I lose it lacking you to cudgel the pates of 'prentices, you may make a new name for yourself!' And so, to sea I sent him under Master Hezekiah Greene, bidding him bite Spanishers if his teeth should get too sharp on the ship's food for endurance. 'Bite 'em, Edward,' says I, 'in the Lord's name, not mine; and bring gold Portuguese and angels clinking home in your pockets. I'll add you two for each one, and thereto I'll give you this house o' mine to marry in so soon as men on 'change look envious at me because my son is lustier than theirs!'"

I have no doubt but that was good enough advice, but Will Shakespeare

spied a hole where he could drive his wit in, so he piped up:

"Marry! Will you add two to every one that Will Halifax brings home? If so, I'll go to sea with him!"

"Is he my son? Are you?" old Tunby answered. "I have made him welcome for his father's sake, and I gave him some good advice for his own. But he is too old for a 'prentice, and I have no doubt he isn't old enough to let the maids alone, on top of being too well born to stomach trade. But this I will do. For his father, Sir Harry's, sake I'll speak a word for him to a master mariner whose ship lies in the Thames by Greenwich. I will do that for you, Will. If you wish me to do your friend a turn, I'll speak for him, too."

NOW I knew I should make him my enemy an I said no to that offer; yet I doubted it were wise to say yes, and by the look in Will's eyes I made certain he thought as I did. Old Tunby's offer was too sudden kind.

If he were seeking to get rid of me, as seemed not impossible, then it might be that he owed my father money! Of this, indeed, I had long entertained a suspicion, although I had no proof. And to the contrary, if he were hiding nothing, and were merely well-disposed, then it should go hard, but that his good-will should continue for a few days without my snapping at the first bait offered.

So, affecting a gratitude I did not altogether feel, I asked how soon he could arrange the matter. He answered it might need a few days, he not caring to take boat to Greenwich while the ague lingered in his bones, but that he looked to see the ague leave him with the first warm sunshine. Will and I might stay with him meanwhile if we would lend a hand among the 'prentices.

But I had seen men with the ague. If he had it, then I had it too, and so had my horse Robin. Therefore, I began to feel sure that he hid some matter from me, since a reputable merchant would be hardly like to lie to a guest in his own house concerning such a simple matter, unless his mind were on a greater and more complex issue, one lie leading to another.

So I made a show of doubt that a merchant adventurer would accept my services on board ship without a few score pounds to boot to balance inexperience. He did not dislike that, mistaking it for modesty on my part; a virtue in which he declared too many youths were lacking.

After supper, by the fireside, he began to "drink tobacco," burning it in a pipe—which I thought a filthy habit until later on I met Sir Walter Raleigh, and from admiration of him learned to do the trick myself.

When we had talked a while, old Tunby's married daughter, Mistress Atkins, with a guard of noisy 'prentices, came from her own house half a mile away to pay her duty to him and to find fault with the serving maids, since Tunby kept no woman in the house to manage them, being not so long a widower that he wished to replace his wife's tongue with another that might clack louder.

After she had finished deviling the wenches, Mistress Atkins sat with us before the fire to do her sewing, deeply curious to learn how Will and I had come there and for what foul purpose. From her manner and her shrewd way of questioning I drew conclusion she was privy to whatever secret Tunby might be keeping from me, so that I began to feel sure there would a trick be tried on me, though what the nature of it might be I was far from guessing.

PRESENTLY I spoke to her about my Mildred, thinking that a youngish woman with her second child due about May day might admire a tale of lovers' constancy. But she liked neither me nor my story, and read

me a shrew's sermon on it, vowing that young women who defied their elders ended by marrying ne'er-do-wells, the more bitterly to regret it the longer they lived.

"But most of them," said she consolingly, "died young, of broken hearts."

I wished I had been silent about Mildred, but Will Shakespeare took the scolding merrily enough. He told her of his own wife in Stratford; whereat Mistress Atkins made bold to ask him how many pounds the year Ann had for keeping house the while her husband ruffled it in London.

Will's answer drew her anger as a good dog draws a bear: "Whoso puts," said he, "a burden on a horse, should feed him. Should the poor brute haul the wain up heavy hills and feed his owner likewise with the very juices of his strength?"

The mean shrew flew into a passion, storming at her father that he wasted substance entertaining squibbes come begging with their hose patched on their heels.

Masterless men, she called us, runagates who should be haled before a magistrate and smartly whipped back to the parish where we shirked work; vagabonds, who might be spies for all an honest woman knew—papish Jesuits, mayhap, in league against the queen's grace, fattening ourselves on English beef in English homes the while we plotted with the Scotch queen and the French!

In choler I rose from the settle to take my leave, late though the hour was. But Will stood up and nudged me until I caught his eye. There was such mischief there as gave me pause and he was smiling, although as for me the turkey-red went flaming up my temples and I could not speak for the wrath that boiled in me. Will pushed me back into the corner.

"Mistress," he said, "it were better done thus."

He struck an attitude, so sudden that she quailed. I, too, thought he would curse her. Tunby struggled to his feet, but sat down; I think he was not sorry to see his shrew-tongued daughter taken down a peg or two.

And of a sudden Will began to pour forth words that stung and bit like summer horse flies. They were like a whip's crack. There was steel in them. Laden, they were with the freight of a curse impending, all the more dreadful because he never launched it; and his gestures, like a master swordsman's, terrified by their restraint suggestive of a passion leashed and ready to be loosed, yet held in check.

For a minute—aye, more than a minute, I believed his venomous invective was assailing her; and so thought she, recoiling from him like a souse-wife* in a back-street broil.

BUT it presently appeared that he was teaching her a better way to void her spleen, not voiding his on her. With subtlety beyond my cunning to detect, when she was browbeat into speechlessness, he passed her by, as floods go rolling by a broken dam, and left her, as it were, behind him wondering to watch him overwhelm all levels lower than herself.

We three became the audience, and he the player showing us how virtue triumphs over vice. He seemed to play for us the better part of our own natures, with the very splendor of his presence conquering the venom that makes devils of us all.

He was no longer the Stratford trader's son who had shared the road with me to London, but, methought, some hero resurrected from an olden time to show us how a very souse-wife's humor may be splendid.

And in time he paused, in good time. Subtle gesture changed him. He became the very creature he had overwhelmed with eloquence! He trembled and began to answer—stammered, tried to summon dignity; then turned

*Woman who pickled and sold souse.

away, recovering, to cloak his shame beneath a show of anger, coveting a passion that he could not feel, his very venom turned to water by the magic of his former speech. He seemed to try to gather new resources from the empty air, then hung his head and answered—nothing!

Presently he smiled, and seemed to take us into confidence; now he was Will of Stratford, we his hosts.

"All men," he said, "play many parts. And that which we think worthy in us often shows itself weak wretchedness when nobler presences appear. Vain-glorious Goliath falls before a David's sling. A David cowers at a weak old man's rebuke."

He changed again. He took his seat, and like a cat before the hearth, drew comfort out of hospitality, contenting others with the spirit he exuded.

Then he told us tales, so full of magic and the mystery of interest as kept us wakeful, until midnight saw the fire die low and Mistress Atkins had to beg grace of her father's roof.

She sent two 'prentices to warn her husband she would not be home that night, old Tunby bidding the 'prentices tread slyly lest the night-watch catch them and the magistrates impose a penalty next day for being out when honest lads should lie abed.

CHAPTER IV.

OF THE MEETING WITH BENJAMIN BERDEN, AND THE OPPORTUNITY THAT CAME OF IT.

I ROSE at dawn, leaving Will Shakespeare in the bed, and I was in the street before the 'prentices took down the shutters, finding my way to Burbage's mews where we had left the horses overnight.

Will meant to follow custom and sell the nag that carried him to London; and we had heard the day before, along the road from Uxbridge, how good horses were in fine demand since so many knights and gentlemen had gone to the Low Countries at their own costs to help Dutchmen fight the King of Spain.

But what with the purse my Mildred gave me, and Will Shakespeare's impudence having saved us so much tavern expense, I was not feeling so bankrupt after all, and the thought had found lodging in my head that two good nags would make a better showing and perhaps be better for my destiny than one. And a thought whether it is right or wrong, is not much easier to get out of my head, once it has found lodgment, than it is to pull a bear's teeth.

So I aroused the drunken hostler, and he, thinking I would pay my reckoning, summoned Burbage from his bed, most scurvily ill-tempered to be called to pocket those few pence.

I bade him offer me a price for Will's mare, and what with his mislike of being up so early, and with his thinking I could not afford the charges and would therefore sell the mare cheap, he bid low. Whereat I cried a pox on his avarice and came away before he could better the offer.

Then I returned to the house and wakened Will, who was a lusty sleeper, and I offered him the same price for the mare that Burbage bid me. Will accepted it without ado, it being nearly twice as much as he had hoped to get for his old sorrel that he started with from Stratford, although much less than the mare was worth. I paid Will Shakespeare there and then, he smiling as I counted out the money.

"You will die rich or be hanged poor, one way or the other," he said, pulling on his hose, "but if you always practice to leave your victims richer for the chousing, you will not lack mourners."

I grew half ashamed of having paid him such a low price, although the mare was in a way part mine, since it was I who had forced the exchange

with Jeremy Crutch, but Will read my humor.

"Rest you merry," he adjured me. "Let me not know what the proper price is. In the good enough, our true contentment lies. The better, unattained, frets disposition. I am only happy when I see no summits out o' reach, nor no flights of imagination missed."

We ate our breakfast with the 'prentices, Mistress Atkins being gone betimes in great dread that her household might have fallen into sloth for lack of clacking tongue. But ere our meal was done old Roger Tunby came among us in his nightcap, with a great red shawl about his shoulders, to admonish the 'prentices and to bid me help them.

THE while I hesitated how I should avoid him without risking enmity, considering a lie about the horses, or a cousin's cousin to be found, or some such subterfuge, Will Shakespeare stole my privilege, like Jacob robbing Esau. He proposed himself in my place, vowing he could sell two bales of merchandise to my one and declaring I was likelier to quarrel than to lure new custom or retain the old.

So old Tunby hesitated, doubting Will, and yet remembering the magic of his tongue that certainly might serve in wooing custom. While they argued I went up and put on my best suit with the pointed sleeves, made by Fugger, of Augsburg. I did on, too, my new short cloak of blue French velvet.

When I came down Will was chaffering already with a purchaser of wool. Apparently he understood that trade—and by the rood, I have found little that he does not understand.

The 'prentices, who were sweeping out the kennel * before the shop, were in two minds, whether to listen to Will or to the common cryer, who was serving notice of an execution to be held at noon that day. I made my way to Cheapside unobserved—I thought—by any of them, and for awhile I was hard put to it to bear myself with proper arrogance, so entertaining was the scene.

I had never thought that London could be up and agait so early; we of the shires were used to mock all Londoners as lie-a-beds. The very name of flat-cap for a London citizen included a thought of mockery.

Adown the middle of Cheapside rode gentry, picking their way through crowds of 'prentices and loiterers of many nations. There were French, Dutch, Germans, Genoese, Italians, Danes, Swedes and even Turks, along with men whose origin I could not guess, and to all of them the 'prentices yelled, "Buy-buy-buy! What do you lack, masters?"

There was constant movement, wondrous pleasing to the eye, enhanced as it was by the colors of men's and women's costumes against the painted woodwork of the houses and the heaps of soiled snow.

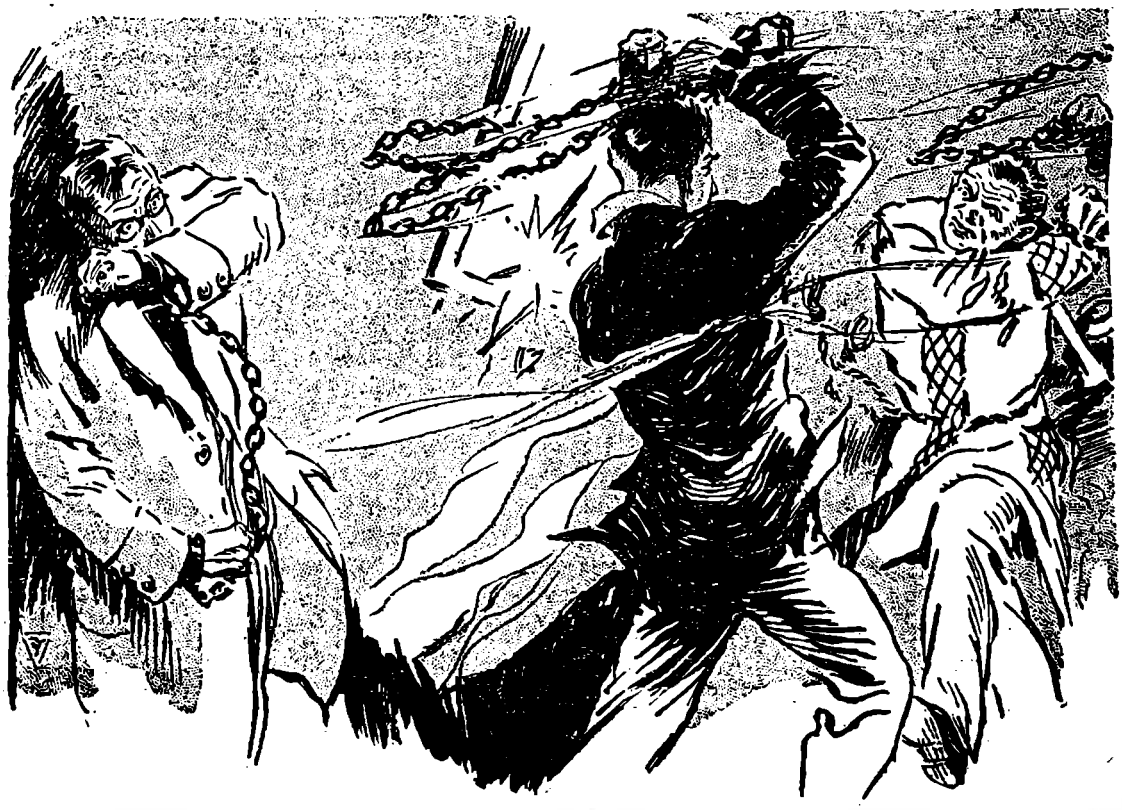
When I stepped aside to dodge a horseman, I was seized by half a dozen 'prentices, who were like to tear my cloak off, so eager they were to drag me into their master's shop and sell me I know not what extravagances at double or treble the market price.

I was irked to think they took me for a country lout, being flattered that I carried myself already with a proper townsman's air, yet it was worth a man's life, almost, to incur their enmity. I was giving and taking repartee right merrily, to hide my anger and to rid myself of the rogues, when a horseman, spurring in his haste, knocked down a 'prentice.

Instantly there was a cry of "Clubs! Clubs!" The clamor sped up Cheapside until the whole street rang with it. Swarms of 'prentices, like angered hornets, surged out of the shop doors with their cudgels swinging.

* A gutter down the middle of the street.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



Horror on Owl's Hill

Men take on the color of their surroundings—and the gloomy fustiness of a decaying house cast morbid shadows on three physicians' minds until horror and madness stalked its gloomy corridors

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Novelette—Complete

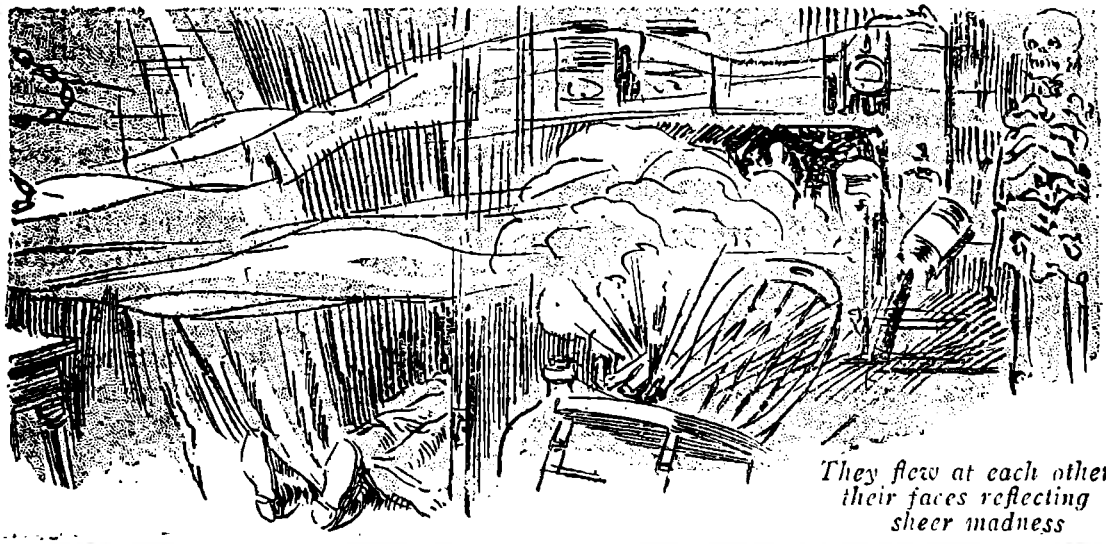
CHAPTER I.

A VOICE FROM THE DEAD.

PERHAPS no setting in all the world could have been more appropriate for these grim and awful occurrences than that senile old mansion of gray brick squatting atop Owl's Hill, its south wall, sheer and rain-streaked, overlooking the dark breast of the flood. A rambling house of angles and gables, arches and long corridors, staircases that creaked out in the night; its rooms were gray in mournful shadow, its halls forever in twilight. Even the many chimneys leaned wearily in the wind.

Tall pines reared ghostly limbs above the pavements and paths leading to the distant street—pines once peopled by the nocturnal birds that had loaned the hill its name. There was a decrepit garden slanting against the sagging veranda. An iron deer corroded in immobile stoicism beneath a drooping lilac. The whole establishment, smelling of rain and river and funereal lilac perfume, was redolent of an era that had fled long since.

Abetting this atmosphere of fust and decay, the gloomy façade of the abandoned student hospital loomed on the bank across the river. Unoccupied for years, the building had almost fallen



They flew at each other, their faces reflecting sheer madness

in ruin. Windows, sightless without glass and hung with cobweb curtains, peered from sooty walls plastered with forgotten real estate signs, circus posters, and advertisements for patent medicines.

Empty halls echoed—if one cared to listen—with eerie calls that might have been wind soughing up from the river or the voices of those who had expired in those uncheerful chambers.

Altogether, Owl's Hill presented an uninviting front. Local gossip, flowing in subtle undercurrents about the city, had it that the place was haunted. Of recent manufacture was a story about a strange light seen winking at night from the blind windows of the hospital. The bolted outer doors and the nailed-over windows of the two lower floors had not been tampered with, yet the reports persisted about a weird light seen flickering on the top floor. Folk who give credence to "haunts" do not all live in the back woods.

Just why we continued to dwell in that old gray brick house on Owl's Hill across from the abandoned hospital, in a neighborhood fast growing dingy, can only be explained by man's reluctance to leave a location of early youth and former pleasant associations.

Being just a bit more imaginative than my two companions, I had once broached the subject of a move for the three of us. Holmes Terril had sighed; said yes, a new location would probably be a good thing for his practice; and steadfastly refused to budge an inch. McGrath had not even looked up from his test tubes, being so utterly absorbed in some involved culture that I dared not speak again. So I, who had thrown over medicine for scribbling childish verse, stifled vague fears to stick it out with my friends.

Why not? Terril, McGrath, and I had lived in that house ever since we had stepped from the school across the river with high hopes and wet ink on our certificates. We had studied, experimented, practiced, made money, loved and lost there, all three of us. Terril's beloved had died. McGrath had deserted his for his laboratory. Mine had married, but not me. Three bachelors growing a bit gray and fussy—why should we leave our comfortable rooms in the old gray house?

Believe me, it would have been a thousand times better had we never entered the place on Owl's Hill. For I blame the sunless aspect of the spot. Blame it for the gruesome inspiration leading to the awful deeds of our final winter there. We, scientists of the mind, should have known enough to get ourselves sunlight and air and fishing trips. Instead we lurked in a rot-

ting mansion on a pine-clad hill, feeding on fusty books, hours of gruelling mental labor, abstruse explorations, experiment—until one brain began to corrode, even as the iron deer corroded on the lawn beneath the lilac that smelled like a funeral on a rainy night.

STICKY, wet snow had been falling for the past three hours, laying on tree limbs, fence, roof and lawn a mantle that showed mist-white in the darkness. Returning from a measles case down town, for all the world like a country doctor with my kit under one arm and a book of adventure yarns under the other, I paused at our gate to wipe snow from my glasses and pull up my overshoes.

Far up the trackless walk the old mansion loomed shadowy behind the sifting curtain, a light in the lower hall glowing dimly into the night. The pines stood stiffly in their white coats. The iron deer stood bearded and white against background of the newly weighted lilac bushes. The night was quiet, save for the hiss of the wet snow, the burble of the dark river, the toot of a distant taxi horn. The night was still but for the movement of the falling veil.

Slushing along, with mind on dry slippers and a pipe, I started up the walk. Then my eye had wandered to the abandoned hospital across the river, and abruptly I stood pinned in my tracks. Clearly, unmistakably I had seen a light. A luminous green glow flitting from window to window along the top floor of the building across the river. An oath escaped me, and I dropped both book and kit; wiped my glasses and stared.

As if hiding from my suddenly directed gaze the light went out. I felt ashamed of my jumpiness. It was simply some prowler roaming the old property over there—a tramp, perhaps, seeking shelter. No business of mine. I picked up my kit and resumed my walk to the house.

And then, with my foot on the veranda step, I turned right around and hurried back to the gate. I would puncture the local ghost yarn, even though it was rather infantile to pay it any attention. I wanted to go over to the hospital and see where the prowler had broken in for myself. Calling myself a groggy ass, I turned my steps toward the footbridge across the river. I told myself in huffy accents that I simply desired, as a scientific man, to lay this ghost story built by a lot of city yokels.

However, to my disquiet, I could hardly explode their occult theories; for, search as I might, I could find no place where the building had been forcibly entered. Lower doors and windows were boarded and nailed fast. My idea that entry had been made by ladder was shattered by the total absence of the ladder. And, worst of all, there was not a track to mar the blanket of snow spread around the place. Not a track.

It began to grow mighty uncomfortable, strolling around in the darkness under those gloomy walls. What with lighting matches and cigarette lighter —a job in that snowfall—as I hunted footmarks, I had probably been noticed by the nocturnal visitor. Things might be unhealthy if I played around too long, and under the half light cast by the white snow I could easily be detected by any watcher in the silent building.

Quite suddenly I did not care who or what inhabited the old hospital. For I had heard the sound of boot-heels pounding fast down an empty corridor; the sound of a moaning voice!

The sound of those boot-heels running, the sound of that moaning voice carved me to freezing stone where I stood; left me stark and sweating against the wall. As the ghastly echoes melted within the walls of the hospital and all I could hear was the labor of my gasping lungs, I found my feet and

started to run. Took to my heels. Fled. Like a schoolboy going down the road past the graveyard. Ran, panting and gulping, slipping and skidding, my heart whacking in my chest. Raced for the house on Owl's Hill.

That voice accompanying the sound of boots running down a corridor in the empty hospital had moaned out two names. The first name was that of a patient who had died many years past in that very hospital, due to the fumbling hands of the student-doctor in charge. The second name was that of the young doctor who had miserably lost his first case.

That name was mine!

TERRIL'S rooms occupied the lower floor front of the old gray mansion. His spacious library, with the walls hidden by laden bookshelves, and massive, leather-upholstered chairs facing a blazing log fire, was, in my estimation, the most cheerful room in the house. There Terril could almost always be found, sunk in one of the leather chairs, slippered feet toward the fireplace, one of his Danes curled up near by, a volume on philosophy or a pen in his hand.

The library, quiet, passive, filled with golden firelight and warm shadow, reflected the calm temperament of the man who spent his days among its books. For Terril, like myself, had practically quit medicine. His chief interest now were his learned tomes, his philosophical writings, philology, and his Great Danes. He was also an artist of no little merit, and an accomplished pianist, though he indulged in painting and music infrequently.

It may be determined that Holmes Terril's character was far from mediocre, scholar and gentleman that he was. Had he chosen, his fine intellect and gentle manner could have won him high distinction in the realm of medicine or any social pursuit. As it was the quiet, kindly manner of this tall, somewhat stoop-shouldered man with the finely chiseled features, the genial mouth from which a pipe always curved, and the unostentatious dress, had won everlasting regard in the heart of friends. And I, who had known him since school days, loved him as a brother; knew him almost as well as I knew my other comrade, McGrath.

It was to Terril's library, then, that I first carried my breathless story concerning the haunted hospital. Banging into the house like a terrified idiot, I charged into Terril's rooms, slamming doors behind me. He started up from his chair and dropped his book at my sudden entry. And I, who had invaded the sober quietude of his study, felt at once like a fool. Standing in the firelight, overshoes and hat leaking melted snow, I tried to calm my voice and to collect scattered wits. For I realized abruptly that my story would sound like puerile nonsense if rattled out in that sane atmosphere.

"Why, Brownie!" Terril's voice was taut with concern. "What's up, old chap! You look pretty white in the face. Not sick, are—"

"No," I denied, panting out the word. "But—"

Right there I was swamped. I knew I could never tell my story to the man before me. Holmes Terril stood watching me, absently tugging at the ear of one of his dogs, with a look of grave anxiety and calm interest, his pipe in his mouth, retrieved volume in the other hand. Well, the man and his library were simply too conventional and normal for a yarn about mystic lights and hidden voices moaning. The story would only upset him. He would smile understandingly, and prescribe ten hours' sleep for me.

"Holmes," I lied, "have you got any laudanum? Just as I came up the walk one of my teeth started going. Hurts like the devil."

He looked a bit mystified; wondering, no doubt, why I had not dashed to my own chambers after the sedative. But without a word he nodded and left

me, to poke about in his former consultation room. Nerves jangling in truth, I slumped into a chair. Baring its fangs, the dog sidled toward me. When I stretched a hand toward it, it growled viciously; and I cursed it under my breath. Nobody could approach Terril's dogs but their owner. He had five of the big devils, and no other human could lay a finger on them. He loved his dogs, and they loved him when they had not the slightest iota of devotion or even indulgence for any one else.

For once I was too disturbed mentally to worry about the Dane. Terril returned with the laudanum before the dog had made up its mind to sink its teeth in my face, so mumbling thanks, I quit the library. Out in the chill and gloom of the lower hall the shocking affair of the hospital became infinitely more probable. Again the sweat came to my chin. Again I could feel the prickles on my spine.

I would tell Mac McGrath. He was enough of a mental specialist to understand when I insisted that I had suffered no illusion. Besides, McGrath's rooms above his laboratory on the upper floor were on the river side of the house. If he had been sitting by the window reading, as was his usual habit at this hour, he must have seen the strange light. Grumbling to myself, I started for McGrath's rooms.

ON the staircase I encountered Repple. Repple, to my mind, was almost as much a nuisance as Terril's Danes. And there were times when I liked him a lot less. He was a squat, bow-legged little man with hairy, tattooed hands, red neck, crimson jowls, blue chin, piggy eyes, and a churlish scowl wrinkling the pale forehead above his bulbous bloodshot nose.

He was the only servant our establishment could boast, and he was a bad one. He was one of those servants who thought himself far too good for his job; spent his days in sullenly going about his tasks, as if he conferred a favor on those for whom he worked. Craft glimmered in those little eyes; his loose-lipped, wide mouth sulked.

Terril's tall and quiet dignity wrenched respect from Repple's coarse hide. McGrath's wild temper and his abrupt impatience with any inefficiency brought our admirable servant to terms. But for me, who was neither quick-tempered nor sternly tall, our Repple held little respect. And I would have flung the beggar out long since had not my father extorted one of those silly deathbed promises from me that I keep Repple in my employ and thus reward him for some ridiculous bravery exhibited during the Spanish War.

This Repple was the most unpleasant creature I had ever known. Coarse, sulky, sly, ugly, slothful, he let his work lapse during the day, and of an evening could always be found down town in the back room of some scabrous speakeasy, joying in the bawdy company of some burlesque queen.

"Repple!" I snapped sharply, as he would have shoved past me on the stairs. "Repple, is Dr. McGrath in his rooms?"

"He don't often go out, does he?" came the sullen response.

In no mood for the man's insolence, I snatched at one of his powerful arms; caught him up short with an angry jerk. "Look here," I growled, "that's no way to answer a question. Now I'm going to ask you a something, and if you aren't civil and smart in replying, you can bungle as a servant elsewhere. Whom do you think you're talking to?"

Never before had I spoken so sharply. Repple glared; his jaw dropped to reveal a battery of gold teeth; he exhaled a beery blast. Then he went absolutely servile, starting to whine. The fellow was utterly vulgar. His cringing was poisonous as his impudence had been.

"I didn't mean nothin'," he staggered me by replying. "I—"

"Listen," I cut him short. His sudden humility would be followed, I knew, by secret cursings bent in my direction. He was that sort. "Listen, Repple. Answer me this. Have you ever seen a light in that old hospital building across the river?"

Mottled pallor suffused Repple's cheeks. He drew away from me; stood with hands clawing along the banister. A husky whisper escaped his pulpy lips. "I heard about that ghost light las' night in town," was his reply. "But I ain't never seen it. No, I ain't, nor I don't want to—I ain't fer playin' with them things." His voice grew shrill. "There's funny things goin' on around here, I tell ya! Didn't I hear some one creepin' around th' halls th' other night? Ain't I seen a cloaked figure runnin' up th' stairs? I'm gettin' outa here, I am. I'm leavin' in th' mornin'." He was almost shouting. "So you seen that light on th' other side th' river, has you? Well, I ain't stayin' on Owl's Hill no more. I'm goin' in th' mornin'."

"For God's sake hush up," I rasped, fearing his nerveless clamor would raise the house. "I didn't say I'd seen anything, did I?"

Terril's door opened, and my tall friend and his dog stepped to the foot of the stairs. On sighting Repple the dog voiced an ugly snarl, and the servant cringed away. Terril eyed us curiously. "Anything wrong?"

"Not a thing," was my reply. "Just the usual roundelay with Repple over the handsome way he does his work here. I'm on my way to my room. Repple," I finished weakly, "was on his way to his."

The business was growing ridiculous and my reaction was one of anger. Of course Repple would have to yowl like a coward and let fly some silly yarn of his own about creepy figures sneaking down the halls. I was almost dancing with utter annoyance, impatience and malease. For I wanted badly to talk to McGrath.

Now Terril, who had been watching us with a cryptic smile on his lips, shrugged, nodded, caught his dog by the collar, and turned to go. Repple slunk down the stairs, head hunched between his shoulders, fingers plucking at the lapels of his slovenly jacket, and headed for his room below. As he passed Terril the great Dane flew at him with a volley of furious snarls. Repple fled off in the darkness whimpering, and Terril dragged his big dog into the library; leaving me on the staircase alone.

I DID not want to stay on that staircase alone. My nerves were beginning to twinge at every little sound, and, cursing to myself, I hurried up to McGrath's door. His cheery invitation to enter reassured me. Once more I felt like a driveling moron as I entered a brightly-lighted chamber exuding an atmosphere of septic sanity. There was a scrupulously tidy desk, a case of books, a wall lined with test-tube racks and surgical apparatus under glass. In one corner, stiff as a sentinel, stood a wholly cheerful skeleton.

On a dissecting table, under shining glass, stood a jar of solution in which lay the beating heart of a chimpanzee. McGrath had kept the organ alive for weeks; and it always gave me an uncanny thrill to see the thing. It was McGrath's belief that he could keep a human heart pumping in a human breast could the right solution be injected—"Keep life in a decapitated body," he had once confided.

McGrath was a wizard in his ability to seal and connect severed veins and arteries, thereby forming a minor circulatory system. Dr. McGrath, however, devoted most of his time to a study of the human brain, and was, in my estimation, the foremost scientist of the day in the fields of spinal surgery, brain disorders and psychiatry.

Why a man with McGrath's appalling culture should choose to remain in a place like our mansion on Owl's Hill

could only be explained by the absolute seclusion afforded. His laboratory would never be invaded, for few contemporaries even knew his whereabouts.

When I opened his door McGrath sat at his desk, eyes fastened on a human brain floating in a glass container before him, hands busy making notations and arranging a set of gleaming instruments. Feeling rather childish, I approached him. He swung about in his chair, smiling, and his deep brown eyes searched mine as he extended a delicate hand. There was a trim and precise neatness about the little man that might terrify one who did not know him well. I knew him, perhaps, better than any man living. I knew how humanely he could act; how pleasantly he could smile.

He brushed white fingers across his spruce brown mustache, reset his pince-nez glasses, and asked: "Well, Brownie? You look a bit upset. You haven't taken off your hat and rubbers. I say, you didn't lose that case you were handling in town, did you?"

"Mac," I told him, "I want you to be indulgent with me. I've got a story to tell and it doesn't fit in with the twentieth century. A ghost yarn, Mac. That's right, smile. But listen—"

Talking rapidly, I told my friend about the hospital across the river. I told him about the local legend of the haunt; about seeing the light; going to investigate; finding no track in the snow; hearing the sound of running feet and the voice wailing out the name of the patient I had once allowed to die; wailing out *my* name.

"I swear to God I heard it!" I repeated. "No illusion, Mac. That death worried me frightfully at the time, but even a young doctor soon forgets those things. And then I heard that man's name as clear as day, followed by my own! Moaned out in the darkness. Feet running, too. Not an hour ago, in that deserted building across the river!"

Going to the window, I drew aside the shade. McGrath came to stand at my elbow. Together we looked out. It was snowing hard and there was no moon. The hospital on the other bank was a dark blot against the purple sky, distinguishable through the sifting snow-veil. No light startled the darkness.

McGrath, who had listened in sympathetic silence, gave me a puzzled glance. "Your story is difficult, Brownie. You seem aware that you are not indulging a neuropathic state at present. Your reaction is entirely normal. A strange experience. Have you told any one else? Did you tell Terril?"

"He would have thought me demented. I told nobody. But I did ask that fool Repple if he had ever seen a light across the river. The moron went out of his head. Threatens to quit Owl's Hill in the morning."

"A good riddance. But it bears no light on the case. Take a powder and turn in, Brownie. You look badly shot. Sorry I can't say I've seen a light over there, too, but I never have. Fact is, I happened to be at the window about an hour ago and saw nothing. Perhaps we can take a run around the place in the morning and find a clew."

CHAPTER II.

THE UNKNOWN STRIKES.

BUT we did not take a run around to the old hospital in the morning. Things happened right there in our old gray brick mansion atop Owl's Hill that occupied our minds. I had not been in bed ten minutes before affairs got under way. Quitting McGrath's quarters, puzzled, annoyed and nervous, I had retired at once; was reclining in bed with a prescribed sleeping potion on the stand at my elbow and a magazine in my hand.

The dial of my watch had just read one, and I was reaching for the sleep-

ing powder when I heard the clamorous roar of a furious dog followed by a shriek that brought me bounding from my bed.

The screaming echoes had no sooner died away than a desperate racket broke loose on the floor beneath me. Again the Great Dane sent a chorus of roars vibrating through the house. Above a riotous outcry in which I heard my name called several times, there sounded the thud of bootheels upon the staircase. The uproar shocked the hollows of the dark mansion into a thousand echoes, filling the black shadows with terrifying sound.

Floundering about in the sea of ink that engulfed the hall, I strove to find a light-switch. To no avail. The lights would not go on, and as I struggled with the switch the light in my room sparked out. I was left in a turmoil of night; left in a gulf black as pitch that vibrated with screaming voices and the thud of blows. Bathed in cold sweat, and swearing at the top of my lungs, I stumbled back into my chamber, battled to my dressing table and grabbed an automatic that stood guard behind a convenient mirror. Blue steel felt good in my fist right then. The stomach came back to me, and I darted into the upper hall once more.

It was dark as the shore of the River Styx out there. The dog had choked quiet with a spine-chilling squawk, but the very devil of a fight was being waged in the hall below. A sharp thin overtone escaped the hubbub—a shrill screech I knew could only come from the lips of the servant, Repple. Sick with excitement, I started down the stairs. My heart pounded. My hand sweat water on the handle of the automatic. I would have sold my soul for a flash light. Believe me, it was no fun to creep down that staircase into a hall stuffed with darkness and swirling with cries.

Somehow, through no courage of my own, I confess, I gained the foot of those stairs. A new note added to the racket—the clank of chains! Iron links rattling. It was all I could do to keep from howling aloud, and shooting blindly into the blackness.

Then the shouting died out. Hubbub quieted to the shuffle of scuffling feet and the clanking of chain. A bilious, sicklish odor permeated the dust-laden air. Chloroform. And I heard a sound that might have been caused by heavy burdens dragged across the floor. The sound drove an insane yell from my throat.

"Terril!" I wailed "Mac! McGrath! Help! Help! Where are you? The lower hall! For God's sake!"

FOR answer a shaft of light stabbed out of the dark, blinding my eyes. A violent explosion shattered the semi-quiet and roared in echo through every room in the house. Barbing pain tore across my left shoulder, flinging me against the banister of the stairway.

Screaming an oath, I fired a return shot. The echoes of my gunfire bounced and caromed down the hall, deafening me. A door slammed. I fired at the sound; heard four bullets go plunking into wood. Slim tongues of flame streaked and flickered fast, and five lances of hot steel sought me where I crouched. The bullets burned close by, one of them striking my gun to send it wringing from my fingers. But aside from my first wound I remained untouched.

My assailant, or assailants, had missed, and apparently carried no more ammunition. Again came the sound of a slamming door. Then quiet. Blank, soundless quiet. Utter stillness more appalling than the clamor.

I clutched my bleeding shoulder, and scrabbled around in the hall, hunting the main light switch. I found it after a panicky ten minutes of stumbling around in the treacherous dark. It had been thrown to cut off the house circuit, and I closed it madly, flooding

the entire house with light. Then I whirled around; stared, mouth agape.

A hurricane might have driven through that lower hall. Draperies had been wrenched from the walls. Splintered wood and pieces of wrecked furniture strewed the floor. The door to Terril's library stood open, disclosing a scene of confusion that could only have been the stage of a desperate struggle. The door at the end of the hall showed split paneling where my bullets had struck. That was the door through which the riot had gone. Grabbing up my automatic and clawing stiff fingers over my wound, I made for the closed door.

I don't know what I called out, but I stood there yelling for fully three minutes. "Who's there?" I shouted. "Help!" And again and again I called the names of my two friends. I yelled until my voice became a husk; my only reply being ghostly echoes.

Unable to stay there longer, I kicked at the door. Nobody was behind it, just a long, empty corridor. I ran down the corridor to McGrath's laboratory. It was empty and in good order. I banged into room after room. They revealed nothing.

In sudden alarm I fled back to the front hall; rushed through Terril's library; dashed down to Repple's quarters below stairs; went shin-banging up to the second floor, racing into McGrath's study. Library, servants' quarters, and study were empty. Not a soul remained in the house. I darted onto the sagging front veranda, and sprinted around the outside of the mansion, snow in my face, pyjamas fluttering, blood dropping from my wound, eyes starting from my head. When I reached the door to the rear entrance and found it bolted fast the strain of events grabbed the knees out from under me. Down on my face I went, sprawling in the wet snow—stricken by the impossible events of the past half hour.

For all the fighters in the frenzied racket that had raged about the lower hall of that old house on Owl's Hill might have vanished like vapor in air. Certainly there was not a soul within those gloomy walls of gray brick, nor had escape been made through door or window. The snow-blanket spread around the outside of the mansion betrayed no single, solitary track.

POLICE came. Inspectors came. The press came, through a back window, twelve minutes after my hysterical phone call to headquarters. Photographers came. Doctors came. The coroner arrived—a little ahead of time, I informed him with a snarl.

I lay in bed with a spanking fever and a shoulder that burned like the very devil; and the whole house swarmed with red-eyed reporters, blue-nosed policemen, detectives without derbies but with most unhealthy paunches, headquarters men who smelled of bootleg and bribe, and special officers who looked scared.

They reminded me of nothing so much as a rabble of college supers playing cops in a Broadway murder thriller. They blabbed and bleated and made notes and took measurements and harped out promises of capturing what-not, until I all but went insane.

Typical small city police, they failed to unearth anything at all. They poked into all sorts of corners; puzzled over motive after motive. They photographed my foot-tracks. They arrested one of Repple's favorite girl friends, a blowzy wench with thick red lips who told them where to get off in no uncertain language.

The sum total of their investigations, herculean and intelligent though they were, revealed the following: nothing. Unless the total disappearance of three men and a Great Dane can be called something. Pry and investigate as they would, the police could only come up hard against a blank wall. What had happened to McGrath, Terril and Repple, who or where they had gone,

remained unsolved mystery after a week of diligent searching.

Of course the local journals raised a pretty hullabaloo, prodding the local police into frantic effort. As for me, I was accused of being everything from murderer to ghost. Assuredly I looked more the part of the ghost. And my state of mind cannot be imagined. Lying flat on my back, tortured by my infected shoulder and the stupid faces that were poked into mine, I spent my hours in agony.

If the question of how McGrath, Repple and Terril vanished without a trace to point their path of exit baffled the police, it threw me into a fever of speculation. At the end of the first week the police commissioner, a fat churl with cupid-bow lips, came to my bedside, and with much brow-mopping informed me that headquarters was stumped into oblivion. I glared into his doltish visage and turned it pallid by informing him that my opinion coincided with that of the evening paper: I believed my friends, my servant, and the dog had been spirited away by the legendary specters haunting Owl's Hill. That fat police commissioner never knew how near I had come to literal belief in that statement.

After six weeks of infernal rumpus the affair began to die down. I stubbornly resisted efforts to remove me into a hospital, and stuck it out on Owl's Hill, going through pleurisy, a shot-up shoulder, and doubts as to my sanity. Doctors harangued, and an alienist dropped in to help me wonder about my mental balance. None of them had sense enough to realize that the disappearance of my friends and worry about their safety was simply and naturally driving me to delirium.

None of them knew how glad I was when I could get out of bed and poke about the house myself. Nor was sorrow my emotion when the knowledge that the town was terrified of Owl's Hill became known to me. My worthy neighbors from down town would walk blocks out of their way to avoid the old mansion crouching among the pines. They had come in droves to see the place at first, but after the papers came out with their ghost stories the townsfolk came no more. The idea of three men and a dog vanishing in the night, after a fierce struggle with something that fired shots and caused the rattle of chain was too much for them. Even the three occultists from Oklahoma City who came to see me were scared away.

The police went back to their bootleg-bribe business. The press pounced on a lively hammer-on-the-head murder. Sick with fear, stubborn, determined to ferret out the case, I was left alone. Left alone to prowl empty halls, feed Terril's vicious pets in their kennel behind the house, and rack a tired brain. The rooms in the house were set in order. Terril's library, study and bed chamber were locked. Repple's room was cleared of furniture; the door bolted. McGrath's laboratory on the lower floor and his study and quarters on the upper floor were locked.

Two months passed. Three months. During the third month a curious incident occurred. One night I was certain I heard some one roaming the house. Weighted with guns, I stole from my room to investigate. A hunt through every room revealed nothing, but on searching McGrath's laboratory next day I discovered that several of his instruments were gone, as was the human brain he had kept in his study. Some one was entering and leaving the mansion at will, by unknown means.

Two days later affairs took the turn that led to the gruesome climax.

CHAPTER III.

MAD CONFUSION.

SOME one was moving about downstairs! I awoke with a shock; sat upright in bed; found myself straining every nerve to listen. Gray early morning light slanted through a

window opaque with frost. My quickened breathing hung bouquets of steam in the air. The nerves in my healing shoulder throbbed. Sliding fingers under my pillow, I found my most companionable revolver. Taut as a drawn wire, I listened.

Again I heard footsteps, the sound of a closing door, the creak of moved furniture. Could it be the mysterious prowler who had entered the house before and removed those articles from McGrath's laboratory? Gun in fist, I slid out of bed; tugged on trousers and dressing gown. My days alone in that mansion so crowded with mystery had given me something of courage. Boldly I marched down the stairway.

The first thing I saw was a set of muddy foot-marks tracked down the hall and leading into Terril's library. Panting with excitement, I stared at those muddy tracks. The trail led from the door of McGrath's laboratory, which stood open at the end of the corridor. I did not stop to investigate. I did not think to wonder how the visitor had entered the house in the first place. My only thought was that Terril had returned. Holmes Terril had come back! Terril, McGrath and Repple carried skeleton keys to fit any lock in the house; and at that very moment Terril must be in his library.

Without hesitation, I made for the library door. It was partly closed; key in lock on the outside. Breathless, I flung the door wide; made as if to step in. Then I stopped short, gaping in astonishment. The sight before me was beyond my understanding.

The occupant of the library sat deep in a leather armchair, back toward me. On the table at his elbow lay an opened volume I recognized as a book on philology. Next to the book lay a sheaf of manuscript and an open box of oil paints. A lazy wreath of blue tobacco smoke coiled about the man's bent head. And he was thoroughly engrossed in painting a raised canvas in front of him; coloring the facial features of the half finished portrait of Terril's dead affianced, on which Holmes Terril so often worked.

The library was quiet, warm, orderly. A blaze snapped jauntily in the fireplace. The man at the easel worked carefully, daubing on his palette. At intervals he would pause, study the canvas before him, and sigh smoke.

Amazing scene! One might have thought the routine of Holmes Terril's studious days had never been altered. One might have believed that Terril had been sitting there all night, industriously painting his tribute to the dead, so serene was the warmly-shadowed library, so natural was the attitude of the man before me.

But I did not dart forward shouting Terril's name. I did not rush into that library, grabbing at a familiar arm and spouting questions. I stood in the doorway and glared like one possessed, with my throat knotting in my neck. Certainly that was Terril's dressing-gown across those stooped shoulders. Certainly that was his book on philology, his habit of painting and smoking and stopping to read a paragraph or two between brush-strokes. But the man in that leather chair in the library was *not* Terril!

Stricken to marble, I say, I stood glaring in the doorway, while hot sweat leaked down my cheeks. Feeling came suddenly to my legs, and I flung myself into the room, to ram the blunt nose of my gun between the thick shoulders of the artist.

"Who are you?" I shouted, flinging him about with a blow.

Paints, books and canvas went over. The victim of my attack stumbled up from his knees, an expression of aggrieved dismay on his face. His pipe still hung in his teeth, and the spilled tobacco-coals were scattered down his chest. He brushed them away; stood eying me reproachfully.

"I say!" he exclaimed with some asperity. "What's the matter? A beastly disturbance in my library. Tell

me what all this means. Can't a man paint and study in peace? Who are you? Outrageous for you to—"

My head reeled; eyes ached with staring; knees melted to water. That man! His voice was the voice of Holmes Terril. Wild-eyed I glared at the crass, revolting face of the speaker. The speaker was none other than the servant, Repple!

NO wonder that I doubted my sanity at that moment. Was I hearing aright? Was I living a horrid dream? Was this actually Repple before me in the library, speaking, gesturing, acting exactly as would Holmes Terril? Was this the ugly, moronic house-servant of ours protesting like an erudite gentleman, painting deftly on a picture the details of which were known only to the one who had begun it? Terril's voice. Terril's manner. Terril's passion for art and philology. All this, in the likeness of a coarse roisterer with a bulbous nose and tattooed paws.

I did not stay to find out. Believe me, I had no wish to study this phenomenon. Not I! This creature with the countenance of a boor and the voice of another man, this moron who would read philology and paint on canvas, was too much for me right then. I think I almost fainted in my tracks. I know I fired the gun by accident. The room roared with the detonation. I cried out, and fled for the hall, locking the library door behind me as if to capture a ghost.

Then I was sprinting down a snowy pavement, rubbers over bare feet, greatcoat shielding pyjamas, hat over ears. It had been my intention to call at police headquarters the day before, and report the mysterious disappearance of instruments from McGrath's laboratory. It had also been my intention to instruct the police as to the ghostly light seen in the hospital across the river—a detail completely forgotten during the stress of succeeding events.

That I had actually seen such a light or heard the phantom sound of running feet and accusing voice, I was beginning to doubt. And I did not want to tell a ghost story that would augment the flapdoodle that had already engulfed the true details of this disappearance.

But now I was quite willing to believe anything at all. I headed for police headquarters as if the devil were after me.

Five o'clock was chiming in city hall as I turned into Main Street. A small inland city is hardly out of its nightie at 5 A.M. of a wintry morning. The fact that it was Sunday kept all but the desperately devout on their couches.

Those who were abroad and chanced to sight me as I raced down that snow-banked roadway must certainly have had a yarn to tell over their griddle cakes. A man sprinting along with greatcoat flapping open to reveal flannel pyjamas and bare ankles plowing through the snow is hardly an earthly sort of figure at five of the morning. Those who recognized in me the "lone ghost-doctor of haunted Owl's Hill," as one of the journals had so generously named me, probably retired squeaking to pull the sheets over their heads.

Police headquarters was a scrubby frame building a block from city hall. The railroad ran steel across that end of town, and the railroad district there was like the railroad district anywhere. A region of smutty-faced buildings wearing such signs as "Eat!" "Pocket Billiards," "Family Entrance," "Sheedy's Hotel," "Fish and Chops," "Electric Lunch." A region of slatternly men and doughy-faced, bunchy women.

Here would be people who were up at early morning. As I neared the shabby section I slowed my pace; pulled my greatcoat collar about my ears. If I attracted attention, I might be delayed. Avoiding a trio of yardmen on their way to work, I shuffled along close to the face of a ramshackle

frame hotel, formerly a corner saloon and still unable to hide the marks of ill-repute behind a sign declaring:

RYAN'S.
Rooms by Day or Week

Ryan's was the sort of establishment pointed to with righteously trembling finger by evangelists from the West; it was a great financial aid to the local gendarmerie. I had seen Repple wabble out of there on occasion, and it was from Ryan's the police had extracted Repple's blowzy blonde. Anæmic yellow light glowed behind the ragged curtain shielding the inmates from the vulgar view of passers-by. At least they had to drink behind a curtain. And in passing the window I was treated to those dulcet symphonies that issue only from the throat of a piano with a nickel in it.

Just as I passed the entrance the door swung open, giving exit to a burst of gory music, an alcoholic wind, and an arm-in-arm couple who lurched out in front of me. Frantic in haste, I tried to pass. Weaving sidewise, the girl rocked against me. I yelped in surprise. Repple's lady friend! The red-mouthed burlesque belle.

The next minute I was staggering back dumfounded. The inebriate on the arm of the burlesque queen had swung around swearing. A polluted flow of profanity had belched from his drawn, unshaved lips. He had lurched at me, gesturing slim, soiled hands that hardly matched the raggedness of his attire, but I did not notice that. I did notice the voice. It was Repple's voice! And I glared at the thin face beneath the dowdy cap with a shudder of sheer terror; glared at the drunken creature from head to foot; stared and went sick to my heels.

HE, in turn, stopped short to eye me sullenly. A curious smirk curled his lips. Dirty fingers brushed across his bristly chin. Giving the girl a nudge with his thumb, he growled: "See you later." With that, he shoved past me and started to run.

He started to run in the direction from which I had come, and he was running fast. Forgetting my previous chase for police headquarters, I grabbed my coat about me, and started after. A strange race. An astounding sight we must have made for any witness, as we legged it up Main Street, our heels spreading the soft snow, our coats fluttering. We reached the public square. He turned for the river, and I knew at once he was heading for the house atop Owl's Hill. And I was in a frenzy.

The man I pursued owned Repple's voice and Repple's vulgar mannerisms. He had been enjoying the cheap company of the servant's girl, the tawdry surroundings of a railroad district blind pig. Yet, the man I chased was Holmes Terril!

Never in my life had I endured the mental turmoil that swept through my brain as I chased the body of Holmes Terril across town toward Owl's Hill. I say the *body* of Holmes Terril, because the *mind* of Holmes Terril was not there. A dozen times I shouted out his name; called at him to stop. Not once did he turn around, or so much as alter his gait. But when I madly enough thought to call the name of Repple, the man ahead of me halted, half turned, hid his face and took up the race again.

I could not believe it, and yet it was true—I could not deny what I had seen and heard. Wild thoughts churned through my mind. Doubling speed, I sought to overtake the man I chased. But he was bent on keeping the lead; determined that I should not see him again. When we reached the gate on the pine-clad hill he vaulted it with a splendid leap, dashing for the veranda. Exerting a last burst of energy, I sought to catch him. But he gained the hall three rods ahead of me, and to my absolute astonishment, fled to Rep-

ple's room below stairs, sprung the door, and slammed it fast behind him.

It took no mean brand of valor to go in there after him. There was madness in the wind of the old house. That Holmes Terril was out of his mind I knew. What desperate attack might greet my entry to the room I had no means of ascertaining. A sense of impending horror, of grisly fingers shaping ugly destinies for those of us on Owl's Hill, had assailed me that first wild evening. Dread gnawing at my vitals, I shook off fear, and forced the door to Repple's room.

The man within offered no resistance. I gained entry to find him slumped against a back wall, sagging knees and drooping body giving evidence of exhaustion after his long run while intoxicated. He eyed me stupidly as his mouth formed words that lost themselves in drunken chuckles. His hands fluttered over his chin; plucked at the lapels of his coat. He grunted dully; slipped to a sitting posture on the floor.

Impossible situation. Here was my heart-bound friend, a man I had known since youth as a gentleman of finest character, lolling in alcoholic imbecility. Acting, speaking, moving in the personality of the crude servant who, in turn, had apparently absorbed the character of the gentleman. A staggering turn to a staggering run of events.

I FORCED words through nerveless lips. "Terril! Holmes Terril! This is I, Brownie. Holmes! Do you hear? Holmes Terril!"

No response. Apathy robbed his face of sentient expression.

"You, Terril!" I demanded, shaking his limp arm. I could have sobbed. "How did you get to town? Where have you been? Do you hear me? Where did you come from? Answer me! Where did you come from?"

"Don' know you," he whispered hoarsely, turning bleary eyes toward mine. "Who y-you? Who you? Don' know. How I get here? Run. Man after me." He laughed foolishly. "I beat him. Yes. He chased me from down t-town. Huh. Thi-this my room. My house. Use' live here, didn' I? Ye-yes, I did. My room, this is. Where's m-my girl? I ain' nobody's servant! I—I ain' jus' sure where I am. Got here through a pass'ge. Th-th' passage from hospital 'cross river. Nobody's business. Come las' night. Look up my girl. Where's she? I—uh—"

His voice—Repple's voice—trailed off. His head wabbled drowsily; fell chin on breast. A stertorous gasp escaped his lips as he slumped over in drunken sleep.

But I had heard enough! All I needed to hear. Passage from hospital across the river; those were the words that sent an electric shock through my system. Those were the words that sent me darting down the hall, after locking the door to Repple's room. Passage under the river! And had I not seen muddy tracks in McGrath's laboratory! Theorizing wildly, I ran down the hall. A secret passage under the river could lead to anything; solved a most baffling twist to events past.

In passing, I listened at the door to Terril's library where Repple was imprisoned. Anxiety that he might have escaped through a window was dispelled when I heard him moving about. Faint strains of music tinted the quiet. Repple had placed a record on the victrola. A violin rendition of Schumann's *'Am Springbrunnen.* The tenuous melody from delicate strings conveyed no sense of beauty to me. More a sense of dread that sent a shudder down my spine—for *Am Springbrunnen* had been Terril's favorite record.

Madness tainted the air of the old house. Sinister currents in the very sunshine that lighted the day without. Evil in the shadows lurking down the hall. Daylight only cast deeper shades in the corridors of the old mansion.

Shivering in my greatcoat, I hastened to the laboratory. The door that had been standing open before was now closed. So great was my agitation I failed to heed this unexplained detail. It never occurred to me that some one might be in the laboratory. My mind was on the mud marks I had seen tracked across the floor. I expected them to lead me to some secreted trap in the floor.

I kicked the laboratory door open—and there stood McGrath. A trickle of blood was leaking from a cruel gash on his temple, threading a red line down his ghost-like cheek to his chin. His jaw was set to draw a grim smile on his pallid lips. His eyes were fever-bright and flickering venomously. In his fist was a blue-steel automatic!

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE FIEND'S LABORATORY.

A CONVENIENT time to faint. Never completely recovered from my illness. Chilled by my long race to town, racked to shreds by the nervous shocks of the past half hour, I went out like a scared maiden aunt.

The memory of that swoon shames me, for it was the last thing in the world to do in the face of a man with a diabolic grin, and a gun in his fist. He must have made good use of his time during my enforced sleep on the floor at his feet. Dreams of iron chain a-clank, of ghostly men weighted with manacles filled my slumber. And I awoke to an actuality worse than any nightmare.

The persons of Terril and Repple were my first conscious sight. They stood along the wall, side by side, their faces working, their eyes staring in fright. My mind struggled. Feeling throbbed into my arms and legs. I lunged to a sitting posture, only to find my wrists clutched tight, shackled in rusty handcuffs to which were attached a length of heavy chain.

The men against the wall suffered the same plight. Their manacles I recognized as curios which McGrath had picked up somewhere in France—relics of the Middle Ages. Rusty old bracelets they were, wrist-irons from which hung long loops of double chain. Repple and Terril stood with hands clasped at their waist, and the chains on their handcuffs dangled to the floor. I recalled the sound of clanking chain the night of their disappearance. My mind cleared. Fear tugged at the muscles of my stomach, as I turned my gaze to the laboratory door.

McGrath stood in the doorway. The little scientist had cleansed the blood from his face, and a strip of bandage now bound the wound on his forehead. He stood watching the three of us with a smile friendly in the extreme, rubbing his nervous hands together. Nodding genially at me, he slipped a hand into his pocket and drew out his automatic. For a second I imagined he might shoot us down, for his smile thinned to a grimace. Instead, he spun the weapon on his finger. Then McGrath touched the bandage on his brow, and spoke.

"Well, my friends, here we are together again. Our little family established once more, on Owl's Hill. Terril is here, Brownie is here, Repple, the execrable servant, is here. All here. Brownie, you would have joined us before, had things gone as I wished; but you are with us now. And my experimentation can go on without further interruption."

His experimentation!

Sweat poured from my forehead. There was a sinister current vibrant in his colorless voice that tightened the muscles in my throat. Unfriendly sunlight found a glint in his eyes that matched the glitter of his automatic. The smile on his lips lied.

"Yes," McGrath went on, "we will continue with my experiment. Already it has proved my hypothesis. You, Repple, on escaping, returned to Ter-

ril's normal haunts. I find you in Terril's library, a book on philology at your elbow, Terril's favorite music in your ears. You didn't do so much with the painting, but it was a marvelous reaction, anyway. Yes!"

McGrath turned to Terril. "And you, on escaping, take up Repple's life where he has left it. I find you drunk and in Repple's quarters. Do you know what this means, Brownie?" he turned to me with glittering eyes. "It means my theories are successful! It means the greatest experiment in mental surgery ever attempted is on its way to completion! The world will be turned from its rut! Success! Do you see? Terril has become as Repple; Repple has become Terril! Their bodies have not changed, but, given time, they would—is it not the brain that fashions the body! But come, you shall learn all about it, Brownie; no further intervention shall halt my work now. Terril! Repple! Come along with you! Back to the hospital with us all."

That soft-voiced speech struck me ill to my heels. Chill sweat oozed down my cheeks. With a desperate lurch I gained my feet. The chains on my wrists jangled grimly. My voice came husky as the whisper of withered cornstalks rustled by an arid wind.

"McGrath!" I managed, alarm striking panic through my being with every word. "McGrath—what are you saying? What the devil do you mean! In God's name what have you done to these men?"

The horrid suspicion made my head swim. The gleaming shelves of laboratory instruments, tiled walls, racks of surgical apparatus, cases lined with prim rows of bottles reeled in fantasm before my eyes. McGrath's suave countenance faded to a gray moon.

"WHAT have I done? What have I done, indeed! Let me tell you, Brownie, it will set the world a talking. The foolish world! I'll tell you what I've done. And make no false moves, any of you, because we're going through with this, all of us; I can't be hindered now. Brownie, be kind enough to stand there beside the others. Quick!"

The strangest scene in all the world! Three men with wrists shackled, chains dangling to their ankles, lined up against a wall like victims of a shadowy inquisition. Three pairs of eyes turned toward the man in the doorway. Terril's glance was sullen, surly. A confused, thoughtful frown wrinkled Repple's brow. While I, ridiculous in greatcoat, pyjamas, and overshoes, glared like a maniac.

And the chill white walls of the scientist's laboratory, washed with wintry sunshine that made daylight to surround the pine-shadowed mansion, furnished strange background for the discourse of the man in the doorway. He spoke as if to a trio of newspaper reporters, as he lounged calmly against the doorjamb. But the gun in his fist was held alert, and his eyes never left ours as he pronounced his soul-appalling lecture.

"As you, Brownie, and Terril knew, I have long been interested in explorations of the brain. I know perhaps more about the brain than any living man. I am also a surgeon of great ability. You all know that." He smiled thinly; twirled the weapon on his finger.

"It has always been my desire to remove the brain from a living body without destroying the life of either brain or body. Such operations are difficult in the extreme, and I needed a place to work without interruption. Fortune favored me. I was moving some of my shelves last summer when a portion of the wall-plaster fell in, to uncover a gaping hole in the cupboard wall that proved to be the entrance of a subterranean passage. Imagine my surprise, when on following the tunnel, I found it led to the cellar of the abandoned hospital across the river. This house used to be the

residence of the faculty, and was erected at the same time as the hospital. The passage looks like a natural fissure in the rock below the river bed. No doubt the builders of the institution decided it would be a handy passage from hospital to house, and, on discovering it, cleaned it out for a tunnel. They may have abandoned its use because it is always carpeted with mud and silt. Forgot about it. The entrance to it is in that clothes closet in the corner." He indicated a small room at one end of the laboratory.

"When I found I had secret access to the old ruin across the river I was delighted. There I could work without a soul knowing of it. Unknown to you, I bought apparatus and carried it over there. The operating room on the top floor is excellently located, and makes a handy retreat. I have an option on the property, and my haunt is secure. I am fitting it out for all sorts of experimental work. It was my light you discovered that night, Brownie. I wanted to scare you away; didn't want my place known for the time. I faked the ghost over there, because I wanted people to keep away. I had to conduct my experimentation in secret."

He smiled whimsically. "I needed Terril for a subject, and I needed Repple. I wanted you, Brownie, but things went awry. My operating room over there was ready. I had living quarters arranged, and a store of food that would have kept me for months. Why, we can live over there for a year. Good. I was ready. Terril's intellectual mind I wanted to match against Repple's vulgar one. How could I get them over there? I must capture them. And capture them I did, after that wild fight in the dark. I had to dope them first, and when I called them together in the hall I found they weren't doped enough. I turned the lights out; fought to manacle them. Terril managed to battle into his library and get a gun. But I finally got them shackled when the drugs got them under. Then you, Brownie, appeared on the scene. Sorry I had to shoot you to clear you out—I didn't want to, but my work could not be hindered. I thought I'd put you in bed for good—I'm glad you're still alive. Anyway, I got Terril, his damned dog, and Repple chloroformed at last, and dragged them into my laboratory without the lights going on. And I got them down the secret passage in the closet before you came."

WE listened, the three of us against the wall, without a word. Terril and Repple seemed as stricken with astonishment as I was. Their pallid faces were studies in consternation. I felt as if under a trance, my every thought fighting to deny the astounding words that came to my ears. McGrath talked in a detached, nervous way that was far from normal. I concluded later that his unnatural state had been enhanced by the blow he had received on his forehead. His eyes dilated as he talked, and his words flowed with increasing rapidity:

"I got them under the river to the quarters I had arranged in the hospital. I kept them under ether, and in shackles. Knowing their odd disappearance would bring furor to the place on Owl's Hill, I darted back through the tunnel, and managed to eradicate any trail that might lead to the passage in the laboratory closet before the police arrived. Later I found it necessary to return for instruments and apparatus needed. But there was little danger of apprehension. I presume the police were as fumbly as usual. And you, my dear Brownie, seemed to have been confined to your bed. To tell you the truth, things would be easier had my bullets gone true. But I can use you now. Yes, indeed. To resume:

"Repple and Terril are the perfect subjects for my experiment. Their mentalities, normally, were exactly op-

posite. Terril was quiet, kindly, scholarly, talented. A dilettante. A gentleman. And Repple was ugly, ignorant, servile, vicious. A plain low-brow. Just the types I needed, gentlemen.

"Alone with them at my disposal in the hospital across the river, I set to work on them. Before you disbelieve, Brownie, my friend, remember that I'm a master surgeon and lead the field in analytic medicine, psychiatry, psychotherapy. Let me tell you, if Repple had not revived from coma, suddenly attacked me, knocked me unconscious, grabbed my handcuffs' key and freed himself and Terril, my work might have been more complete. But the success of my experiment is assured.

"You will notice that Terril has absorbed the characteristics Repple formerly possessed, while Repple thinks and acts as scholar and dillettante. They are both dazed; suffering from the aberrations of men who have been lost in amnesia. They cannot recall their former selves.

"And when I found them where you had locked them in their rooms—the rooms they had returned to after escaping back here from the hospital—their symptoms followed the reasoning of my hypothesis perfectly. I find Repple acting in the manner of Terril; Terril playing in the rôle of the crude servant. Perfect. I would have wagered my life that with their returning consciousness they would have slipped thus completely into their switched personalities. Each would have emerged in the identity of the other.

"I would have guessed that Repple's first move should have taken him straight to Terril's library, and that Terril might have repaired, directly after his release, to some old haunt of Repple's. Resuming their lives where the mind had left off."

The scientist paused. Horror-stricken, I stared at this quiet-voiced little man who had been the friend and companion of Terril and me for years. A glance at Terril revealed him staring in stupid incomprehension. The bestial mind in him could not understand. Repple, on the other hand, was standing rigid, hands twisting, face ghastly.

"IT has always been my contention," McGrath continued softly, "that by removing the brain from one man by operation and placing it in the brain cavity of another, not only would the subject's mentality be altered, but his physical features would come to assume those of the one who had originally developed the brain. Now in the case of the experiment at hand, Repple has mentally become Terril; Terril has mentally become Repple. Their minds are entirely incongruent to their physical aspects. But in the—"

McGrath's awful discourse was cut short by a terrible groan that burst from the white lips of the servant, Repple. The man's pallid face twitched as if in convulsion. His eyes glared, staring at McGrath, at Terril, at me. He glared at himself, at his gnarly, stub-fingered hands. A look of repulsion widened his glowing eyes. The chain dangling from his wrists clanked as his manacled hands flew to cover his face. His fingers fumbled over his chin and flabby jowls. He shook his head.

"God!" he moaned, his tone low as an echo in a well. "I—I never noticed. It's true, my body doesn't suit me. So!" His eyes, seeking McGrath's glance, flamed. "You—you monster! You fiend! This body is not mine! I am this brain, and the man beside me—these limbs, this flesh, is his! He has my body! McGrath, you monster, who are we? You removed our brains from our bodies, and changed them about! Monster! Fiend! *Fiend!*"

His voice, rising like wind whipping tree tops, broke in a sirenlike scream. Snatching the shackles in his fingers,

he hurled himself at McGrath. Four feet of looping iron chain whistled as it whirled through the air.

McGrath screeched and fired as the looping iron chain, swung with fearful force, coiled about his skull. The bullet from his gun shattered a glass mortar on a distant shelf. The pretty tinkle of falling glass sounded oddly on the echo of the shriek, the explosion, the crunch of crushing bone, the thump of a falling body. I yelled, and Terril yelled; and there stood Repple, gory and dripping chain dangling from his wrists, over the blood-splattered, faceless corpse that had been McGrath.

Slowly Repple turned toward Terril. His face, gray under a brightening shaft of morning sunlight released into the room by a passing cloud, was screwed up in an inhuman twist.

"Do you realize," he demanded hoarsely, "what this means? Do you understand? When I saw you chained to your bed over there in that hospital where we were, I had no idea who you could be. But—we were once different than we are now. That body of yours is mine. Mine! This flesh in which I am bound belongs to you! God! I understand what that devil meant! He has put my brain in your body!"

TERRIL raised his eyes from the dead man in the doorway. On his face was a curious mixture of emotion. In his eyes one could read abysmal fear, hate, desire. He shoved forward; stood to face Repple, glaring. I wanted to scream and get away from there, but I could not stir a step. I could scarcely draw breath. I stood like a mummy, stiff against the wall, unable to draw my glance from those awful men before me, from that battered corpse. Terril—the creature that had been Terril—spoke to the creature that had been Repple.

"I get you now. We was operated on in that place where the tunnel goes, he means. Yah! This body ain't *me!* It's yours! Them arms on you is mine! They belongs to me, an' I want 'em, too" He choked, raised his shackled hands in a threatening gesture.

"And my soul is locked up in you!" returned the other furiously. "If you think it can go on! I'm—I'm going to—"

A hideous laugh trickled from his clenched teeth; was answered by a chattery wail from the other.

And they flew at each other, their faces reflecting sheer madness, their hands whipping the heavy iron chains to which they were fastened. The laboratory floor trembled under their tramping feet. The old mansion rang with the clangor of chain clashing against chain.

They rocked together with a mighty shock that threw them apart gasping. They rushed to battle again and again, whirling their chains about their ducking heads. Chain would strike flesh with a sickening grindy sound. Iron links would strike and wind about iron links, showering sparks. An ear-splitting, soul-shaking conflict. The jar of body against body quaked the walls.

They staggered about the laboratory, fastened in conflict, two gargoyles from a nether universe. Wind soughed from their laboring lungs. Sweat carmined with blood flowed down their torn cheeks. Their coats were ribboned on their backs. Their hands clutched and clawed, red twigs tangled in their iron fetters. They fought and strove, beating iron against iron, and iron against flesh. Each fought to tear the other limb from limb. They battled to regain their stolen, outraged souls.

Shelves came down spilling cascades of instruments. Racks fell to the floor, smashing chemical containers and releasing fluids that smoked and steamed and went up in founts of varicolored vapor. Cabinets, torn from the wall, splintered under foot. A case of medicine jars fell. Glistening liquids

crawled across the floor. Fumes wandered ceilingward. The faceless dead sprawled calmly across the doorsill. And I, like a chattering imbecile, watched horrified from a safe corner.

I saw it when the fighters broke. I saw Repple's chain slash hard across Terril's jaw. Saw Terril's coiling weapon cut deep in Repple's naked shoulder. I saw them topple and collapse in unison, the jar of their fall bringing down a jug of crimson fluid from a shelf near the door.

Spreading across the floor, the crimson liquor flowed to join a pool of inky substance leaking from an overturned vat. As the liquids joined, there resulted a violent burst of green flame that filled the laboratory with gaseous smoke.

Flickering fire-tongues, tagging a draft, licked past me into the hall. A breath of fire scorched the lashes from my eyes, bringing me to my feet with a cry of pain. I became conscious of the power to move. Grabbing up my shackle-chain, I leaped the ghastly figure in the doorway and fled screaming down the hall.

CHAPTER V.

LATER.

REPPLE died.

He died last year down at "Ryan's—Rooms by Day or Week." He died with a cheerful smile, however, and with some of Ryan's varnish remover under his belt, and with his burlesque queen weeping tears of alcohol on his failing shoulders. The papers gave him a lively write-up: "Principal of Famous Owl's Hill Mystery Dies of Heart Trouble."

The blonde did not sing "I wunduh what's become of Saylee" at the Sunrise Theater that night. Ryan looked scared and sold real gin for almost a week. The minister read the service, and almost looked sincere. "John Adams Repple—*Requiescat in pace.*"

Holmes Terril is nearly over his long period of convalescence. Color is coming to his cheeks. He is taking on weight. The doctors are allowing him a few books, and he has expressed a desire to paint a bit and hear *Am Springbrunnen* once more.

His broken jawbone knitted beautifully. The burns on his arms and legs healed without bad scars, thanks to the efficient first aid of the firemen who rescued him and Repple from our burning Owl's Hill mansion. The effects of two years' confinement with nervous prostration and total amnesia have almost left him. He is Holmes Terril, and quite himself now.

And of course he never *was* any one other than Holmes Terril. Nor was Repple possessed of another physical being. I think the realization of that did more to rescue my sanity than any medical aid. The day McGrath's notebook, charred but intact was brought to me, marked the beginning of my recovery to normal health.

The old house on Owl's Hill burned until the fusty walls fell in, and the abandoned hospital across the river, fired by flying sparks, burned to a hollow shell along with it. The bodies of Terril and Repple were the only things recovered from the Owl's Hill mansion; everything else within was consumed in the holocaust. The rotten old place expired as a molten furnace. But some interesting items were recovered from the burned hospital, among which were a set of surgical tools and a medical kit containing a book of notes. The notes were written in McGrath's precise hand; and they were brought to me. Among them I discovered a section of items from which I quote the following excerpts:

> Terril and Repple are now available as subjects for my test. I bungled the kidnaping in beastly fashion. That fool Brownie almost thwarted the whole affair. If the idiots had scientific spirit enough it would not have been necessary to coerce them into my experi-

ment. Terril and Repple are under ether, condition normal.

The twilight sleep experiment carried off well. I would certainly enjoy attempting an operation to remove and exchange their brains. An operation utterly impossible, of course, but interesting.

Their pulses are normal and they respond to treatment and artificial feeding. Their state is quite similar to sleeping sickness, without symptoms of dropsy. The trypanosome injections have proved efficient. They lie in coma, but with their subconscious exceedingly alert.

To-day I began the treatment. Both were responsive. Both suffer amnesia already, but neither suffers aphasia, which I had feared. Subconscious minds very acute. Under my suggestion they move, speak, reply to questioning, repeat obediently. My experiment is proving my theories. Under suggestion Repple's subconscious betrayed a store of hearsay knowledge amazing in extent. If I can prick it into further activity! He recited much fool poetry overheard in Brownie's room, and the chemical formulae I was reciting repeatedly ten years ago. Also divulges subconscious knowledge of music. Says he likes to paint. Divulges amazing store of philological learning—all unknowingly absorbed in the presence of Terril. Is responsive to training. Can already be urged to speak in Terril's accents. Amazingly receptive.

Success! While Repple's subconscious has been taught to function along the habits of Terril's exterior personality, Terril's subconscious reveals an absorption of Repple's unlovely characteristics. Both are now talking and thinking steadily along instructed lines. They lie in coma and I sit at bedside carrying them through a formula of suggestion. Their subconscious receives it, new mental habit replaces old. Their dual personalities are now evident. Each has subconsciously absorbed something of the other's characteristics through years of contact, and now it is revealed as having been retained. Repple repeats words spoken by Terril years ago. Terril reveals an amazing knowledge of gutter slang.

The tests are successful. Two months now, and they are learning fast. A month more to mold the subconscious of each, and Terril will be revived from his twilight sleep to find his dual personality fully developed. He will find himself Repple. And Repple will awake with Terril's mentality. An unusual contribution to psychotherapy. We can bring about total remolding and recreation of the individual through suggestion to subconscious. Paupers can think as kings. Morons as philosophers—

A new personality given an individual by suggestion to his subconscious while he suffered coma! Yes, McGrath's experiment was an amazing contribution to mental science. Would God he had developed it more rationally!

But it was well proved. His suggestion to the subconscious of Terril and Repple had switched their personalities. And it was by this very method that they were at length restored to their normal selves.

And I would be willing to undergo the same treatment if it could erase from my memory that house on Owl's Hill. Though it burned to ashes fine as featherdown, and a fine new hospital occupies its location, I can always see it standing there, morose, gloomy, gray among the pines, its rambling walls guarded by a corroding iron deer that stood beneath a lilac. A lilac redolent of funeral flowers when it rained.

THE END.

The figure staggered back

The Mystery of Ball Bar Ranch

The puzzling drama of the mountain ranch takes a spectral twist for Ben Camp as he helps Justine—and finds himself confronted with sudden peril

By ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

Author of "The Magic Keys," "Unhearing Ears," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

JUSTINE DAVANT, niece of the eccentric Foster Ballard and his sister Aradne, of Ball Bar Ranch, high in the San Anselmo Mountains, is startled when her uncle shows outright signs of lunacy; for he announces that he is going to be murdered in three weeks, so he intends to have a funeral beforehand and enjoy it! But she is even more amazed when, during the "funeral," Uncle Foster's will is read—deeding her the ranch provided she marries Lambert Abbie, the foreman, within a year! She likes Bert, but hardly considers that he is educated or fine enough for her to marry.

After the funeral—to which all the countryside was invited, for the barbecue and dancing—Ben Camp, a naturalist, asks to rent Faraway cabin, a deserted cow camp on the edge of the ranch. He plans to set flash light camera "traps" to photograph the larger night prowling animals of the mountain country; Justine, interested in his work, offers him the cabin.

She comes out to help him fix it up, and follows him through the dense

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"locked" chaparral to the sites of his cameras. He has already caught a picture of the rare grizzly; and as they come out of the chaparral to the great rubble slide near the lake, he finds a grizzly track on the trail across the slide. This trail, built years before by Uncle Foster as a short cut to Faraway, has been half obliterated by the successive landslides of this rubble slide—an inexhaustible supply of great and small roundish red stones that compose the entire huge slope.

That afternoon there is a terrific cloudburst. Faraway Creek bursts its banks, and floods the valley, cutting off the cabin—for it turns the valley into a bog which no horse could cross. Then comes a July snowstorm. Marooned, Justine offers to help Ben rebuild the trail, which he planned to do in order to get more photos of the grizzly. They stumble upon a rusted old cannon ball—a clew to the location of an old battle ground where a treasure-laden party of Spanish colonists had been wiped out by Indians. Uncle Foster and others had searched for the treasure for years.

That evening, there is a knock on the door—and Giles Rebble, Foster's cousin and enemy, who has the Hazy Valley ranch beyond Faraway, appears. He makes an excuse about hazing some strayed cows, and getting caught by the cloudburst. They play cards most of the night, and finally Justine goes to sleep.

In the morning, Giles leaves; and Ben and Justine are scouting through the chaparral when they suddenly discover Giles and his cousin, Carey Backus, spying on them from across the valley, with binoculars! At last the cousins depart. Ben and Justine are returning to the cabin, when they see a figure trying to reach them by the impossible trail across the rubble slide! It is Lambert Abbie. He slips, nearly is crushed in the avalanche of bowlders, and at last pulls himself free, bruised but alive.

He reaches them, then, with the news that Uncle Foster has disappeared, and his horse came back with blood on the saddle and a .45 bullet embedded in the leather!

CHAPTER X.

A TRACE OF THE MISSING.

THE rivals and the attractive cause of it all were in Faraway Cabin, and night was once more stealing over the wilderness. The sun had come out that day, and the snow was almost gone. Bert Abbie thought that on the morrow they might be able to cross the bog afoot, if they kept close to the rubble slide.

Justine and Camp could loose their horses and the burro to shift for themselves, he said. Justine, at least, was needed at home to comfort the bereaved Aunt Aradne. Abbie's own horse, Bert imagined, had long since taken the backward trail, since he had purposely left the reins across the saddle-seat, in case he couldn't return to the horse for a considerable space of time.

Justine was cooking supper. The men sat in opposite corners, Ben Camp having chosen the corner where the rusty cannon ball lay concealed by his canvas coat. They smoked and spoke an occasional word to the busy girl, but they did not address each other. The foreman glowered when he caught Ben Camp's eye, but the naturalist's glance showed only serene indifference. It was a primitive, caveman rivalry. "If we had a couple of saber-tooth tiger's bones," Ben Camp chuckled to himself, "we'd probably be beating each other up."

Justine did most of the talking while they ate, and her subject was, of course, her uncle's disappearance. But Lambert Abbie had little more to say than he had set forth already. Of course the Ball Bar cowboys were hunting for the old man, trying to

back-trail his horse. What they had discovered Abbie did not know, for, after setting them at that job, he had ridden away immediately to find Justine and bring her home.

The girl was now contrite over her attitude at the "funeral." She dearly loved her erratic uncle, and the thought that harm might have come to him appalled her. Blood on his saddle. A .45 slug lodged in the back of the cantle! What was the terrible meaning of these? Was there, after all, some significance in dreams? Had the old man actually foreseen his death—his murder?

She wished that Lambert Abbie were elsewhere, so that she could talk to Ben Camp seriously about this matter. The foreman, she knew, was not capable of considering such a subject rationally. There were mysteries to life that science had never solved. Many intelligent people claimed that dreams often were prophetic.

They passed a dull, tiresome night, with Justine cat-napping in the blankets. The men dozed in their chairs, rising occasionally to replenish the fire. But morning came at last, bright and clear. The storm had passed.

THE three of them were away after an early breakfast, creeping slowly along the base of the rubble slide, now passive as if the stones that composed it had not moved for centuries. Ben Camp, remembering Giles Rebble's interest in the tripod, had removed most of his belongings and cached them in the woods. But the cannon ball he dared not remove while Abbie was about.

Often as they snailed along they sank to their ankles in the clinging mud. At times they were obliged to climb over stones that had pitched down in years gone by and lay scattered over the grassland.

It was noon when they came out at the head of the valley, and the open forest lay before them.

To his surprise, Abbie found his sorrel awaiting him. In lowering his head to reach the grass, he had broken the whang-leather thong that held his reins together. The reins were dragging, moist and swollen by the wet grass, and he was grazing contentedly.

Justine mounted him. Abbie readjusted the stirrups to her shorter legs. Then, the girl riding, and the two men following on foot, they set off on the long trail to the home ranch.

Night was once more threatening the mountains with oblivion when the lights, twinkling through the pines, told them that their journey was near an end.

A man, dusk-shrouded, met them at the ranch house gates. He drew Bert Abbie to one side and whispered with him. They were a long time in conversation. Then Abbie walked back to Justine Davant and Benjamin Camp, who were talking in lowered voices about the things they had left unfinished at Faraway.

"Th' boys got on Uncle Foster's trail," the foreman stated. "It took 'em into Yellow Girl Cañon, over beyond Bodkin's Basin. They found blood on the chaparral. But night drove 'em back without their discoverin' anything of the body."

"Don't talk that way, Bert!" pleaded the worried girl. "You don't know that Uncle Foster has been killed. Wait!"

Abbie shrugged. "Blood splattered all over the saddle, and a lead slug in th' cantle of her," he said morosely, as he turned away and opened the gate for Justine to ride through.

He laid a hand on the sorrel's bridle as Justine would have continued on after the closing of the gate. He cleared his throat apologetically.

"Back there at Faraway," he said, "I told you and Camp that you oughta be home comfortin' yer Aunt Aradne. But I was just tryin' to sorta shame yeh, Justine. Truth o' the matter is,

yer Aunt Aradne ain't been told about th' hoss comin' back alone, with blood on his saddle and a bullet in th' cantle. Us fellas thought we wouldn't worry her till we knew fer sure that Uncle Foster had been killed."

"And how did you explain his absence?" the girl asked.

"We said he had to stay at Cannibal for th' night. You know, he often puts up at that cow camp when he's out late and's in that country. I'd suggest, Justine, that you don't tell her any different. Not yet awhile, anyway."

Justine nodded assent. "It's just as well, I guess." she said, and, dismounting, gave the reins to Abbie and walked toward the house with Camp.

AUNT ARADNE BALLARD met them at the door. "And where have *you* been?" she demanded. "Traipsin' around from morn till night—I declare, Justine, I don't know what things are a comin' to. And here's yer Uncle Foster, still over there at Cannibal. There all night, and here it's night again and he ain't showed up! *Tk-tk-tk!* He must like that ornery cow camp better than he does his home. Always traipsin' over there and stayin' th' night! Th' idiot! Come in to supper."

Fat, thin-haired, her odd gray eyes defiant, she waddled away ahead of them, muttering crossly to herself: "Cannibal! A pretty place to spend half his time! Just wants to git away from me, that's what. It's only a thin excuse. I see through 'im! I bet they's drinkin' and carousin' and poker-playin' over there. That's what makes 'im love that cow camp. I'll bet them ornery Galway boys, and Steve Geddes, and that lout, Ozias Halgrim, are there right now, drinkin' rum and playin' poker and tellin' lewd jokes. I know. He don't pull the wool over my eyes one little bit!"

Despite the solemnity of the occasion, Justine could not repress a smile as she explained to Camp:

"Cannibal has always been a source of worry to Aunt Aradne. It's one of our cow camps, over near Bodkin's Basin, close to the southern line of Ball Bar Ranch. The Galway boys' ranch adjoins us over there, and the Galway boys are notorious high-livers. I suspect there's a moonshine still on Galway Ranch. Sometimes they and their punchers meet Uncle Foster on the line, and they adjourn to Cannibal for a night of poker and drinking. Then Uncle Foster doesn't come home until morning. And Aunt Aradne knows that it's not work with the cattle that has kept him."

Ben Camp nodded understandingly.

Shortly after dawn the following morning the Ball Bar punchers were away again on their search for Foster Ballard, and Justine and Camp accompanied them.

"Bring 'im home from there!" Aunt Aradne shouted after them. "Send them ornery Galway boys kitin', and bring Foster Ballard home, drunk or sober. I won't put up with it any longer!"

"Which last," remarked Justine, as she rode away at Ben Camp's side, "she has said a hundred times."

CHAPTER XI.

A GRUESOME SEARCH.

BEN CAMP was silent and thoughtful as he rode along on the leggy gray horse that had been provided for him. Certainly he had witnessed peculiar happenings on Ball Bar Ranch since his arrival, only a few days before. How did all this fit in with Uncle Foster's recent presentiment that he was doomed to die?

Benjamin Camp seemed to smell a sizable rat!

The girl, who rode by his side when the conformation of the land permitted, rode silently, too. She also was brooding over this strange problem, no doubt. Both perhaps felt that there was a sim-

ple and logical answer to the odd mystery if only they could discover it. But they did not discuss probable answers now.

Only thin patches of snow remained on the ground here and there. The sky was as blue and serene as a baby's eyes. They rode through forests and across sweeps of chaparral, into V-shaped cañons and out of them, and over rolling slopes, till at last they came to Bodkin's Basin, where red cattle grazed contentedly, watched over by Ball Bar punchers. They galloped down the green basin to the point where the trail had been lost the evening before, and here the search was taken up again.

Spread out fanwise, they slowly covered the ground, the experienced eyes of the cowboys searching for signs. Ben Camp was no less proficient in this art, and it was he who eventually found the lost clew.

It was on a steep, sunny hillside covered with sparse chaparral no more than two feet high. This was a burned-over area. The clew was a trace of dried blood on one of the bushes. Camp reined in the gray and lifted his voice in a long call of discovery.

He was soon joined by the others. They set to work more methodically now, keeping close together as they forged ahead. And presently a shrill scream from Justine brought every horse to a standstill.

"Come here! Come here!" she called. "I—I've found something!"

She had indeed. All acknowledged it when they had gathered round her. Bert Abbie slipped from his saddle and picked up the object she discovered. It was a leather cuff, covered with metal "spots."

"Uncle Foster's," he pronounced gravely. "I oughta know. It was me set them spots in his cuffs for 'im. Look! There's dried blood on it, too."

Their faces were set as they continued the search. Every moment they expected to come upon the dead body of the wizened little rancher, whom all loved and admired. But nothing more was found that day.

That day, nor the next, nor the next. It was a puzzling problem. They covered every inch of the ground in the ensuing days, and each night as they returned, weary and saddle-sore, to Aunt Aradne, she lashed them with her tongue for not bringing Foster Ballard home.

"Is he so drunk as all that?" she kept demanding. "Can't he ride? Can't you carry 'im? Bring 'im home, I tell you, and send them ornery Galway boys a kitin'!"

ON the fifth day after Ben Camp joined the search it came abruptly to an end. Gerald Coons, who had drawn mournful strains from his violin at Uncle Foster's funeral, was the one who uncovered the tragedy.

He was riding along a little arroyo, and up the bank on his left he saw something dangling from a rocky niche. Dismounting, he clambered up there, to discover a sizable cave with a level floor of stone.

Coons's eyes bulged at what he saw strewn over the floor. Then he swiftly left the place and dropped into the arroyo once more. But he did not call all of the searchers to him. He saw Ben Camp riding along the arroyo's rim, and, catching his eye, motioned frantically. Ben Camp made his horse slide down into the depression and joined him.

"What is it?" he asked, riding up.

Gerald Coons wiped a film of moisture from his swarthy forehead. "I didn't wanta yell," he said. "I didn't want Justine to see 'em. But I reckon she's gotta, before so very long. You come look."

He guided the naturalist up the arroyo's side to the little cave and pointed dramatically when they reached it.

The rocky floor was strewn with white human bones and ragged cloth-

ing, most of it torn to shreds. It was the foot of a boot that Coons had seen protruding over the edge of the opening.

Ben Camp stared, then he, too, wiped his brow.

"But this can't be Mr. Ballard!" he cried huskily at last.

"Th' clothes, what's left of 'em, are hisn," said the solemn cow-puncher. "That's his hat there. Them are his boots. Them rags are what's left of his flannel shirt. And that's his six-gun. Murdered, and crawled in here to die!"

"But he's been missing only about a week. And these are only—bones!"

"MISTER," said Gerald Coons, "it don't take coyotes no more'n three nights to strip a carcass down to nothin' but bones. Why, man, I seen 'em do it to a dead calf in a night, almost. It don't seem possible, but they do it."

"Great Heavens, you're right!" groaned Ben Camp. "I've seen it myself. I didn't think of coyotes. This is ghastly."

"Say!" Coons exclaimed suddenly.

"What?"

"Where's th' head—th' skull, I mean?"

It was true that the skull was missing. It was not in the little cave. The two searched for it along the side of the arroyo and down on the arroyo's floor. They did not find it.

"Coyotes done drug it off, I reckon," decided the melancholy cowboy. "We'll never find it, likely. Look how th' grinnin' devils tore them clothes to ribbons. Look at th' leg o' that boot, even! And it'd take a smarter man than I am to put them bones together agin and make a skeleton out of 'em. Say, mister, this is hell!"

"It is," the naturalist solemnly agreed, as he stooped and crawled farther in to pick up a well-filled purse.

"And there's Uncle Foster's jackknife!" suddenly cried Coons. "I borried her enough times to know her. And that black silk neckerchief—Uncle Foster always wore that kind, ridin'. My God, man, what 'll we do?"

"Call the others?"

"But Justine! She mustn't see! Why, this here's—horrible!"

"I agree with you," said Benjamin Camp. "Miss Davant shouldn't see this terrible sight. I'll wait here, while you ride out and get the other men."

"No, you do it, mister. Please! I'd bungle it, sure. I can't lie in a good cause."

Ben Camp smiled. But for reasons of his own he was obdurate.

"You work on Ball Bar Ranch," he pointed out. "I'm only a stranger in the country. It's up to you."

The cow-puncher sighed heavily and left on his distasteful mission.

No sooner was he out of the cave than Ben Camp was casting about for a straight piece of green wood. A chaparral branch finally satisfied him, and he began worrying it off with his pocket-knife. He trimmed off the tiny leaves and kneeled on the floor of the cave. But he was outside and standing erect when he heard the thud of horses' hoofs and Justine's treble tones in the arroyo down below them.

CHAPTER XII.

COMPLICATIONS.

THE scattered bones of the skeleton had been collected and packed on a burro's back to Ball Bar Ranch. The coroner had come from Earlybird, and had impaneled a jury of mountaineers, who gravely considered the evidence and arrived at the stilted verdict that Foster E. Ballard had met death at the hands of a party or parties unknown.

Then the boxed casket that Uncle Foster had caused to be buried at his unique funeral was disinterred, the bones and strips of clothing placed in it, and it was returned to earth without

any ceremony. The burial ceremony had already taken place, and it began to look as if Uncle Foster had known what he was about, after all.

Justine Davant had gone about dry-eyed throughout the entire proceedings, but Ben Camp knew that she was suffering. Aunt Aradne Ballard had seemed stunned, and whenever Camp went near her he heard her muttering to herself in an undertone. Her weird eyes held a far-away, puzzled look, as if she couldn't quite figure out this terrible thing that had come to pass. Occasionally she methodically wiped her faded eyes with a corner of her apron.

About five o'clock on the afternoon of the funeral she gave Ben Camp the shock of his life when she approached him as he sat on the broad veranda writing a letter to his closest friend, Professor Raymond Emory, a colleague at the Western Museum of Natural History. Camp was recounting in his letter some of the strange events that had taken place on Ball Bar Ranch, and had already written, in part:

"THE fact that we have been unable to find the skull strikes me as significant. Though, of course, it is very likely that one of the coyotes carried it off as his particular prize sometime during the frightful orgies.

"But there was not a sign of a bullet hole in what remained of the skeleton, Ray; and you must realize that, if a man received a death wound from a bullet in the torso, the likelihood of the bullet's striking a bone is about fifty-fifty. I have arrived at the conclusion that the bullet passed between two ribs, or into the man's stomach, or struck him in the head, which is missing.

"The coroner's jury seemed to believe that he was shot in the head, because no bullet could be found in the cave. But it strikes me that a man shot in the head, even though not killed outright, would be too dizzy to ride on, dismount from his horse, and crawl into that cave to die. How about it?

"Some of the cowboys here don't care for the foreman, Lambert Abbie. I have noticed these fellows bestowing peculiar looks on him since the finding of the skeleton. Those who do like Abbie, however, seem to lean toward the theory that either this Giles Rebble, or his cousin, Carey Backus, is the murderer. This, of course, because of the old-time feud between Foster Ballard and the owners of Hazy Valley Ranch.

"Giles Rebble, however, was at my cabin at Faraway on the night of the day that Foster Ballard was killed. It is possible, of course, for him to have killed the old man that day and ridden to Faraway before nightfall. It's a long ride, though, and his horse showed no dried lather on his coat when Rebble rode him off next morning. That horse had not traveled from the bloody trail to Faraway on the day Ballard was murdered, I'm positive. But, of course, the cousin, Carey Backus, may be the guilty man. He didn't show up at Faraway until next morning.

"The assumption is that Foster Ballard, riding peacefully along the trail, was shot at from behind. One bullet lodged in the back of the saddle leads to this belief. The second bullet, perhaps, gave him his death wound. He rode on rapidly, and having outdistanced his enemy, he got off, or fell off, and crawled into the cave to die. But that doesn't ring true with me. The little old man had a fighting eye in his head if ever I saw one. Still, it's impossible to reconstruct the dramatic scene.

"And now about Lambert Abbie: He stands to win Miss Davant and Ball Bar Ranch, and was, presumably, the only man who had anything concrete to gain by the death of the old pioneer. I confess that I don't like the fellow, Ray. Perhaps I have a reason for this which is entirely personal,

since I'm afraid I'm falling desperately in love with Justine Davant. You're the only man on earth to whom I would make such a confession, so don't laugh at me.

"But, that aside, doesn't it strike you as logical that Abbie might have taken advantage of Ballard's weird dream, his subsequent ludicrous funeral, and the well known feud between the Hazy Valley people and Uncle Foster, to put the old fellow out of the running and claim both the girl and the rancho? This thought gives us a motive, to say the least.

"I realize that I am merely theorizing, and vaguely at that. But I mean to probe this thing to the bottom, Ray, for Justine's sake. I am determined that she shall not marry Lambert Abbie unless she wants to. And I am equally determined that she shall not lose Ball Bar Ranch if she refuses him—"

THE letter had progressed that far when Aunt Aradne threw her bombshell.

"What time is it, Mr. Camp, please?" she asked, in what Ben considered a plaintive tone.

The naturalist looked up from his writing, consulted his watch, and told her.

"Pretty near five, eh?" she repeated. "Dear, dear! And Foster not home yet! Over there at Cannibal, likely, carousin' and playin' poker and carryin' on with them Galway boys and Steve Geddes and Ozias Halgrim. *Tk-tk-tk!*"

Ben Camp sat up straight and blinked his wide blue eyes. Aunt Aradne, weeping softly, had witnessed the burial of the bones and ragged clothes that afternoon.

"Wh-what's that?" he stammered, scarce able to believe his ears.

"I say it's time my brother was showin' up, Mr. Camp," she said indignantly. "He ain't foolin' me one little mite. He's over there at that cow camp we call Cannibal, drinkin' and swappin' lewd stories, and th' like. He'll say it was work with th' cows that kept 'im when he drags in to-morrow. But I know!"

"Why, Miss Ballard, don't you remember that your brother—"

Ben Camp came to a dead stop. Had something snapped in her old brain so as to cause her to forget the painful proceedings of that day? If this were so, ought he to recall them to her mind? If she had forgotten, was it not better to allow her to forget? He must consult with Justine about this matter at once.

Aunt Aradne was eying him placidly. "What was you about to say, Mr. Camp?" she asked politely.

"Nothing," said Camp. "It was of no moment at all, Miss Ballard. I beg your pardon."

"Granted, I'm sure," and she gave him a smile almost motherly. "And now I'll be gettin' back into th' kitchen, I guess. Foster 'll be ramblin' in after all, maybe, and he'll be hungry as a bear. Jest make yerself to home, Mr. Camp."

A few minutes afterward Camp had found Justine and was sitting with her under the trees.

IN her sadness, Justine's eyes were like a starry dawn, velvety, deep.

For a little, torn between sympathy for her and the flame of love that was steadily growing in his breast, Ben Camp talked of trivial things. She had been hurt enough during the past few days. He was angry to think that he must be the one to heap more difficulties on her sturdy shoulders. But she ought to know about Aunt Aradne in advance, before the quaint old lady shocked her as she had already shocked him.

Finally, then, he told Justine. Her wide-apart eyes grew round as she gazed at him in bewilderment.

"She doesn't realize he's dead?" came her low, throaty exclamation.

"It seemed that way to me," Ben answered. "Either she didn't get the significance of what happened to-day, or she had forgotten the bringing in of the—er—bones, and their burial. You see, Justine, if your uncle's body had been carried here and buried, it might be different. But her poor, twisted wits don't seem to connect those pitiful bones with her beloved brother."

"I understand," said Justine in a low tone. "You think, then, that she's really insane, Ben?"

"She's pretty old," he temporized. "Merely absent-minded, perhaps. Or stunned by grief. She was older than your uncle?"

"Yes, she's nearly eighty. But she's always been so spry that, in spite of her peculiarities—" Justine paused and bit her lip. "Things grow worse and worse," she continued presently. "But if she has actually forgotten, isn't she better off, Ben?"

"Decidedly," he agreed immediately. "That's the first conclusion I reached. I merely wanted to prepare you, so you wouldn't be shocked if she said such strange things unexpectedly to you."

"I understand," she said again. "Thank you for your consideration. It's nice to have a man about who—who is considerate, Ben."

There fell a long silence between them.

"I'm chasing back early to-morrow morning," he said finally. "My work is calling me."

"I know. You must go, of course—no telling what your cameras may have caught while you've been away. Don't think about me at all."

"That command is impossible for me to obey," he told her softly. "I'll be thinking about you night and day, Justine. About you, and about your problem.

"I'm going to get to the bottom of this strange business, too. I'm going to see that nobody puts anything over on you if I can help it."

"Bert Abbie?"

"Of course."

"HE'S been saying some pretty bitter things about the Hazy Valley boys," Justine Davant remarked.

"Yes, some of his observations strike me as a little too bitter."

"Just what do you mean by that, Ben?" she questioned.

"I think you know, Justine. He hasn't a scrap of proof, so far as we know, that Rebble and Backus are connected with this. Yet he's doing his best to throw suspicion on them."

She nodded. "Of course we mustn't lose sight of the strange actions of Rebble and his cousin at Faraway, Ben. But Bert is inflaming the minds of his particular friends on the ranch," she said. "They're looking pretty dark. They all loved Uncle Foster—he was one of the straightest bosses that ever lived, Ben. I fully believe that, if they were convinced the Hazy Valley boys had a hand in this thing, they'd ride over there in a body and slaughter them. All of the hands would be in on that, both Bert's chums and those who don't care for him so much."

"That would be disastrous," said Camp. "But it would suit Lambert Abbie's purposes mighty well."

"Go on, Ben, I'm listening. I want to get your angle on this matter."

Ben Camp hesitated, cleared his throat. "If Ball Bar were to become ostensibly Bert Abbie's property, he'd like to see the Hazy Valley outfit cleaned up, wouldn't he? As owner of Ball Bar, your uncle's feud would become his, wouldn't it?"

"By 'ostensible owner,' I suppose you mean the husband of the owner—myself."

Ben Camp nodded slowly. "Just about," he admitted.

She gave a short, bitter laugh. "He'll never be the ostensible owner of Ball Bar Ranch, then," she said.

"But your Aunt Aradne is incapable of managing the property," the naturalist pointed out. "She certainly proved that to my entire satisfaction this evening. Then what are you to do? Suppose, Justine, that you are unable to break the will."

"No, I'll never try. I detest such things too much, I know now."

"Wait, Justine. Suppose the ranch becomes the property of Aunt Aradne, because you haven't lived up to the will's stipulations. You will doubtless leave the ranch and return to San Francisco. Bert Abbie will continue to manage for Aunt Aradne. How long do you suppose the old lady will have a home here? How long before Abbie, if not actually able to get the property away from her, will be gobbling up all the profits?"

"OH, dear. Ben, you're making it so hard for me!"

"You must face the facts, Justine. Here's a piece of property. fully stocked, as I understand, the value of which runs close to a hundred thousand dollars. It's a responsibility, Justine, that you dare not shirk. Wealth shouldn't be wasted, no matter how little one may care for it personally."

She turned her dark eyes full upon him. "You advise that I accept the conditions, then, and marry Bert?"

Ben Camp's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he stared at her, helpless, confused. In his ardor to help her out of her difficulties he had hardly realized that he was sentencing himself as well as her.

"Let's forget it," she said, lowering her lashes. "Let's forget it all, Ben, for the time being. Go back to Faraway to-morrow and resume your interrupted work. You may ride Mustard. She has drifted home again, Bert tells me. Use her till you've located your own horse and burro, then turn her loose. She'll trail straight for the ranch. That's best for the present —just to forget it."

"And I'll see you again? When? You mustn't forget that we want more exposures of Old Ephraim, nor that we have found a possible clew to the hiding place of the Spanish treasure."

"I'll ride over as soon as I see an opportunity," she promised. "I'm going now to help Aunt Aradne in the kitchen; I've loafed too long already."

Smiling bravely at him, she ran toward the old log house as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Shortly after noon next day Ben Camp stepped into his cabin at Faraway to discover that some one had been there during his absence.

There was just one slight evidence of this invasion. The cannon ball, though still lying in its corner and covered by Ben Camp's canvas coat, had been handled. The round hole in it was not pointing in quite the same direction as when the naturalist had left it. And Ben Camp was a methodical man; he noticed such things.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SPECTRAL SPY.

WHEN Ben Camp visited his "stands" that day he found that both trip-wires had been sprung. He removed the plates and, as it was too late to look for new stands, rebaited his cameras where they stood and returned to his cabin.

That night he developed the two plates he had removed that day and the one that he had found exposed on the day that Lambert Abbie interrupted proceedings with the news of Uncle Foster's disappearance.

This last plate, as he had expected, showed a beautiful large lynx. While the subject was not novel, the exposure was a particularly good one, and he was glad to have it.

But he centered his interest on the other plates, wildly hoping that one of them would show the great bear again.

In this he was disappointed. One

exposure turned out to be of nothing more startling than a big skunk, deeply interested in rooting through the fallen chaparral leaves for bugs. The other was of a young coyote, ears erect, eyes laughing like those of a friendly dog's, tongue lolling good-naturedly.

Extinguishing the red lamp and putting away his paraphernalia, Camp rebuilt the fire and sat down before Mohammed's cheerful grin to brood.

His thoughts were of Justine, naturally.

What a truly wonderful girl she was! So untrammeled, so serene, so self-possessed. How bravely she had borne up under the strain of the past few days! What could he do to help her? He had boasted that he was going to unravel the mystery, but he realized now that his boast had been more or less an idle one.

He found his brier pipe and tamped tobacco into it thoughtfully. With a couple of twigs he reached into Mohammed's fiery mouth and removed a glowing coal, as a Chinaman lifts a morsel of food with his chopsticks. The pipe lighted, he cast the accommodating coal into the hearth and settled down in his rickety chair.

What could he do?

Who was the murderer? Bert Abbie, Giles Rebble, or Carey Backus? Everything pointed to the supposition that the guilt lay among these three.

Suddenly his eyes steadied straight before him. They had been glazed with thought till now. But the creepy feeling had stolen over him that he was being watched.

THERE were, he reflected, two windows to the cabin, one on the west, and one on the east. The door behind him, of course, was closed, for the mountain nights were extremely cold. With great presence of mind he continued to puff at his brier pipe and kept his eyes fixed on the elevated stove.

Somehow or other he felt that whoever was watching him so stealthily—if indeed any one really were watching him—meant him no immediate harm.

In a scientific attitude of mind he studied the situation. If his so-called sixth sense had truly warned him that eyes were staring at him, might not the same faculty eventually tell him which window the eyes were looking through?

He concentrated. East or west? Or was he merely fancying things? When he had decided which one of the windows was the treacherous betrayer of his solitude, he would quickly cast his glance toward it and apprehend the spy in the act. Or, if he was wrong, swiftly look the other way and perhaps see a head in the act of slipping out of sight.

He became quite interested in feeling out his mind in an effort to decide which window the eyes were peering through.

East? West? Left? Right?

Finally he gave it up. He could not decide. He found that, despite his control, he was growing a bit nervous. He would try the—

Right! With a quick jerk his head turned in that direction. Nothing. A black window pane.

Left!

His head pivoted at the thought. Then he leaped from his chair, the chair crashing on the floor behind him. He was staring straight into the hollow eye sockets of a human skull, chalk-white, grinning diabolically.

It receded slowly as he stared, became an indistinct blur, faded into the night.

Next instant the stunned man was clattering for the door. The skulls of dead men had no terrors for him. He threw up the black oak latch, swung the door inward, and darted out into the night. In a very few seconds after he had seen the apparition he was at the eastern window. But there was nothing there, absolutely nothing.

He stood listening, a hand cupped

about one ear. There came only the soft night sounds of the forest—pine whispering to pine, a small owl pleading for the coming of his mate in a plaintive voice, cool and musical as a fairy's pipes.

Not a footstep—not the sound of a cracking twig.

Around the cabin he darted—perhaps the apparition had gone that way. The cabin would deaden the sound of his flight. Twice, at top speed, he rounded the tiny structure.

Nothing!

Then, too late perhaps, he ran straight east from the window in which the skull had appeared. He had been outgeneraled. He ran fast, beating from left to right through the trees. Then in a wide circle he raced round the cabin a third time, a hundred feet away from it.

Nothing whatever!

He stopped, stilled his panting with a hand on his chest, and listened again; then, defeated, he returned to the cabin and sat down again before the stove.

AFTER several minutes of reflection he was chuckling with delight. This was good! Trying to scare him off, eh? To drive him away! The missing skull at last! Had there been a bullet hole in it? He couldn't say for sure. But it seemed, after all, that there had been. In the frontal bone, a little to the right of center as he faced the thing. A small, black round hole. If he was right in this, he knew that no man could have survived such a wound long enough to crawl into a cave to die.

But his murderer might have dragged him into the cave to hide the body. Maybe two men had been after him. One in front of him, the other behind him. The man in his rear had fired and missed, his bullet embedding itself in the cantle of the saddle. The man in front had been the better marksman, almost centering his bullet in the victim's forehead.

Something queer about this, too. Ben Camp was familiar with the methods of Western gunmen. An experienced gunman, he knew, seldom fired at an enemy's head. Too risky. If the bullet happened to go over his head it meant a clean miss, and the gunman himself might pay the price! No, he aimed at a fellow's middle. Then if his horse reared, or his six-gun jumped, or anything happened to deflect his aim, the target was so large that a clean miss would hardly result.

But, again, suppose the victim were riding a high-headed horse! In that event the horse's head would shield the rider's breast and stomach. Especially might his horse be high-headed if, seeing danger ahead, the rider suddenly reined him in.

Then the murderer would be obliged to shoot over the horse's ears at his victim's head.

How many angles there were to the thing, anyway! What a contrary puzzle!

But what a joke—somebody bringing that skull to Ben Camp's window in a silly effort to frighten him stiff! He chuckled again. Ben Camp had studied surgery before he took up zoölogy. Dead men's bones, cadavers, skulls, and such things held no more terror for him than a girl child feels for a doll that has come apart.

But how had the fellow contrived to evade him so skillfully? Ben Camp would have sworn that a noiseless flight would have been impossible, so quickly had he acted. But the fellow certainly had contrived a noiseless escape. He would look for tracks in the morning, but the brown pine needles that covered the ground about the cabin would offer little help.

Now, who? Giles Rebble and his cousin, Carey Backus, were the only men who had been in that neck of the woods under suspicious circumstances. That is, their actions had looked decidedly suspicious. Lambert Abbie scarcely could ride to Faraway, operate

his spook at that hour, and be back at headquarters by morning. No, he couldn't make it. But perhaps he wouldn't have to get back by morning.

Was the appearance of the skull merely an attempt to frighten him, or a taunt? Or a threat?

The last possibility offered food for thought. "What we did to the owner of this skull, we'll do to you if you don't get out of here!" Was that the big idea?

AS Benjamin Camp had figured, the resinous pine needles on the ground yielded not a sign next morning. But he bethought himself of a plan, in case another manifestation should take place.

There was a six-inch board which he had found among other trash near the cabin. Also a snarl of baling wire. With his ax he cut the board to about four feet in length, and with a piece of wire bound a pole to it, making an impromptu rake.

With this clumsy tool he dragged away from the cabin on all sides the fallen pine needles that had accumulated there. Then he carried bucket after bucket of water from Faraway Creek and thoroughly drenched the naked ground. The moisture would not evaporate quickly in that altitude. He nodded his head with satisfaction, and, muttering, "Foxy guy!" he went to visit his traps.

He found that neither of the tripwires had been touched, so he left the cameras as they were, since the stands could not be bettered. Then he worked his way along to the rubble slide and resumed his rehabilitation of the trail.

But not before he had carefully examined the ground at the opening of the trail for Old Ephraim's tracks. He was so disappointed in finding no evidences of the big bear's having revisited the spot that he almost gave up the trail idea. But having little else to do, he went to work, anyway, plying pick and shovel until nearly one o'clock.

At that hour, being hungry, and also remembering that he had some prints to make while the sun was bright, he wandered home. He remembered the recent storm, too, and decided to kill part of the afternoon in felling sugar pine, sawing off a length of trunk, and making some shakes with the froe.

These activities occupied him until dusk threatened. He had a nice pile of shakes, and would put them on the roof to-morrow. Then he threw breadcrumbs to the eager little chipmunks, who had watched his labors with interest all afternoon. After which he carried a few more pails of water and sprinkled the already moistened earth about the cabin.

Inside, then, for the night.

After supper he sat before the fire looking at his prints.

The one of the big lynx was a dandy. The laughing coyote was good, too. But the skunk had been too deeply immersed in his own lowly pursuits for a good view of his pert face and beady eyes. His plume, however, was jauntily erect.

He laid the prints aside, poked at the fire, sought his brier pipe.

WHAT would happen to-night? He wondered how it would be to have his Colt .45 close by and, if the skull appeared again, plug a bullet through the window—not at it, but beyond it. Still, he didn't want to kill a man merely because he had held a human skull up to his window. But if this was a threat—

He was concentrating on the west window to-night. He thought that perhaps the would-be terrorist would change his tactics this time. Then he decided that the man would expect him to think that way, and would cause the apparition to appear in the same window as the night before. Subtle reasoning, he told himself. Perhaps too subtle.

He discovered that he was growing

nervous as the night wore on. Not afraid, but nervous. Nobody likes to think of some one prowling about his habitation in the night, no matter if he be harmless.

He was glancing at the windows more frequently now, on the *qui vive* to rush out, gun in hand, much sooner than he had the night before.

Suddenly he began to feel a peculiar sensation at the back of his neck. He sat facing the stove, as usual, with the door behind him. The new sensation was one of coolness. Undoubtedly there was a draft. The feeling grew. The back of his neck was becoming cold. With a sinking heart, he realized that the door behind him was slowly opening.

For a moment or two he was paralyzed—with real fear, too, brave though he was. There was something so uncanny, so horribly unearthly about that slowly opening door, that he remained frozen in his seat.

Slowly he reached out and up a trembling hand for his Colt. He had placed it on Mohammed's throne of clay, between the front legs of the stove. But he couldn't reach it without standing. And he dreaded to move.

But something must be done. He felt that he must scream like a terrified girl if he remained inactive a moment longer, with that door opening at his back and the cold draft streaming against his neck.

He lunged up and forward. He did not glance over his shoulder. Every faculty was centered on getting that gun in hand at once.

He fumbled at it, gripped it shakily. Then he wheeled, drawing back the hammer with a numbed thumb.

All this had occupied only a few seconds' time. He stood there, half crouched, his gun held waist-high, his thumb on the hammer. His lower jaw sagged down.

He was staring out through the doorway into the black mountain night, crisp with frost. The door was on the move, traveling slowly inward as if propelled by an unseen hand. There was nothing else to see. The black rectangle of the doorway, the slowly swinging door. Nothing more whatever.

With a cry of relaxed tension and anger he leaped for that doorway. He dashed through it, darting glances from left to right.

Nothing!

HE stood listening as on the previous night, but heard only the soft, familiar sounds of the forest. He knew, somehow, that it would be useless for him to race about like a bird dog after scattered quail, as he had done the night before.

Instead, he sprang back into the cabin and got his electric torch. Outside again, he shot its brilliant beam on the moistened ground before the door.

There was not a single footprint to be seen.

The roof! He had not thought of that before. Trotting backward precariously, he shot the stream of light on top of the cabin. There was no one on the east slope, so he ran to the right, almost colliding with an enormous bull pine, and swept the west slope of the roof.

Nothing! Nothing but curled-up shakes and the old stone chimney, from which the smoke ascended lazily.

"I won't mess up the ground with my own tracks till morning," he told himself, and went inside again.

Was it possible that he had not securely latched the door, and that a slight puff of wind had started it swinging inward? He closed it to a six-inch crack, then gave it a gentle push. It was at once apparent that the door was not plumb, for it started to move slowly and continued to move until it had traveled three-quarters of the semicircle which was limited by the wall.

He did the same thing again. The crazy thing acted in the same manner exactly.

"That answers that," he said grim-

ly. "I was positive I latched that door securely, but I must have been mistaken. A slight gust of wind must have started it, and then it swung slowly inward of its own accord. But, damn it! I know I fastened the thing!"

The latch, made of black oak, was a simple contrivance, such as has been made by outlanders from time immemorial. A piece of green second-growth black oak limb had been thrust through a hole bored in the door so that about a foot of it stuck out on either side. Then the piece had been bent toward the edge of the door until it had taken on the shape of a hairpin. The ends had been fastened to the door until the wood became seasoned and held its new shape.

Grooves had been gouged in the end of the log opposite it, one on each side of the door when the door was closed. Into these grooves the ends of the latch fitted when the latch was pressed down. To open the door, either from within or from without, one had merely to lift the latch out of the grooves. It was no protection at all, since it worked exactly the same from both sides of the door. It was designed merely to keep the door closed when the occupant of the cabin wished it closed.

Ben Camp distinctly remembered forcing the latch downward until the ends engaged with the grooves! However, here seemed to be evidence that his memory was at fault.

He shook his head. "Getting balmy, Benjamin," he censured himself. "Can't remember to latch your door. But, darn the infernal luck, I know I did latch it!"

CHAPTER XIV.

STORM CLOUDS.

THAT same night Old Ephraim shuffled along the obscure trails, intent on this endless business of making a living, grunting from his own weight. He came upon Camera No. 2, and gave it a careful investigation. It might contain something good to eat, though it looked unpromising. Well, these human contrivances, such as he had occasionally come in contact with, were interesting, anyway. And Old Ephraim was born with a healthy curiosity about life and things.

He sniffed it. It gave forth no appetizing odors. Yet it somewhat resembled a beehive that he had once investigated. The stings of the angry bees had not bothered him a great deal, though they had closed one eye for him and made his nose terribly sore. But the delectable honey had been worth it. He listened for infuriated buzzings, but heard none.

Standing in the chaparral like a huge man, he took the thing to his breast.

There came a deafening report and a dazzling flash of white fire. He dropped the camera in amazement.

He remembered now. It was just about here, several nights ago, that he had been shuffling along a trail and the same phenomenon had happened. What was the grand idea, anyway? Well, he'd put a stop to it from this moment on.

He dropped to all fours like a collapsing house, picked up the camera, crushed it to his shaggy breast, then hurled it on the ground with all his might.

Bang went seven hundred and fifty dollars!

With an indignant snort, he shuffled on, slavering, wheezing asthmatically, grunting from the mere effort of locomotion. He might be old and heavy and not as brisk as he was in his far-off youth, but he'd show 'em! Try to play a joke on him with their puny cap-pistols, eh? Now he'd go down to that place where he used to cross the rubble slide. Stupid to have to lumber 'way down into the valley to get beyond the slide!

And next morning Ben Camp found his enormous tracks entering and leaving the partly reconstructed trail.

"I thought I'd lure the old boy into it!" he crowed jubilantly. "He's gone across as far as the trail's been rebuilt, then turned back in disgust. I should have had one o' the cameras set for him—ought to've known better. Too bad! But we'll remedy that right away."

An hour later he was gazing down in consternation upon the wreck of Camera No. 2.

"Well, this is your trick, Ephraim," he said moodily. "But we'll have another deal."

Camera No. 1 he found intact, and the trip-wire stretched across the trail. Nothing doing there.

HE took down the wires and prepared the camera and tripod for carrying on his back. But as he crawled from the chaparral with his load, some thirty minutes later, he sat down to revolve a new thought in his mind.

Up there above the trail on the rubble slide, the camera would be exposed to anybody who happened to be on the lakeshore, or in the edge of the forest beyond it, or in the valley below. This would never do, considering the strange things that had recently been taking place. Suppose the Hazy Valley cousins were still in the neighborhood with their spyglass!

He'd have to set his trap after dark, and visit it before daylight, then hide it till night swooped down again. Not so good! It entailed a lot of hard work, a great deal of difficulty scrambling about in the blackness. However, it was all a part of Ben Camp's business.

He sat there resting, his glance coasting intermittently along the shores of the placid lake, across what he could see of Rubble Slide Valley, and penetrating the black spaces among the trees beyond the water. No sign of Giles Rebble or Carey Backus. No living thing in sight.

Funny about that door last night. And there hadn't been a footprint near the cabin when he had investigated first thing that morning. The moistened ground was as smooth as when he had left it on going inside for the night.

Well, couldn't sit here all day. Better hide the camera until dusk. Then go down and mend that roof. All he could do would be to tuck the shakes, one under another. He hadn't any nails. Justine had forgotten nails.

An hour later, as he came up from the lake and entered the deeper forest that stood back from it, his pulse quickened as he saw a mustard-colored horse grazing along the creek. Not only did his pulse quicken, but he felt a little weak. Strange emotion, this budding love. Sometimes it made him feel like a fool, and at other times like the ruler of the world. Now he was trembly and gulpy, elated, and at the same time ill at ease. Stupid feeling!

He found Justine in the cabin, rearranging his things to her own satisfaction.

"Hello," she greeted brightly. "Just straightening up a bit. This first jar on the shelf contains tomato cream soup. You can heat it. I know you have a quantity of canned soup, but I don't approve of that. Aunt Aradne's is far superior. And this jar has honey in it. I wrapped the fresh loaves of bread in newspapers to keep 'em fresh, and you'll find them in that packbag."

A slender forefinger touched three more glass containers on the little shelf. "Quince preserves, pickled peaches, crabapple jelly," she catalogued their contents.

"Say, this is too much!" he laughed. "I don't deserve it."

"And the five-penny nails that I forgot are under the stove there," she added. "Has Old Ephraim been around?"

"Let's sit outside in the sun and talk," Ben suggested. "I've a thousand things to tell you."

"And I've something to tell you," she returned. "It looks as if we have an enjoyable hour ahead of us, Ben.

But, goodness! I nearly forgot your mail. Here's a letter for you."

"Thanks, I'll read it later. Right now I'd rather talk with you."

THEY sat in the sun on a fallen tree, charred in places by some ancient fire. Justine insisted that Ben Camp recount his experiences first, and he complied. The appearance of the skull and the ghostly opening of the cabin door brought puzzled lines to her smooth, broad brow.

"It seems mighty silly. But I doubt if Bert had anything to do with it."

"The cousins, then?" asked Ben.

She shrugged. "Who else?"

"But I've seen nothing more of them," he pointed out.

"Just the same, it's quite apparent that they want you out of here. Just why is another matter."

"What has been happening at headquarters?" Camp asked.

Justine Davant's attractive face was turned toward him, and her dark eyes lost their contemplative look.

"Things have been rocking along much as ever," she told him. "That is, so far as ranch routine is concerned. But poor old Aunt Aradne. She doesn't miss Uncle Foster all day long, for, of course, it has always been natural for him to be away from breakfast till suppertime. But when evening comes on she begins to fret. 'Where is he now?' she'll demand. 'Over there at Cannibal again, I guess, carousing with those Galway boys. Won't be home to-night, likely. I simply won't put up with it another day!'"

"It's pitiful, in a way," Ben Camp said. "But, looking at it from another angle, perhaps she's better off."

"Yes, decidedly. But it's strange—terribly strange. She goes about her work all day long, as contented as she has ever been. It's only when the hour draws near for his return that she remembers him at all. Force of habit. Like recurrently dreaming of unpleasant things. She doesn't know he's dead, Ben. I simply can't grasp it. Will she keep it up for the remainder of her days?"

"That's likely," he said musingly.

"And there's going to be trouble, or I miss my guess," the girl went on.

The naturalist looked at her sharply.

"THE men haven't forgotten, by any means," she explained. "And I'm sure that Bert Abbie is keeping the fires of their hatred alive. If they get over there to Cannibal and get to drinking with the Galway boys, Ben, there's sure to be trouble."

"For the Hazy Valley outfit?"

She nodded slowly. "It's coming, as sure as shootin'."

"Can't you and I prevent it?"

"I don't know how."

Neither did Camp, so he fell to musing again.

"Has—er—Abbie made any new advances toward you?" he presently asked.

"Not by word of mouth," she answered readily. "But he looks at me—it may be only my imagination—in a sort of possessive, gloating way that makes my skin crawl. And he's certainly running Ball Bar, and without asking me for any suggestions, either."

Ben Camp gazed into nothingness for a time, then resolutely shook unpleasant thoughts from his head. He told her about the ruined camera, the exposures that had been taken, and the fresh tracks of Old Ephraim at the opening of the rubble-slide trail. Justine brightened perceptibly, and was all interest at once.

At three o'clock she rode away from him on Mustard, galloping rapidly toward Rubble Slide Valley. Ben Camp watched her out of sight, then got the nails she had brought and went at the mending of his roof. His thoughts were so busy with her that he had completely forgotten the letter she had brought.

Nor did he remember it when, the roof patched to his entire satisfaction, he moved his picketed horse up the creek to a new grass plot, and entered the cabin for the night. It was not until long after supper, when he had settled down before Mohammed's throne, with a brisk night wind singing through the needles of the pines outside, that he suddenly slapped his thigh as remembrance came to him.

And soon he was slitting an envelope that contained a letter from Professor Raymond Emory, paleontologist at the Western Museum of Natural History.

The communication from his friend was a long one, and he had not half completed it when again he had that strange feeling that there was a presence near him.

He lowered the letter and sat gazing at the clay pedestal that upheld the stove, waiting, wondering what was to happen now.

Then came three slow, distinct knocks on the cabin door behind him.

Knock—knock—knock!

Deliberate, solemn, sepulchral.

CHAPTER XV.

NIGHT RIDERS.

IF Benjamin Camp answered that solemn, ghostly summons to his door, what would happen? Would there be nobody there when he lifted the latch and opened? He felt that this would be precisely what he would experience.

He felt an uncomfortable prickling at the roots of his hair. His mind wandered to the thought that he had been too tired, after mending the roof that afternoon, to set his camera-trap on the rubble slide.

What was the matter with him? This was no time to think of anything but the present. He certainly was growing balmy!

Knock—knock—knock!

That cleared his mind. He rose noiselessly to his feet, got his Colt .45, and, with legs that trembled a little, tiptoed to one side of the door.

Here he waited, scarce daring to breathe, the six-gun leveled at the height of his breast, his left hand quivering on the black-oak latch.

Would it come again?

It seemed that he waited thus for minute after minute. The intense strain was cruel. Then again:

Knock—knock—

But as the second tap came, Ben Camp threw up the latch, jerked the door inward with a mighty heave, and stood looking over his six-shooter at a dark form on the doorstep.

"Love o' Gawd!" came a startled voice, and the figure staggered back. "What 're you so jumpy about, Mr. Camp?"

Ben Camp lowered the revolver, and a feeling of weakness swept over him that almost made him ill.

"Mr. Rebble—is that you?"

"Sure thing! And not wantin' to carry any o' your lead around for you, either."

"Come in, won't you? I surely beg your pardon. I—you surprised me."

"I reckon I did. Yeah, you acted some surprised, I'll say. By golly, if all you city fellas are like that when you're out in th' woods, us natives had better watch our step."

"It's not that. I—well, fact is, I'm a bit nervous to-night. Please come in. I won't shoot you."

"Dunno about that," grumbled the cattleman; but he accepted the invitation.

"COLD wind to-night," ventured Camp, as he closed the door against the stiff blast that was causing the blaze of the candle to stream horizontally like a flaming sword. "Take that seat before the fire and warm yourself. Been in the saddle long?"

"Yeah, sev'ral hours, Mr. Camp. I am sorta chilled, like." He rubbed his

hands before the glowing grate of the stove. "We got a bunch that persists in wanderin' over this way, onto th' disputed range. But I got 'em rounded up this afternoon and headed back. I'll pick 'em up later on and drive 'em clean to Hazy Valley before I'm through. Saw yer light, like I did a while back, and thought I'd drop in to say hello and warm my feet a little."

"The proper thing to do. Glad you did."

Giles Rebble seated himself in Ben's chair. "Mighty poor stove to warm yer feet at," he laughed. "Have to stand on yer head and hold 'em in the oven."

"Leave it to me," said Ben; and he took from the oven a large, flat stone that he was wont to warm and tuck inside his blankets on cold nights.

He placed it on the floor before the cattleman. "Set your hoofs on that," he invited.

"Aw, now!"

"Do it! That's what it's for."

Giles Rebble obeyed, and silence fell between them.

"Too bad about ole Foster Ballard," said Rebble presently. "Didn't hear about it till two days ago, when I got my weekly mail from th' other side o' th' mountains. It was in th' paper about him. Who did it, Mr. Camp?"

"Nobody seems to know," was the noncommittal answer.

Silence again.

"Gosh a'mighty, but that stone's hot!" And Giles Rebble lifted a foot, the bottom of which was protected only by the thin sole of a fancy cowboy boot. "I reckon they're sayin', over at Ball Bar, that me or my cousin smoked 'im up, ain't they? Be honest, now! That's th' main thing I wanted to talk to you about to-night."

"There's no use beating about the bush with a man like you, Mr. Rebble," said Ben Camp. "They do suspect you."

"Course. Natural. But you know yerself, Mr. Camp, that I was here with you and Justine almost all that night. And didn't you and me hear a shot out in th' woods, long after Justine went to sleep?"

"But Mr. Ballard disappeared on the day preceding that night," the naturalist pointed out.

"Disappeared, yeah! But that ain't sayin' he was killed at the moment he disappeared. He could 'a' disappeared durin' daytime and been murdered that night, couldn't he?"

"Yes."

"And didn't you and me hear a shot somewhere round half past four or five in th' mornin'?"

"Yes," Ben Camp admitted, remembering the explosion of magnesium powder as one of his trip-wires had been touched in the chaparral.

"WELL, who fired that there shot? I've wondered many times since, even before I heard about Uncle Foster's bein' bumped off."

"But his bones weren't found near here," protested Camp.

"That don't make any dif'rence, does it? Couldn't th' murderer have packed him over beyond Bodkin's Basin and stowed 'im in that little cave? Good place to hide th' body, I'd say. I've ridden all over Bodkin's Basin and vicinity, and I don't know that cave."

"It's a long ride from here, Mr. Rebble. Most murderers, if they had killed their victim hereabout, would have dropped the body into the lake, or buried it in the woods. And why not in the rubble slide? An ideal place."

He was watching Rebble carefully, and he imagined that his shoulders jerked slightly when he mentioned the rubble slide.

"Where was your cousin that night?" he asked abruptly.

"At home in Hazy Valley, Mr. Camp."

This was a falsification, and Ben Camp knew it well.

"I wonder what folks are sayin' about me and Carey down in th' Early-bird District?" mused Rebble. "Everybody in this country knows about th' fool difficulty between Foster Ballard and us boys."

"I've heard nothing," Ben Camp told him.

He studied the man's strong profile. He was a rather good-looking fellow, and certainly picturesque. There was character written in his face as well. It was difficult to believe that this man would sneak about another's cabin at night, trying to frighten him with a human skull and a mysterious opening of the door.

But, of course, Ben Camp had never met the cousin, Carey Backus, and so could form no opinion about him.

"That Bert Abbie, o' course, is sure one of us boys done it. I know th' son-of-a-gun!"

"I haven't talked directly with Abbie about the matter, Mr. Rebble."

"He's a mangy pup!" exploded the Hazy Valley man. "I wish it was him had got it instead of ole Foster. Th' old man and us boys might 'a' straightened out our difficulties and come to an understandin' if it hadn't 'a' been fer Abbie. He accused us o' stealin' and brandin' Ball Bar calves. He's a dirty liar, Mr. Camp."

Ben Camp said nothing; only waited.

The cattleman's feet were warm now, and he rose as if to go. Ben saw him glancing surreptitiously into corners, and believed that he was looking for the tripod that seemed to have interested him so much on his former visit. But this tripod, being of the collapsible kind, Ben Camp had folded up and put away. He wondered why the man was so deeply concerned about it.

STILL Rebble seemed loath to go. "I don't like this business a little bit, Mr. Camp," he said. "I don't like to be suspected of murderin' a man—shootin' at him from behind, if that bullet in th' back o' Ballard's saddle means anything. Carey Backus and I ain't that kind o' men. We're straight, for all you may have heard at Ball Bar Ranch."

He locked his fingers behind his back and began pacing the length of the cabin, his brow puckered, his dark eyes troubled. He had made several turns, and was approaching the door again, when suddenly he stopped short and assumed a listening attitude.

"What's that?" he asked presently. "I heard something that wasn't th' wind."

Ben Camp gave ear. The wind was lashing the branches of the pines furiously, and their swishing drowned all all other outside sounds. Then came an unexpected lull, and the trees moaned softly; and during that lull there came the rapid *thuddety-thud* of galloping hoofs.

"Who's that?" The cowman's eyes were round and glittering.

"I haven't an idea," Ben Camp told him, stepping toward the door.

He saw Giles Rebble take two steps forward and plant himself against the wall in which the door was hung.

The wind howled gleefully in as Ben Camp opened the door. The galloping hoofs were close now. Then around a corner of the cabin flashed a horse and rider, and the rider swung to the ground before the horse had stopped.

"Who is it?" yelled Ben Camp. "What's wanted?"

Then the light streamed out on the animal's coat, gleaming with sweat, and the naturalist saw that this coat was mustard-colored. There was no saddle on the horse's back, and only a hackamore to serve as bridle.

There came a smart slapping sound as a hand struck the horse's rump. The animal snorted and leaped away from the cabin through the trees.

"Who is it?" Camp demanded a second time.

"It's I! Oh, Ben! They're right behind me! Let me in, quick!"

"Justine!"

The girl reeled drunkenly as he reached out and helped her through the doorway.

"Bert Abbie—all of 'em!" she panted. "They're drunk! Riding to Hazy Valley to kill Giles Rebble and Carey Backus! I—I came to you for help!"

And even before she had finished speaking Ben Camp heard close-by shouts, and the thudding of several sets of hoofs down Faraway Creek.

BEN CAMP slammed the door and latched it. There was a brief silence, with Justine breathing heavily from her long bareback ride. Her side was aching.

Then the thunder of hoofs was close at hand, directly before the cabin door. A loud voice shouted:

"She stopped in here! You boys ride on. I wanta see her. I'll ketch up with you before you git to Hazy Valley."

It was the voice of Lambert Abbie.

There were indistinguishable replies, several long whoops of encouragement, and a fusillade of dirt struck the cabin as the other riders lifted their horses into a gallop.

Knock-knock-knock! The butt of a six-gun hammered on the cabin door.

Justine Davant was in the middle of the room. Ben Camp was close to the door, and his body was between her and that of Giles Rebble, standing motionless against the front wall of the cabin.

Camp arched his eyebrows at Rebble. Rebble nodded grimly. Camp threw open the door, and the foreman of Ball Bar Ranch, his six-shooter held by its barrel, butt forward for another series of raps, stood revealed.

He and the wind swept in, and with difficulty Ben Camp closed the door and latched it. He swung about.

Bert Abbie, hands on hips, stood facing the girl, wagging his head knowingly. Ben Camp wondered if he was so very drunk. His eyes had not shown it when the light struck them as the door opened.

"So this is th' idear, is it?" he demanded of Justine. "I guess you thought I didn't see you make your get-away. Chasin' over here to git this bird to help you stop th' little frolic th' boys are gonta put on, eh? What a fool you are, Justine! Hell couldn't stop 'em now, let alone you and this dude lover o' yours."

"Wh-what are they going to do?" Justine faltered, too greatly perturbed over the situation to show resentment at Abbie's beastly manners.

"What are they gonta do? What are we gonta do, yeh mean! We're gonta make them dirty Hazy Valley skunks pay th' price fer th' murder of yer Uncle Foster! And you nor this guy can't stop us! I had an idear you'd be droppin' in on yer little playmate, to tell 'im all about it, so I headed th' boys this way! You little fool!"

"And so you, Bert, are going to help them murder the Hazy Valley cousins! And then what do you think will happen? Do you want to hang?"

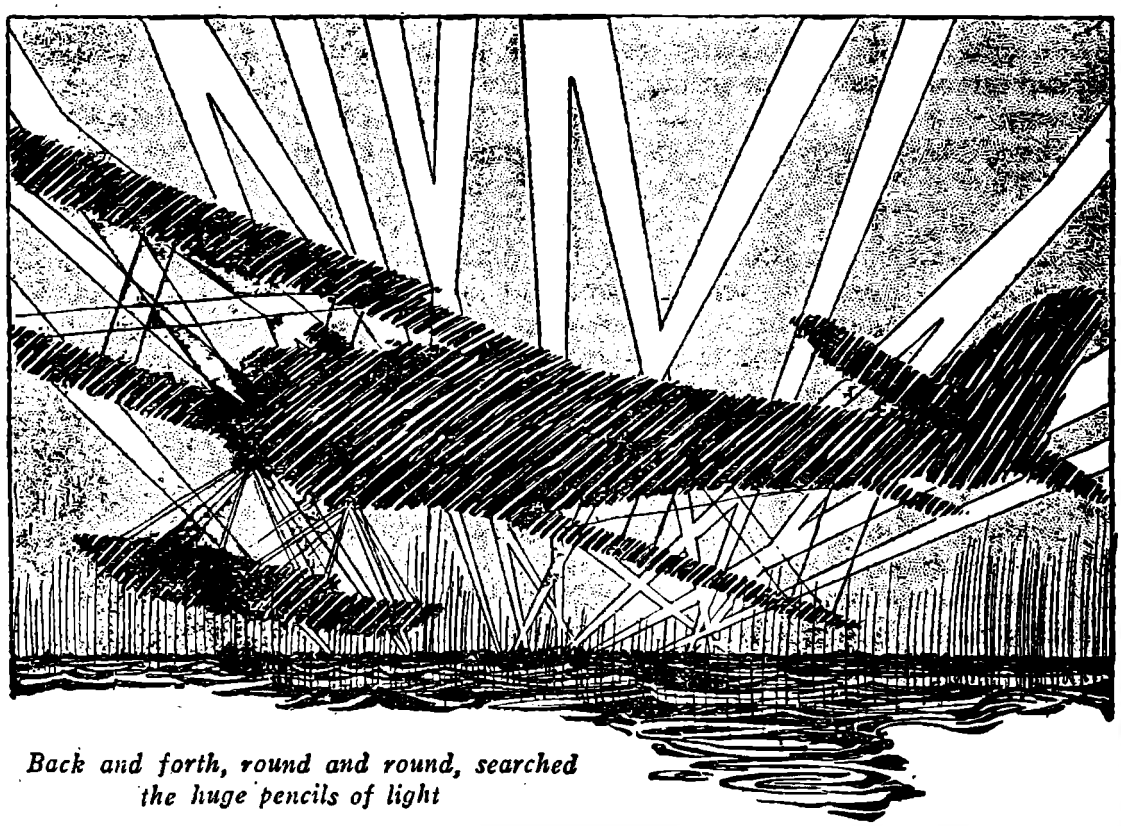
"Hang, my eye! If th' law won't do nothin', us boys will. There'll be no hangin'. Leave it to us. Them two cousins murdered Foster Ballard in cold blood, and they can't git away with such a thing with th' Ball Bar outfit. You can stay here with yer little pal now. Th' boys have got ahead of yeh, and you can't do nothin' more. I'm ridin' on to overtake 'em."

He swung about angrily to face the door.

Tableau!

There they stood, both absolutely motionless, facing each other, with eight feet of floor between them, Giles Rebble's hands hung at his sides, as did the Ball Bar foreman's. Rebble's mouth was set and hard, and his black eyes glittered. Bert Abbie's eyes bulged in amazement, and his mouth stood open, lips loose.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.



Back and forth, round and round, searched the huge pencils of light

One Bomb in the Night

Lieutenant Commander Strickmore wanted to find out what that incorrigible Ensign Wilson was doing with the best bomber in the base—and he did!

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

ENSIGN WILSON was just one of those things which might happen, once in a lifetime, to any salty, hard-boiled regular Navy officer. If Lieutenant Commander Strickmore, United States Navy, had had nothing else to do, he might have taken this fresh young cub in hand, trimmed him down and made a real officer out of him. It might have been the work of years, but he could have done it.

As it was, however, he had other things on his mind. His paper work, for instance. Every morning he was forced to spend at least three hours working up alibis explaining to Admiral Sims's office in London the failure of the United States Naval Air Station at Souilly-sur-mer to wipe the English Channel free of all the U-boats in the Imperial German Navy.

Following that came the disheartening daily inspection of the hangars. Rickety sheds full to overflowing with French and American seaplanes and flying boats in various stages of disrepair, ranging from total washouts to those whose only trouble was that they would not fly.

When, upon a given day, Commander Strickmore could be sure that at least four patrol ships would take the air, that day to him was one when the sun shone brightly and the birds carolled blithely. His dozen-odd young hellions of naval aviators took on, in

his beaming eyes, the sterling qualities of Annapolis graduates.

The fresh, unsightly craters left by the nightly raids of Jerry bombers failed to bother him. He could kiss inspecting groups of French admirals out of the grounds with the utmost urbanity. And upon such a day he could even look upon the slim, gangling form of Ensign Wilson, United States Naval Reserve Force, without too strong a feeling of distaste.

But when only two or three seaplanes could be trundled down to the quay to start on their morning hunt after the elusive submarine, every young officer on the station scuttled out of sight or attended most diligently to duties in the rear of the hangars when he observed the skipper's chunky, determined figure coming in his direction.

Every one except Ensign Wilson. Invariably, on these black mornings, when Strickmore roved the grounds looking for blood, he would come across Wilson shambling lazily along, his hands in his pockets, his unbuttoned tunic flapping about in an unsailorly manner and a cigarette drooping from his lips.

Full thirty times during the month since Wilson had arrived at Souilly he had been dressed down by the captain for these flagrant breaches of navy etiquette. Commander Strickmore reflected bitterly that unless he could arrange to have him transferred, Wilson would continue to offend his eye in exactly the same manner for as many days, weeks and months as the war might last.

Well, the skipper would get rid of this blight soon. There were already two entries on Wilson's service record of overstayed leave. The next time it occurred he would go up for a general court-martial and be run clear out of France. Wilson would be no loss. No, indeed.

He had but three outstanding qualities, so far as the commander had observed: an unquenchable thirst; an easy-going, happy-go-lucky disposition; and a most remarkable ability for talking himself out of trouble and into the easiest, pleasantest details to be found on the station. Yes, the station could stagger along without him—and would do so at the very first opportunity.

So, with those pestiferous subs on his mind, the captain decided that he was much too busy to polish up one young squirt of a reserve ensign, who, aboard ship, would have been detailed to duty in the ammunition room or, in fact, any place where he wouldn't be seen.

Strickmore glowered at the mail orderly. Mail orderlies were usually bearers of bad news.

But the first and second letters were not so bad.

A swivel chair at the Bureau of Navigation was worried about a matter of addition or subtraction in a six months old patrol report. Some one at the Bureau of Steam Engineering called the captain's attention to the fact that the twelfth indorsement on a document which had passed through his hands some fourteen months previously was slightly irregular, as he would readily see by reading through references (a) to (q), attached. The bound volume of correspondence, references and indorsements dealing with a carton of faulty spark plugs was put aside for further study.

It was the third letter which drew fire. Admiral Criseneuf, Commandant of the French Naval District of which Souilly was a part, courteously informed the commanding officer that he would appreciate an opportunity to address the flying personnel of the station that very evening on a matter of the gravest import.

"Now those birds will be sulky and temperamental all day and our flying time will be shot to hell again," brooded the harassed commander. "There's a dance being held by the nurses down in

the village and the whole flock of fliers wanted to go. I'm going to put in for a transfer back to the fleet!"

A FEW minutes after the courtly Admiral Criseneuf had supervised the placing of sentries outside the wardroom so that no whisper of the secret proceedings might reach curious and unfriendly ears, Ensign Wilson slid unobtrusively into the well filled room and slipped into the nearest empty chair.

Lieutenant Commander Strickmore became somewhat red in the face as he noted that the young officer was a full twenty minutes late. That would cost the tardy one just ten days loss of liberty, he decided grimly.

It was time these scatter-brained one-stripers learned that a naval air station should be run with the same punctuality and precision as a man-of-war. Wilson seemed utterly unabashed at the captain's sultry look; he smiled back with all the good humor in the world.

All the fliers wondered—some audibly—what was eating the Frog admiral. It developed that it was the matter of the submarines coming out of their refitting base at Bruges. The British and French destroyers patrolling off the Mole at Zeebrugge had succeeded in reducing the activity of U-boats from that port by fully fifty per cent, and expected to tighten their net still more effectively as time went on.

But Bruges was a turnip of different texture, according to the admiral. Despite the magnificent and entirely appreciated efforts of the so brave American fliers at Souilly, the Hun submarines were able to outfit at Bruges and slip through the lock at Ostend into the Channel with comparative ease.

The fact that the anti-aircraft defenses at Bruges and at Ostend were probably the best in the world was taken into full consideration by the speaker, he pleasantly assured the listening pilots.

On a great blackboard at the end of the room the admiral sketched the known defenses which had hitherto frustrated every effort made by Allied airmen to wipe out the menace.

Here, the admiral pointed, was the sea coast and here, near Ostend, was the entrance to the canal system which led inland to Bruges. Where the canal emptied into the Channel was a great lock, through which the U-boats passed in entering and leaving their base.

His friends and brave allies, the American officers, could appreciate the fact that this lock was the neck of the bottle. If it could be corked, the usefulness of Bruges as a base for enemy activity would be at an end.

But, alas, although Allied airplanes had dropped the so many tons of explosives, always the raiders were forced to remain so high in the air that their aim had been ineffectual.

Across the seaward end of the lock, he explained, ran a multitude of telephone wires which formed a barrier twenty feet high. At each corner of the rectangular basin and along its concrete sides were parallel rows of balloons, held at altitudes ranging from one hundred to five thousand feet, and they were anchored by heavy steel cables, which were sufficiently strong to tear the wings from any airplane that blundered into one of them in the dark.

The purpose of this balloon fence was to keep raiders at an altitude most suitable to the anti-aircraft guns, which were, the admiral assured his listeners, as numerous as fleas upon a camel.

Flaming onions, grapeshot, a veritable horde of large-caliber machine guns, searchlights and listening devices without number, all concentrated around the lock, made the place so unapproachable as to be almost invulnerable, the speaker confessed with regret.

He then proceeeded to describe the defenses of Bruges itself, which seemed, to his hearers, to be so remarkable in their strength and in the accuracy of their high-angle gunfire that there would be little doubt as to the fate of those who attempted to storm them from above.

BUT Commander Strickmore, his eyes ranging back and forth across the countenances of his junior officers, for all the world like a school-teacher vigilantly watching a class of small and recalcitrant boys, saw Ensign Wilson lean forward and stare at the blackboard as though fascinated.

His gray eyes were squinting thoughtfully as they studied the chalked sketches. His forehead, beneath his tousled shock of brown hair, was furrowed with concentration. His mouth was set in a tight-lipped line.

"My God!" the skipper thought drearily, "he's got another idea!"

He remembered, in clearest detail, the last idea that Wilson had presented. The hook in it was that the ensign should be given a week's leave in Paris to study something or somebody. The thing had sounded so plausible, when fluently outlined by Wilson's gifted tongue, that he had almost fallen for it.

It was only when the youngster had unceremoniously lighted a cigarette in the skipper's office just as the latter was making out a pass, that Strickmore hesitated and then examined the matter once more in the cool light of reason. The pass was tossed into the spit kid.

"—And now," the admiral was concluding, "if any of you young gentlemen have any ideas as to how this so horrible menace at your very doorstep may be destroyed, I will be a thousand times obliged if you will rise and present it. The base at Bruges must, of a certainty, be destroyed or bottled up. Now, gentlemen, I await your suggestions with eagerness."

With something akin to horror, the commanding officer saw Wilson squirm about in his chair like a boy in church. Yes, he did have an idea, and there seemed to be no way of stopping him from presenting it.

The skipper feared greatly that it would have something to do with an easing up of Wilson's routine duties at the station, indeed it would probably entail frequent trips to town, or even to Paris itself. He had a hunch that this eloquent youth would succeed in persuading the admiral that his idea was all that stood between France and certain German victory.

But something akin to a sympathetic Providence was, for the moment, favorably disposed toward the commander. At the very instant that Wilson rose to his feet and the admiral turned toward him with an air of pleased expectancy, there was a long, eerie wail from a steam siren close by the station gate. The doleful sound was picked up by another siren and then another until the very air itself seemed to rise and fall with the shuddering shrieks of the alarms. The effect upon the admiral was instantaneous.

"My little ones," he announced hastily. "I regret that the enemy bombers are again upon us. We shall be forced to adjourn and retire to our bombproofs. If any one of you has an idea, let him come to my office tomorrow morning."

AS Lieutenant Commander Strickmore ruefully surveyed the wrecked hangar and the smashed runway in the cold light of day, he regretted that he had given Ensign Wilson permission to leave the station to take his idea to that old goat, Criseneuf. It would have been entirely according to regulations if he had insisted that the brainstorm be set down on paper, approved by himself and forwarded through official channels.

But no; the youngster had requested permission in such a humble tone and

with such a winning smile that the skipper, who was more than fed up on the admiral anyway, was glad to permit him to go ahead and tell the Frenchman anything he damn well pleased.

But having inspected the havoc created by the night raiders, Strickmore's views changed. Here was a detail, in supervising the policing of the wreckage, that he would have really enjoyed assigning to Wilson. But it could not wait until he returned. After lunch it would be the young squirt's turn to make a patrol hop, so he would probably escape scot-free of unpleasant assignments that day.

Lunch at the officers' quarters was a silent function. The captain was peckish and the other officers ate hurriedly, anxious to escape from the sultry atmosphere of the room. Ensign Wilson had not returned from his mission and Commander Strickmore resolved that the afternoon patrol would go out on time to the minute, whether the tardy officer had eaten or not.

Twenty minutes before the hour set for the departure of the patrol the skipper, gazing out of his office window, saw the admiral's familiar Peugeot draw up to the gate. To his irritated amazement, out stepped the dignified admiral himself, accompanied by the entirely self-possessed ensign.

As they strolled together toward the administration building, it could be seen that the admiral was arguing with animated gestures of his hands, shoulders, eyebrows and beard, while Wilson shook his head from time to time as though he disagreed with his companion on a point of some importance.

"My dear commander!" exclaimed Criseneuf, enthusiastically, when the formal salutes and greetings were done with. "This so intelligent, so resourceful young officer has presented the French navy with an idea so magnificent that he has overcome us all with joy. *Magnifique!* Splendid!"

"So?" commented the captain noncommittally, regarding the beaming Wilson with a jaundiced eye. The admiral's enthusiasm left him cold.

"But yes!" continued the admiral, now thoroughly warmed to his subject. "I telephoned the Ministry at Paris while we were having lunch with the staff.

"The minister, himself, agreed with us that the plan is masterly."

"What is the plan?" asked Strickmore bleakly. The admiral looked quite embarrassed, while a curious gleam appeared in Wilson's eyes as he turned away to light one of the admiral's cigarettes.

"A thousand apologies, my commander," parried Criseneuf, "but the minister himself demanded that it be kept in the most absolute secrecy. Only the minister, Ensign Wilson and myself are to be informed. Even my staff, my dear commander, know but the vaguest outline of the project.

"Oh, yes," he interjected hastily as he noticed the captain's dour expression. "I know that all this is rightly irregular, but the minister begs your indulgence and your coöperation. If necessary, he asks me to inform you, he will apply to your great Admiral Sims for permission."

"No, indeed," the commander hastened to assure him. "I will be very glad to coöperate."

"BUT that is too sympathetic of you!" smiled the admiral contentedly. "What I desire is this: That Ensign Wilson be furnished with a single-motored bombing seaplane and that for the next three weeks he be relieved from all duties and be permitted to come and go, with the seaplane, at his discretion."

The commander gasped like a trout. This exceeded his worst fears by a comfortable margin. A bomber stolen from a flock of ships already hopelessly inadequate! Free to come and go as he pleased! That probably included a pad of signed Paris leaves! And they

weren't letting him, the commander of the station, in on the secret!

A pretty pass the service was coming to when a Sears Roebuck ensign, who should rank with, but after, the ship's cat, could put over such a stunt! But for the moment Strickmore's hands were tied. There was nothing to do but to smile at this ass of a Frog admiral, take his orders and like them.

"Perhaps it might be well, my admiral," suggested the ensign, with a thoughtful look at the flushed face of his commander, "if we were to inspect the seaplanes in the hangars and decide which one is best suited to our purpose."

"Precisely," agreed the admiral, stroking his long white beard with tender hands. "Let us then, my comrades, examine the *avions*. It is of most supreme importance that the airplane be suited to the task before it."

As the brooding Strickmore accompanied the two down the gravel path, he calmed himself by thinking of the many months that were to come before the end of the war. And of the many soul-satisfying talks he would have with this impudent bird who was chatting so clubbily with the gold braided Frenchman.

On their great wooden cradles were two of the only three ships on the station which could be counted upon, day after day, to take the air when needed. With a sardonic gleam in his eye, Wilson directed Criseneuf's attention to No. 992, the foremost seaplane in line.

She had arrived from the factory less than three weeks previous and the purring chuck-chuck-chuck of her exhaust stacks described, more eloquently than words, the excellence of her mechanical condition.

"But yes," murmured the admiral happily. Then, turning to the commander, he asked: "May this ship be assigned to us?"

Strickmore, speechless, nodded. Whereupon the admiral and the ensign climbed into the cockpits, were rolled down the launching quay and were seen no more that afternoon.

TWO weeks to the day that Ensign Wilson had been relieved of routine duties at the naval air station, Lieutenant Lewis, who had just come in from the morning patrol, threw a bombshell into the officers' mess by remarking, casually:

"I saw Wilson in the 992 a couple of hours ago."

"Where?" snapped the commander, from the head of the table.

"I'd been having a little engine trouble and was coming back in sight of land. About forty kilometers down the Channel, I saw his ship. His motor was cut off and he was coasting down in a thin glide from about nine thousand feet. I thought maybe he was having trouble, so I loafed along after him to see if he was going to land in the Channel.

"He just slid along, calm as a clam on the half-shell, about six miles out to sea, when, all of a sudden, he banked over and headed toward shore, at right angles to the course he'd been taking. I followed him, to see what it was all about."

"Down he went, so slow his stick was hardly turning over, heading straight inshore. By the time he'd reached the beach he didn't have more than twenty feet altitude and disappeared behind a clump of low trees right at the edge of the sand. I wouldn't have given two bits for his silly neck. With all the open water to light on, why he had to put her down on an uninhabited stretch of shore beat me. Maybe he thought he had an airplane instead of a seaplane.

"But at the last minute, just before her pontoons hit, he must have got her engine started again, for he came up over those tree tops like a bat out of hell. He banked over and cut out over the water for a couple of miles before he turned again and flew off

down the Channel in the direction he had come from. Can you beat that? He must be potty, plain potty!"

After some discussion, the rest of the mess arrived at the same conclusion. No naval aviator, in his right mind, would choose the land to put a seaplane down upon. There was no other answer.

The commander, however, shoved his cold soup aside with a gesture of impatience. The cumulative effect of stewing about Wilson for two solid weeks was beginning to get on his nerves. He was too good a naval officer to demand that Wilson tell him what this mysterious business was all about. Besides, he wasn't at all sure that the ensign would tell him—and that would effect an impassé which would be, to say the very least, disagreeable.

If Wilson was just playing a smart game to get out of work, and was selfishly depriving the station of the use of one of its few airworthy ships, it was the skipper's duty to find it out. Wilson was costing the station at least eight hours a day of flying time and he, Strickmore, would be held accountable.

Here the U-boats were raising seven different kinds of hell right within the Souilly patrol area and his fliers hadn't bagged one, officially, for two months. It was no wonder that Sims's office was riding him hard—Washington was probably riding Sims.

All that afternoon Strickmore worried over his problem. But at dinner time Wilson himself cut the Gordian knot. As the commander was washing up in his room, the ensign knocked on the doorjamb.

"Sir," said he, with all due regard for etiquette, "I wonder if any one would care to volunteer to fly with me to-night? The French weather authorities say that conditions are ripe for me to pull off my little stunt, and I need a machine gunner to keep any Jerry ships off my tail."

The commander stood stock still, soapy water cascading from his stubborn chin, regarding Wilson with amazed eyes. He was actually going to try something! Or, as a matter of fact, was he? It was entirely possible that he was fed up with the whole silly thing and wished to bring it to a conclusion.

It would certainly be interesting to know whether what he intended to try would be worth the placing of 992 out of commission these past two weeks. There was one sure way of finding out.

"I'll go along myself," snapped Strickmore, returning to his washbasin to close the conversation. He listened for Wilson's departing footsteps. At length he looked up. The youngster was still standing in the doorway, shifting from one foot to the other in quite evident embarrassment.

"I said I'd go with you!" repeated the commander succinctly.

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Didn't you say you wanted a gunner?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"I'll handle the gun. That's all!"

Wilson's hesitant footsteps sounded from the hall. The skipper smiled to himself, the first real, wholehearted smile he had indulged in for some time. Now he would get to the bottom of all this monkey business. There had been a temptation to ask Wilson what it was all about, but he decided to let the fellow show him instead of tell him. Then there could be no alibis.

JUST after eleven o'clock that evening, seaplane 992 took off from the crowded harbor of Souilly-sur-mer. Seated in her fore and aft cockpits were Ensign Wilson and Lieutenant Commander Strickmore respectively. Both of them had remained silent and stubborn to the bitter end. Beneath the fuselage, between the two coffin-shaped pontoons, was slung one huge bomb, which had been delivered and attached early that evening by a

detachment of French marines. It was all very mysterious.

Having reached the open Channel, the pilot banked over and headed straight up the coast, toward Belgium and Holland. It was as dark as the bottom of a coal mine, for a thick, high ceiling of clouds overcast the night sky, obscuring the moon and stars.

Wilson put his ship into a slow, easy climb and held her there, while the commander watched the altimeter in the rear cockpit curiously. Fifteen hundred, twenty-five hundred, four thousand feet, and the ship still climbed.

Nothing could be seen of the shore line. The peasants, wise in the ways of enemy air raiders, kept their windows tightly shuttered. The lonely plane, droning ever upward in the midst of the night, seemed to the skipper to be the only substantial thing in a vast, empty world of blackness. His heart warmed a little toward the silent, helmeted man in front of him. There was an intangible aura of companionship between the two of them sitting up there so alone in the skies.

Strickmore adjusted his tray of tracer bullets and fired a few bursts to warm up the cosmoline. He found the noise agreeable and reassuring. Wilson looked around at the first shot, scanned the sky and then turned back to his cockpit. In a moment he passed back a penciled note which the commander read under the cowl light:

> After we change course, do not fire unless we are attacked.

Strickmore was conscious of a distinct feeling of irritation. Since when did ensigns give orders to lieutenant commanders? So he permitted himself the satisfaction of firing another burst, after which he felt better.

The luminous pointer of the altimeter vibrated at eight thousand feet. It was cold and the commander shivered. Why hadn't the boy told him he was going to break the altitude record for bombers?

It was all too ridiculous.

He saw the helmeted head in the forward cockpit peering downward over the right side, gazing fixedly at something far below. So Strickmore, too, craned his neck and saw a tiny pin point of light blinking up at him through the blackness. Code! He read it with ease.

> Wind Force Ten Kilometers. *Bon chance.*

Good luck, eh? Wind force ten kilos. The whole thing was exasperating. The commander wished that he could tap that fool's helmet and order him to return to Souilly. That was the trouble with this aviation business. On a battleship, now, everything would be according to regulation and you knew where you stood.

He tried to imagine an ensign on the Arkansas taking the ship wherever he chose, whether the commander liked it or not.

That thought helped to pass the next ten minutes very pleasantly.

The left wing dropped; they were heading straight out into the Channel. On this course, Wilson reached ten thousand feet, then leveled her out and held her there.

When the clock on the instrument board had ticked off exactly eight minutes, he banked to the right, setting his new course parallel to the coast line. At the same instant he closed the throttle, cut the ignition switch, and nosed down. Not in the swift, hurtling descent of a flier about to land, but in the very thinnest of glides, at an angle just sufficient to keep her from falling off into a tail spin.

LIKE a wraith the great seaplane drifted down, straight ahead on her course. Except for a barely audible fluttering of the propeller as it was blown over and over by the wind

and the faintest hum of wires and struts, the ship was as silent as a bird in flight.

Strickmore gripped both edges of the cowl with tense fingers. What folly was this, gliding down to the Channel with a dead motor? He hastily calculated their position. They must, he figured, be only half a dozen miles west of Ostend and about an equal distance offshore. He scanned the blackness to his right. The coast line was as dark as the Channel itself.

In the weird silence of their slow, straight descent, he could almost have whispered to the pilot, but there seemed to be a spell cast upon him. He could only sit there, alert, waiting for something to happen.

He watched the pointer of the altimeter settle, with incredible slowness, past 9000, then 8000. Never had he known a plane to glide so slowly or so silently.

He missed the usual popping and backfiring of the engine, the stabbing flames from the exhaust stacks.

At five thousand, five hundred feet, when the suspense had become almost unbearable, the plane executed another right turn. It was now heading straight inshore. Well, that was something. Anything was better than that everlasting gliding straight down, down, down, amid that nerve-racking silence. Strickmore fought off an almost irrepressible impulse to fire another burst from his Lewis gun, just to relieve the ever-tightening tension of his nerves.

Twenty-five hundred feet. Suddenly the commander realized what it was all about! Lieutenant Lewis had watched Wilson rehearse exactly the same maneuvers in broad daylight. Gliding down, six miles offshore; dead stick; right angle course; heading straight to land; cutting in his motor when his pontoons grazed the grass!

Strickmore fingered his gun stock nervously. They were heading straight down toward the lock at the entrance to the canal at Ostend! At zero altitude, if Wilson had made due allowance for the wind and had figured his courses correctly, they would find themselves right over the middle of the lock itself!

One thousand. The commander felt nervous chills running up and down his spine. Suppose the engine became clogged with oil and refused to start again at the end of their glide? Suppose they missed their mark by only eight or ten feet and plunged headlong into the telephone wires, or, worse still, into one of those steel cables held straight and rigid in the air by the tug of the captive balloons?

Suppose—

Five hundred feet. There was not a sound from the shore line ahead, which now became visible as an even blacker splotch in the inky darkness that enveloped them. The skipper knew that hundreds of men stood watch there, waiting for them, ears glued to delicate listening devices, fingers ready at triggers and lanyards. Just waiting for the two of them, who slid down toward their objective so silently.

Strickmore stood up in his cockpit and leaned forward against the pull of his shoulder harness, peering between the upper and lower wings, trying to sight some landmark. Every instant that the enemy remained unaware of their presence widened, by a slender margin, their minute chance of escaping safely.

Yet he found himself wishing that the silent enemy would wake up and open fire so that he and Wilson might observe the gun flashes and spot their own position. He remembered a childhood game where he had been blindfolded and given a paper tail to pin on the picture of a donkey. He hoped that Wilson had a better sense of direction than he had had as a child.

He wished that the pilot would turn about in his seat to grin at him, or even to curse at him. The helmeted head irritated him by its very immova-

bility. Anything would be better than just waiting there, helpless, useless, while the seaplane carried him down toward the invisible waiting mouths of the guns.

WITH a nerve-jerking suddenness, unexpected because he had awaited it so long, a single blue-white beam cut a great white slice out of the night. Like a conical pillar of incandescence it stood there for an instant. Then it groped back and forth, blindly, uncertainly, hesitatingly.

Strickmore glanced at his altimeter. Eighty feet. At that height, he knew, the instrument was inaccurate. They might be twenty feet in the air, or a hundred.

Another great projector threw its brilliance into the sky and against the clouds. Another and another snapped on, until they resembled an incredibly huge octopus lying on its back and waving its rigid legs in the air. Back and forth, around and around, searched the huge pencils of light, hunting for the invisible plane high in the air, instead of almost at water level.

The reflection of these millions of candlepower turned the whole seaplane into an odd, dim halftone, which remained indelibly etched in Strickmore's memory.

With a crash that blotted out every other sound, a dozen guns spat blue and scarlet flames into the air. Far up in the sky, feeble, tiny sparks flickered and disappeared. Another and another gun joined in, throwing up a box barrage until the whole sector in front of the plane was erupting fire.

In a moment the pilot would try to fly through the trajectory of that barrage. Strickmore watched the vomiting flames with a curious sense of detachment. This thing wasn't really happening to him. He was just viewing it through somebody else's eyes.

Slightly to the left of the seaplane's bow, there was a cleavage, a wide line of darkness in the midst of the flashing guns. There was the canal! Wilson saw it, too. The plane tilted and swerved, heading for the black strip. At that moment the seaplane slid into a whiteness which seared the commander's eyeballs.

Every square inch of the dope-covered fabric shone like molten silver. He shut his eyes, knowing that they had been spotted at last. Then he opened them again, for the nose of the ship dropped, the motor coughed, backfired and then burst forth into a full-throated roar.

He stood up, balancing himself against the downward slant of the cockpit floor. He looked straight into a seething, erupting volcano, which belched up at him with a thousand jagged tendrils of fire. Tracer bullets streamed by in a maze of sulphurous gray lines. Gusts of air, accompanied by a thousand Valkyrie shrieks, swept past.

Things flashed in his face—great crimson balls of fire that he hardly noticed. An unbelievable green and purple stalk of asparagus rose slowly, horribly, and stood on end, not a dozen feet away from the left wing tip. Flaming onions, chains of fiery balls, whished by, so close that he might have reached out and caught them as they blazed past his cockpit.

Split seconds seemed to stretch into eternities. He was deadly calm, watching everything with utter detachment. He found time to marvel at the unmoving, helmeted head in the forward cockpit and to wonder how the youngster was enjoying the fireworks.

Fifty feet ahead was the grayish concrete lock of the canal, the still water within its walls flickering like a pool of mercury. A ruddy strand of steel cable, hanging from nowhere, flashed by to the right.

The balloon barrier!

He found himself staring straight down upon black figures, clearly visible in the pulsating light. Some of them were crouching around machine gun

tripods. Others scuttled about like ants whose hill had been trodden upon. He laughed aloud to see some of them actually firing up at him with rifles.

Fools!

He was surprised to see that his own machine gun had swiveled around as if it had moved of its own accord. Its stock was vibrating against his hands. A stream of luminous tracer issued from its mouth and searched in and out of the groups on the ground. It was like popping off clay birds at a ten-foot range.

Hell, he had never hoped for a target like that!

A CLUSTER of telephone wires, glistening in the reflected glow, swept just beneath the pontoons. The figures on the ground grew in stature by the instant. A huge chunk of the padded cowl vanished beneath his eyes.

Close, that! He slipped on a new tray automatically, and again his gun stuttered and shimmied. More of those crouching Heinies with the coalhod hats stumbled and fell as his tracer picked them off.

The platform beneath him gave a slight lurch, but he paid no attention. Then the whole plane zoomed straight into the air. A mammoth geyser of smoking water rose from the placid lock and reached up for the seaplane's flippers.

Strickmore ceased firing, exasperated. How could he see his target with that leaping pillar of water hiding everything? Great fragments of concrete rose with the water, turning end over end, lazily, until they fell back into the now seething water. By all that's holy, he marveled, the kid had wrecked the lock—the subs were bottled up!

When the fountain subsided, Strickmore's targets were no longer there. They had disappeared like leaves in a windstorm. On the edges of the drifting smoke, guns were still firing. But for two hundred yards about the lock, everything was black—wiped out.

The earth seemed to tilt over on its side and the lock pivoted around beneath the plane. Then they were leaving the canal. Strickmore was dimly conscious that the ship was rocking and bumping on invisible cyclonic currents of air.

He knew that the flashes of light close by bothered his aim. But he concentrated upon his work and was satisfied with results. His tracer was working well. It swept around the outlying gun crews like a stream from a garden hose.

Funny how they wilted when that tiny, luminous line struck them!

Suddenly he could no longer reach his targets. Beneath the hurtling plane all was dark, except for the paths of light which led back to the guns at the shore's edge. The searchlights still held them in their brilliance.

Then the seaplane tilted so abruptly that Strickmore lurched against his harness and clutched the cowling to keep his balance. In a dizzy, breath-taking sideslip, she skidded down toward the water and out of the beams of the searchlights. Then they were in darkness.

Just above them the great lights ranged back and forth, up and down, hunting for their lost mark. Below, Strickmore could just see the gray wool-capped waves of the Channel, almost touching their pontoons as they skimmed along, a few feet above the surface.

Behind them, the flickering pinpoints of gunfire had vanished. One by one the searchlights were extinguished. The seaplane, with its crew of two, was once more alone in the night.

THE commander was astonished to find that he was soaked through and through with perspiration. The keen sea air struck through his coveralls into his very bones. He shivered and huddled down beneath

the cowl. The seaplane banked again, and he knew that she was headed straight down the Channel toward Souilly.

He glanced at the leather-clad head before him and his eyes widened. In the dim reflection from the cowl light he saw a bottle tilted up at the sky. For many moments it remained thus poised, then it dropped. It reappeared, this time held back across the rounded deck which separated the two cockpits.

Strickmore reached over and grabbed it. The cold rim of the bottle rattled against his teeth as the smooth, hot cognac slipped down his throat. He lowered the bottle, gasping for breath. That had been just what he needed.

It wasn't right to drink on duty, but, after all, their watch was over. They were just returning to the station after a good night's work.

He tilted the bottle again; then, as the potent stimulant warmed his entire body, he felt himself once more. Fit for anything. He wished they had carried one more bomb so they might fly over Bruges, now, and lay the egg on the whole brood of sea adders.

And Wilson would have been glad to go. Strickmore was sure of that. Not a bad young chap, Wilson. Maybe he'd judged him a bit harshly in the past. He resolved to be more patient from now on.

The bottle was empty, Strickmore discovered to his surprise and regret. He observed, for the first time, the damage that the seaplane had sustained. He wondered how she had stayed in the air. Ribbons of tattered fabric blowing straight back from the wings. Two wires whipping back in the windstream. A strut on the trailing edge stood knock-kneed, trembling, like a dizzy old drunkard.

There were two or three drops left, Strickmore found. Then he tossed the dead soldier overboard. Well, the plane was almost a washout. But it had been worth it. It had been a hell of a good evening and he felt grateful to Wilson for inviting him to come along. Good egg, Wilson. Great boy.

The skipper eyed Wilson's helmet hopefully, hoping that there might be another bottle in the front cockpit. But no, the helmet was cold, impersonal. The perspiration-soaked coveralls were cold and clammy again. He had not realized it was so far back to Souilly.

He began to shiver, and sat on the floor to escape the icy wind. His head ached, the steady drone of the engine irritated him. Still, Wilson was a good lad. Perhaps he wouldn't be so flighty now that he had done a job like this.

The nose dropped, the engine's pulsating roar died to a muffled sputtering. The wind whistled through the wires as the seaplane spiraled down to her landing just beyond the anchorage. A motorboat, her running lights showing a welcome red and green, headed for the idling plane.

Wilson stood up and stretched. Then, for the first time since leaving Souilly, he turned and faced the commander.

"I say, skipper, that ought to rate me a Paris leave, what?"

Strickmore tried to stop shivering. He clamped his teeth together to prevent their infernal chattering. His muscles felt numb as he, too, rose in his cockpit. So that was the kind of a bird Wilson was, eh? A Paris leave? Well, his judgment had been correct from the very first. Wilson was a shiftless, lazy swab, who had always caused him trouble and always would! He leaned far across the cowl and glared at the grinning pilot.

"If I hear one more peep out of you—just one—about Paris leave, liberty, or anything else, I'll boot you clear back to ground school!"

The ensign lighted a cigarette in close proximity to the gasoline tank and flicked the still blazing match into the black water.

"All right, captain, but listen. I've got a peach of an idea—"

THE END.

He struggled desperately under the deadly thing

The Phantom in the Rainbow

Risking life and sanity against the chance of happiness, Edmond Fletcher makes the supreme gamble of his career in a desperate effort to confront his occult master, Van Mortimor

By SLATER LAMASTER

Author of "Luckett of the Moon," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

EDMOND FLETCHER, young broker with Morton, Keene & Co., is leaving his offices when a foreign car stops and its liveried chauffeur inquires if he wishes to go now. Fletcher, a good gambler, sees a chance to meet wealthy clients, and steps in. He is whisked by car and yacht to a great country estate, and learns he is being mistaken for wealthy Sigmond Van Mortimor, who has just returned from a fourteen-year absence abroad.

The only relative, the lovely and petite sister Gloria, accepts him unhesitatingly and will not hear his explanations. Fletcher falls deeply in love with her, while her loneliness and pent-up affection for her "brother" quickly makes them intimate. But as Fletcher is kissing his "sister," a weird unearthly wailing as of some dead soul strikes them with supernatural terror.

Time and again, as Fletcher takes up the life and duties of Van Mortimor, he encounters this uncanny influence once he meets it face to face—and it is his own face and shape, ghastly, blanched and horrible!

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 29

Fletcher takes Van Mortimor's place in the business world without difficulty, and even his former boss, Morton, and his chum, Bland, whom he hires as his confidential secretary, accept him, despite their first suspicions, for he is too generally recognized. He takes charge of the vast railroads, banks, and other interests, which he welds into a tremendous force.

Getting a summons to a consultation of specialists on his "case," he learns that his double has a deadly blood clot on the brain, which will probably drive him into stupendous criminal activities, probably toying with his victims' emotions. But Dr. Bates, the family physician, saves him from an immediate operation, and gives him the stenographic reports of Van Mortimor's case. An eccentric genius, Van Mortimor, with all the world at his command, had sought a superlative thrill in adventure, epicureanism, voluptuous dances and bacchanalian orgies in Paris; finally, indulging in stupendous quantities of drugs, he had gone to India, becoming a hashish addict and an adept practitioner of the occult magic of Hindu fakirs. There he had learned this unearthly wailing cry, the mournful wail of ultimate hopeless desire after an unattainable ecstasy—the cry of the damned!

Fletcher, suspecting that he is the puppet of this fiendish trifler with human emotions, nevertheless, goes bravely ahead with his stewardship of the Van Mortimor wealth. A tabloid feature writer prints a sensational story, insinuating that Fletcher is either an impostor or a maniac. When he sees Gloria's faith in him, however, he instantly marshals the power of his great wealth to smash the paper and drive the writer, Bill Skyles, out of the country.

By showing Gloria something of the tragedy of poverty, he starts developing her beyond a mere society girl, artificial and unreal as such friends as Myrtle Marbleton and Count Rononotski. But this is in line with Fletcher's personal and selfish desire to win Gloria; for the most part, he attends to business. Having unified his organization, he determines to help his employees become self-respecting and thrifty; and announces that he will add half again as much money as they will permanently put in savings banks.

This widespread scheme starts a terrific run on his stocks by jealous and fearful capitalists; and Fletcher lets the attack drive his and all other stocks downward, till at last, feeling they have hit bottom, he buys millions of dollars' worth of bargains. Still the stocks go down, and at last he is forced to throw all the Van Mortimor assets into the balance to support the market. That night he goes home, knowing that the morning's market will tell whether he is saved or ruined—and fearing that Van Mortimor will wreak some fiendish vengeance for this reckless philanthropy and gambling.

Deep in the sleep of overwrought nerves, he dreams he is stifling in a wet, hot tropical forest. Screaming in agony, he gets to his feet in a cloud of dank heat—and dimly sees Van Mortimor's ghastly figure spraying live steam upon him from the automatic heat-regulating machinery. His doors are locked from the inside—and his screams grow fainter as he suffocates in this scorching steam!

The servants burst in the door and save him, but he is months recovering from the scalding, despite Gloria's nursing. As he is nearly recovered, he has a night visit from Van Mortimor—who commands him to be cruel, to make all men fear him—or suffer his master's vengeance!

Not long after he gets a cablegram from Skyles in Europe, hinting that he has uncovered Van Mortimor's past. Fletcher sends Bland to trail Skyles, and gets a warning message from him—then silence! His cablegrams to Bland are unanswered! Fearing some immediate and awful ending to the whole tragic game, Fletcher takes up

pistol practice; but he has little hope that such skill would avail against this demon of the occult.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SPRING.

FLETCHER buckled himself down determinedly to strengthening his business machine. He did not see much of Gloria except at breakfast, and he knew this was wise just now, in view of the impending scandal from Skyles, and the proved fact that Van Mortimor was here, no doubt hovering ever closer over them.

However, one of these days at noon, the warm spring sunshine a little too enticingly flooded across Edmond Fletcher's desk at the bank. It was really too beautiful for him to remain indoors. Although he knew it was not the thing to do, something deep within him called insistently for Gloria and the open country of Westchester. He impulsively got the bewitching little lady on the telephone and asked her to go for a drive. She accepted gladly, but just a little hesitatingly, he thought. He supposed he had startled her with his sudden attention.

When he entered the apartment, Gloria handed him a cablegram, rather timidly, too. It had been forwarded up there, was opened, and was from Bland. He did not care if Gloria had seen this because it was in code.

The cable informed Fletcher that Skyles and Bland aboard the steamship Latronia were nearing the port of New York, and would dock some time Friday. "Our messages must be intercepted," said Bland, "because I have received no answer from you for many weeks."

This jolt would have thrown Fletcher into a sweat of apprehension but for the remarkable change, which was manifesting itself in Gloria; and that, on the very instant of his noticing it, turned his attention from anything else.

Gloria had not happily run up to kiss him, as was her invariable custom. Nor did she ask him the contents of the cable, which certainly was to be expected; and when he reached out to touch her, she very shyly drew away from him!

"I read the message," she broke the news simply. "I made a copy of your personal code very recently, so that I could find out what was worrying you."

His concern about Gloria mounted until it effaced all his own apprehension. How cruel it was of him if he had let her into his terrible fears at this late hour!

Gloria had turned away and was pensively staring out the window, one small foot tremulously tapping the floor. He stepped up awkwardly behind the demure little person and placed his arm around her. As if she had been some beautiful stranger, she darted from him in dismay, only stopping in the doorway to look back very timidly. A crimson flush was spreading over her features and he beheld this new and elusive Gloria in rapt astonishment.

"Why, Gloria!" he exclaimed. "What on earth has come over you?"

"Don't be silly," she smiled, as if possessed of some sweet and secret knowledge. She turned her face away from him. "Let us get out in the lovely sunshine. It is so close in here!" And out of the room she went.

IN a moment she was back. A stunning spring coat, gay-hued, fluttered around her when she tripped ahead of Fletcher to the car. Now and then she was glancing over her shoulder at him diffidently as if she were half afraid of this slender, erect young man with the solemn mien behind her.

"Where to, sir?" asked the gold-emblazoned starter.

"Give us a long ride along the Hudson," Fletcher suggested absent-mindedly.

It was May-time. As they swept

into the invigorating open country, the scents of the blossoming and budding trees—peach, apple and cherry—and all the green and growing things, were wafted to them on a warm southern breeze from an ever-changing panorama of colorful landscape.

Every so often Edmond Fletcher caught Gloria Van Mortimor studying him as some beautiful woman might covertly look upon one when she thought herself unobserved. Oh, how careful he knew he must be with this delicate-spirited girl!

Fletcher nonchalantly lay back in the cushions, apparently content with all the world. They must have been quite a distance out now, for they had been speeding on the perfect billiard-table road up the Hudson for over an hour, their motor humming dreamily, musically, like a swarm of woodland bees.

"Gloria," he suggested casually, "we are near Cleborough. Would you like to see in full dress the woods in which we rode last summer?"

Her eyes met his and wavered uncertainly.

"Yes," was all she said and it seemed that it was with a mighty effort that she said so much.

Fletcher spoke into the tube and soon they were winding gracefully up the parked ribbonlike roadway which led to the great house on the crest of the hill at Cleborough. His eyes feasted hungrily on the familiar scenes which unrolled before his gaze. Memories crowded in upon him of all the happiness that he had discovered here, of all the high hopes that had been born in these surroundings.

The cars pulled down to the edge of the great woods far behind the house, where Edmond Fletcher directed them to wait. Edmond and Gloria sauntered into one of the magnificent trails over which they had joyously ridden the past year.

About them clung that fresh clean odor of budding things and reborn life. A little beyond them the long, clear waterfall broke over its precipice and went sparkling like silver far down below to a pool where they could faintly hear its murmur upon the rocks.

Near them was the great trunk of a fallen tree which made a natural seat.

"Come," he called out when he noticed this, and confidently took her hand which thrilled him with its soft warmth. She did not withdraw it, and her slender little fingers trembled.

THEN they were at the body of the tree trunk and something had to be done. It was much too high for Gloria comfortably to seat herself. Fletcher grasped her firmly, a hand on either side of the lovely slimness of her waist, and he bounced her up there!

"Don't!" she cried out. However, it was too late. She was prominently displayed on the big log and blushing profusely. Fletcher vaulted up beside her. He still avoided her eyes, but now it was not from any fear about how she felt for him! He felt sure she really loved him with a love that knew that he was not her brother. Gloria on her high perch was vividly publishing her mind! And, it seemed, she did not know what else to do about it! What an exquisite feeling pervaded Fletcher! What a beautiful and glorious thing it was to live!

Her eyes met his and in them was the irresistible soul-offering of this maiden for her lover. Such wholesale self-abandon deserved more attention than he was giving Gloria!

As she melted into his embrace, her warm lips pressing one cheek and her tender arms about him caressing the other, some great void in Edmond Fletcher was completely filled—some great growing gap in his nature was blissfully healed over. Nothing was said for awhile; but sometimes lips have little use for words.

From where they were sitting, through a break in the woods, was barely discernible in the far distance the east terrace of the grand house

where this idealistic romance had started.

"My very dearest," Gloria whispered ever so gently as she looked in that direction and her eyes closed. "Kiss me as you did on the terrace the first night we met. I have thought and dreamed of it ever since."

At last they found time to talk a little, but in view of what she so earnestly said, it seemed trivial for Fletcher to be inquisitive immediately.

"From here," she insisted, "we go as one! You must never have any more fears, because if you love me, nothing can take me away from you. My love, you can do as you wish with me from this moment on! Unless you tell me in so many words that you do not want me, you will always have me!"

"Don't, don't, Gloria!" he exclaimed.

"Let me say it all, dearest! This is the last time I wish to assert myself! Look into my bare heart. It may help you. Even if you told me to go, you could always have me back, when you wanted me! Why lie about the nature of a woman in love? It seems wrong to say so, but even if you did not marry me I should be the same to you! You've taught me that one alone, no matter how self-sufficient, is incomplete in this world; and when one finds the missing part, the great thing is to hold together at any cost."

"Gloria," he said very thoughtfully, deeply moved, "among my many premonitions, something seems to tell me that you are as clever as you are lovely. Such humility usually accompanies wisdom. When did you really know that I was not your brother?"

"Only this morning! Dr. Bates came up and informed me! He told me that I was only your adopted sister!"

"What?" cried Fletcher in astonishment.

"Look!" cried Gloria, drawing a letter out of her dress from somewhere near her heart. "Here is what he gave me! Haven't you yours? Here, read it quickly!"

IN the unmistakable bold script of the grand old man, Phelps Van Mortimor, Edmond read:

MY DARLING GLORIA:

This letter will be given you by Dr. Bates in whom I have full confidence, when he feels that you have attained womanhood. Though I have been blessed with worldly goods as few men ever have, there are some elements of evil in passing so much on to my posterity. Yet I wish to act fairly in the matter.

I very well know what pitiful wasters men may become who receive too much unearned wealth, with nothing to do but spend it, and I do not want to burden any man with more than his shoulders are capable of bearing.

Sigmond Van Mortimor is my only child and as a boy he is fearfully weak. I feel that there should be some check put upon giving him this tremendous power, and I am not satisfied with the ways and means prescribed by lawyers for doing this.

You, dear Gloria, are at least strong, healthy, beautiful and, from the time you were born until this is written, the sweetest little girl on earth! You ought to have been! I picked you out myself from nearly all the fine little orphans in the country when my wife and I decided we needed you. The sight of you is an inspiration of all that is fine and noble and we have reason to believe you may live the part.

You were our ideal little baby girl; and in order that our happiness might be the further served in the same spirit and that the welfare of our son, Sigmond, might the more naturally be safeguarded as well—as I shall presently explain—you were reared as our own daughter in reality.

However, so that you should have all the rights of a child born to us, you were legally adopted in a quiet little town so very unimportant and so very far away that even our name passed unnoticed there. Dr. Bates alone knows this secret. He will give you all details, will tell you that you are of sturdier stock than our own, and that you need only call attention to your adoption record if you ever wish, or need to do so.

When you read this you will be possessed by due course of law with one-half of the Van Mortimor wealth. You will, I am certain, have been a good influence upon our beloved son.

If—and the many dreams my wife and I have had of you seem to promise something miraculous from you—if Sigmond should prove worthy and you should fall in love with him, what more wonderful thing could happen on this earth?

A copy of this letter will be delivered to Sigmond at the same time you receive it. But decide all issues with your own free wills.

Your loving father,
PHELPS VAN MORTIMOR.

FLETCHER was gazing blankly at Gloria.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, glancing up at him through moistened lashes. "Isn't it wonderful for me that you still want me! Now I can breathe again without my throat aching. You see, I had been trying all this time to puzzle things out, absolutely convince myself one way or the other about you—and it was only this morning that I succeeded in understanding the whirlpool of my own feelings. When Dr. Bates gave me this letter I realized how simple it all was."

A haunting sadness came into her soft eyes.

"A year ago when you returned from France, my true love had come to me! No wonder you affected me so!

"You were really that all-wonderful one to whom I should have freshly given every intimacy in my nature. You understood our love at first sight, without any letters to explain it, as I should have done! And you tactfully made up fairy stories to prove our true situation! I am a sorry ideal for you!"

She buried her face on his breast. "And I have been so immodest, that this morning, when I received the letter, I feared that you, my very dearest, would not want me now!"

"My exquisite little girl!" said Fletcher tenderly, "let me tell you how badly I want to get rid of you! Always have I followed in my day dreams an ethereal little maiden of such surpassing loveliness that her soul matched her beauty! A golden little sweetheart, gorgeous as a peacock, and yet one who could be implicitly trusted, whose sense of honor and delicacy were so high that I need take counsel from her rather than ever criticize. And impossible as it may seem, wonder upon wonder has brought her to me—in you!

"Don't worry about those other little things! As a matter of fact I am still not Sigmond Van Mortimor!"

"Ah! Sigmond," she stopped him; suffused with happiness, and put her slender pink fingers over his mouth. "I know you were rather wild in Europe, but you have certainly proved worthy of all the love I can give you, so don't spoil my happiness by speaking of such awful past things!"

Rapturously they wandered back to the cars, with not a care on earth. Life for them was just to be something better than a reopened Garden of Eden.

When they emerged out of the woods Fletcher looked up at the clear blue sky. Well he could face heaven with his highest hope so joyously fulfilled. But even as the lightning of their love had so vividly flashed, now came its thunder!

Far over Fletcher's head and circling about was one lone vulture. That Gloria was an adopted daughter, had not changed his relations with the true Sigmond Van Mortimor in the slightest. It possibly added relish to the man's fiendish work.

Gloria, running playfully ahead, was snatching up daisies and wild flowers, which she capriciously tossed, like some nymph of the woodland, in a little path, before Fletcher.

"What have I done?" came down the question bursting into his consciousness like a bombshell as his normal senses returned. Of all things that he could have perpetrated, this surely

was the most despicable to his other self, Sigmond Van Mortimor!

He suppressed his feelings, at least outwardly, and catching up with Gloria, they strolled together hand in hand.

BEFORE them now lay the big old house, with the east terrace plainly disclosed to their view.

"Look!" discovered Gloria, "some one is on the terrace. I wonder who it could be? The house is still closed."

So there was. Fletcher could easily see a man, dressed in dazzling white, standing by the balustrade.

"I cannot understand that," he replied slowly. "You run over to the cars and have them wait for me. I shall cut across here and see the caretaker about this! That house, you know, is very dear to us!"

There was an added interest in this investigation for Fletcher. Why should any one wear such brilliant white clothes? It was too early for flannels or ducks, and these were too white for them anyway. If foreign strangers were at the house they might throw some light on the one and only Van Mortimor, and Fletcher dared neglect no clew now, no matter how trivial, on account of his great new responsibility.

Edmond Fletcher saw no further signs of life as he approached the mansion. The caretaker's quarters were locked. Evidently the man's whole family was taking a holiday, and Fletcher would have to look about for himself. With the strange tail-dives that his mind took into superstition, he reflected that to-day was Thursday, the 12th of May. Fletcher was glad it was not the thirteenth, as he gingerly came up the terrace to prowl around the old home of this stock which dealt so potently with the destinies of the living even after they were dead!

But what pleasurable memories this place could excite in him! He was visiting the very spot where he had first kissed Gloria. Fletcher ascended some stone steps and was surprised to behold some chairs on the terrace as though they had lately held occupants. He walked cautiously toward them. On the balustrade lay a powerful pair of field glasses. This was getting very mysterious!

In front of him now one of the large French casements leading inside was open. Some intruders must be in the house. He felt a vague uneasiness, as though this might have something to do with Van Mortimor, and so he dared not summon his servants and detectives from the cars, Fletcher let his curiosity take him into the house. First he peeped covertly through the open French glass window. He could see or hear nothing, and since it only went into the main hall, he softly stepped inside.

Even that near the spring sunshine, it was dark and rather spooky as all closed houses are likely to be. He held his position for a moment thinking something might turn up, but here was only silence—and the silence was deafening for Fletcher. When his eyes had become accustomed to the dim light in the hallway, he saw that the door of the library was flung back. Since a heavy velvet rug extended from where he stood to its entrance, he decided his footsteps would be sufficiently muffled to enable him to view the interior of the open room.

Guardedly, stealthily, he moved toward the library door, thankful that the heavy-piled rug deadened his footsteps and that it was so dark in the hallway that no one could see him. What little light there was in the whole house came from the open library door.

Finally he reached its entrance. First he noticed that the curtains at the top of a window had been undrawn. That accounted for the gleams of daylight. Then, chilling him to the marrow, he saw in a mirror directly across the room from him a half profile of himself! It was very sallow, haggard, and white

in the dim illumination, but it was a horrid caricature of himself!

He would have believed that by some optical illusion that it was himself, too, since it was reflected from his own direction; but this figure was sitting down. Fletcher was still standing, but he did not know for how long that would be! Even in the paralyzing fright which instantly gripped him, he tried to reason.

From where could the reflection of the blanched face be coming? His eyes painfully surveyed every inch of the deeply shadowed library, as they worked back to the doorway in which he stood. Horrifyingly, it dawned upon him that Van Mortimor was seated with his back to him at a table just inside the door—so near Fletcher that he could easily touch him.

He made his way outdoors in a panic, to the blessed sunlight and fresh air, as fast as his legs would let him!

A SICKENING dread pervaded him. Sigmond Van Mortimor, if not always with him, had now returned in the flesh. He had been right with him, to-day of all days! The binoculars still lying on the balustrade told their own disquieting story. Thus were the beady eyes of this modern demon upon him all the while to-day! Now Edmond Fletcher understood the figure in snowy-white whom he and Gloria had seen on the terrace; no doubt an Indian servant or conjurer, who always wore snowy-white. It all pointed to the awful mysteries of Indian magic.

This was no place for Edmond Fletcher. He hurriedly ran from the terrace, closely hugging the side of the house. He made strenuous efforts to compose himself before reaching the motor cars.

Ah, the old war-horse, Phelps Van Mortimor, had had great vision to see trouble ahead! But, of course, he could scarcely have foreseen a thing as bad as this! The benign influence of the grand old man was now forever gone. Another had taken charge, and what a wretch he was!

At the very moment Sigmond Van Mortimor, the last of the line, sat in the old family home, using it as an ambush while he leisurely plotted a final orgy in the torture of a human victim!

If it were not so, why did not this living ghost come out in the open and meet his dupe? For the malignant spirit was indisputably present! With Fletcher's own eyes he had seen him —the blanched face in the flesh!

At last he succeeded in burying his turbulent emotions, and at least outwardly quieted, joined Gloria in the leading car.

"Everything is well," he explained bravely, "friends of the caretaker!"

Soon they were putting distance speedily behind them. This was very much as he would have had it, but he knew flight would be futile in their case. Again a different little Gloria sat by Fletcher. She chatted merrily, indeed, about the future, so well was she satisfied with it—but her partner in this could only force smile after smile.

As they neared the city, he declared:

"Gloria, I am stopping at the National Club to-night."

"Oh, Sigmond!" she pleaded. "This is the very first time that you have stayed out all night since you came back to me! If you stay away from home I am afraid you will get that queer feeling again that you are not Sigmond Van Mortimor!"

"Remember what you said: 'From now on,'" he reminded her, smiling nervously. "It is for the best! Anyway, unless you can give me some better advice, a brother goes out when a sweetheart comes in!"

"Ah, well!" she agreed resignedly.

FLETCHER talked to Gloria several times on the telephone that night. Although he had other reasons for absenting himself from the playhouse, it was rather consoling for

him to realize that it would be difficult for even a Van Mortimor to pull off one of his fiendish stunts at such an exclusive gentleman's club as this which he had chosen to-night! However, he slept only fitfully after many stiff drinks had drowned out a stark, blanched face that was staring, staring, forever staring at him and gnawing its presence into his heart.

Edmond Fletcher had a distinct premonition that his end was close at hand. He knew by intuition that something monstrous was going to happen the next day, something was coming from which he could not possibly run away! The mine for this atrocity had been planted squarely within himself!

The blanched face with the brilliant intellect had merely been using him as the subject for the most dastardly experiment ever practiced in human emotions! Even as Dr. Martel had predicted, this degenerate human fiend had, like a snake, alternately charming and torturing a bird, simply worked upon him, the gullible victim, storing up within him enormous hopes and fears—of course, with no other purpose in view than ultimately to kill him by touching off this accumulation of high explosives and thus completing the weird drama for his superlative thrill.

Fletcher's taking Gloria for his own to-day must surely have signaled the attainment of the height of hope in him in this intoxicating and gruesome test of love and fear. It would surely provoke the fiend to bring up his full forces on the other side—to strike the fatal blow! Had not Van Mortimor himself intimated as much? Some things are so plain that they hardly need a ghost to tell us, but Edmond Fletcher had even seen his other self that very day!

As the well-meaning young impostor went back over all things in retrospect, it was obvious that he had just been led into a magnificent trap with an exquisite and innocent little girl as living bait.

CHAPTER XIX.

FRIDAY, THE THIRTEENTH.

EDMOND FLETCHER lay abed late the next morning, for he slept much more comfortably in the warm sunlight which flooded his club bedroom from the high windows. Light of some kind had come to be essential to his ease and daylight was so much more soothing than the electric light to which he had become so accustomed. He had so much to fear from darkness! Actually the morning sun shining fully in his eyes only soothed his aching nerves, so far had his sensibilities been distorted in this supersensitive realm of emotion.

The telephone jangled shrilly by his bedside. It was as if the voice of his strident fear itself were within the instrument. Every noise, every sound now had some distinctive character for him! He must expect to hear the vindictive cry of the avenging face at any moment now, since Gloria was his own.

All the other sinister signs had been but omens—outcroppings of something he did not understand, heralding a greater and more peremptory warning! What he dreaded most of all now was the depraved hunting cry of Van Mortimor himself, which always came when he was in action—that yell from the hidden depths of the occult. This time Fletcher did not see how he could conceivably protect himself against the attacks of perverted natural forces which would surely accompany it. How dangerous it was for him even to stir out of bed this day! Any step might be toward his end!

His nerves were breaking so badly and his resistance to terror was weakening so rapidly, he wondered if Van Mortimor intended to kill him with violent fear alone! Would merely the coming of this murderous warning

touch off something already loose within him and plunge him into sudden madness? Indeed, such would be a most subtle assassination and strictly according to the medical prophecy of the case!

With all this sunlight, he finally decided he could answer the telephone.

"Miss Van Mortimor on the wire, sir," announced the club operator.

Oh, what a relief that was!

"Good morning, Gloria," he called.

Edmond could have smilingly entertained himself with pleasantries with Gloria, even in his sorely distressed condition, but for something else on the wire—a low, dismal howl which set him half crazy. The sound was not mechanically in the wire, but guttural, from something alive—or dead.

"What is that, Gloria?" he asked excitedly. "Can't you hear that awful thing?"

"Yes, dearest—it's Belshasher!" she hastened to speak bravely, but her voice broke. "He has carried on in that wild manner ever since—since midnight! I thought I had him quieted, but when I began talking to you he started again. I have him shut up in your rooms, but he is jumping against the—he's charging the door now! And his howl is getting terrible!"

"Send him out for—for a walk in the park. I cannot bear to hear him!" spoke Fletcher weakly. He was getting deadly pale.

While he finished the conversation, he heard old Belshasher's gradually receding growls. Good old "Bel"! He was doing his best to tell something which he, too, knew. The workings of the perverted forces of nature had not escaped the old dog's love for him. Things were drawing to a close. Even the joy of love in Gloria's voice was blighted by the warning of terror accompanying it.

Fletcher rushed feverishly to his private office at the bank. On his desk was a Marconigram in personal code. He tremulously tore open and deciphered this. Skyles was due and this doubtless was from Bland. He read:

5—13. At Sea. S.S. Latronia.
Dock this noon. Give whereabouts to police and bury yourself. See no living creature until I reach you.
BLAND.

IT was evident that Bland had grasped a part of the true situation and was still striving to save him even though his hands too were in some manner tied. Again Fletcher looked at the cable, but this time minutely.

"5—13." The mystic date smote his eye. Fletcher's eyes traveled to a large wall calendar. "Friday, 13," stared back at him! Something instinctively told him that he need not worry about Skyles's coming; but he did wish that he could see Bland again—good old Bland, who had been so faithful and who had worked so loyally for him, even in the dark.

It seemed so petty, however, even to consider running away at the very end of everything. It seemed suicidal to start now with such an unevenly balanced baggage of love and fear as he must carry! Any fight that Edmond Fletcher could put up against his great intangible enemy appeared so feeble that he could not conceive of any better place to face him than in the very harness of his business imposture. Instead of calling the police, he shortly scrawled out a code reply to Bland:

Bullard Bland,
S.S. Latronia at Sea.
Come directly to my office. Will remain here until you arrive.

He sent it, and now he sat inactive and all alone in the very seat that he had been warned to leave. He would see no one. There now remained only a few hours of precious daylight. Yet, upon the use he made of them he knew his life depended.

Time went on relentlessly clicking off the minutes of the hours, while here he sat inactive and all alone in the

solitude of his inner office. For him, no less than the weakest little oriole in the toils of a viper, paralysis was setting in. It was as if he were in a lethargy, but still faintly struggling to formulate some defense against this monstrous unseen thing which was already settling down upon him.

Come what might, however, he determined he would not communicate with Gloria until this horrid thing was over, and that meant, he was sure, that he might never see her or hear her sweet voice again. The more Fletcher left her, the other waif of circumstance, his innocent orphan partner, free from this hideous business, the better was her chance of surviving it!

"What a master is handling me!" was the best his addled wits could muster up. Now at last he caught a broad view of his whole predicament. The idea came to him that while his situation was cruelly oppressive, it must be intensely difficult for another —dead or alive—to maintain! Possibly the phantom whip over him was having some trouble too!

It was as if fate itself had rolled all human trials into one—all a lifetime's hopes of reward and fears of defeat—and of many lives for that matter, rolled into a single supreme test for Fletcher. Now the test squarely faced him, unescapable, demanding that he put forth some superhuman effort as the price of his further existence! But why did Van Mortimor not strike now!

Well, with just a little bit more time, maybe he could put up a little fight himself. What was there still left sound and firm beneath him on which he could make his last stand against this monstrous invisible enemy? With what straws could he combat him?

FLETCHER had considerably strengthened this bubble which his namesake had blown about him. He was, in fact, well intrenched in it if he could just get his enemy out in the open, where he could meet him on fair, human terms. Now a great light of reason broke on Edmond Fletcher which routed all fear from his mind.

Why, Van Mortimor himself had not known until yesterday, when he received a copy of the letter from his father, that Gloria was only his adopted sister! That must have given him an awful jolt, possibly had upset some of his well-laid plans!

Ah! While Sigmond Van Mortimor had made a vicious tragedy of life, a tragedy in which a human being was now being sacrificed, his father, though long since dead, had placed another living character in this very weird play as a check upon Mr. Sigmond Van Mortimor's enormities. An unseen hand no less powerful than the fiend's very own actually operated in Fletcher's favor!

Gloria Van Mortimor, not of this doubtful blood, actually owned one half of this whole great fortune, and, though she did not so much as know it, Edmond Fletcher now stood here as her representative and champion! In these unforeseen circumstances, such would certainly be the wishes of the founder of the fortune.

His situation thrilled him to the core! Now, by all the powers on earth, he must stand his ground and bring up his best shock troops!

Fletcher at once began to think more coherently. First he would wait for Bland; secondly, he would take counsel with Dr. Bates; and, thirdly, he must not let anything conceivable overcome him.

This was his program for the moment. And since he could never again for long avoid the beady eyes that were settling down upon him, the next move was up to Sigmond Van Mortimor. Now, while he waited for Bland, he started methodically clearing his desk of the day's work, to give his painfully strained mind more sane employment.

The sun edged over in the sky. Noon

had passed. He knew the Latronia had docked.

Shortly his inner door burst open, and Bullard Bland slammed it tightly behind him. He was wildly excited, red in the face, puffing desperately to get his breath.

"Edmond!" Bland cried, rushing to Fletcher and grabbing hold of him, "for God's sake get out of here! You haven't a minute to spare! Come! Come!" He begged piteously, trying to pull what he considered his discredited and hopeless leader away by main force.

"Don't! Don't!" exclaimed Fletcher, indifferent to his entreaties. "If you want to help me, sit down and quietly answer my questions!"

Bland dropped into a seat.

"Where's Skyles?" demanded Fletcher.

"He's through! Got cold feet and crumpled up with fear! Came to me, told me he knew who I was, and begged me not to mention he had anything to do with this matter! He wanted to wash his hands of it."

"What is he afraid of?" asked Fletcher incredulously.

"Van Mortimor!" stammered Bland in an agony of impatience. "I got Skyles down on his knees in his stateroom and choked the truth out of him! He sold his stock in the *Morning Star* twice, and he has been doing this traveling abroad for the real Van Mortimor himself! Was employed by him all the time. But Skyles is scared to death now. He says he's been playing into the most weird game that was ever staged in the world! Come on, Edmond!" begged Bland, with hot tears breaking forth from his eyes. "Get yourself out of here! This is no place for us. You are the subject of a ghastly experiment."

"I KNOW," answered Fletcher apathetically, "but where is Skyles now?"

"A gleaming white yacht came slipping up to our boat at quarantine and took him off. That's the last I saw of him."

"Was its name the Sylvia?" asked Fletcher breathlessly.

"Yes! Yes! That has something to do with Van Mortimor and the biggest tragedy ever played in human emotions! Come on, Edmond. For God's sake come on out of here. You haven't a second to lose, and this awful degenerate Van Mortimor knows everything! He is due to strike at you any instant now because you made love to his sister yesterday."

"God!" exclaimed Fletcher, burying his face in his hands, "did Skyles know that too?"

"Yes—I searched his baggage while he was at breakfast. He had a radiogram which said: 'Trap sprung, sister taken, climax on, rush ashore, we'll strike together!' Signed, 'Your Host!' Do you want anything plainer than that?"

Bland's voice was choking with terror. "Oh, the horror of what you are doing! Here you are, staying in his identity, in his property, right in his clutches! He'll knock you off with a thrill murder as clean as a whistle—do you want to make it easier for this filthy beast to kill you with some devilish mystic trick?"

"That isn't it!" cried Fletcher. "I am trying to figure him out, guess what he is up to! Where he is now, and how he will strike! Don't get rattle-brained," commanded the victim of it all, growing steadier momently, and holding Bland down now to keep him quiet. "Think, Bland, think for me. I've got to think to live. He would run me down anywhere I go! Good as you are, haven't you a single idea with which to help me face him?"

"Here's all!" said Bland limply. "I can't believe that Dr. Bates is a party to all this blood thirst, and if we could talk to him quickly, tell him the Sylvia took Skyles off my ship, that Skyles is at sea with Van Mortimor, and find out what the doctor knows, maybe we can get the jump on this colossal

maniac and somehow be ready for him!"

"Now you are talking sense!" agreed Fletcher heartily as he wiped the moisture from his tense face. "I'll go with you!"

But even as he spoke the door of the private exit in the rear of his room moved slightly, making a faint noise which instantly caught their strained attention. The ashen countenance of Dr. Wendell Bates was peering in at them through a crack in the doorway.

"Come in! Come in!" commanded Fletcher testily.

"God forgive me!" said Bates to Fletcher as he came in, furtively glancing about. "You realize it is not like me to sneak in on you this way, but, honestly, I did not know whether I should find you or your double in your seat!"

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded the young financier, "and let go of my arm!" he cut in on Bland, who was shaking all over.

"I'll tell you all I know!" confessed the doctor. "What a fool I have been! But I have awakened, thank God, to what is really going on here! We've got to talk fast. Do you know what happened to Skyles, the only other one that knows anything about the truth of what is being done?"

"Sure," answered Bland at once. "Skyles is on a yacht with Van Mortimor!"

"Skyles is dead," said Dr. Bates.

"Dead!" gasped Fletcher and Bland together.

"Yes, poor Skyles is dead! I was called to the Jefferson flying field to meet a sinister and queer airplane just a little while ago! Van Mortimor stepped from it and, with a great show of frankness, took me back aboard. 'Make out a death certificate for this fellow,' he said, casually indicating Skyles, who was stretched out on a lounge. 'He died of heart failure.'" The doctor paused to catch his breath, went on:

"Not a mark of violence on the body! Not a trace of poison in his system! I made a thorough examination. He did die of heart failure, but the heart failure was from—"

"Fright!" said Fletcher, taking the word out of his mouth.

"Yes-s-s," stuttered Bates. "How did you know?"

"Never mind!" he shot back. "How did Van Mortimor do it?"

"I don't know!" cried the doctor. "But in some infallible way that leaves no trace of evidence. Van Mortimor killed Skyles in that way and—you are next! Then it is Bland, and myself, I know, for he said—" The doctor gulped.

BLAND was clutching both Fletcher and Bates, huddling them closer to him as if in clinging together there might be some little measure of protection.

"Ah! What did he say?" exclaimed Fletcher earnestly, with a cooler, saner light breaking in his face. "That's what I want to hear! What did Van Mortimor say?"

"'Now, Bates!' he told me confidentially, 'you see what happens to people who inject themselves into my affairs! You have been a pretty bad offender yourself, by keeping secret until yesterday the information that Gloria is my adopted sister.' I gave him a letter—"

"Yes, I know!" cried out Fletcher. "Go ahead with exactly what he said!"

"'That little matter of withholding that knowledge from me,' he said, 'might have spoiled all my plans! But as it is, everything has just turned out perfectly. The big bubble that I have been puffing up in my place is almost ready to burst anyhow. And fortunately he has the girl so anxious to marry me that it won't be any trouble at all after I finish with him. Then I'll have eaten the whole cake of life, and still have it, too! The fortune will be reunited, I'll have a good reputa-

tion—everything just as my very d-e-a-r old father so ardently wished! The girl is rather a nice fresh young trick, isn't she?' He ended, laughing uproariously." Dr. Bates was white.

Fletcher was leaning rigidly across the desk. His face had gone livid with anger at the mention of Gloria's name. Would he stand by Gloria! Gloria, who had stood so unquestioningly by him through everything! Before Dr. Bates had finished speaking, his passion had become a cool white heat that glowed in his eyes, pervaded his whole person. His hands unconsciously reached out before him. They were writhing and twisting in agony as if he were grappling with something intangible.

"That beast marry Gloria?" he said hoarsely as if he were talking to himself. "Why—if he dares to touch her—" and his hands and throat became strangely quiet.

"But wait! That's not all!" exclaimed Bates. "'A little something more will happen to-night,' Van Mortimor said; 'a little loose end in my new plans will be cleaned up this evening, something, Bates, which it would be better for you to know nothing about; and then, doctor, you will have no more trouble at all warding the public off me! I'll have a reputation splendid enough for anybody and I'll live up to it—or at least so every one will think! You're like all doctors,' he flung sarcastically at me. 'How silly you were to have believed that you were smarter than I! That you could "cure" me! I have more brains than any one else in the whole world; I do absolutely as I please and the law can't even suspect me! While you fooled around trying to work your cure, I have simply been using your crazy scheme to play God over another, and build him up to suit myself and the dear public! That's vastly more amusing than all the things you've told me to do! Now there only remains the supreme thrill of puncturing the big bag of wind that is tottering in my place, and I'll step forth in his shining character! Doctor,' he said, 'actually in the passing of my dummy, though the means may be somewhat the same, there is not going to be a fraction of the evidence of disaster as you see before you on Skyles! My dummy's old clothes are all waiting for him, and he is going to kill himself, literally! However, be careful—no interference from you, Bates, or there will be an extra death certificate in my collection!'" The doctor gazed piteously at Fletcher.

"An undertaker was removing Skyles's body, and during the confusion of that, Van Mortimor simply disappeared as he has done many times before! I was talking to him one moment and then he was gone—just vanished behind my back! I searched all over the airplane for him. Ah, me; at last he is a raving maniac, and I have lost all control over him! I don't know where he went or what he is up to; and finally I got up courage to come here and tell you!"

"LET'S all get out of here!" said Bland sullenly. "This will be his next stop!"

"Where can we go?" asked Bates hysterically. "Van Mortimor is everywhere! He is a brilliant roving lunatic with a fiendish sort of insight into men's mind! I never heard of anything like him in all my medical career."

"He is still on that airplane, at Jefferson Field or no matter where it is, even in the sky; he will try to come on it to-night!" spoke up Fletcher firmly, with a desperate look in his eyes. "Thank God I now know where to lay my hands on him! I'll be there to meet him and I don't need any further invitation from anybody to come aboard on my business!"

"For the love of Heaven!" wailed Bates, both he and Bland panic-stricken at the thought of what had been said. "Don't go aboard that plane! I forgot

to tell you what an incredible death plane that is! It goes up white and comes down black! When I first saw it, it was a terrible black thing swooping down out of the sky—and then it touched the earth and turned a gleaming white!"

"Please be reasonable!" was all Fletcher said, and that quietly.

"But it did! It did!" protested the doctor obstinately. "I'm not insane—though God knows how long I can say that. If you set your foot in that plane of death, you'll change, too! You'll go up alive and you'll come down dead like Skyles!"

"Bates, I am surprised at you," Edmond declared, even smiling dryly now. "You are the one who has always told me to keep my head clear; now look at the foolishness you are trying to put into it! My mind is functioning perfectly and you are simply afraid of one of your own patients!"

The door opened abruptly and they all jumped. Colston Floyd, the secretary, entered, vastly surprised at the commotion he had caused.

"A message for you, sir!" he explained to his chief. "Wouldn't have disturbed you, but it's urgent and from home," and he beat a hasty retreat.

Fletcher tore open a dainty envelope and in neatly typewritten script read:

> Meet me at Jefferson Flying Field at twilight for an airplane ride.
>
> GLORIA.

"Here is a nice little invitation, too, much as I expected," commented its recipient, and he idly tossed it across the desk to the others. "Of course, that is from Van Mortimor. Gloria never saw it. It is plainly a decoy message, and he knows I am one goose who will come!"

"You aren't going to accept that invitation to die, are you?" asked Bland.

"I may have to!" he mused aloud. "Some way or another that I can't prevent now, he may have Gloria coming on that airplane this evening; and then Van Mortimor understands as well as I do that I will sail with him to-night. Wait a minute!" he exclaimed sharply, and he quickly telephoned home.

He spoke to the butler for a moment and a twitch of pain flickered across his brow.

"TOO late!" he said sadly, and he hung up the receiver slowly. "Parkins says they are searching everywhere for her. Gloria has disappeared!"

"Oh, Lord! How awful!" moaned the suffering Bland.

"Can't we do something to find her," demanded Bates spiritedly, "and stop her before she goes on the plane?"

"I doubt that very much!" said Fletcher coolly and deliberately. "But what a mistake Van Mortimor is making now! He already has Gloria in charge in some manner that we could not possibly find out, but I am sure he will not harm her in any way until he finishes with me this evening. She's safe until nightfall, and that part doesn't bother me; for the poor little thing is simply bait to get me aboard that airplane to-night! But Van Mortimor's a good fisherman only up to that point! There's where he errs, badly! He expects me to wear myself out searching for Gloria the rest of the afternoon and then come on the plane exhausted, still looking for her. Our time is far too precious for any wasted efforts! I'll come aboard, willingly enough; keep the appointment to the minute; but I am saving all my strength for a rendezvous with life—not death! He little guesses what he is inviting aboard! I am just beginning to grasp things clearly now and I am coming on that plane to fight! This dope fiend, or I, dies to-night!"

"Oh! What a pity!" wailed Bates again. "You haven't a ghost of a chance—with that fiend!"

Bland, though listening intently, had given up all attempt to talk.

"You two can quit thinking altogether if you wish," Fletcher snapped, "but you must obey me! Your lives depend on how well you do it! This fellow is almost a perfect criminal," went on Fletcher. "And he nearly had me to-day! Without one touch of physical violence he could have murdered me, this morning! I don't know how he killed Skyles; but I do know that only a few hours ago he had me worked up to such a pitch of frenzied fear of him that his sudden appearance in this room would have killed me outright. All that, he could have done through the tremendous power of the unseen, in which he has worked so skillfully upon me! But for me he is no longer an unseen terror."

"You haven't faced him yet!" objected Bates pointedly.

"No, doctor," explained Fletcher. "The brief time in which he could have killed me with mere fear is forever passed. As they say in salesmanship, the psychological moment for getting the order has passed! He has overplayed his hand by letting you two through to scare me further with your tales; and he has made a lot of other wholly unnecessary arrangements for scaring me to death, that seem positively silly to me now! Therein he has proved to me that he has no supernatural ability whatsoever, and I am not in the least afraid of him!"

"Let me tell you about those occult powers—" begged Bates.

"No. Not now," he answered. "I must hurry with anything I intend to do. Van Mortimor thinks he has set a trap for me to-night, but he has really set a trap for himself! I am going to catch him in it just like the dirty snake he is! His greatest power has been that he has worked altogether in the unseen. I have learned a great deal about that in serving my apprenticeship under him; and now I am going to give him a taste of his own vile medicine, that will lay him out cold so that we can deal with him sensibly! Outthink him in his own field. Doctor, what kind of an airplane has he, and how many are in its crew?"

"It's a big Fokker," said Dr. Bates in surprise, "has dual controls, seven or eight compartments—it's a sort of air-going hotel, a flying yacht. It has two pilots, a mechanic, a steward and two or three other men who all go with it. But it has changed so—it goes up white and—"

"FINE!" cried out Fletcher, wryly smiling—much to the amazement of the others. "Now where was this air yacht situated on the field when you saw it to-day?"

"There was a storage shed for housing planes not far from it. I think there was an old office and a reception room in one end of that. In between the building and the plane were some trucks and a fueling station."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Fletcher. "Quick now, Bland! Think of the old days when we were hungry! What we have before us is nothing compared to that—we are fighting on a full stomach now. Quick—" Bland was already out of his chair. "Can you hurry down to that flying field, if possible catch a glimpse of that air yacht, but by all means duplicate that whole crew Bates has described?"

"On my way!" Bland answered, fired with his old enthusiasm.

"And Bullard, old boy!" said his old friend. "Don't let Van Mortimor see you or anything you are doing."

"Not liable to," he growled.

"Come to think of it, don't duplicate the steward! We'll leave him on the ship to allay our 'host's' suspicions and to lead me to him, wherever he is hidden, when he sails down for me to-night!"

"Boy!" declared Dr. Bates suddenly. "I don't know where we are bound for—it's probably across the bar—but I got you into this, so count me in on the last act!"

"That's the spirit!" cried out

Fletcher. "Now we sound like three live men, instead of three dead ones! Bland, work carefully down there. Don't let any one at all catch on to what you are doing this time! By sundown, have your men out of sight, but instantly ready in that shed! You must have two pilots, a mechanic, and at least two others, five altogether, but don't take them near the plane! I'll show up with Dr. Bates and two secretaries, each a plainclothes man! Post a man to delay Gloria if she arrives much ahead of me and then wait for me! I'll take charge!"

Bland rushed out and Dr. Bates fell back weakly in his seat.

"If it were any one else but Van Mortimor!" the doctor gasped.

"No matter what you say," objected Fletcher, "you have heard the only way for me to tackle him! I propose to cut the whole earth and everything else that he can use, right out from under his feet. He will have to operate in very thin air to beat me tonight!"

"That's his specialty!" cried the old physician. "I beg you to let me warn you about that! His father before him had great foresight! He always had his way while he lived, but he died with a big worry. The grand old man wanted badly to leave a living monument behind himself and his efforts, yet he only had one child and the blood of that heir was tainted with insanity through his mother's family! That accounts for Gloria's adoption and the two letters which were intrusted to me for delivery to the children. But who could tell that all these horrible events would follow!" The doctor shook his head dolefully, then continued:

"I saw your face first in a newspaper picture of a group of people, noted your remarkable resemblance to the present Van Mortimor, and kept tabs on you just for the romance of it! When Van Mortimor returned from his long residence in Europe such a mental and physical degenerate that he could not appear publicly, I took him off the boat near Sandy Hook to avoid notoriety. It seemed then that Providence had sent you! I suggested to Van Mortimor that you be substituted for him until I could get him straightened out, and he readily agreed to the whole affair, and arranged it himself. He did it superbly, too; but as you know, from the most sordid of motives, though I thought he was very liberal at the time. I had him in the lodge in the valley below the house at Cleborough and he behaved very well outside of yelling."

"Don't mention it!" said Fletcher with an uncontrollable shudder.

"Well, he didn't bother you much at first, did he?"

"I haven't time to tell you about that. Go ahead!"

"I DIDN'T know there was to be a brain operation and when all those foreign specialists landed here, Van Mortimor simply disappeared! I couldn't find him anywhere! However, he turned up at an opportune minute, said he was very sorry—that he had taken an overdose of dope and slept for three days in a strange haunt, and he wanted to do the right thing for you by giving you a general power of attorney to act in his name and stead for awhile. He did, too!"

"When and how?" asked Fletcher unbelievingly.

"It's a fact. You have actually had the authority to act for him up your sleeve all the time, so that everything you have done for him, if it were ever really contested, is perfectly legitimate from the very first day you went to business for him! He put the instrument of your authority inside the covers of the 'History of the Van Mortimor Case,' and that is the way he made me give it to you!"

"Smart as his father!" exclaimed Fletcher.

"Smarter, in his perverted way,"

said Bates. "If I told you, he could revoke the authority instantly, and in the meanwhile he did not have you violating the law. It was better for him, too, than if I had tried to have him put in a lunatic asylum. However, I let things run along; I was so anxious to keep you in his place! I hadn't taken seriously Dr. Martel's prophecy that he would start this fiendish playing on human emotions; I thought I had everything in hand and was serving every one's best interests. Van Mortimor promised not to touch you and he never did—but, of course, as I now see too late, he doesn't have to touch you to kill you! He made me believe you scalded yourself in your sleep with the steam pipes; but I suspect now that he did that!"

"Absolutely."

"What a fool I have been! This whole thing is just a cold-blooded experiment in murder on Van Mortimor's part! He is a sadist, one who delights in cruelty. When you stepped in that car last summer on lower Broadway, no one in this world but this fiend himself knew just how thoroughly he took you in charge. Your very thoughts have scarcely escaped his attention since then. And I encouraged it! I wanted to show him how splendidly you were living and cure him by example—and all along he has simply been trying to kill you!"

"I have known that a long time," said Fletcher wearily, and he did not appear to be giving close attention. His thoughts were flying with the man in the airplane!

From then on only snatches of Bates's talk registered in his mind. Van Mortimor, no doubt, had keys to the play house. He was often hidden in that second car which always followed Fletcher!

"He must have tortured your dog and then returned him to you," said Bates, "for the animal goes wild at the sight of him."

"And that," Fletcher checked up, "explains the howl on the phone this morning!"

"I have seen weirdly contorted little dead animals lying about," stated Dr. Bates with a shiver, "on which he must have experimented. But have you any idea why he has been keeping a few buzzards in a coop on the roof of the house at Cleborough?"

"I know what he did with one of them!" answered Fletcher grimly. "He must have been turning some of his buzzards loose yesterday, for one of them circled over Gloria and me just after I made love to her in the woods up there!"

"A man who would do that has lost all human feeling," spoke the doctor solemnly. "You may expect something so gruesome to-night on his new airplane as to be unbelievable! I never saw this great plane before Skyles's dead body was removed from it, but you can rest assured that this air boat has a special death trap aboard for your last torture! How do you propose to catch him?"

"When we sail to-night," said Fletcher grimly, "he can't get off the plane, and I am confident of my own hands!"

"But, man, whatever you think of, he'll think of something better! He is everywhere at once and he seems to know everything! If you should catch him, God help you! He is slimy and poisonous! He would slip right out of your hands and leave you to die in agony!"

"Not these hands!" spoke Fletcher slowly. "Not these hands which have held Gloria!"

"The real reason you can't possibly win, I haven't told you yet!" and the good doctor hesitated a moment as if he were deliberating whether he should speak of it at all under the circumstances, but he proceeded at last: "The reason I myself am so deathly afraid of this degenerate is that I know something about him that only his physi-

cian could know! He has developed some damnable occult power which he picked up in India; it transcends all our knowledge of life and medicine. He is somehow supernatural! As surely as you go on his airplane to-night you will find that no living man can combat him!"

THE doctor's next words trembled in a queer falsetto:

"You'll find Van Mortimor can't die! Neither you, nor all the ravages of disease, nor all the poisons on earth, can kill him! I swear he has conquered such things and death in all its forms, and he uses them on other living creatures! He is sort of a moral cancer, a social leper, an evil genius among us. He has dissipated enough to kill ten normal men and he still lives! Sometimes he has taken me in a big dim room about twilight and while he has sat in a chair by my very side, he has tossed his head over on the mantel, and laughed at me!

"He says it is only a trick that he learned in India, but I am not so sure about that now! He can take a thousand drops of laudanum in wine at one sitting; and he positively seems to thrive on all of his dope! Though his system is so heavily saturated, I have seen him take doses of strychnine and cocaine that I know no ordinary mortal could stomach and live! If you put a bullet or a knife through his heart to-night, he will laugh at you and go on murdering you, without even needing to use violence."

But Fletcher had quit listening to all this morbid description. He was completely engrossed in something he considered far more important. It seemed that Gloria was now mutely and dumbly calling to him for help!

He sat there before Bates, oblivious of his immediate surroundings, with a mighty effort striving to achieve the impossible. Behind the blank expressionless curtain of his face, Fletcher was tediously weaving a noose for a neck which he believed would hold upon any man or ghost!

"Now, doctor," he finally said, "just come with me to-night, and do not be surprised at anything I may say or do! I can't talk further with you now! I am really sort of a coward at heart, and at times I have to be left severely alone! If I saw very much more of you, or good old Bland, or even Gloria, before my boat arrives, I feel that I'd fall all to pieces! We'll go to Jefferson Flying Field by different routes. You start out now—and slam the door hard behind you! I want to test my nerves."

The door closed behind Bates with a crash, which went resounding up and down the deserted corridors of the great bank like a burst of artillery, and Fletcher was alone!

A LONG shed, such as is common at airports, ran along one side of Jefferson Field. Fletcher appeared there just as the shadows of the day were falling. He was immaculately dressed in a new flying uniform, as punctilious and conventional as Sigmond Van Mortimor himself could have been.

Two prize-fighters, lately sworn in members of the police department accompanied Fletcher, as secretaries.

Bland and Bates nearly fell upon his shoulders at sight of him. He was taken to the rooms, with which he had been so pleased when he had first heard of their existence. There were three *en suite*, in the end of the shed and Bland already had his new crew corralled in the end room. Fletcher's face was set and impassive and showed no signs of the terrific strain under which he actually labored.

"Have you seen the airplane or Gloria?" was all he asked.

"Neither!" whispered his confidential wizard, Bland, "but here are pictures of each of the airplane's crew. They were all hired here and I hastily borrowed their tin-types from the files

of the office of the commandant of this field."

"Fine," complimented Fletcher as his eyes devoured the photographs, without recognizing anything familiar in them.

"Field records," said Bland, "show that this airplane is a huge Fokker biplane recently brought over from abroad. There in the room I have two good Fokker pilots who have flown all types of these big planes and one of them, a man named Koebel, has taken up this very machine of Van Mortimor's in a test flight. Two mechanics and an expert are with them and altogether they will just about roughly fill the places of the men in the pictures with helmets and make-up. They are all old army men, good fighters when trouble starts!"

"Thanks!" answered Fletcher feelingly and he stepped in the room among them.

"Mr. Koebel!" he called out and a stocky airman, with gnarled hands that seemed especially dependable, stood forth.

"Mr. Koebel," Fletcher said, "we are changing crews in a rush when my plane descends.

"How soon can you have her back in the air again, after I remove the present crowd?"

"Less than ten minutes," he answered smiling, "with the help of these boys!"

"Very well! Then you handle the flying part."

Now he called everybody around him and announced:

"We may be carrying a stowaway to-night. I believe an assassin is hidden on this plane and these elaborate precautions are necesary to catch him. As soon as the plane comes down, one of you meet it and tell the first member of the crew you see that I want him to come over here. Then, one at a time, send them all over here to me, all except the steward! As the places are vacated, casually fill your men in to them, Mr. Koebel; and be ready to take off again, the moment I step aboard!

"When we are in the air, everything is to proceed as naturally as possible and as if nothing at all were expected to happen. There will be, including my sister—let me figure it out—exactly twelve people aboard! Twelve people are to be accounted for and every one of us is to be alert, and on a still hunt for the extra passenger all the time! If we do not find him we'll all retire early and lights will be dimmed; but the signal for the alarm will be for the lights to flash on, in any part of the plane. Then we'll all rush to that spot!

"Understand me?"

Heads were nodding in assent.

An inspiration came to him. He thought of all the brokerage commissions that were credited to his account in the office of Morton, Keene & Co., and which were his in any event. He said:

"I'll personally pay a reward of twenty-five thousand dollars to anybody who catches the thirteenth passenger who rides with us to-night!" He wondered how Van Mortimor would like that!

An electric tension gripped the atmosphere about them. He called Dr. Bates aside and quickly told him:

"You get in the middle room of the three, and receive the old crew for me as they come off the plane! Have each man strip to the waist for a physical examination as he comes in, and then pass him on into that empty room beyond.

"Tell them it's by my orders! My policemen secretaries will help you, and take care of any resistance on their part. When you have stolen the last man's clothes, come aboard the plane!"

For Bland and Bates, the tension in the air about them had taken on the tautness of a piano string. They listened for the least unusual sound.

Now Fletcher swung boldly out onto the field.

WHEN he first sighted the plane it was coming like a tiny speck in the distance. Soon with a mighty roar it loomed up like a black cloud in the sky. Suddenly it was describing huge circles over him. It seemed alive, with its great, dark wings and naked head, it appeared a giant buzzard hovering over him. Well he knew that the beady eyes of Van Mortimor were looking down upon him now.

The cold sweat broke out on Fletcher's forehead and he retreated to the shed, wiping this from his brow. He was glad Bland and Bates had not seen what he had.

The ghastly thing landed not far away and the noise of it was quieted as it came racing up by him and the shed. Fletcher nearly fell over backward when he gazed upon the big buzzard again. It had stopped just a few hundred yards from him and it had turned a gleaming white all over! It was resplendent now in its swanlike innocence, to receive its passengers.

However, events moved so fast that his mind could not keep up with all of them. Men were passing into Dr. Bates's room in the shed on the one side behind him, and different men were coming out of Bland's quarters on the other side of him. Some of them coming out had on the clothes of those who had gone in.

A small hand waved from the plane and he stared at Gloria, spellbound. What a slim chance he would have had of finding her this afternoon, for she had been up in the air!

He heard a scuffle behind him in Bates's room. A fist shot out, and now one man would need some real medical attention.

He touched the doorway of the plane by his side. Its wood felt moist and chilly, clammy to his fingers, like the railing of the terrace on the house at Cleborough that first night when he had heard the weird yell from the valley.

Bates and Bland now rushed out of the shed. Fletcher grabbed an automatic pistol from one of his strong-arm secretaries, stuck it in his clothes, and together they ran for the plane.

Just as Fletcher reached the big air boat, he dived down and peered momentarily under its lower plane. The whole bottom of the craft was painted black. It was a simple trick after all.

With his heart a little lighter he jumped aboard the huge deceptive bird of prey. Its engine roared, and they were off. Fletcher and his insatiable shadow were on their way to keep a rendezvous with death in the sky.

There were many places he could have poked into aboard this great luxurious air yacht as they went thunderously plowing into the heavens. But he left the searching to his men, who were eager for the task. They moved quietly about now, apparently attending to their duties while they thoroughly searched the entire boat for their extra passenger.

Fletcher knew it was better for every one to act naturally; in this way they might more easily draw the prince of horrors out of the woodwork or the wings or wherever he might be hiding. For his own part, Fletcher went directly to Gloria, whom he found in a dainty rosewood paneled compartment, forward in the ship.

"Isn't this lovely?" she wrote on a little pad after she was through hugging him. "Where are you taking me? To one of those South Sea Islands you once talked about?"

"Anywhere you say!" he scribbled back after a moment's reflection. He answered her just as if this big white plane with its seamy underside could take them there. Evidently Gloria had not the slightest conception of the true situation.

However, since they had to have some destination for the time being

and he wanted to please her all he could, he wrote out directions for the pilot:

"Take us over the sea to Bar Harbor."

HE hoped Van Mortimor would see that; but not certain other things. He had a feeling that he was being watched, even while his men were searching.

"I have been on the plane riding about since two o'clock," Gloria informed him, "just getting acquainted with this beautiful surprise that you have had built for me, as you told me to do in your message!"

Fletcher smiled faintly, for other eyes than hers. He thought sadly that she must have arrived just after poor Skyles's body was taken off of this "beautiful" flying barge of death, and now it was on another such little errand!

It was agonizing that all his men should not be finding anything!

He excused himself and went back to Dr. Bates.

"Who fell so hard at the examination?" he asked.

"The former pilot of this infernal craft!" wrote the doctor tersely. "He questioned my instructions, and we didn't argue with him."

Bland's face was pathetic. He and Bates were now only wooden men, like automatons they had performed their parts in this mad drama which had no reward but death for them. And now they were simply waiting to be scrapped!

The steward served a generous lunch, which was not enjoyed by any one but Gloria; if the servant was surprised at all by the new faces aboard, he did not in any way show it.

That was the dreadful part of everything—nothing at all unusual occurred! Though Fletcher had taken the ship, his men could not find the thirteenth passenger; and the merciless eyes watching Fletcher were still in control of it all. It was just the same for him, in a racing airplane, up here in the sky, as it had ever been!

Finally Fletcher began to believe that since the life of this man over him was a drug dream, not like an ordinary mortal's, he was also capable of making his victim live the same thing. Or worse, he might even be all that Dr. Bates thought of him. In any event, Fletcher saw that if he caught Van Mortimer, he would have to catch something as elusive as a ghost!

About eleven o'clock, he cautioned every one to retire, but remain on the alert throughout the night. Then he kissed Gloria and called the steward to conduct him to his berth.

Fletcher was led down an aisle to a small cabin in the tail of the plane.

The steward remarked: "You are looking unusually well, sir."

Fletcher passed into an oblong room, about ten feet in length by seven in width, which was the last one on the passageway. Any one who had ever read "The History of the Van Mortimor Case" would have promptly recognized the owner of this. The floor the woodwork, and such little furniture as there was, was all of polished ebony, black as midnight.

A little porthole window had lavender silk curtains.

The bed was an ordinary double-decked affair, such as is common on ships, one section below and another directly above, and both supported by simple iron rods or standards. Each berth, however, conforming to the room, was of black wood with its surface highly finished. There was an outside door across the room, but Fletcher did not think Van Mortimor could come from outside this speeding plane; both the top and bottom of it had been inspected since they left the ground.

There was paneling all around the room. Fletcher would have sounded this paneling, but the noise of the motors made such a thing impossible.

He believed more than ever now that

invisible eyes were upon him and from behind these panels! He was very careful, however, not to appear nervous or suspicious. He undressed nonchalantly. But in changing to the pyjamas which had been provided for him, he kept his revolver well out of sight when he slipped it into his nightclothes.

Then he acted as if he were locking the door into the passageway, but in reality he left it unlocked; then snapping out the lights, he jumped in bed.

BY some little moonlight that flickered into the room, he was startled to find that the sheets were of black silk. Yet he pulled them over him with the thought he could stand even that suggestive touch for to-night. Then he glanced up, to discover that the bottom of the upper berth was lined with white satin.

This bed was just like the infernal airplane; black below, white above, for one who had to use it!

Nevertheless, he worked his pistol around under the sheets so that it could not be observed, and yet be free for his use; and he waited for the ghost to appear.

It must have been nearly an hour later that Fletcher realized that his body was getting numb. All the lights were out on the great lumbering plane. The noise of the motors, deafening at all times, now reigned supreme. He was very sleepy, his eyes drooping repeatedly; but he had no intention of going to sleep here, and now!

It was nearing the last minute of the day of Friday the thirteenth, for which Sigmond Van Mortimor had made so much unearthly preparation. Fletcher believed the phantom of him. at least, was due before the day was over, even if he had to hop the plane in mid-air to become the thirteenth passenger!

Suddenly a panel in the rear end of his room flew open! His other self, Sigmond Van Mortimor, dimly appeared in the gray moonlight. He must have had some secret control of the machine, for the engines went off for a second. Fletcher's heart stopped; for in that single second came softly one plaintive note of the old cry of the hashish eater!

At the same instant the upper berth began slowly slipping down its iron rods upon Fletcher! Then he knew how Skyles had died of fright, and under what sheets. He was sleeping in an open coffin that Van Mortimor was closing up!

Fletcher was paralyzed as usual in the presence of that half-seen, blanched face. The ghastly visage of himself was leering in upon him now. The stuffy white satin cover above him was so gently and so steadily creeping down to envelop him! The apparition was delighted—it stopped leering, and now laughed contemptuously.

Was not Van Mortimor actually infallible, omnipotent? The lid of the coffin came down, nearer and nearer to the life-breath of Fletcher, who was held so very securely by the fear of this evil power. None of Fletcher's men could suspect his plight or hear his cries, above the roar of those engines.

But now Fletcher made a tremendous effort to stir. He realized he was not altogether being held by fright, for he smelled the odor of crushed peach pits. He knew now that there were fumes in the funeral room.

If he only had a little fresh air, he believed he could move, even in the face of this inhuman white thing, his double. But how could Van Mortimor stand this same air that was choking him? There was a secret chamber back where the fiend was, but the panel between the two of them was open.

Fletcher could see the cruel face of his other self in that other little room. Van Mortimor was bringing out Fletcher's old clothes now, the very ones he had worn up to Cleborough on that first memorable night so long ago.

The lid of the coffin was within a foot of Fletcher's face. Each breath seemed his last. Yet his hand was still clenched upon his revolver. He had succeeded in weakly raising it about an inch under the black sheet. If he could just get the muzzle of the pistol a half inch higher he could clear the foot of the berth and take one dying shot at the pitiless Van Mortimor.

With an effort that brought the blood pounding in his ears he gave the pistol a desperate jerk that raised it a little higher. His deathlike grip held it there, and his numb fingers fired point-blank ahead. The bullet nicked the wood at the foot of the berth, but it also went through the open panelway!

There was a shattering of glass which he could not hear, drowned out by the sound of the motors, but he felt the flood of fresh cool strength-giving air that swept in upon him. He quickly put another bullet through the little window in his own room and wiggled out from under the falling coffin lid. He hit the floor in the throes of the last life of a cat.

Van Mortimor had ceased his preparation of the burial wardrobe at the first shot. Now he turned upon his victim, haughtily incensed, and advanced through the open panel in a maniacal fury. But Fletcher had nimbly sprung upon his feet and braced himself against the wall.

HE had a straight bead down the barrel of his automatic on the demon's heart—but the fiend kept coming, his hands raised in gloating malediction. Just as he plunged into the room Fletcher blazed away. A streak of fire cut the darkness straight and true to its goal.

Then Fletcher understood what Bates had feared.

That bloated white face was laughing at him and still advancing. Leisurely, triumphantly, now. Fletcher pumped the contents of the revolver into its breast, but he knew now that not even the shots could be heard. Resistance was futile.

But now his hands found and touched the light switch. The gloating face showed up in the light with the pallor of a sickly spider, as it closed in upon him. Fletcher threw the empty pistol at its head and missed. Then he flew desperately at the Thing's throat with his bare hands, and failed in his grasp—his fingers only tore feebly against a vest of solid steel.

People were pounding on the door. The lights were blazing, and the door from the passageway moved. With a sudden burst of diabolical strength the phantom slipped from Fletcher's hands and lunged across the cabin.

The outside door flew open, and for an instant Fletcher saw a patch of pale gray sky. Then the air pressure had closed the outside door—and Van Mortimor had vanished.

In the open doorway from the passage were crowded the white faces of Dr. Bates and Bland. They stood there obstinately blocking the aisle, obscuring the view of those behind them, pushing those behind them back up the passage.

Now Bates turned and made frantic signs for all the others to look elsewhere. Then he pulled Bland into the room with him, shut the door behind him, and locked it.

Fletcher was still so terrified he could not believe the spell was broken. It took Dr. Bates to prove it to him.

"Bland and I alone actually saw him go out into the sea," scrawled the old doctor, and he stuck that under Fletcher's eyes.

"My God!" answered Fletcher. "He had on a steel vest, and he went into the sea."

"So much the better," Bates scribbled below; "his body will never float up."

Running to the nearly closed black bed, Bates examined it with horror. He pointed out that three of its inno-

cent iron corner rods were solid; the upper berth had simply been loosened so that the top section could creep up and down its own legs. The fourth post or support, however, which appeared to be identical with the others, and was hidden in the corner, was in reality an electric jack for raising and lowering the heavy upper berth.

Concealed wires ran from this bed to the secret chamber where the control switch was located. When they attempted to close the coffin-berth completely, they found that the top lid of it could go no lower than it had stopped now.

"You see," Bates informed them, while Bland methodically prowled about the cabin for traces of the disaster, "after Von Mortimor had a victim prepared for death he didn't need to touch him to kill him with this contraption. This is how poor Skyles went!"

They discovered a little rubber tube running from the secret chamber, still oozing some faint fumes. The shattered glass told how Fletcher had broken a pane there to get the fresh air that saved his life.

THE good old physician had a happy idea next. He fished a prescription pad out of his pocket and scratched his head, thinking for a moment. Then he wrote:

> There's no one left but yourself. Van Mortimor is dead. Long live Van Mortimor!

And he solemnly handed it to Fletcher, while he held a finger over his mouth. Both Bland and Fletcher read it and nodded their heads.

Then Bland and the doctor quickly collected all the simple evidences of the phantom's unnatural practices, including Fletcher's old clothes. Then Bates tore into small bits their present conversation, and dropped that, too, upon the little pile. He made a neat bundle of everything in one of the black sheets, and, opening the outside door, he threw this baggage out after its master—far down into the deep.

Thereupon he locked and barred the outside door, shutting the secret panel; pushed the dark upper berth up into its normal position, heaved a vast sigh, and waved the two others from the room.

When Fletcher finally emerged from the vulture's nest he was confronted by Gloria, waiting by the side of his door.

He gathered her up drunkenly in his arms, and weakly reeled up the passageway which was so swiftly speeding on to Bar Harbor. All the boat was now aglow with cool moonlight; his black cloud truly had a silver lining.

They stopped in an observation salon which was a part of this luxurious sky yacht.

He was handed a message reading:

> CAPTAIN VAN MORTIMOR:
> False alarm! Have had the whole plane gone over again. There are only the same twelve of us aboard this ship.
> KOEBEL, Pilot.

Gloria had at once insisted upon getting a basin of fresh water, and now she was tenderly bathing the clammy perspiration from his face. Her gaze followed his, down to the quiet sea gleaming silver in the moonlight, a mile beneath them, gliding by so swiftly and smoothly.

Impulsively Gloria Mortimor seized a pad and wrote in her charmingly delicate hand:

"There's something awe-inspiring about having been 'hand-picked' and then reared like a little princess, for a great purpose. But somehow, with your help, I feel that I have accomplished it."

Edmond Fletcher answered eagerly:

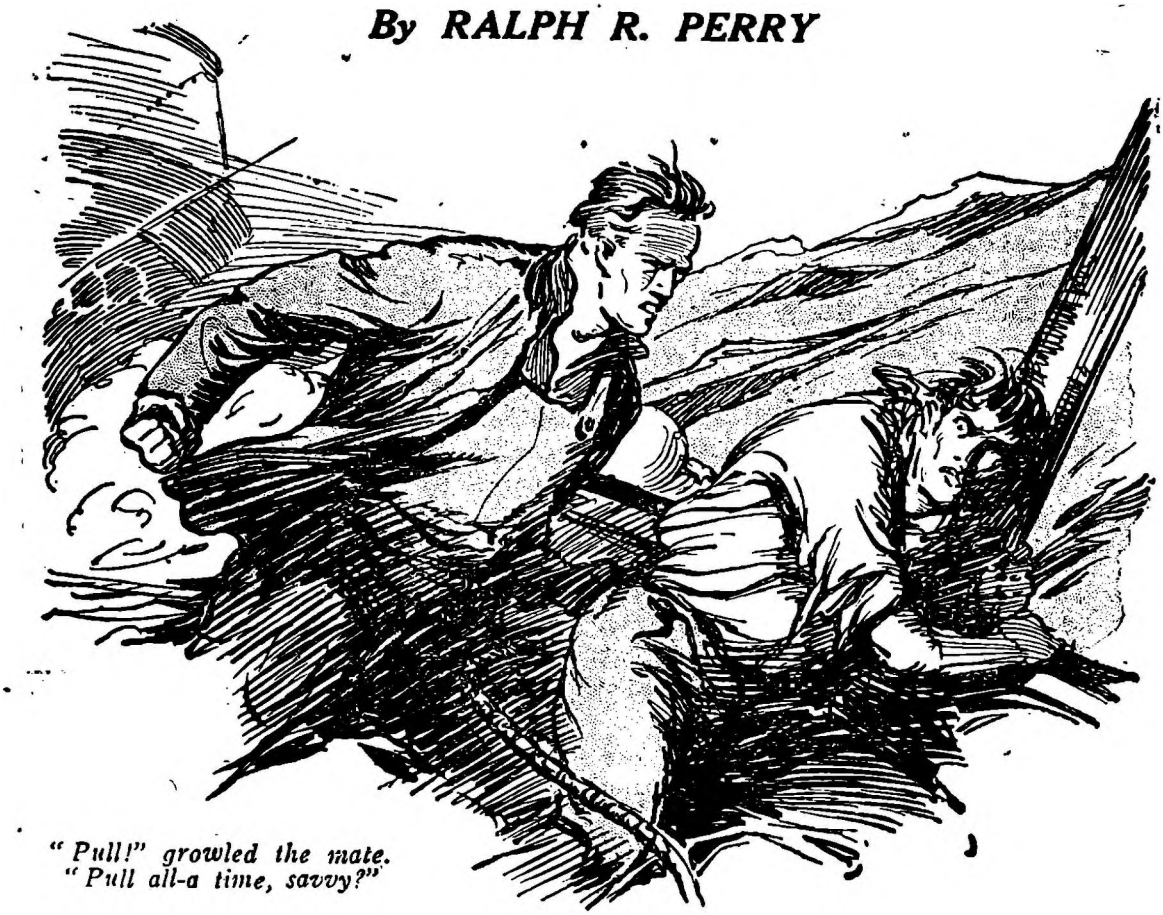
"You have! You have driven the phantom out of the rainbow."

THE END.

Gale's Aftermath

Murder, or another tragedy of the deep? Sam Elroyd, third mate of the Perro Serra, could not be sure—at first

By RALPH R. PERRY



"Pull!" growled the mate. "Pull all-a time, savvy?"

HAD murder been done, or had the sea drowned Billy Connor? Had there been a blow struck in the darkness and a limp body hoisted over the rail, or had that terrific wave which swept the Perro Serra's boat deck merely washed the purser over the barrier which had saved two other men?

Sam Elroyd could not decide. Either event was equally probable in the light of what little he had observed. That a crime had been committed the third mate had not one particle of evidence. Now that morning had come the Caribbean Sea rolled a thousand fathoms deep over Billy's body. Any weapon the murderer might have used, any bloodstains, any scrap of Billy's clothing which might have been torn off in the struggle, had been swept and scoured off the lurching Perro Serra by the huge broaching seas.

Nevertheless Elroyd sought out the three sailors who had been working with him when that great wave struck. He led them to a place where the gale of the previous night had ripped a ten-foot section of the rail; put them at the edge of the deck with nothing between their backs and the Caribbean, blue and calm now, gleaming under the tropic sun like a mirror of hot, polished steel.

"You're not getting away with anything," he said. Not loudly. He did not bluster, he pronounced sentence.

Elroyd was hatless, and in dungarees. Except for his manner nothing about him marked his authority. Tall, gaunt-cheeked, seeming at that moment decades older than his twenty-five years, his gray eyes impaled the three he suspected of killing his buddy.

"Last night I heard too much for your good," he said. "Right now I'm doing nothing about it. There's work for all hands. Last night's gale left us a leak to patch and a jury rudder to rig. But—when the ship docks at New Orleans I square accounts for last night. So don't kid yourselves."

Bluff. Nothing but bluff. Elroyd had heard nothing. Yet he was proving his suspicions by the only means within his power. The murderer, if there were a murderer, could hide the money belt which had been the motive for the crime, if there had been a crime. The man could bribe or intimidate his fellow sailors, if they had not actually been his accomplices.

But until he stepped ashore at New Orleans, free, he could not be positive of how much Elroyd had observed; could not be sure that the officer was not biding the most advantageous time for an arrest. Keenly the third mate searched the three faces, one white, one yellow, one black, for a hint of uneasiness.

All three scowled at him, unabashed.

"What you drivin' at, mister? All the rough stuff that was done, you pulled yourself," Gus answered.

Gus was the white man. He had made a pierhead jump at Maracaibo, and he had never explained why he had come to sea in such haste. Emphatically not. When the skipper questioned him the thin lips closed to a slit and the cold eyes glinted. What he replied was that he had been a rigger in the oil fields and had lost his job. It was cheaper to work a passage than buy one, wasn't it?

Since he was a powerful, intelligent-looking man, Captain Haddon had let him sign articles. The past and the character of a seaman are immaterial. Elroyd hadn't bothered about Gus until this moment. Now he found the man's face dark and evil.

"*Si!*" Felipe corroborated, but his eyes shifted from the third mate's. Felipe was the color of saddle leather; a huge, black-browed Nicaraguan, one thirty-second Spanish and the balance Indian. He spoke little English. That circumstance had made Gus his buddy aboard, for the ex-rigger could jabber what passed for Latin-American Spanish.

Alex said nothing. A surly expression and a razor slash which had left a white line across the dark cheek from nostril to ear marked the black man for what the South calls a "bad nigger." Alex had joined the Perro Serra two voyages before. He went ashore in Central America, but never in the States. He gambled constantly, and with very bad luck. Alex kept his mouth shut, and a negro who does not talk will usually bear watching.

All three men were tough. That fact was the root of the third mate's suspicion.

"You'll know what I'm driving at when the cops come on board," Elroyd said. "That's all for now; turn to!"

He swung on his heel and walked away. An attempt to answer Gus would only have revealed how very little he knew.

AT 3 A.M. on the previous night all hands wondered whether the Perro Serra was going to live through the storm. The disaster had occurred suddenly. First the beginnings of a hurricane had swooped on the old six-thousand-ton freight-and-passenger steamer. The storm was small in extent; much like a cyclone ashore. It would only last four hours or so, but what it lacked in scope it redeemed in intensity.

The Perro Serra pitched heavily. The wind screamed. Flattened, foam-streaked seas lurched out of the dark, but all the power and confusion and fury of a gale at night were nothing to bother a sailor until the Perro Serra heaved up on a wave and plunged down upon a ten-ton fragment of floating wreckage. Then it was, "All hands save ship!"

The first impact punched a three-foot hole below the water line. Then the wreckage tore loose, *bump-bump-bumped* along the side, and finished by disabling the rudder. The ship yawed into the trough. The force of the wind held her there.

At once the seas leaped on the old Perro Serra as a boxer striving for a knockout rushes a reeling, punch-drunk adversary. Green water thundered across the well decks; leaped up and smashed at the superstructure. The weather rail was ripped away. The weather lifeboats were knocked from the gripes and crushed.

The boom of tons of water falling on the decks, the crash of wood and glass, terrified the passengers. Sailors were more concerned at the way the water rose in the holds. Little by little the ship listed to starboard till the lee rails were awash at every roll. Below decks water sloshed ankle deep in fire and engine rooms. Steam went down. The dynamo short circuited and all through the ship lights flickered out.

Captain Haddon took the bridge. The first and second mates hurried aft with the best men of the crew to get out a drag by which they could throw the ship's head into the sea. They had no faith in any such rough-and-ready method of steering, but the fo'c's'le was swept by every sea, and they had to do what they could.

Elroyd was ordered to get the lifeboats ready for lowering. He had a deck lantern for light, and Gus, Felipe and Alex to help him. Not men enough, but all who could be spared.

On the boat deck the spray was blinding. The force of the wind pushed him backward in spite of braced feet. When the ship rolled, water would lick along the deck three inches, six inches, a foot deep, depending upon whether the wave rolling under the Perro Serra was big or small. Elroyd decided the chances of smashing the boat against the davits the instant the gripes were loosened were far better than even, but he, too, had to do what he could.

Felipe and he were the strongest of the four, so he sent Gus and Alex to the cranks of the patent davits. They could swing the boat out while he and Felipe pulled on a rope which would prevent it from swaying or swinging. Felipe, however, had never been to sea before. He was whining Spanish and clinging onto the hand rail.

Elroyd had to kick him three times to get him loose. The big Nicaraguan slid across the deck. The mate caught him, lifted him to his feet, and thrust the rope into his hands.

"When she rises you pull, savvy?" he shouted.

"*Si, si!*" Felipe snarled, fearing the third mate as much as the sea at that moment.

Elroyd kicked loose the gripes. Gus and Alex ground away on the patent davits, but just as the lifeboat rose the Perro Serra dipped to a big sea. A foot of water sloshed down the deck.

"PULL, Felipe!" Elroyd yelled, and flung his own weight on the line. For an instant he held the lifeboat, but as the ship dipped farther into the sea Felipe dropped the rope and lurched back to the hand rail. He wasn't going to be swept off his feet and over the side.

Elroyd's strength couldn't hold the boat alone. He slipped, and went down. The water tumbled him aft, swung him like a pendulum at the end of the rope he held, and pinned him against the next lifeboat aft. Of

course, the boat they were hoisting was slung against the davit, and its stern was crushed into matchwood. There had been only three lifeboats. The accident left two.

The third mate walked to Felipe and punched him between the eyes.

"Pull! Pull all-a time, savvy?" he said, and then, remembering how little English the Nicaraguan understood, he turned to Gus. "Tell him if he thinks of his yellow hide again I'll break his head. Make it strong, Gus."

The white man must have made it very strong, for Felipe cringed.

And it was at that moment, when all four stood close together under the lantern, that Billy Connor stepped into the spray-blurred circle of light. He took the lantern from where it hung.

"Sorry, Elroyd. I got to open the safe," he shouted above the roar of the wind.

"Hi! Put that back!" Elroyd yelled.

Billy shook his head. The purser was a little, fair-haired man with a broad smile and a wit that was clever among the passengers and broad when he kidded the crew. Because he was quick where Elroyd was slow, merry where the mate was grave, the two were friends.

"Won't take a minute. Then I'll help you!" Billy insisted. "I'm responsible for the ship's funds. If we abandon ship I've got to carry them with me!"

"We're not abandoning ship!" the third mate contradicted.

"I'm no passenger," Billy grinned. "We're liable to, damn sudden. It's duty with me, Elroyd. 'Save ship's funds if possible.' Won't take me a minute to fill a money belt, and I've left my flash light with the passengers!"

Without waiting for a second refusal he ran down the deck with the lantern.

"Ze sheep zink, *sí?*" gasped Felipe while the four seamen waited in the darkness.

"No!" snapped Elroyd, but the thing was only too likely. The Perro Serra listed more and more to starboard. The wind was rising.

"Kin he get all that money into a belt, Mr. Elroyd?" shrieked Gus.

"Shut up!" said the mate.

The light bobbed through the door, and Billy Connor worked his way toward them, pulling himself along by the hand rail. In the light of the lantern they could see the straps of a broad leather belt around his waist beneath the coat.

"Well, hold the light, since you're here," the third mate grunted.

Momentarily the Perro Serra rode easily. Elroyd kicked loose the gripes. "Hoist away!" he ordered. Gus and Alex ground at the cranks. Felipe and Elroyd braced themselves on the preventer line. The lifeboat was rising into the air when the great wave which followed the deceptive lull loomed up like the side of a wall. The Perro Serra rolled till her starboard rail was deep in the water. Then, after a second that was etched in Elroyd's brain, the top of the great sea foamed waist deep across the boat deck.

Before the third mate was swept aft he saw Connor drop the lantern and clutch the hand rail with both hands. Felipe cried out and for the second time leaped to save himself. He was too late. The sea caught him on the open deck. Gus and Alex were at the cranks, which gave them a hold as solid as a sailor could wish.

The rush of the great sea knocked Elroyd from his feet. The rope was torn from his clutch. Half strangled by salt water his head bumped the deck twice and then struck a stanchion. He saw stars like the burst of a rocket—and nothing more.

WHEN Elroyd recovered consciousness Felipe was trying to lift him from the deck. The mate was pinned against the rail at the break of the after well deck, fully

fifty feet from the lifeboat. Water was draining off the planks all around him, but whether this was the last wash of the big wave, or from some subsequent sea, he would have given much to know, later.

At the moment he pushed the black-browed Nicaraguan backward and staggered erect. Gus and Alex seemed to have been washed aft also. They were opposite an open space between the lifeboats moving down the deck toward him.

"Where's Billy Connor?" he gasped.

"*Quien sabe?*" said Felipe—and drew himself out of arm's reach.

Gus came splashing aft at a run.

"The purser's gone!" he shouted.

"Poor devil!" Elroyd said. Grief was the only thought that entered his head, and the mate of a hard-pressed ship cannot waste time in mourning a friend. Grimly Elroyd led the way back to the lifeboat. This time the four of them swung it out; secured the third and last boat also. The three sailors went aft to help with the rudder. Elroyd reported to the skipper that two lifeboats were ready, and that Billy Connor was overboard.

"Two boats aren't enough!" said Haddon.

"The other smashed, sir," Elroyd answered. His head was ringing like a bell, but even then, before the storm had abated, some odd details worried him. Why had Felipe been trying to lift him up—so close to the rail, too—while he was still knocked out? Why hadn't the water swept Billy against the same rail? How had Gus and Alex had time to get so far from the davits unless he had been unconscious longer than he had believed?

Between every lifeboat, of course, there was an open space, unprotected by a rail, yet those spaces weren't more than a foot wide. Billy might have been washed out through one of these; but it was just as possible that after the great wave passed the three sailors had seen Elroyd unconscious. Billy would still have been clinging to the hand rail.

For Gus and Alex to throw themselves on the little purser, rob him, and toss him clear over a lifeboat into the ocean, would have been the work of a minute. Billy didn't weigh a hundred and thirty pounds. Both the sailors were powerful six-footers. On the other hand, for Felipe to hoist Elroyd, one hundred and ninety pounds of dead weight over a four-foot rail would have been quite a task.

Murder? Followed by an attempted murder to remove the only possible witness? Or merely an accident? Elroyd could not decide. He brooded over the problem while the wind and sea went down; racked his brain for means of proof all through the forenoon watch, and in the end could think of nothing more efficacious than a veiled threat to the three suspects. To search for the money belt hours after the crime would have been futile.

"WE can have the cops search the three of them at New Orleans, yes," said Captain Haddon. Immediately after leaving the sailors Elroyd had gone to the skipper's room and told the entire story.

"We can keep them from getting ashore with the money," he went on, "but even if we find they're loaded with cash, that fact won't hang them. Billy's belt might have been torn off. They might have picked it up. That's unlikely, of course, but to prove there was a murder the courts require a corpse or an eyewitness."

"Billy was my friend," said Elroyd softly.

"Well, damn it, wasn't he mine?" snorted the skipper, whose quick temper was beyond the power of middle age and corpulence to check. "Ain't I discussing this with you like I believed he was slugged, which frankly I don't?

"What do you want me to do? Lock them up, with all this work to be done? With our coal wet and liable to take fire

and all the rest of the grief last night left us? Or tell the passengers we think there's three murderers in the crew, but we aren't doing anything about it? Smacking Felipe was bound to make trouble. Those Spigs are hot tempered."

"You aren't suggesting—" began Elroyd, level-eyed.

"That you're trying to cover yourself? Hell, no!" the skipper disclaimed. "But what did you talk to those bimbos for? You just wised them up that they could be searched! Or were you hoping they'd make another try to get you, so's you could land them in the calaboose for *something?*"

"No-o." Elroyd's tone was wistful. "I just don't give a damn about the money, captain. Thought if we got them worried they might incriminate themselves."

"That cold-eyed tropical tramp of a Gus has too many brains. Alex ain't got sense enough. He'll just keep his thick sullen head shut," snorted the skipper. "I do care about the money—ten thousand dollars, about two thousand in gold, plus the passengers' jewelry. But care or not, I'll risk losing it for the sake of Billy Connor."

"It's all hidden away by now, anyway," answered the third mate. "You wouldn't mind telling those three men you're going to discharge them at New Orleans? Of course, you are!"

"'Of course' ain't emphatic enough for the way they're going off this ship!" Haddon retorted. "But why tell them?"

"Because they must have wanted that cash bad, awful bad, both of them," said Elroyd. "Let them know what they're up against. Our only chance comes when the Perro Serra docks at New Orleans. They'll surely try something funny to get the jack ashore. If Billy was killed Gus and Alex did it. Felipe wasn't anything but a measly accessory. I can't imagine that negro leaving money behind, or Gus daring to give it all to him. Alex would either skip out, or get caught and squeal on Gus."

"Well, tell them, then," snapped the skipper. "Of course, I think Billy's death was an accident, but—is that all I can do for you?"

"All I can think of now," said the third mate. "While we're sailing north I'll gumshoe around, but the big play comes alongside the docks at New Orleans."

WITH a jury rudder to rig and two watches to stand every day, Elroyd had little opportunity for detective work. Yet as long hot day followed long hot day he poked his gaunt face into unexpected places, and at odd times. His persistence worried the three sailors. He might have been a bloodhound baying far back on their trail. What he accomplished amounted to little, except that day by day he reminded them they were being pursued, that they must make greater, more decisive efforts if they were to escape.

The crap game he interrupted when the Perro Serra was a day out of New Orleans was typical in its frustration of Elroyd's hopes, and in the opportunity he received to press home his original threat.

Walking forward after supper the third mate heard the rattle of dice on the steel deck of the crew's quarters. He tiptoed to the door.

Eight men knelt in a circle with their heads together. Behind them, half facing the doorway, Gus stood with arms akimbo. Alex was shooting and, which was rare for the big negro, he had the dice hot. Twice he naturaled, and let the money lie. Rolled an eight; made his point. Rolled a four, made that.

"Ah'm shootin' the works," Alex growled with the fierce passion of a seldom successful gambler. The crew had difficulty in fading him. There was a sizable heap of crumpled bills on the deck.

Alex rolled a two. He gasped as he saw the snake eyes; reached into the hip pocket of his dungarees, and tossed out a handful of bills and silver.

"Lightnin' don't strike twice," he growled, rolling the dice between his palms. "Warm babies, sizzle that money fo' papa!"

Across the deck the dice rattled and turned up snake eyes.

Alex stared. The scar on his cheek became almost indistinguishable against the sudden yellowish pallor of his face. His hands fumbled through his clothes, but came out of every pocket empty.

"You-all lend me some jack, Gus. Ah cain't stop on a hoodoo," he growled.

"I'm broke," said the white man.

"Ain't neither," Alex contradicted sullenly. "Wait, you-all. Ah got to git some money."

Anxiety to follow every move of the negro made Elroyd lean too far around the door jamb. Gus saw him.

At once the sailor leaped over the kneeling men into the circle. Two kicks sent dice and money flying. "The mate!" he snapped.

"Craps aren't against orders," said Elroyd, walking forward. "Go ahead and get your money, Alex."

"Aw, he was lyin'! I know what he's got!" Gus interrupted.

"You always think and speak for him? Thought Felipe was your sidekick," Elroyd answered. "You're broke, too, aren't you, Gus? Glad to know it." The third mate's tone was sarcastic. "There's been some money stolen, and every man aboard is going to be searched before he leaves the ship. You're not signing on again, either, Gus. Nor Alex nor Felipe."

"Searched, hey?" Gus muttered. His cold blue eyes met the mate's boldly.

"You think we robbed the purser," Gus challenged.

"You know best," said Elroyd. "Fact is, sailor, that a man who's been knocked out gets his hearing back long before he can open his eyes or move a finger. I told you once I heard too much the night of the gale for your good."

"In all that wind? You must have been dreaming," said Gus coldly. "You're wrong, Mr. Elroyd. You won't find nothing on me when you search."

Though Gus was defiant, this time Elroyd observed with considerable satisfaction that he was uneasy. Not to have been able to follow Alex to the hiding place of the money was a disappointment, but, on the whole, Elroyd was satisfied with the results he had obtained. He waited impatiently for the Perro Serra to dock.

ONCE an ocean-going vessel breasts the tawny flood of the Mississippi, where it slides between reedy swamps that stretch away to the horizon on each side of the jetties, the crew remove the cargo hatches. Unless the ship anchors at quarantine, this is the last piece of work. In the case of the Perro Serra, the first stop would be at the dock. The passengers would disembark, an official from the shipping office would come aboard to pay off the crew, and, at the first possible instant, black stevedores would swarm all over the ship.

The crowds and confusion inevitable to disembarkation would afford the three sailors a fine opportunity to slip ashore and lose themselves forever in the back streets of New Orleans, and Elroyd planned, therefore, to keep them working in the holds until the passengers were gone.

Luck was against him. When the cover was lifted from No. 2 hatch a thin vapor rose into the air and the reek of coal gas spread over the ship. Far under the cargo the wet coal in a reserve bunker had taken fire.

At the first sniff of burning coal the third mate looked at Gus. On the sailor's face was an expression so re-

lieved, so triumphant, that never before had Elroyd been so positive of the man's guilt. The thin white vapor seeping upward through the cargo meant the ruin of the third mate's plan for an orderly search, for unrelaxed vigilance at the dockside. Gale and fire alike had played into the hands of the cold-eyed seaman.

Captain Haddon came on the run.

"Leave it alone, mister," he ordered sharply. "One hold's flooded now; we can't pump another full of water. We'll let off the passengers and beach the old wagon near Jalke's dry dock. Their fire boat'll fix this!"

"There'll be strangers all over the ship," Elroyd demurred, knowing that Gus was listening.

"Forget that. Passengers come first. Then the ship," said Haddon sternly.

"Coal won't burn fast. Besides, the docks at Jalke's are wooden. We might anchor in the stream," Elroyd persisted.

"Jalke was burned out in 1919. He'll probably make us anchor at that," snapped Haddon.

It was Elroyd's turn to look triumphantly at Gus. Two hours later, when the Perro Serra dashed for the dock in the crescent bend of the river at New Orleans, the third mate posted himself at the foot of the gangway while the passengers streamed off the ship. He was alert for an attempt on the part of any of the three sailors to slip ashore, but, rather to his surprise, none was made.

On the contrary, when he walked up the gangway all three were lounging around the deck. The rolling eyes of the big negro and Gus's strained expression told of suppressed excitement, but the attitude of the three was that of innocent men.

Unconsciously Elroyd doubles his fists.

"Evidence and the law be damned," he addressed Gus in a fierce whisper. To be mocked in this way; to know he was right, and see his opportunity for justice and vengeance slipping away infuriated him. He was on the point of punching the sneer of Gus's face there on the open deck when a half-clad seaman dashed out of the fo'c's'le.

"Fire!" the man shouted. "The boson's storeroom is blazin'!"

Both the hasty warning and the excitement were amply justified. From under the forecastle head whence the seaman had emerged sounded a *pugh!* Half explosion, half the roar with which flames leap upon tarred cordage. Onto the well deck billowed a cloud of black smoke. On the deck a fire gong clanged.

Stevedores started for the Perro Serra on the run. Behind them two excited white men wheeled a chemical fire engine into sight and pushed it hastily for the ship's gangway. Gus, Alex, and Felipe moved closer to the rail.

"YOU don't get away with that!" barked Elroyd, who saw in that involuntary movement their intention to dash for liberty as the fire-fighters came aboard. "Lay out the hose, sailor!" he shouted at Gus. "Alex, Felipe! Stand by! We four are going to put that out!"

They would have refused had they dared, but the third mate's deadly truculence brooked no refusal. He pushed them ahead of him into the smoke-filled passage, shouting to Captain Haddon to start the water, that he would keep the fire under control while the ship was warped into the river. Two steps under the forecastle head and all four were hidden.

"On your knees and crawl! Air'll be better," Elroyd said.

Already the air was insufferably hot. The third mate jerked off his uniform coat and pushed Felipe forward. Alex and Gus were ahead, dousing the steel walls of the passage as they advanced. They had nerve, those two. A roughneck is seldom a coward.

Steam began to mingle with the

smoke. Sweat broke out on Elroyd's body, and he tore open the collar of his shirt and flung his coat over his arm. The garment deflected the smoke that rolled thickly along the deck; shielded him also from the heat.

He nudged Felipe, reached forward and pulled Alex's heel.

"Take your jumpers off! This stunt works!" he gasped. The big negro shook his head. Gus pulled his dungaree jacket more tightly around him.

Slowly they crawled ahead through heat that beat down upon them as though they were moving into an oven. Ahead, the square of a doorway showed luridly through the smoke. They reached the opening, and saw, in the center of the compartment below, an open hatch spouting a column of flame. Swiftly Elroyd crawled around Felipe and Alex to Gus's side, took the hose nozzle from the seaman, and pointed the stream down the hatchway.

There was a mighty hissing and a cloud of steam which all but choked him, yet the column of flame scarcely wavered. The heat of it bit through the coat Elroyd was holding over his head. Gus was protected only by thin cotton dungarees, soaked with water. They smoked. The touch of the hot cloth must have been torture, for the sailor shrank behind the partial shelter of Elroyd's coat.

"Take off your jumper, man," snapped the mate, too excited in that moment to think of hatred.

"Go to hell!" Gus snarled. Then Elroyd understood. The sailor dared not protect himself—because he feared what the removal of his coat would reveal! Gus had expected to make a dash for shore. He was carrying the stolen money on his person.

Without haste, the third mate turned to Felipe.

"Go back," he ordered. "Tell Captain Haddon we've got the fire under control." And when the big Nicaraguan had crawled out of sight in the smoke Elroyd thrust his hand under Gus's jumper. He felt a money belt wadded with bills and packed with coin.

"You dirty murderer!" said Elroyd.

The sailor twisted, snarling so that he lay on his side facing the mate. The hose was between them, gripped in Elroyd's hands. The stream hissed unregarded into the blazing hatchway. Neither dared to rise. A foot above their heads rolled a cloud of steam and smoke. There was no air to breathe on the steel deck, slippery with water, which sloped with the list of the Perro Serra toward the burning hatch.

"TAKE him, Alex!" Gus shouted. Both the sailor's hands shot out for the mate's throat. Alex seized him around the knees.

Once and twice Elroyd swung the hose nozzle into the cold-eyed face. He could give little force to the blows. Gus's thumbs dug into his throat. His legs were pinioned fast, and Alex, pulling himself over the mate's body, began slugging at his stomach and side. Again Elroyd struck, a two-handed blow that did not swing the nozzle three inches, yet bumped the full weight of it fairly against Gus's forehead.

The sailor swayed backward. The grip on Elroyd's throat relaxed, and the mate was deluged with water as the stream caught Gus in the chest.

Half dazed, the murderer clawed for Elroyd's face, but the fingers only scraped at the steel deck. Flung back by the force of the water, Gus was sliding inch by inch toward the blazing hatch.

He screamed—leaped to his feet. As he rose the full force of the water struck him again. Gus was pushed backward. He tottered, his feet slipped—he fell. The shrill cry of terror was cut short by the flames that leaped to receive him.

In less than a second that horrid death was accomplished. Alex still clutched the mate around the legs, still battered at his stomach with one hand,

but the blows were feeble. The negro moaned aloud.

Elroyd twisted about and struck with the edge of his hand at the base of the woolly skull. Alex went limp, knocked out completely. Elroyd, gasping and numb with horror, pushed the negro backward with his feet and turned the hose again into the blazing hatchway.

He hadn't washed Gus into that hell deliberately—at least he hadn't done it consciously. If he had, he didn't care. Gus had pushed little Billy Connor from the rail and cast him, probably unconscious, into the sea. Poor Billy had been longer dying.

Behind Elroyd Alex moaned. Slowly the mate crawled beckward, for the heat was becoming insufferable. He passed behind Alex, and stopped, letting the stream of water shoot just above the negro's head. Alex's eyes rolled in terror.

"You and Gus killed Connor," Elroyd said. Not as a threat, or a sentence. Merely a statement of fact. The rushing stream of water never wavered. Not for proof or vengeance would Elroyd have turned the force of it against Alex.

"Yu-yas, suh, boss!" Alex gulped. "Gus, he hit him 'nd throwed him ovah. Ah nevah done nothin! Ah jes' got a third 'cause I seen it all. Felipe, he was a-tryin' to lift yo' when yo' surprised him."

"Got some of the gold in your belt?" said the mate.

"Yassuh, boss!"

"Going to confess to Captain Haddon?"

"Goin' to do anything you say, boss," the negro moaned. When Elroyd drew aside the black scuttled down the passage like a frightened dog. He was sitting, gray-faced, on the deck at Haddon's feet when Elroyd emerged into the sunlight.

"Where's Gus and who's killed?" snapped the skipper. "I can't make anything out of this nigger. 'Mate burned Gus for drowning Billy' is all I can get out of it."

"Gus slipped. He fell down the hatch," said Elroyd. "He did kill Connor, captain. Alex will confess the whole thing when he calms down."

The skipper of the Perro Serra studied the smoke-blackened face of his third mate, looked for a long second into the steady gray eyes. He may have seen the bruises left by Gus's thumbs on Elroyd's throat, for he turned to the firemen who had boarded the ship.

"Chemicals may extinguish that. Water can't," he declared briskly. "Hop to it, lads!"

When they were gone Haddon addressed Elroyd. Quietly, as becomes the master of a ship and a man imbued with the fatalism engendered by life at sea. "When Gus—slipped, was it an accident, or—"

"An accident on my part," said Elroyd slowly. "And yet I'm pretty sure Gus started that fire himself."

"Yassuh, boss, yassuh!" Alex moaned.

THE END.

Cape Hatteras Mirages

MIRAGES may sometimes be seen off Cape Hatteras when the weather conditions are right. While looking at the lighthouse on the port bow, passengers can see another lighthouse clearly visible against the sky, and yet another back of that, but upside down. Behind the phantom lighthouse will appear ranges of hills where there is no land.

Minna Irving.

It created an astonishing transformation

The Black Ace

Battling Jacmer Touchon, conscienceless wizard of the mind, Mme. Storey fights to hold her own against unfair odds and methods

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "The Murder at Fernhurst," "It Never Got Into the Papers," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MME. STOREY, the famous criminologist, is retained to put the clever charlatan, Dr. Jacmer Touchon, behind prison bars. He pretends to be a "psychosynthetist," or soul builder, inveigling wealthy women to bare their secrets to him; then he has a confederate blackmail them.

Mme. Storey meets Touchon, who becomes interested in her, and pretends to love her, although he knows she is investigating him, for he thinks himself cleverer than she, and enjoys the deadly game.

She hires Basil Thorne, an actor, to shadow Touchon; and Thorne finds him signaling to one Francis Fay, across Gramercy Park. Under threats of exposure, Fay makes an appointment with Mme. Storey.

A few minutes before the time, Touchon drops in; and as he, Mme. Storey, and her secretary, Bella Brickley—who is telling the story—are in the office, Fay appears. From behind a tapestry, some one cries "Judas!" and shoots Fay. Touchon, playing protector, kills the assassin.

The youth is identified as Arthur Sims, "Blondy," an accountant. His buddy, Jack Coler, or "Scarface," disappears. Mme. Storey's agents trace him, preventing him from shooting Touchon—whom he hated for killing Blondy, not knowing that Touchon was the man higher up, for whom they and

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for January 12.

Fay worked. He is traced to the Cobra Club, owned by Manny Low, East Side boss; this night club is a place where "associate members"—rich youths—can have the thrill of mixing with the "regular members"—gangsters.

Meantime Dr. Touchon, working through Inspector Creery, stupid political appointee, who is jealous of Mme. Storey, has framed up a "confession" from Barney Craigin, convicted murderer. Craigin swears he hired Fay to have Blondy kill Mme. Storey, and that when Fay started to double cross, Blondy tried to kill both of them.

Touchon has apparently succeeded in damaging Mme. Storey's reputation as an investigator, and worse still, foiling her in the attempt to pin this double murder on him! She failed to get Craigin to retract his confession, but she has traced his wife to a new home, where the woman is displaying considerable money.

Mme. Storey has learned that Touchon plans to give up his practice. Touchon now invites her—and Bella, whom she always insists on having along—to dinner.

CHAPTER XVII.

TOUCHON'S GESTURE.

IT amused my mistress to make the most elaborate preparations for this dinner. She studied me with as much attention as if I was to be presented at court, and finally brought out a dress of her own of magenta and silver, that she said I must wear. I shuddered at the thought of magenta with my red hair, but she said it would be right, and it *was* right; a little queer, perhaps, but vastly effective. Grace, her maid, took it up and fitted it within half an hour.

Mme. Storey wore a dark red velvet dress designed for her by Canneton. It was just a plain straight slip hanging from her shoulders by two points, but, oh! so subtly fashioned! With her dark hair in a loose twist and a short string of her famous pearls—no other ornament—she looked superbly simple and simply superb. Ignorant people would expect the dark red and the magenta dress to clash, but when she put an arm around me in front of the mirror, I saw that they created a subtle harmony. We set each other off wonderfully. Of course I am not beautiful, but I did look well that night.

It was evident the moment Dr. Touchon's door was opened to us that great preparations were afoot. His delightful old servant, Boker, had disappeared, and his place taken by a spruce and supercilious young sprig evidently fresh from the most expensive agency in town. We were led into one of the little waiting rooms to take off our things—but what a change in it. It had entirely been done over, and now revealed itself as a modish boudoir in rose and French gray. Mme. Storey smiled wickedly when she saw it.

"This is worse than I expected!" she said.

On the threshold of the principal room we stopped dead with cries of astonishment. A marvelous transformation had taken place. The scene that met our eyes was like fairyland. In place of the dark heavy furnishings, one received a delicious impression of color and gayety; great tropical ferns drooping their green fronds; masses of flowers; perfect music. An army of decorators must have been at work, because we had been in that room less than a week before.

In the center of it Dr. Touchon awaited us in his miraculously cut evening clothes with velvet lapels. The Oriental nature of the man could not resist this touch. But I must say he made a figure of true elegance. His glowing face was wreathed in smiles. He looked less devilish than usual. Like a boy, he was delighted with his

own contrivances. What a strange mixture!

"You like it? You like it?" he said eagerly.

"It is perfectly lovely!" cried Mme. Storey. "I am stunned. What does it all mean, Jacmer?"

"Merely a gesture to signify a new departure in my life," he said.

"What new departure?"

"Later! Later!" he said. "Tell me how you like it first."

While they talked I used my eyes to take in the details. Every vestige of heavy respectability had been swept away. The archway between the two front rooms was filled with a screen of immense ferns, and behind it a string quartet was playing Mozart. From the quality of the music, it must have been one of the famous quartets. We did not meet the performers.

DINNER was announced. You do not need to be told that the food was worthy to be set before Lucullus, and that there was a whole list of wines, smuggled at God knows what expense into the country! Johannisberger, Burgundy, champagne, *et cetera*. Lovely it all was, done in perfect taste; it excited me and it afflicted me with a kind of horror, too. It was only too strongly reminiscent of the old tales wherein the devil seeks to ruin man by spreading luxury before him. Our handsome, debonair, dark-skinned host was well fitted to the part. The very perfection with which everything was carried off, filled me with a fresh terror of the man.

There was not much conversation during the meal, the music was too good. It came to us slightly softened through the two intervening rooms; delicate old airs by Mozart, Gluck, Handel. Evidently Touchon's taste for the modern did not extend to music.

With coffee, cigarettes and liqueurs, we, or rather they fell into talk. I played the part of the humble gooseberry. The music had stopped. Dr. Touchon fixed his burning eyes on Mme. Storey—he had the kind of glance which seizes on you and said:

"You asked me what the occasion signalizes. It is this: I have abandoned my practice."

"Good Heavens!" cried Mme. Storey in simulated surprise. "Your patients will be brokenhearted!"

"Ah! Do not chaff me," he said with a wave of the hand. "I have never tried to hide from you that it was all humbug. They asked me for humbug and I gave it to them. It was not a very serious crime, because if I had not taken them they would have fallen into the hands of much more sinister practitioners." (I marveled when I heard him say this.) "But it has been getting on my conscience. Or, if you wish to put it more cynically, say that I have made enough money to stop. I confess I deliberately set out to levy tribute on a society swollen with riches and stupidity. Well, I have levied it, and now they can go hang. Hereafter I shall devote myself to the pursuit of beauty."

Mme. Storey blandly ignored it. "This is the veritable Chartreuse," she said, sipping. "I didn't think there was any left."

"Don't you approve of my move?" he said, a little taken back.

"Oh, by all means," she said. "You're much too clever a man to be called a soul-builder."

He affected a pretty confusion. "I confess, I blush at 'soul-builder,' but that was what brought the money in. I preferred to call myself psychosynthetist, but the fools didn't know what it meant. However, away with all!" he cried. "I'll give you a toast." He stood, and raised his glass:

"To beauty which is man's desire! The stimulus of his ambition; the goal of his hopes; the crown of his life! Who cares about immortality while beauty walks the earth?"

"To beauty, yes," said Mme. Storey, smiling, "but my conception is a little

different from yours." She raised her glass. "To beauty—the unattainable!" she murmured, and let it go at that.

The dining room had a French window opening on a tiny balcony only about four feet above the level of the sidewalk. It was a mild fall night, and the window was slightly ajar.

"How easy for a thief to watch from the balcony and slip in when your servants left the room," she said.

"You are right," said Dr. Touchon, locking it. "I am the least suspicious of men!"

On the way back to the drawing-room he asked her again what she thought of it all. "I am struck dumb!" said Mme. Storey. "It is perfect. I only have one criticism to make. I missed the friendly face of your old servant at the door."

"Oh, Boker," he said carelessly. "I haven't discharged him, but I thought he wasn't fine enough for to-night. I put him in the pantry."

"Perhaps his feelings are hurt," said Mme. Storey. "Have him in for a moment. Let him bring me some more coffee."

"Beauty commands!" murmured Dr. Touchon, pressing the bell.

In due course the old man came in carrying the coffee on a salver, and wearing a pleased smile.

"Wonderful changes here, Boker," said Mme. Storey.

"Yes, ma'am! Yes, ma'am!"

"But one doesn't forget old friends."

He went out speechless with pleasure. By this intimation of her wishes, Mme. Storey saved his job for him. She had perceived that the gentle old figure, no longer a necessary part of the camouflage of the soul-builder's establishment, would certainly have been discarded.

NEXT followed the main event of the evening, to which everything that had gone before had merely been preparatory.

"Rosika," said Dr. Touchon impressively, "I do not know if you have remarked it, but I have the sort of nature that dotes on symbols. I cannot feel that I have really broken with the past unless I go through with a little ceremony typifying the act. That is what I have asked you here to witness."

"Good Heavens, Jacmer!" said Mme. Storey in mock alarm. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You will see," he said, "it is very simple." He removed the painted screen from in front of the fireplace. "I hope you will not be discommoded by a little fire. It will only be of paper."

Opening a safe concealed in the base of a carved table, he took from it a tray containing perhaps two hundred large thin cards which were closely covered with typewriting. Carrying it to the fireplace, he knelt down and crumpling up the first card set it alight and dropped it in the grate.

"These are the case records of my patients," he said; "these cards set forth all the perilous confidences that they poured into my ear."

His back was turned toward us, and Mme. Storey glanced at me. Outwardly her face was perfectly expressionless, but deep in her eye gleamed a spark of the artistic appreciation of Touchon's matchless effrontery that she wished to share with me.

One by one Touchon crumpled the cards, and dropped them in the grate, letting each one catch from the blaze before he dropped another. He turned halfway around so he could watch what he was doing on the one hand, and observe how Mme. Storey was taking it on the other.

"Dangerous stuff!" he said, addressing the crumpled balls as he fed them to the flames; "they look so harmless, mere ink stains on clean paper; matter-of-fact typewriting like statistics of animal husbandry, or the decline of the infant mortality rate, but really more dangerous than nitroglycerine! The

secret thoughts of men and women! The evil that they store in their souls. There is matter here to wreck a hundred powerful and conspicuous families. And see! I give it to the fire."

It is so difficult to convey in words the infernal *double entendre* of Dr. Touchon's "ceremony." If you could have seen him! There he knelt, slowly feeding his sacrificial fire and intoning a devout litany, and all the time his devilish, mocking eyes, fixed on my mistress's face, were telling quite a different story.

"Wouldn't you like to read what is on these cards?" his eyes said. "Watch me feed this precious evidence to the flames, while you are helpless! From the beginning you have been helpless against me. You knew I was a blackmailer, but with all your cleverness you couldn't catch me. Before your very eyes I committed murder, and you couldn't bring it home to me. Instead of that, I covered you publicly with ridicule. Now, having made my pile, I renounce crime, and still you are helpless. I burn the evidence, and you will never catch me. In me you have met your master."

Such was the inner meaning of Jacmer Touchon's ceremony.

When the last crumpled ball was dropped on the fire he stood up.

"*Finis!*" he said impressively.

"Oh, Jacmer!" murmured Mme. Storey as if profoundly impressed. But I who know her so well could see from the flicker at the corner of her lips that she was thinking: "I am not so sure that this is the end!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

MME. STOREY'S RUSE.

A LITTLE later in the evening Dr. Touchon's efforts to entertain us appeared to slacken a little. You know what I mean; a gentle hint. When a sensitive person perceives it, he says instinctively, "Well, I must be going," and that was in fact what Mme. Storey said.

Our host made only perfunctory attempts to detain us. Finally he said: "I'll ride home with you in the cab."

"That will be nice," said my mistress.

Ordinarily she would have protested against such a thing, and it was this which first gave me the idea that something was in the wind.

When we retired into the little pink boudoir for our wraps she said softly: "Bella, he is meditating another murder."

"Oh, good heavens," I said, turning faint, "is it us?"

"No, silly," she said, with an indulgent smile for my fears. "Think it out. Follow through this symbolism of Touchon's. He is cutting himself off from his former life. Well, what is the human link that still binds him to his past?"

"Scarface!" I gasped.

"Precisely. Scarface knows too much. While he lives Touchon is not safe. Francis Fay went, Blondy went, now Scarface's time has come. To hire somebody to do it would only create a new danger. Touchon will cut the last link with his own hand. He says he loves symbols and ceremonies, and it's true.

"For that reason I am convinced that he means to carry this ceremony to its logical conclusion to-night. He is anxious to get rid of us now. I believe he has an appointment to meet Scarface later. He will shoot him on sight.

"When Touchon knelt in front of the fire I saw the outline of a gun in his hip pocket. He never carried a gun in his evening clothes before. He has a use for it to-night."

"Oh, what can we do to prevent it?" I groaned.

"We will do what we can," she said grimly. "Keep your eyes open, and act promptly when you get your cue."

As we were leaving the room, I

started to call her attention to the fact that she was leaving her beaded bag on the dressing table. She held up her hand with a smile.

The Westmoreland shared a cab stand and starter with the apartment next door. Dr. Touchon, who did not maintain a car of his own, always used these taxis. As we were seating ourselves in one of them, Mme. Storey said suddenly:

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I've forgotten my bag. It's got our latch key in it. I left it on the dressing table."

"I'll get it," said Dr. Touchon politely.

The moment he was out of earshot Mme. Storey shoved back the front glass of the taxi.

"Man," she said in a spirited voice to the chauffeur, "you look white! Are you game to do me a favor without asking any questions?"

Trust the appeal of those flashing eyes! He grinned delightedly. "Sure, lady! As far as you like!"

"Listen," she said swiftly, "you're taking me home, and then you'll be bringing the doctor back here, or perhaps some place else. When you turn into Lexington Avenue after having left my door, I want you to stop for three or four minutes as if you had engine trouble. It is just to give me time to pick you up in another cab."

"I get ya," said the driver laconically.

In a flash Mme. Storey was out of the cab, and approaching the cab behind.

"I want to engage you to come to No. — East Sixty-Third Street," she said to the driver. "Double fare. Let this first cab drop me there before you show yourself in the street. As soon as he turns the corner you drive up to the door."

Like the first driver, this one said, with a grin: "I get ya, lady."

As Mme. Storey returned to me, I said anxiously: "Touchon will learn from them what you have done."

"No matter," she said serenely. "He's bound to find out anyhow that we've blocked his game."

AS Touchon closed our house door behind us, Mme. Storey said to me swiftly: "Quick, Bella, call up the Cobra Club. If Scarface is there, warn him in the most forcible words at your command not to keep any appointment he may have made outside to-night, but to remain in the club."

She ran upstairs.

I got my number without delay, but alas, it was only to be told that Jack wasn't there—wouldn't be there that night!

Mme. Storey came running downstairs again. She saw in a glance that I had had no luck with my call. She had a tweed cape for herself and an old raincoat for me, felt hats and stouter shoes. We put these things on and went outside again. Not more than two or three minutes had elapsed. The second cab was at the curb.

In Lexington Avenue we found Touchon's cab headed down town, drawn up at the sidewalk while the driver made believe to be tinkering with his engine. We took a turn around the block. As we approached the second time, the first car started down Lexington Avenue, and we followed at a discreet distance. It led us back to the Westmoreland, where Dr. Touchon paid his man and went in.

"I thought so," murmured Mme. Storey. "He wouldn't let anybody who knew him drive him to the meeting place. He'll allow his servants to think he has gone to bed, and then come out again."

"But the hall boy would see him come out," I said, "and the cab starter."

"I fancy he will use the little balcony on the side street," said my mistress dryly. "If I mistake not, he has used it before."

Sure enough, in less than half an hour we saw a figure climb over the

rail and drop as quietly as a shadow on the pavement. He started walking briskly east toward Third Avenue, circled a block or two, then turned into Twenty-Third Street, walking west. At the Lexington Avenue corner he boarded a street car bound uptown.

"Clever!" said Mme. Storey. "He doesn't trust taxis."

We followed the street car, keeping a whole block behind. We could watch all who alighted from the car. Dr. Touchon got off at Fifty-Ninth Street and walked west. At the Plaza he turned into Central Park. We dismissed our cab and followed him on foot.

AFTER following the main east drive for a short distance, Dr. Touchon turned into the footpath which descends a little hill and crosses the bridge over the neck of the lake. The area which lies across the lake is one of the least frequented in all the Park. After we had left the east drive we saw nobody.

"He has chosen his spot well," murmured Mme. Storey.

Repeated shivers went through my body. I would have given all I possessed to be away from there. My mistress, guessing what I was going through, caught hold of my hand, pressing it firmly, and drew me along.

Touchon was a good way ahead of us, and we only caught sight of him at intervals as he passed under a lamp. The lamps along the footpaths do not give much light. Suddenly, in advance of Touchon, we made out a solitary figure sitting on a bench.

Mme. Storey caught her breath sharply.

"Ah! Come on!" she said. "He may shoot before we can get there!"

We broke into a run. Just as Dr. Touchon was coming to the bench, Mme. Storey uttered a loud, silly-sounding laugh. The ruse was successful. Dr. Touchon looked over his shoulder sharply, and, putting his head down, walked on past the bench without stopping.

In a moment or two we reached the bench. There was a gas lamp about seventy-five feet away. The man sitting on the bench kept his head down as if desirous of avoiding notice, but we could see that he had a slim, athletic figure, instinct with grace. Not the least doubt but that this was our man. Mme. Storey dropped on the bench beside him laughing and pulled me down beside her.

"Gee! What a chase they give us!" she said in a common voice.

I could now see Scarface's handsome profile outlined against the street lamp. He was scowling in annoyance.

"Say, fella," said Mme. Storey with coarse impudence, "if two fellas comes after us, you'll stand by us, won't yeh?"

Scarface got up without speaking and walked away.

"Aah, go chase yourself, then!" Mme. Storey called after him.

In two or three minutes Touchon came back from the other direction. His hat was pulled down, his coat collar turned up; it would have been difficult to recognize him had we not known it was he. His feelings could not have been pleasant when he saw two women sitting on the bench where he expected to find Scarface. He had gone to a lot of trouble to arrange that appointment.

I thought he would pass on, but, to my horror, Mme. Storey cried in her own natural voice:

"Jacmer! What are *you* doing here?"

CHAPTER XIX.

ESPIONAGE.

WHAT a hideous shock it must have given him. I could see the man's whole figure sag and waver in a sickening uncertainty. For a moment he made as if to walk on un-

hearing. But aware that would make him appear even more ridiculous, he stopped with a simulated start of surprise and turned toward us.

"Rosika! What does this mean? I thought—I thought—" There was a gone, flat quality in the resonant voice. It caused a sweet feeling of triumph to steal through me. It was worth the terror I had felt to see the superman so shaken.

"You thought you had just put us to bed," Mme. Storey cried, finishing his sentence for him. "The truth of the matter is you gave us too much to drink, Jacmer. Sleep was out of the question, and Bella said: 'Let's take a walk in the park before we turn in.'"

"Same here, same here," he said lamely. "I felt I needed a walk. Well now, let me take you home again."

As we left the bench we met Scarface walking toward it. Neither one paid any attention to the other.

Dr. Touchon had to make believe to accept our explanation that we had simply come into Central Park for a mouthful of fresh air before retiring. It was not an implausible explanation, for after all our driving down town and back again, the spot in the park where he came upon us was less than ten minutes' walk from Mme. Storey's house in East Sixty-Third Street. That he really believed us, we never for a moment supposed; he was too old a bird to be caught with such chaff. In fact, Mme. Storey did not wish him to believe us.

During the short drive home he administered a gentle scolding to my mistress. "It's close on two o'clock," he said. "It was rash beyond words for you to venture out at such an hour, Rosika. A woman like you! And especially to seek out such a solitary spot."

"There is no reason why a woman should not go anywhere at any time," said Mme. Storey, "provided she is not afraid."

"Ah! I know your courage," he said tenderly, "but what avail would that be against superior strength if you were attacked?"

"Oh, I am always armed," she said carelessly.

His usual assurance was gone. Indeed his voice become almost plaintive as he expostulated with my mistress. The man had had a horrid shock. He dared not speak of it, but one could feel the grinding anxiety of his mind to find out how we had come to surprise him in such a spot, and how much we knew.

When he left us, I asked Mme. Storey why she had called out to him in the park. "We could have got away without ever being recognized," I said.

"No doubt," she said, "but I had to show my hand in order to save Scarface's life. If Touchon had not recognized us, he would have come back after we had gone, and shot Scarface; or if we had succeeded in blocking his game to-night, he would have made another appointment for to-morrow night; but now we have him guessing; he dares not shoot Scarface until he finds out how much we know."

"He will question the two cabmen who stand at his door."

"Naturally. And from them he will learn how we followed him to the park. But that won't tell him all. He still won't know if we knew what he was up to, or if we just followed him on a chance. I shouldn't like to be in Jacmer's shoes to-night. His grand ceremony had an ugly kickback."

"Thank Heaven we got under his skin for once!" I said viciously.

"Under his skin," said Mme. Storey, "we have applied an irritant that will keep him writhing on his bed for many a night to come! You see," she added dryly, "I wanted to insinuate the idea into his mind that he might have further need of Scarface; that there might be a couple more murders to be pulled off before he could afford to step on his chief agent."

"Oh, don't!" I murmured with a horrible inward quaking.

She laughed at my fears.

IN the morning we began to perceive the consequences of the shock that Dr. Touchon had received. On our way to the office we found ourselves followed by another car. This car hung around Gramercy Park all day, always within sight of our door. Other men loafed inside the park watching our door and our windows, and there were more spies in taxicabs that came and went. Whenever we went out, either walking, or by any sort of conveyance, we were picked up and followed until we returned again. It was demoralizing to the nerves.

"He must know that we can see we are being watched," I said angrily. "What does he expect to gain from it?"

"He hopes to make his espionage so perfect," said Mme. Storey, "that even though we know we are being spied upon, we can't escape it. It suits me very well," she added with a smile. "The closer the better!"

She immediately began to prepare her countermeasures—as usual, in the most unexpected direction. She instructed her two maids, Grace and Amanda, to make friends with the maids in the house on Sixty-Second Street, whose back yard abutted on her back yard.

A sheet blown over the fence and its subsequent recovery afforded the means of breaking the ice. There were two maids in that house, and very soon the quartet became firm friends. It appeared that the family living in the Sixty-Second Street house was traveling, and the maids were living alone in the house, sleeping on the top floor. They arose at seven in the morning.

Grace, instructed by Mme. Storey, reported that the door from the kitchen into the yard was locked by an old-fashioned bolt which, after being shot into place, turned and caught in a groove, so that it could not be pushed back. The door from the front basement hall into the areaway was locked at night by a Yale lock, a chain, and a big key.

Mme. Storey, in seeming kindness of heart—such kindness was habitual to her, so this display of it did not excite suspicion—suggested that the girls use stepladders in visiting each other back and forth over the fence, and thus save a trip around the block. Each house provided a ladder. She stipulated with feigned sternness that the ladders must be carried into the respective houses every night, in order not to provide a convenience for sneak thieves.

As a further step in her plans, Crider was instructed to purchase a taxicab and to obtain a license to drive it, also a suitable outfit.

Meanwhile our relations with Dr. Touchon continued unchanged. I think he may have been a little nervous as to his reception when he called on the second morning after the meeting in the park, but he did not show it. He had recovered his face marvelously.

"Good morning, Rosika," he said fondly. "The freshness of the dawn lies on your eyelids." He sought to command her with his glance.

"Does it?" said Mme. Storey innocently. "I use Rouget's Les Sylphides powder."

She allowed her eyes to fall under his glance, then raised them, a little flutteringly. Touchon was intoxicated by the glance, and his confidence increased.

They took cigarettes. "Look, Jacmer," said Mme. Storey, turning her chair, and pointing through the window. "Somebody is having me followed again."

"This is outrageous!" he cried, springing up. "I suppose the friends of Barney Craigin are getting up another demonstration against you."

"No, these are not crooks," she said. "These are flatfeet."

"Flatfeet?"

"Detectives, innocent! Highly respectable sleuths. One always knows them by their childlike efforts to avoid calling attention to themselves."

"But who would dare to set them after you?"

"That I can't say. By doing a little counter-sleuthing I have discovered that they are from the Horgan agency, the largest in town, and the most unscrupulous."

"This is infamous, Rosika. I will find out who has hired them. Just leave it to me. If the annoyance persists, you must lodge a complaint with the police."

"Oh, I don't like to do that," said Mme. Storey, "after the hateful way in which Creery has acted."

"Then I will speak to Creery myself. You must be protected!"

Behind his back Mme. Storey and I exchanged a glance. We had to share our appreciation of this rare bit of comedy.

"I came to ask if you and Miss Brickley would dine with me tonight?" said Touchon. "I have seats for the opening of the new edition of the Scandals."

"We should be charmed," cried Mme. Storey. "I was unable to get seats."

"Ah, you should always leave that sort of thing to me," said Touchon.

And so the comedy proceeded.

CHAPTER XX.

A TRAP.

I MUST interrupt the main thread of my tale for a moment in order to tell how we secured our first bit of direct evidence against Jacmer Touchon.

The Storey Murder Case, as the newspapers had always called it, though Mme. Storey was neither the murdered person nor the murderer, was now a closed chapter in the press. It had been settled to everybody's satisfaction and forgotten. Only poor Blondy's father and mother presumably nursed their grief and shame in obscurity. If Fay had left any relatives they were never known. To have the case thus forgotten had the effect of freeing our hands; it was a relief not to have the reporters camping on our doorstep.

On the other hand, though the case was no longer talked about, the injurious dénouement engineered by Touchon persisted. There was no use trying to deny from ourselves that Mme. Storey's prestige had received a serious blow. Her popularity had declined.

New business was very slow in offering, but the unexpected resurgence of an old case gave my mistress a chance to stage a little come-back. Her real aim, I need hardly say, was very different from that which appeared on the surface. I refer to the case of Lear Caybourn. That intrepid young adventurer was caught running a cargo of arms into Guatemala. Mme. Storey set herself the task of saving his life, and succeeded in the end, though everything was against her.

It was not an important case, but she made it one through the judicious use of publicity. Many columns of "copy" were prepared in our office, and most of it got by the city editors because it was so well done. It was always Lear Caybourn who was featured. Mme. Storey kept herself in the background.

As I say, she saved the young man's life, and incidentally she made him serve an end of her own. Her real object at this time was to persuade Jacmer Touchon that she was occupied with the case of Lear Caybourn to the exclusion of everything else. She talked about him in Touchon's presence until Touchon conceived a furious jealousy of the young fellow whom none of us was ever to see.

How far Touchon was deceived I could not say. Not completely de-

ceived, because he never removed his watch upon our movements, still it must have had the effect of partly lulling his suspicions. Detectives followed us wherever we went. Their reports to their master could not have contained much of interest, for at this time we never went anywhere during the day except to and from the office, while at night we were nearly always in Touchon's company. One might hazzard a guess that he spent a great deal of money to very little purpose; however, that was his look out.

Under cover of the Caybourn case Mme. Storey and I were always hard at work on what he called "our" case. There was no longer any attempt to intimidate the witnesses, and we kept up connection with that nice little Mr. Greenlees, the chief clerk in the cashier's department of the insurance company where Blondy and Scarface had worked. Mme. Storey talked with him once or twice over the telephone, and once, before Touchon had us so closely watched, she had him out to lunch.

One morning Dr. Touchon was talking to my mistress on the telephone about some arrangements for the evening. Mme. Storey expressed a wish to see a certain play, and Dr. Touchon said he would try to get seats. "I will call you up again in a few minutes," he said.

"Oh, make it noon," said Mme. Storey. "I have to go out directly."

"Very well, at noon," he said.

She hung up with a smile. "Bella," she said, "see if you can get Mr. Greenlees on the wire."

She made an appointment with him to come to our office at a quarter to twelve.

THE gentlemanly little chief clerk was very prompt, and obviously highly flattered by the summons. It was the first time he had been in Mme. Storey's office, and he looked around him wonderingly. My mistress talked of indifferent matters to put him at his ease. Finally she said:

"There's a man going to call me up at twelve o'clock, and I want you to listen in."

He nodded, full of excitement.

Suddenly my mistress said to me, with a sly smile: "Bella, we have a canny customer to deal with. His suspicions are easily aroused. Suppose he takes it into his head to call in person?"

My heart sunk. It would be only too much like Touchon.

"Let us ask Mr. Greenlees to wait in the middle room in order to be on the safe side," she said. "And unlock the door into the hall."

It was done.

At twelve o'clock I was working in the outer room when, sure enough, the door opened, and Dr. Touchon entered, urbane and purring like a handsome male cat. But there was a sharp point of inquiry in the bottom of his false eyes. His suspicions were aroused. Possibly one of his watchers in the Park had told him that Mme. Storey had not been out. It was a fair assumption that these men did not know Mr. Greenlees, and they could not have been sure that he was a visitor to our office, since there were many other tenants in the building.

I greeted Dr. Touchon pleasantly, but not too pleasantly; Mme. Storey herself had said that it would look more natural if I maintained a certain stiffness of attitude toward him.

"Come right in!" I said, opening the door into Mme. Storey's room. I noticed that his eyes swept a covert glance around it. He would have liked to open the door into the middle room, too. I lingered, wondering how my mistress would handle the situation. She is a perpetual surprise to me, like a good play.

"Well, Jacmer," she said, "this is unexpected."

"I haven't seen you for twelve hours," he said in his fondest manner. "My eyes need the refreshment."

"How ridiculous!" she said, with an alluring sidelong glance.

"I have the seats," he said. "Ninth row center; the best in the house."

"Lovely!" she said, but with a reservation in her tone that forced him to ask:

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, I know I'm unreasonable," she said, "but we'll be so conspicuous. One is so tired of being stared at. It quite spoils my fun. Would it be asking too much of you to change them for seats in the first row of the dress circle? One can see and hear perfectly up there, and we wouldn't meet a soul that knew us."

"Certainly, if you wish it," he said. "Bella will get the theater on the phone for you."

This was my cue. I knew exactly what I had to do. I returned to my office, closing the door after me. Touchon, as I went, cheered up a little, seeing that he was to be left alone with my mistress.

The moment I got the call and switched it into Mme. Storey's room, I ran for the middle room through the hall. Seizing Mr. Greenlees by the hand, I yanked him back with me.

"The moment he hangs up, run back for your hiding place," I whispered, "and lock the door softly behind you."

The little man was both terrified and delighted by his dramatic moment. I put him at the phone in my room. As he listened his face paled and his eyes started with excitement. Then he hung up, and scampered swiftly back through the hall. I closed the hall door.

Almost immediately the door from Mme. Storey's room opened, and Touchon cast a sharp glance around my room. I was busy at a filing case. His face was a study. He knew very well that some sort of game was being put over on him, but he was helpless. We had him in a box.

He did not linger long. I would be willing to bet a hundred dollars that he tried the door of the middle room as he went down the hall. If he did he gained nothing by it.

As soon as he was gone, we had Mr. Greenlees in from the middle room. He was still pale with excitement.

"You listened at the phone?" said Mrs. Storey.

He nodded.

"Have you ever heard that voice before?"

"Yes, madame. That is the voice of the man who called up Blondy on the day he was killed."

"Good!" I cried involuntarily. "Then we have him!"

"Not quite," said Mme. Storey with a provoking smile. "Mr. Greenlees can only recognize the voice over a telephone. How can we bring the telephone into court?"

My face fell.

"However, every little bit helps," she said cheerfully.

Mr. Greenlees remained to lunch with us in our office, in order to keep Touchon's watchers guessing.

CHAPTER XXI.

MASQUERADE.

MEANTIME Basil Thorne had been struggling with his difficulties. For as a matter of fact he had struck a serious snag in his efforts to get into the Cobra Club.

"As I told you," he wrote to Mme. Storey, "when I was talking with my gilded young friend, Ronny Waddon, I left the question of my joining the Cobra Club in the air. Word has now been conveyed to me through Ronny that I am not eligible for election. Since I am neither a crook nor a millionaire, but only a poor actor, this is perhaps to be expected. Indeed, they made no bones about it. As Ronny put it to me with his sublime condescension —they say he has two thousand a week spending money: 'you know, old man,

only extremely well-to-do fellows can afford to join.' So that's that. What am I to do?"

Upon receipt of this letter, Mme. Storey debated with herself awhile, and then called up Asa Van Benthuysen and made an appointment to see him at his office an hour later. This was before Dr. Touchon had us so closely invested. Mr. Van Benthuysen as everybody knows is chairman of the board of the Metropolis National Bank, and a member of that small inner circle of bankers who are supposed to control our destinies. Whether that be so or not, he is a man of vast wealth whose name has become a household word. He is a delightful old gentleman, wise, humorous and humane. For a long time he has taken the keenest interest in Mme. Storey's career, and on more than one occasion has assisted her by the exercise of his unique power.

I was not present at her interview with the multi-millionaire, but upon her return to our office she repeated what had taken place.

"Mr. Van Benthuysen," she said, "I hear rumors that you have a daughter, Inez, who is about to come out in society, but nothing seems to be known about her for certain."

"It is quite true," he said smiling, "I try to keep the children out of the glare of publicity as long as possible, but Inez is straining at the leash. This winter I suppose I must let her have her fling."

"Where is she now?"

"Let me see, where are people now?" he asked.

"At Hot Springs or White Sulphur."

"Well, wherever it is, she's there."

"Do you expect her home soon?"

"Not until the opera season opens in November."

"One more question; are you acquainted with the Waddons? Waddon is the president of the steel cable trust."

"Not socially, if that is what you mean," said Mr. Van Benthuysen carelessly. The Van Benthuysens are of the old Knickerbocker stock. "They are newcomers in New York, I believe. I suppose I have met Waddon at public luncheons or dinners, but I do not remember him."

"Then it is fairly certain that your daughter has not met Ronald Waddon, the son?"

"I am quite sure that she hasn't," said Mr. Van Benthuysen positively. "So far we have been able to choose her acquaintances. I seem to have heard somewhere that the young man is an unlicked cub."

"Quite," said Mme. Storey dryly.

"If I may be permitted a slang phrase, what are you getting at?" asked Mr. Van Benthuysen curiously.

"I came to ask you," said Mme. Storey, "for your permission to masquerade as your daughter for a short while."

"Well!" he said, laughing heartily. "You can always surprise one! I am sure you would never have made so peculiar a request unless you had a good reason."

Mme. Storey gave him a brief sketch of our case. He was a man who was accustomed to keeping secrets, of course.

"Good Heavens!" he cried. "What things go on nowadays! The newspapers astonish one, but the unpublished stories are simply amazing!"

"You see," said Mme. Storey, "any one who may meet me as your daughter will learn in the end that it was all a hoax, so there will be nothing to embarrass Miss Van Benthuysen later."

"You have my permission," he said, "for what that is worth. On one condition. That you promise to tell me the whole story as it develops. Inez herself would be only too pleased with the idea."

"What does she look like?" asked Mme. Storey.

He showed her a photograph.

"A photograph tells one so little."

"Well, she's tall and slender like you," he said, "with blond hair and dark eyes."

"What is her present style of dressing her hair?"

"The skinned cat effect," he said dryly.

"I see, a boyish bob," said Mme. Storey laughing.

AS soon as Mme. Storey had finished relating this to me, she dictated a letter to Basil Thorne:

Keep up the connection with Ronny Waddon. Express the deepest chagrin at being turned down by the Cobra Club, and keep returning to the subject. Suggest that while it is true you are only a poor actor, you have a rich backer who is willing to put up any amount in order to be shown the sights of the town. Make a great secret of this, and only consent after long pressure to tell your friend's name.

It is Miss Inez Van Benthuysen, eldest daughter of Asa Van Benthuysen. She is determined to have her little fling before she is presented to society this winter. She is eighteen years old and very beautiful. Her family does not inquire too closely into her movements as long as she is accompanied by her pal, Emily Beekman, an older girl, who rather keeps an eye on the giddy Inez. Suggest that Inez will put up for all three of you at the Cobra Club. She has fifty thousand dollars a year spending money. This is not as much as Ronny himself is reputed to have, but will be sufficient, I fancy, to tempt the promoters of the organization.

I don't want to arouse suspicion by naming too high a figure. In a day or so you may invite Ronny to a little party with you and Inez and Emily. I will send you word when I am ready.

My perturbation grew and grew as I set this down in my notebook. "I shall never be able to get away with it!" I cried when she had finished.

"Of course you will!" said Mme. Storey. "You are a better actress than you think. We will give you a part that will fit like a glove."

When the letter was dispatched, Mme. Storey said casually, pulling down the corners of her mouth as she does when she is disposed to tease me: "Bella, are you willing to give your hair for our case?"

"My hair!" I stammered. "I—I suppose so, if it is necessary."

She laughed. "Then telephone to Emil Witmer, the wig-maker, and ask him to come here as soon as possible."

This Emil Witmer was a famous man in his way, learned in hair. He could sketch for you the hirsute style of any great man in history at any given stage in his career. Since historical dramas have gone out of fashion, the poor man has had rather hard sledding. He had done work on several occasions for Mme. Storey. By the irony of fate Emil had no hair of his own, save the narrowest of fringes around the base of his skull.

"Emil," said Mme. Storey when he came, "look at my head, and look at my secretary's head. I want you to make wigs for us that exactly resemble our present heads of hair. They must not be wiggy-looking wigs, but must be able to stand scrutiny by night or day. Can you do it?"

"Certainly, madame, since you both wear long hair."

"When they are ready," Mme. Storey went on, "you must come here and cut my hair and my secretary's; a modish boy-bob for each of us. My hair you must bleach or dye to a beautiful golden color, and Bella's—I think you may leave Bella's red. It will be very smart."

"But suppose we were to meet *him*," I murmured.

"Oh, if we meet him we are out of luck," said Mme. Storey. "No disguise on earth would deceive those sharp eyes. However, there's little chance of it. We are going among those who do not know us."

Emil Witmer took the measurements of our heads together with samples of our hair, and departed.

He was accustomed to rush orders from the theatrical profession, and in

two days he was back with the wigs. They were marvelously made. The haircutting and dyeing operations then took place in the middle room. The boyish haircut created an astonishing transformation in my mistress; made her look like a mere slip of a girl. I looked like a freak. Afterward we put on our wigs and looked just the same as before.

By this time the incident in the park had taken place and our every movement was watched. However, Mme. Storey, as I have described, had already taken steps to circumvent our spies. She now sent word to Basil as follows:

> All is ready. Let the party be arranged for to-morrow night. Crider will drive us about in his cab. Arrange with him where he is to pick you up, and arrange with Ronny Waddon where we are to find him later. Let it be an inconspicuous place the first night, until we are more at home in our rôles. We should have about half an hour with you first, to talk things over and to rehearse a bit. All our parties will have to be late parties. You and Crider are to be waiting for us in front of No. —— East Sixty-Second Street at one o'clock.

CHAPTER XXII.

HOUSEBREAKING.

ON the night of our first expedition, Jacmer Touchon was giving a musical party in his apartment. It was one of the first engagements in a social campaign that he had instituted as a part of his new life. From among his former patients he had chosen women of position and influence for his sponsors—presumably those who had not been blackmailed—and had launched himself with eclat. The arrangements at his parties, the music, the flowers, the eats and drinks were perfect; the host a model of urbanity and charm; they were wonderful parties, if you were insensitive to the sinister suggestion that underlay all.

There was no real pleasure at these gatherings—at least not for me. How could there be? How could you let yourself go in the all pervasive presence of that strange man who, while he displayed the most agreeable qualities, ceaselessly watched and calculated and strove to bring every soul present under the dominion of his will? You could not forget Touchon for a moment. Those hard, wicked, commanding eyes were everywhere at once, seeking out your inmost thoughts, prostrating you in spite of yourself until you felt weak and helpless under their dark glare.

It angered me so to see everybody accept him. Nobody present could see through his pretenses except myself, and Mme. Storey, of course. By the sheer power of his egotism he imposed his own idea of himself upon all. Like a hypnotist to his subjects he seemed to say: "I am the handsomest, the cleverest, the most charming man in New York; and they, poor fools, took him at his word, following him about with admiring looks and smiles, lauding him among themselves in the corners. Most people, it seems to me, ask to be enslaved!

Mrs. George J. Julian, blond, fat, breathless and groaning with rapture, supplied one of the most vociferous elements of the chorus. "Oh, my dear, isn't Jacmer wonderful! Never, I think, has a single individual been endowed with such a combination of rich gifts. Such a handsome wretch and so brainy! He is certainly the man of the hour! What a privilege it is to be admitted to the friendship of such a man; to sit at his feet as it were, receiving wisdom!" The picture she called up of herself sitting at Jacmer's feet was a comic one.

This social sortie was a part of Touchon's larger campaign to subdue Mme. Storey to his will. He knew, of course, how unthinking people—and that includes almost everybody—seeing them together would be certain

to say: "What a marvelous pair they would make! Both so handsome, so clever, so distinguished! If ever two persons were intended for each other, etc., etc." Out of the thoughts of the beholders Touchon hoped to create in time an entity too strong to be broken. He was a very subtle psychologist.

As is always the case nowadays, the party was so late in getting under way that it bade fair to last most of the night. As midnight approached Mme. Storey and I began to feel like *Cinderella,* wondering how on earth we should get away. If we insisted, Touchon's suspicions were certain to be aroused. Finally at a quarter to one it could no longer be put off. She drew our host a little aside.

"Jacmer, it has been a lovely party, but I am dropping with sleep. As you know, we have come home with the milk every morning for a week."

"But, Rosika," he objected in real or simulated dismay, "you are my star attraction; you are the only excuse for this party. If you go, it will be like 'Hamlet' without the *Prince.*"

"I have a hard day before me. The Caybourn case has reached a crisis."

"Confound Lear Caybourn!" he said, scowling. "Why do you trouble yourself over such an insignificant affair? There's nothing in it. I hate to see you dabbling in this sordid business of crime," he added, lowering his voice. "Why not give it up altogether —and live!"

"Not yet," she said with a smile, into which he might read anything that he chose.

As she remained firm, though polite, he was obliged to submit.

"Very well," he said; "I'll take you home."

Mme. Storey energetically protested, but he insisted. "I will be back in fifteen minutes," he said; "no one will miss me."

So he drove home in the cab with us, purring in my mistress's ear the whole way. It was a strange kind of lovemaking. I shuddered at him. As we turned into our street I saw a taxi standing in front of one of the dark houses where no taxi had any call to be, and farther along a figure skulking in the shadow of the stoop opposite our house—the spies of this precious lover. I entered the house first, and as he bent to kiss her hand I heard him murmur: "Dream of me!"

What a ghastly farce!

MME. STOREY and I ran upstairs. Her maid Grace roused herself sleepily from a sofa where she had been waiting for us. We pulled off our wigs and burst out laughing at the sight of each other's cropped heads. But there was no time to be lost. It was already one o'clock, and the boys no doubt already waiting for us in Sixty-Second Street. Mme. Storey insisted on making me up as well as herself. My dress was waiting for me, a marvelous creation of paddy green, very long-waisted with a bouffant skirt short in front and long behind.

When I was ready I could scarcely face myself in the mirror. It seemed to me that I looked terrible. But then I never have any notion of how I look. Mme. Storey appeared to be pleased. "Smart as paint!" she said.

Meanwhile she was applying herself to her own make-up. She is a past mistress of that art, and when she turned around I simply gaped at the effect of youthfulness she had achieved. No color in her face except on the lips, but a pale wash of bistre to go with her dark eyes and golden hair. The faintest of shadows applied to the cheeks and temples thinned her face and produced that touching effect of girlishness. It would not have passed muster by day, but under artificial light it was perfect.

Her dress was a scanty thing of changeable pink taffeta very cunningly and amusingly draped, and finished

with an immense ragged bow of the same material on one hip. It had a rakish effect of being slung on anyhow. Her long slender legs were nothing less than poetic.

During the dressing operations Mme. Storey gave a part of her mind to the task of coaching me. "The chum that a rich girl carries around with her," she said, "is certain to be a sort of echo and satellite. When she's older, as you are supposed to be, she may appear to exercise a sort of restraining influence, but there's nothing to it really. So you will be quite safe in saying, 'Oh, Inez!' admonishingly to all my extravagances, while you go ahead and encourage me with subservient smiles. When in doubt, flatter me. They always do."

When all was ready, we left the house by the back door, carrying the stepladder between us. We placed it against the back fence. We had to sit on top of the fence like two cats while we drew the ladder up and let it down on the other side. If anybody had happened to look out of one of the commanding windows, they would have seen an odd sight, but there was little danger of that at such an hour.

Mme. Storey was armed with a little kit containing a tiny flash light, a thin chisel, and a peculiar looking instrument that resembled one of those clips for taking off the top of an egg. Grace had told her that the kitchen door of our neighbors' house was of the same construction as our own back door, so she knew how to set to work upon it. It had glass panes, and by turning the flash sidewise we could see the end of the bolt inside. With her chisel she opened a split in the edge of the door frame, and, holding it open with the chisel, inserted her thin pliers, and, catching hold of the bolt, turned it and worked it back. The operation sounds simple, but it took considerable time.

My association with Mme. Storey has drawn me into many strange situations, but this was the first time I had gone in for actual housebreaking. My heart was pounding like a mallet in my breast, and I was sick with apprehension. On the other hand, my mistress chuckled like a little girl.

"An old burglar taught me this stunt," she whispered. "He's in Sing Sing, poor fellow."

Finally the door swung in. Closing and bolting it behind us, we tiptoed across the unknown kitchen with the aid of the flash. A clock ticked companionably on the dresser. A door creaked as we passed through, and my heart missed a beat. We made our way through the basement hall to the door leading to the areaway. It was an old-fashioned high-stoop house. The multiple fastenings of the door gave us no trouble from the inside, of course. We fastened back the spring lock, and locked the door from the outside, carrying the big key with us, so that the unsuspecting maids upstairs might not be exposed to possible marauders.

What a relief it was to find Crider and his cab standing at the curb. Basil Thorne was inside. "Thank God!" he said. "I thought something had happened."

CHAPTER XXIII.

SPEAK-EASY.

THE rendezvous, Basil told us, was Texas Bill's, one of the innumerable little speak-easies hidden in the old dwellings of Greenwich Village. We climbed two flights of stairs, and Basil tapped in a peculiar way on a door. When it was opened, the scene that met our eyes was scarcely one of revelry. We saw a big bare room set about with tables and chairs, leaving a tiny open space in the middle for dancing.

Young men and women lounged limply in the chairs or spread themselves on the tables, smoking endless

cigarettes, staring listlessly, and saying nothing. A man seated in a chair tipped back against the wall, his heels cocked on the rungs, was crooning a blues song, accompanying himself on a ukelele made out of a cigar box. Through an open door we saw a poker game going on in the front room in perfect silence.

It was my first visit to a Village resort. I was impressed by the extreme youthfulness of the patrons. The lads affected an artistic carelessness, but the girls were as smart as manikins. Inez and I were not at all out of place in our finery.

They all seemed to have a sad way of taking their pleasure. Texas Bill himself let us in. There was nothing wild about him but his name; a slender young man with thin, aristocratic face, drooping mustache and beautiful manners.

Inez put on her new character with the opening of the door. Sailing in like a yacht in a fresh breeze, she cried: "Hello, everybody! Gosh, it's as cheerful as a funeral here!"

"Oh, Inez!" I said admonishingly.

A buxom girl across the room roused herself a little resentfully.

"Suits us," she said. "Who the hell are you?"

"Miss Inez Van Benthuysen," said Texas Bill with a flourish.

A loud laugh greeted this announcement, and all the patrons roused themselves, anticipating further fun.

"Welcome to our midst, Inez," said the buxom girl ironically. "Me, I'm Mary Astor; and my boy friend here is Algernon Vanderbilt."

"Any relation to the hotels?" asked Inez.

"No, the What-the-hells," said the girl.

"Nice people, too," said Inez.

She seemed to get the tone of the place by intuition. I rather enjoyed the lunatic freedom of manners myself, though I couldn't quite let myself go. "Oh, Inez!" was my note.

"Have a drink with me, Mary," said Inez. "Texas," she called, "ask everybody what they're drinking."

Cries came from every side. "Go ahead, Inez! Now you're talking!"

"'Ware the gin," whispered Basil. "It's got ether in it. That's what makes them all so dopey toward the end of the evening."

"Good Heavens!" murmured Inez. "How do they stand it!"

"Oh, they're young," said Basil.

It was a comfort to have Basil along. He had an ugly, clever face and an irresistible grin. Though he seemed to be utterly crack-brained, one observed that he always kept his wits about him.

We found Ronny Waddon in a corner sleeping with his head on a table. When he was roused up he proved to be a tall, gangly, blond young man, rather ashen-cheeked, and inclined to be red about the eyes. He was the sort who has to be sent to a sanatorium at intervals, but never learns anything by it. He was a little surly upon being awakened, but the magic name of Van Benthuysen aroused him. It was rather piteous to see the exhausted young creature whipping himself up to the game as it was played at Texas Bill's.

"By golly, Inez!" he said, holding her hand, "I never thought you would be like this. You don't have to have money, girl. You're a beauty!"

"Thanks, Ronny," she drawled, "you're a good fellow, but I can't return the compliment."

"I know I'm not handsome," he said with a footless grin, "but I'm awful wicked, girl."

AS the four of us sat around the table sipping etherized gin, I would have defied anybody to guess we were not what we appeared to be: irresponsible scions of the rich and their hangers-on, engaged in tracking pleasure to its lair. We had the advantage in having the real thing with us in the person of Ronny. From the

first he made me uneasy. There was something slack-twisted and unreliable about him, and I suspected he would get us into trouble. I could see that the same thought was in Basil's wise and wary eyes.

"Aw, Inez, it's a darn shame you're so rich," said Ronny. "I suppose anybody who married you would have to lead a respectable life."

"Not at all," she said. "It's only the very rich who can afford to be disreputable."

"Then I'll marry you," said Ronny. "Darned if I won't! And we'll send out our kids in solid gold perambulators just to show that we despise the stuff."

"I'll put your name down," said Inez calmly. "There are several ahead of you."

"Who are they?" he demanded jealously.

"The list isn't ready for publication."

"Bet I can drink any one of them under the table."

"I wouldn't put it past you."

"Look, here's a stunt. Let's give a party for all the applicants for Miss Inez Van Benthuysen's hand, and award the prize to the one who can hold the most liquor. Whoopee! Wouldn't the papers like to get hold of it!"

"I want a husband, not a tank," said Inez.

A sudden animation had returned to the company. One was struck by their high average of good looks and intelligence. It seemed a pity. These were real villagers. By day no doubt they worked for a miserable pittance at one of the arts, or eked out a living in some quaint fashion. All had a slightly wild look, due to the poisonous stuff they were drinking. Boys and girls were on a footing of perfect equality. Indeed they were scarcely to be distinguished from each other save by their dress, and one wondered if they didn't miss a good deal by their excessive matter-of-factness.

The phonograph was started, eked out by an accompaniment on the ukelele, and everybody stood up to dance. Small as the space was, it did not seem unduly crowded, because, according to the style of dancing that prevailed at Texas Bill's, the couples stood almost perfectly still in one spot and conversed.

One did not know whether it was the small floor which had necessitated this style, or the style which had permitted the space to be so circumscribed. Inez and Ronny danced together while Basil and I remained sitting at the table.

On ordinary nights, Basil said, everybody's money would be spent by this time, and they would be drifting home.

There was very little chance of their going now with two such spenders as Inez and Ronny present. Inez, having tasted the stuff, did not offer to buy any more of it, but Ronny treated the crowd again and again. I was very thankful upon tasting my gin to find that it was only water. The wise Basil had arranged that for Inez and me with a word to Texas Bill. A bacchanalian tone began to come into the fun-making, harmless enough in itself, but it had explosive possibilities. Ronny was the dangerous factor. There was an ugly streak in him.

"I ought not to have come here," Basil murmured anxiously to me. "But what was I to do? If I had picked out a better regulated place, there was always the danger of meeting somebody we knew."

A tall, stalwart young fellow began to cast sheep's-eyes in Inez's direction. His girl upbraided him angrily, then began to weep noisily. Nobody paid the slightest attention to her. The young fellow came and sat down near us.

To do him justice, there was an honest quality in his glance which suggested that it was Inez's fine eyes which had won him rather than the magic of

her name. Finally he asked her to dance.

"NOTHING doing, fellow," said Ronny brusquely. "Inez is engaged to me for this evening and every other. I'm going to marry her."

"If you are, Inez doesn't know it," she said good-humoredly.

The stalwart youth cast a look of scorn on the slovenly spendthrift. "I'm not asking you, but her," he said.

"Well, I'm answering," said Ronny truculently. "Get that?"

"Will you dance with me, Inez?" said the tall youth.

"No," she said coolly, "I won't dance with anybody else to-night. I'm tired."

Ronny laughed unpleasantly, and getting up, said carelessly: "Come on, Inez."

"You heard what I said," she said coolly. "I'm not dancing."

Ronny dropped back in his chair, scowling. The tall youth, still sitting close by, did not laugh at his discomfiture, but studied him reflectively. "Funny, what money does to a man," he said, addressing nobody in particular.

"Yah!" said Ronny, "you let my money buy you drinks quick enough."

"Sure," said the other undisturbed, "you ought to be glad that a gentleman is willing to drink with you."

Ronny snarled, searching in his mind for a rejoinder. Basil got up quickly, and went to the tall youth. "Look here," he said soothingly, "this is a good party, we don't want any trouble. We've got to take care of her," he added in a lower tone, indicating Inez.

"Sure," said the other amicably. "You're a good fellow, but you ought to be more particular in the company you keep." They shook hands very solemnly and long, and the young fellow went back to his girl.

She was a pretty fluffy little thing who looked quite adorable in her tears. It occurred to me that whatever pretenses they might make, girls were still girls and boys boys. I quite distinctly heard him say to her without irritation: "For God's sake turn off the tap, Evie. You know you're my girl and always will be. But that don't mean I'm not to look at a star if one shines on me in passing." Then he turned up her chin and kissed her lips. Nobody minded, of course.

Ronny sat glowering and nursing his rage. After a few miutes had passed, Basil, with the idea of throwing oil on the troubled waters, said: "Come on, let's go. I know a place—"

"No, I'm damned if I'm going to let any villager run me out of a place," cried Ronny. Before any of us could stop him, he jumped up and flung his glass across the room at the young man's head.

He did not hit him, of course, but the act supplied the spark that the explosion waited on. Pandemonium resulted. Everybody sprang up at once, shouting or screaming according to sex, overturning their chairs. It seemed as if every man in the place was spoiling for a fight, and most of the girls. But it was not as one-sided as you might think. A number of the men rushed at Ronny, but an equal number moved by some instinct of fair play, sprang to his defense. The tall young man was one of these. Texas led them, as crazy for a fight as any, though it ruined him.

"I won't have any fellow beat up in my joint!" he cried.

But it immediately became a perfectly indiscriminate brawl. The fight was the thing, and nobody cared whom he hit. There were half a dozen fights going on simultaneously. It came so quickly, I did not have time to be frightened. I remember looking on, thoroughly interested. The racket was simply indescribable; shouting, cursing, screaming; tables overturned with appalling crashes; glasses shattering on

the floor. Basil Thorne was the only man in the room who did not fight. His whole thought was of Inez and me. The three of us drew off, trying to edge around the walls to the door.

The weapons were fists, bottles—and finger nails. It looked more dangerous than it was. Some blood flowed, and one or two prostrate figures were to be seen, knocked out either by blows or by the fumes of etherized gin. I suspect the contestants fell down oftener than they were knocked down. I had a passing glimpse of the buxom girl wedged between the four legs of a capsized chair, kicking furiously and unable to extricate herself. It was just a brief nightmare of convulsed faces and brandishing fists, and then one of the less warlike girls, thinking to stop it, switched off the lights. But not a bit of it. It was a bright moonlight outside. After a brief pause, the row continued undiminished. Plenty of light to fight by.

IT sounds like a simple matter to cross a room to the door, but we were forced back half a dozen times by the crazy rushes back and forth. The fighting was all split up. Many a private score was settled no doubt. There was a lot more going on in the front room that we could not see. We had no idea what had become of Ronny, and did not greatly care; he deserved whatever might befall him. Basil had his hands full fending off the lurching figures from Inez. Inez's eyes I had seen were very bright, and there was a curious smile fixed on her face. Basil was in despair lest she be mauled inadvertently, but she murmured coolly:

"I'm not made of glass."

As Basil was about to lay his hand on the doorknob, we heard a heavy tramping on the stairs. "The police!" he murmured in dismay, and instead of opening the door, he shot the bolt upon it. An instant later the handle was tried. There was an ominous pounding on the panels. Nightsticks. The sound had not the slightest effect on the uproar within the two rooms.

"The window," Basil whispered to us. "I saw a fire escape."

We climbed through the window on to the spidery iron platform. How strange it was to see all the back windows thrown up, and figures hanging out. There were cries of: "There they go! There they go!" And imprecations directed at our heads. It was most unjust—we hadn't done anything. We crept down the shaky ladder; first Basil, then Inez, then I. It landed us on another spidery platform with an open window blocked by a large woman in a nightgown.

"You can't come in! You can't come in!" she screamed. "It's a nice thing if decent folks can't be allowed to have their sleep!"

There we had to crouch within about a foot of her vituperation, while Basil lowered the final length of the ladder into the yard. It seemed to be the sight of our fine clothes which angered her more than anything. "Trappings of sin!" she called them.

"You are quite right, aunty," said Inez confidentially. "It is not the right thing to wear while fire-escaping."

"No aunt of yours!" screamed the woman.

As we went down the last ladder, she shouted vociferously for the police. "They are escaping by the back!" she cried. Consequently, when we set foot in the yard, we walked into the arms of a patrolman.

"Just in time, friends," he said humorously. "I have phoned for the wagon." Derisive jeers were directed at us from all the surrounding windows. I could not have believed that people would be so inhuman.

As our policeman marched us through the hallway of the house into the street, my heart was in my boots thinking of the "wagon," the court room, the story in the papers next day.

All our careful plans ruined. Jacmer Touchon might never know just why we had undertaken this masquerade, but I could see him secretly triumphing over us, while he made believe to condole.

The policeman lined us up by the curb. "Stand there beside me," he said. Other officers were now bringing down batches of prisoners by the stairs. Everybody was in an uproarious humor; laughing, singing, cutting up. Apparently in Greenwich Village a ride in the wagon is regarded as the end of a perfect day. Even the policemen were jocular and good-humored, and everybody was having a good time but me. I am old-fashioned enough to consider it a disgrace to be arrested. I felt slightly ill.

Across the street I saw our cab standing against the curb with Crider at the wheel. I noticed that the door on our side was unfastened. This was a signal to us that he was ready for a rescue if we desired it. The patrol wagon came rushing through the street with a great clanging of its gong, bringing a lot more people in its train, and waking up what few householders had not already been roused. It backed smartly up to the curb, and our policeman, always friendly, said:

"Let them load all the other guys in first. It's better air near the door."

They started "loading them in." As I said, we were standing by the curb with our policeman on the outside of us. Behind us was the crowd looking on; in front of us the roisterers moved up slowly toward the tail of the wagon. Many of them hailed Inez boisterously, but none by name. Suddenly, one lad, a good deal the worse for wear, missed the step in mounting, and rolled in the gutter. Our policeman took a step forward to help the man on the other side pull him out from under the step.

It left an opening to the roadway. Basil touched Inez's arm and Inez touched mine; we unconcernedly stepped down from the curb, and started across the street without haste. The people behind must have known we were escaping, but evidently they thought the joke was too good to spoil. Nobody made a sound. I never knew if Basil fixed that policeman. He refused to tell me.

WHEN we reached our cab there was a yell from across the street. We flung ourselves in and Crider stepped on the gas. I was still on the running board when we started, and Basil in the street, but we hauled him aboard. Fortunately there was no other car near but the patrol wagon, and that had half its load aboard. One policeman added to the excitement by firing his gun in the air. The crowd stampeded after us on foot, but we turned the corner and were safe. We turned another corner and lost them all.

After having turned a half a dozen corners, we straightened out in Third Avenue, and sped northward. The beating of my heart quieted down. Mme Storey said calmly: "I suppose we will have to abandon this car. They have no doubt taken the number."

Crider spoke through the front window. "No, madame. As soon as I saw there was going to be trouble I smeared the license plate with grease and dirt. They couldn't read it."

"Good!" she said.

"What a rotten piece of luck!" groaned Basil.

"Oh, I don't know," said Mme. Storey serenely. "Of course, if Inez Van Benthuysen's name is mentioned in the newspapers her father will disown us, and we'll have to begin all over. But everybody's identity is pretty well protected in these cases. It is not likely to come out."

"Even if it doesn't come out in the newspapers, think how it will be gossiped around town," said Basil. "Every person there will act as a center from which gossip will radiate."

"So much the better," said Mme.

Storey. "If the gossip reaches the ears of the Cobra Club promoters it 'll recommend us as desirable members."

Crider put us down in front of the house on Sixty-Second Street. We let ourselves in with our key, and, creeping through the strange house, issued out into the yard. Bolting the door behind us took time and skill on Mme. Storey's part. When the chisel was pulled out, the split in the door partly closed of itself, and Mme. Storey rubbed dirt in the crack to render it less conspicuous. Over the back fence we went as we had come, and carried the ladder into the house with us. I breathed a mighty sigh of relief. What a night! What a night!

"I loved it," Mme. Story laughed. "What a burden it is to be respectable!"

Meanwhile Crider, who could not have been recognized, had been sent away to change his clothes and attend the night court to learn the disposition of the cases. He was given money to pay the fines of those who lacked the wherewithal.

"That is only fair," said Mme. Storey, "since we brought the trouble upon them."

Two hours later he called up to say that everybody had been let off with a fine except Texas Bill, who was held under bond for trial. The case wasn't likely to attract much attention in the newspapers. Miss Inez Van Benthuysen's name had not been mentioned.

So far so good. What followed was less satisfactory. Ronny Waddon's father had been present at the proceedings. His son was represented as being responsible for the whole affair, so he paid his son's fine and carried him off instanter to Dr. Briggs's sanatorium in Westchester County. This was a place Ronny would not be likely to escape from for awhile. It made us all feel blue—not that we cared about Ronny's incarceration, but he provided our only approach to the Cobra Club.

However, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good. On the next day but one, Basil received a letter that he instantly repeated over the telephone to Mme. Storey in great elation:

DEAR MR. THORNE:

Mr. Ronny Waddon mentioned a couple of days ago that you and two lady friends were desirous of joining the Cobra Club, of which he is a member. Mr. Waddon, I understand, has gone out of town for a considerable stay, so he cannot introduce you, but the committee has taken action in your case, and desires me to say that you and two friends may be elected as associate members immediately upon receipt of the customary initiation fee, which Mr. Waddon informed you of.

I have learned with regret of the annoyance that you and your friends were subjected to by the police last night, and beg to point out that nothing of the sort could happen in the Cobra Club. There you can enjoy yourself in your own way without interference.

Cordially,

JOHN DOE, Secretary.

"Send him a check," smiled Mme. Storey.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE COBRA'S LAIR.

AN "associate" member of the Cobra Club desiring to visit the clubhouse notified Mr. John Doe, the secretary, over the phone. John Doe, I gathered, stood for anybody who might be around the clubhouse at the time. Mr. Doe would appoint a place for the "associate" to meet a "regular" member, who would then conduct the former to the clubhouse. Our own instructions had been to take the last table on the right-hand side of Lober's restaurant at the corner of Delancey and Wood Streets—we would find the table reserved for us—and await our conductor.

There we sat, Inez, Basil and I. While we waited we toyed with Welsh rarebits, which none of us could eat. A feeling of thick excitement filled me.

We had spent so much thought and pains in seeking to enter the Cobra Club, and now realization was at hand! It was half past two in the morning, and Inez and I—in our other incarnations—had been to the theater and had supped with Jacmer Touchon. Afterward we had escaped from the house in the usual way.

I might say that we made up for the sleep we lost during these forays by retiring into the middle room of our offices during the day and stretched out on sofa and cot while we were supposed to be working on the case of Lear Caybourn. Fortunately, Touchon's spies could not see beyond the door.

Lober's was a perfectly undistinguished restaurant. On the lower East Side it was considered quite stylish. Even at half past two it was fairly well filled. In some quarters of New York people never seem to go to bed. We started when a diminutive figure slipped noiselessly into the fourth seat at our table. It was our first intimation of his coming. He said:

"Howdy, folks! No need to mention your names. Me, I'm Chiglick." So it sounded to me as he said it. Later I found that it was properly Chick Glick. "Pleased to meet yah."

In appearance he was the typical gangster that has so often been described in the press; at once insignificant and formidable. He was darkly good-looking in his diminutive way, of Jewish or Italian extraction, and very well dressed. The only thing tough about him was his manner of speaking. He cultivated a perfectly wooden face, and spoke through a little hole in one corner of his mouth, without changing a muscle. There was something inhuman in the way he watched you, like an animal from behind the bars.

"What-ho, Chiglick!" cried Inez in her giddy style. "How do you know that we are your birds?"

It never fazed him. "That's all right, lady," he said coolly. "We have given you the once over wit'out your knowin' it. We know who you are."

You think you do! I thought.

"Oh, call me Inez," she said.

"In the club I will," he said, "but outside you gotta be careful. The waiters and all in this place, they're good people, but you don't know who all may eat here. It's all for the protection of youse folks," he went on in what he intended for an ingratiating manner: "youse and the ot'er members. We're alla time watchin' out to make the club safe and comfortable for youse all."

"I like your style, Chiglick," said Inez. "You look bad. How many men have you bumped off in your time?"

"Oh, Inez!" I said.

He was undoubtedly flattered, but no muscle of his wooden face changed. "Cut all that, lady," he said with a gesture. He gesticulated from the wrist only. "Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't. The guys who make a boast of it—" He gave us a truly horrible imitation of a man strapped in a chair. "*Pzz!*" he said, and spiralled upward with his forefinger. One saw a little wraith of blue smoke ascending.

I shivered—nor was it a counterfeit.

"When you're ready, folks," suggested Chiglick.

"Let's go!" said Inez. "I'm dying for a real drink."

"Me and Emily, we'll start first," he said. "Give us a coupla minutes and follow. Makes it less conspicuous like. Go through the door on the stairway that is marked: Emergency Exit."

Chiglick and I arose. There was a stairway at the back of the restaurant leading to a lower room not used at this hour. We started down; on the landing Chiglick opened the door he had spoken of, and I found myself in a narrow alley. For a moment my heart failed me. Suppose he intends to cut my throat! I thought. However, he only lighted a cigarette, and, leaning negligently against the wall,

conversed quite amicably through the hole in the corner of his mouth. The bright inhuman eyes watched me all the time he was speaking.

"THE same guy owns the teayter on one side and the apartment house on the other, and the clubhouse in the back," he said. "Makes it convenient like. He keeps the gate of the alley locked, so nobody can trouble us that way. We're fixed real snug in the club. All the neighbors t'inks it's a vacant house."

Inez and Basil joined us, and Chiglick led the way to the back of the alley. It was bounded here by a high board fence. He knocked on the fence and a section of it noiselessly swung back —just as in the story of Ali Baba!— admitting us into a back yard. There was a doorkeeper attending the fence, who closed it as soon as we had passed through. It was a common, dirty back yard, littered with tin cans and other rubbish, and I did not like the look of it at all. Chiglick said:

"We don't fix it up none, because it would attrac' attention from folks what have windows looking down on it. Wait till you get inside."

He led the way into a dark passage that was no more reassuring than the yard. What a place for a murder, I kept thinking. Suppose the whole thing was a plot! Not until we had gone through two doors was there any light. This revealed another length of passage, another door. All the doors were armed with mighty bolts and bars. Seeing me eye them, Chiglick said:

"Them's to give us time to make a get-away over the roofs if they should bust in from the rear."

The third door admitted us startlingly into light, color, luxury. We found ourselves in a charming, low-ceiled reception room with shaded lights, easy chairs, a coal fire burning in a grate. There were smiling attendants to take our wraps. It was the most startling transformation I have ever experienced in my life. From that sordid back yard to this!

Chiglick grinned. "This allus gets 'em," he said. "Some class, eh?"

We went upstairs. A long restaurant decorated after the best modern manner, very plain, it had the look that smart places have anywhere in the world. There was a good-sized dancing floor with little tables all around, an orchestra on a dais at one end playing seductive dance music. To come upon such a retreat hidden within the shell of that dilapidated old building in one of the poorest quarters of the town gave one a curious thrill of pleasure. Truly, I thought, the promoters of the Cobra Club had builded well.

The place was not full; only two or three couples dancing in a rapt style, and a few more sitting at the tables with their heads close. Inez cast an eager glance around, but the face she sought was not there.

"These are the lovers," said Chiglick, with the slight flattening of his lips that served him for a grin. "Ev'body else is upstairs at the tables now. The bank closes at four thirty, and then they come down for supper. You gotta be out before daylight. You was sayin' you wanted to order," he added suggestively.

We sat down at a table, and a magnum of champagne was brought; excellent champagne it was. Chiglick drank the lion's share of it. For so desperate a character, he showed a curious fondness for the light and frivolous wine, though it had not the slightest visible effect on him. He continued to talk in his wooden fashion out of the corner of his mouth. He was friendly, but we never had the illusion that we were sharing his real thoughts. He watched us.

"That guy yonder at the table with the dame in yellow," he said. "I mean the short-necked guy; that's Monk Eyster. He's the best known crook in New York."

"Monk Eyster!" cried Inez.

"He killed Stollmeyer the gambler," Chiglick continued offhand. "He was tried twice for it, but the jury hung each time, and the district attorney got tired of it. Monk is gettin' too old for the game now; he travels on his reputation."

As the man in question was obviously under thirty, one got a startling impression of the swiftness of the underworld's pace.

"HIM dancin' wit' the bit of fluff wit' the fan," Chiglick went on, "that's the Pinny-Dropper. He's the comin' man. The gel is a millionaire from uptown. She's nuts on the Pinny-Dropper."

"How did he get such a funny moniker?" asked Inez.

"Well, you see, he got his start by droppin' little gels on the way to the store with the money in their hands."

"I see," said Inez dryly. "And he's still knockin' 'em down."

Chiglick forgot himself long enough to give a real grin. "Say, you're pretty bright for a gel," he said admiringly. "Of course that's a long time ago. The Pinny-Dropper's got his own gang now. They settle strikes or anythin' you want to hire them for."

"I get you," said Inez.

"Yeah, it's good business," said Chiglick. "Little Stobey, he's got a gang, too. He's upstairs now. Each gang has got half a dozen known murders to its credit, and there's a lot of jealousy between them. They're alla time layin' for each ot'er, but the Pinny-Dropper and Little Stobey, they gotta leave that outside when they come here."

"Tell us what your claims to fame are, Chiglick," said Inez.

"Oh, I ain't in the same class with them stars," he said grinning. "At that I'm just as well satisfied. It's inconvenient to be too well known." For the briefest instant his guard was lowered, and one had a glimpse of naked, insensate savagery. He made you think of one of the tiny savages of the tropics with their poisoned darts.

"Quite!" said Inez.

When the wine was finished, Chiglick said: "I suppose you want to meet them famous guys; they all do. Come on, and I'll give you an introduction."

"All in good time," said Inez. "Let's take a whirl at the tables before they close."

We climbed the stairs to another long room reaching from the front windows to the back. Here there was plenty of life.

Several games were going on, but, as always, the roulette wheel in the middle of its long green table, was the center of attraction. It is the most insidious vice yet invented by man for his own undoing.

It took a good deal longer for Inez and me to search among the faces in this room. We finally exchanged a glance of disappointment. Scarface was not present.

"Who runs this place?" Inez asked Chiglick carelessly.

"Jack."

"Jack who?"

"Jack is all he goes by."

"Which is he?"

"He ain't here. Got a private party upstairs to-night."

We found places at the roulette table. Inez staked Chiglick. Since it was with the money of our rich client that we were playing, it was of small moment to us whether we lost or won, consequently, as was inevitable, we all won. It was wildly exhilarating. I forgot my fears of the place. It seemed like no time at all before we heard the croupier saying:

"The bank is closing, ladies and gentlemen; play is over."

THERE was a rush to cash in the counters. Inez and I handed ours over to the two men with us, while we sat down on a settee facing the stairs, and Inez delicately freshened

her make-up. She was by long odds the handsomest and most distinguished looking woman present, and as they drifted toward the stairs people glanced at her out of the corners of their eyes. I expect that word of our identity had already been circulated. It was a strange procession that passed us; club man, *grande dame*, gangster and thug.

The men returned to us with their hands full of money. "Let's go down and get a table," said Chiglick with a gleam in his black eyes.

"Oh, I couldn't," said Inez with a gesture of distaste. "I have already had two suppers since dinner."

Chiglick's face fell.

Inez was deliberately spinning out the operation of touching up her complexion. She knew, of course, what an alluring picture she made, cocking her head on one side to look in the tiny glass, and dabbing the little pad to her cheeks. The nature of these operations focused attention on her beauty. It was not by accident that she had chosen that particular settee. The stairs from above came down just in front of it. A door opened above, and we heard voices.

"Basil," drawled Inez, "take Chiglick down to the bar and buy him a bottle of champagne. Emily and I will follow directly."

They disappeared.

A gay little party came sauntering down the stairs. First two pretty girls, then two negligible men, then a third girl, prettier than the other two, a blonde of the luscious, melting sort. Scarface had certainly picked the best there was in the club—before Inez came. The third girl, as I learned soon, was Maud Heddle, the "hostess" of the dancing floor. She turned and called, "Jack!" My pulses quickened.

Finally Scarface appeared. Scarface at last! It was like the entrance of the principal character in a play. All our patient planning had been designed to bring about this moment.

It was not, of course, the white-faced, blazing-eyed youth I had seen on that memorable night at Guillaume's. Now his face was a little flushed with wine, and bore a smile of scornful good humor. From the way Maud Heddle looked back and up it was clear she was in love with him, and I didn't blame her. He was sinfully handsome. I don't know why a look of scorn should be so effective with the opposite sex, scorn in itself is not a pretty quality; but there is no arguing against it. Where do we get our notions of personal beauty, anyway? Just a little difference in the arrangement of the features and what a difference it makes! Scarface was as beautiful as a young animal in its natural state.

I looked at Inez. When Scarface was halfway down she lowered the little mirror, and caught his eye. He stopped dead, and the smile faded out of his face. I had the feeling that something important was taking place. He looked dangerous to our sex then. Had his glance been directed toward me I should have quailed under it. But Inez smiled slightly. It was a challenge, and Scarface was never the one to refuse. He came to us, allowing his party to go on downstairs. Close to, I saw that his appearance of slenderness was illusory. His shoulders were both broad and thick.

"You are Miss Van Benthuysen," he said. "I know everybody else in the place. And Miss Beekman," he added, with a slight bow in my direction. I was only an afterthought.

"But I don't know you," said Inez.

"Oh, call me Jack," he said carelessly. "I run this show."

"No. I shall call you Scarface," she said. "Jack is anybody's label."

He showed his white teeth, not at all ill-pleased, and swaggered a little. A beautiful creature must do it.

"You're the handsomest girl I've ever seen," he said coolly. "Why didn't they tell me?"

If he expected to confound her with his terrible directness, he was disappointed. Inez laughed delightedly. "I say! What am I to answer to that?" she smiled. "Yes, sir, and thank you kindly."

There was no answering smile in him. He continued to gaze at her. There was so much genuine fire in his glance, one would not have thought to term it rude. He sat down beside her.

"Your friends are waiting for you," she reminded him.

"Oh, they can amuse each other," he said carelessly. "I'm not going to bother with anybody else after having seen you."

"You do go direct to a thing, don't you?" she murmured ironically.

"You can't razz me that way," he said, undisturbed, "because it's true."

THERE was some more talk. I might have been a cushion at the other end of the settee for all the attention they paid to me; and then he said bluntly:

"I don't believe you're a fashionable flapper."

My heart contracted sharply.

"Why?" asked Inez, smiling.

"You've got too much sense."

"Oh, the younger set is going in for sense," she said airily. "There's nothing else left for us. Besides, you've only been talking to me for five minutes. How do you know that I've got sense?"

"I can see it in your eye," he said darkly.

"Well, what does it matter what I am?" she said coolly.

"It matters a whole lot," he said. "I have to be careful whom I let in here. There is nothing so dangerous as common sense. A few words of common sense spoken at the wrong moment might ruin my graft here."

He was only half in earnest, of course, but his words made me feel a little ill with anxiety.

Inez laughed like a peal of silver bells.

"You're a nice man!" she said with a directness equal to his. "I like you fine. At first I thought you were only handsome!"

He rubbed his lip, not quite sure how to take this. "You haven't satisfied me yet as to your identity," he pointed out.

"Well, don't throw me out this minute," she said, "and I'll soon prove to you that I am what I say I am."

I wondered how she was going to prove this.

A few minutes later he took her hand and held it. "Come and dance," he murmured, his eyes full of slumberous fire.

She repossessed herself of her hand. "Not when you look at me like that," she said coolly.

It was a blow to his self-love. His eyebrows ran up indignantly. "I look as I feel," he said stiffly.

"Sure," said Inez. "That's your privilege—also mine," she added.

As this conversation grew more intimate, I became exceedingly uncomfortable. I didn't know whether to go or stay. However, there is a perfect understanding between my mistress and myself upon these matters, and as she gave me no hint to go, I reckoned she meant me to stay.

Meanwhile they were staring haughtily at each other, each contending for the mastery. I think both must have realized at the same moment that it was not to be had that way, for they smiled simultaneously, and the tension was released.

"You're a Tartar, Inez," he murmured.

"Well, so are you," she said.

"Anyhow, come dance with me," he said cajolingly. "I'll behave."

"You have no intention of behaving," she said coolly. "As soon as you got me on the floor you would start hugging me, and I'd be helpless unless I wished to make a scene."

He laughed outright. "You're no flapper," he said.

"Oh, we start early nowadays," she said quickly.

At this point Maud Heddle arose into view on the stairs. "Oh!" she said, when she saw what she saw. Her face was a study. "Aren't you coming, Jack dear?"

"In a minute," he said grimly.

She hesitated a little pitifully.

"I'll be down in a few minutes," he said with a hard, peremptory stare, and the girl faded out of sight.

INEZ smiled mockingly. He got the implication, and, direct as he was, his thoughts had come right out:

"You're right," he said defiantly. "A man only respects what opposes him. I can't help it. I didn't make man's nature."

"Thanks for the hint," said Inez dryly.

"Come on and dance." he asked for the third time.

"No," she said firmly, "you and I have got to come to an understanding first."

"Oh, Lord!" he said with affected disgust. "I never thought you were the talking kind. You're too pretty!"

"You've got a lot to learn about me," she said dryly. "Listen! You said you were struck with me to-night. Well, I was struck with you, too; immensely so. Your good looks; your directness. Especially your directness. That gets me where I live. I can be direct myself. Maybe you don't care for directness in a woman. Well, if you don't like it, you'll have to lump it. This is what I want to say: You and I could be wonderful pals if you desire it. I desire it very much, so it's up to you. But right away you want to develop an affair; hold hands, dance close, kiss me, I suppose. Not for me! Look me in the eye and you'll see that I mean it. And this isn't just an attempt to lead you on by denying you in the beginning. I mean it now, and I mean it forever. There can't be anything of that sort between us—"

He interrupted her to ask sullenly: "Why not? Is there somebody ahead of me?"

"That's none of your business," she said quickly. "And anyhow it hasn't got anything to do with it. If our acquaintance continues you will see for yourself that there couldn't be anything of that sort, and when you do get it through your head, I don't want to have to bear your reproaches. That's why I am speaking now. So there can be no misunderstanding later on. It's perfectly ridiculous, because we've only known each other for half an hour, but you asked for it. So, is it to be pals? It's up to you."

There was a silence. As before, they gazed at each other silently struggling for mastery. Inez's brow was clear and firm, the young man's scowling. It must have been a bitter pill for the handsome fellow's pride to swallow. Very likely it was the first time he had ever been rebuffed by a woman. At the same time I was marveling at my mistress's cleverness. In the best sense she was dealing with him openly and honorably, yet without showing her hand.

In the end he acknowledged defeat in the handsomest manner. "All right," he said bluntly, "pals it is. You're a marvelous girl. God knows how it will turn out for me, but I promise you you'll never hear any reproaches."

They shook hands on it.

"Come on, let's dance!" said Inez.

As they turned to go downstairs I heard him say: "Just the same, you're no flapper."

"You must meet my father," said Inez coolly. "He will furnish you with the date of my birth."

I gasped inwardly. Did she mean it? But of course she did. How characteristic of her daring!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

What a cigarette meant *there*

20 degrees below, and no tobacco, through lonely weeks of glittering silence. Then a speck on the hard, bright horizon; another musher, outward-bound . . . and *cigarettes!* What price cold or Arctic hardship then!

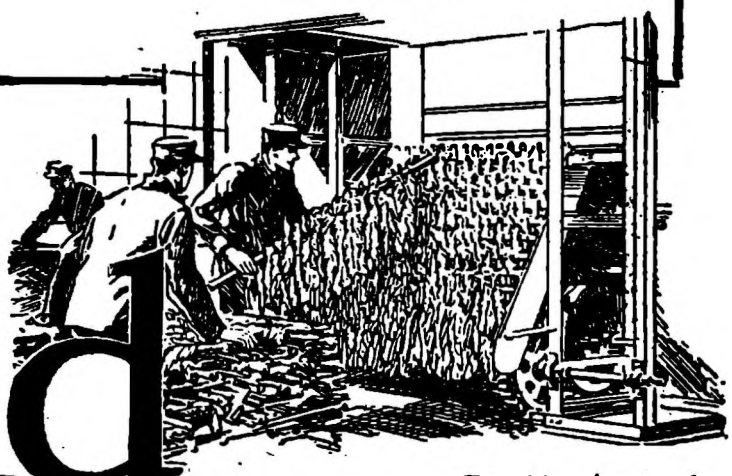
What a cigarette means *here*

220 degrees above, as endless belts carry the choice tobacco for Chesterfield inch by inch through the great steel ovens.

Here, in penetrating heat, science corrects and perfects the curing commenced in the farmer's barn. Dried, then cooled, then steamed to exact and uniform heat and moisture, the tobacco is ready for the final mellowing—two long years ageing in wood—that only Nature can give.

Man, Science, Nature—all work together on Chesterfield. And in the bland, satisfying smoothness of Chesterfield itself is ample proof that their patient, costly team-work is good!

Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co.



Through long steam-heated ovens, new tobacco passes in slow endless procession for drying and "conditioning."

field

. . . . *and yet* THEY SATISFY

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

OLD FAVORITES

EVERY week I receive requests and suggestions for republishing some of the outstanding stories that appeared in ARGOSY years ago. For example:

Pen Argyle, Pa.

Never, in all the years that I've read ARGOSY, has there appeared an issue *half* as good as the December 29, 1928, issue. It's a knockout!

Never has there appeared a greater—from my viewpoint—collection of stories in one single issue! All of the type that I particularly like.

I've read the most outré, the most bizarre, the most fantastic, the weirdest fiction in the world, but your serial of years ago, "The Blind Spot," had them all stopped!

J. WASSO, JR.

ARGOSY never has been a "reprint" magazine, and I feel that to republish an old serial would be an imposition on those who read it when first published and have no interest in rereading it. This I told Mr. Wasso—who comes back with:

Since several of your readers have asked for a reprint of "The Blind Spot," why not ask all the readers to vote on this unusually different story? J. WASSO, JR.

As other readers have made similar requests from time to time there can be no harm in determining just how you all feel on this subject. Won't you let me know how you feel about it?

First, would you like to have ARGOSY reprint one of the old favorites? Or would you resent it and feel you were being served secondhand material?

Second, if you favor such a reprint what story do you nominate for such publication?

I shall appreciate a frank and hearty expression of opinion.

THE EDITOR.

THE only trouble here is that we do not publish ARGOSY often enough to keep Mr. Smith occupied and satisfied:

Chicago, Ill.

Just got through with last week's issue and am sending the ten coupons for one of the sketches.

It is a pity I can't get ARGOSY oftener than once a week. I buy it on Wednesday and Thursday night I am through with it; by Saturday night I am through *Detective Fiction Weekly*, and then come three nights in which I don't know what to do with myself.

Keep on printing W. Wirt's stories; they are good. Keep on with the two-part serials.

I am glad to hear you will publish another of John Hopper's stories, I enjoyed both of his last ones, also I am with Mr. P. R. Weese in rooting for historical fiction. "He Rules Who Can" is good. Have some more like it when you get through with this one. Also if possible have another story with *Gillian Hazeltine* by George F. Worts.

J. F. SMITH.

BUT here is a reader who wants larger doses, but only twice a month:

Brooklyn, N. Y.

I think your magazine is wonderful. I have been reading it for over one year.

A friend of mine had the ARGOSY, and he loaned it to me. When I completed all the stories, I just couldn't wait for next week to come. Since then I have been a steady reader.

"A Hard-Boiled Tenderfoot" was a corker. "Red Hot" is another wow! My favorite authors are: Fred MacIsaac, Garret Smith, Edgar Rice Burroughs. "The Apache Devil" is a story that couldn't be beat.

I read the Argonotes every time and I think the people who criticize the Western stories don't deserve to even hold the ARGOSY. Leave everything just as it is.

Give us another *Gillian Hazeltine*. I think "The Crime Circus" was wonderful.

Why don't you publish ARGOSY twice a month and make the price twenty-five cents instead of ten cents and publishing every week. Put more serials, novelettes, and short stories. That will make things go hot.

I'll stay with ARGOSY as long as I live, and I'll always recommend it to every person interested in good, clean, outdoor life, sport, war, detective stories.

Give us some more of F. V. W. Mason's

works. His story, "Brothers in Red," was an interesting and enjoying novelette, and so was "Useless." I think they are about the best war stories ever published in ARGOSY.

Thank you for the enjoyable evenings I have spent reading ARGOSY.

S. KULYKOSKY & BRO.

"THE CHINOOK" certainly was a good yarn, and Mr. Pierce has promised us another to match it before long:

Concord, N. C.

I see where the readers of your splendid magazine have been telling you what first started them to reading the ARGOSY. This is how I started: I was looking over the newsstand about a year ago for something "good" to read, and the clerk recommended the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY. Since then I have not missed a copy. The first story was by Fred MacIsaac, called "What! Los Angeles." I enjoyed it fine, and I look forward to one of his stories with much pleasure.

The best complete novelette of the year was "The Chinook," by Frank Richardson Pierce. May we have another from Mr. Pierce soon?

I have no criticism to make on your selection of stories, and I can't help but wonder what such people as Mr. Corey want for their money. For my part, keep it an "all-story" magazine.

I remain, as long as ARGOSY-ALLSTORY is published, "a tar heel booster."

PAUL HUDSPETH.

AGAIN Charles Alden Seltzer rang the bell with "The Raider":

Roanoke, Va.

Seltzer's new story is great, and I hope that you will print more stories by the old writers, instead of so many by new writers.

Wishing you years of success.

G. W. HOGAN.

La Fayette, N. Y.

Have been reading the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY for a great many years and would do without many things not to miss my magazine. Enjoy most all the stories, but I realize that the magazine is printed for many to read, not for me alone. Can hardly wait for the next installment of "The Raider." It is the best story since "Brass Commandments."

Hoping long life and prosperity and that the ARGOSY may remain "as is."

MRS. ANTON GRAF.

"LIKE a bowl of soup in cold weather," this lady finds ARGOSY!

Chicago, Ill.

I haven't been an ARGOSY fan long, but your magazine certainly does hit the spot. Like a bowl of soup in zero weather.

My husband and I both think your magazine wonderful, and we enjoy every one of the stories.

We just finished "The Golden Burden," by Fred MacIsaac. It's the best story we have read in a long time.

If you want to keep two pleased readers, keep ARGOSY as is.

We are both looking forward to next week's issue so we can read "Men's Business," by Ralph R. Perry.

An ARGOSY fan. M. W.

NOW comes word from "an old fossil of sixty-five years"—who seems to have some mighty vigorous ideas:

Brooklyn, N. Y.

You invite opinions of readers, both pro and con, and I feel constrained to butt in. I'm an old fossil of sixty-five years, and have been reading fiction for many years, and today look forward to your magazine with more avidity than I ever felt for any other.

Until I have finished reading, I usually have an ARGOSY-ALLSTORY in my pocket to protect me from too prolonged an observation of the prevailing "moron" I encounter in the New York subways and other lanes of traffic in "Greater New York." When I read it in their presence, it seems to amuse them or arouse their benighted sense of humor a bit—yet I feel that of the two "fictions," in the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY, I'm getting much the best of it, as compared to the "tabloids" and the nearly as bad "yellows" or pink extras.

I know that in the daily "Slush," a newspaper writer's work is so edited in regard to the opinions of "machine politics," the "tender" feelings of the police department, *et cetera, et cetera,* as to lose all its sting or effectiveness, while in ARGOSY and magazines of similar ilk, the writer, being *not* local, has full swing to spout forth the knowledge that he has acquired.

I may say, truly, that I believe more that I read in ARGOSY than I do of what I read in the "tabloids."

Now to be a bit personal. I greatly enjoy the work of MacIsaac, Wilstach, Footner, Coe, and Worts—also Loring Brent.

W. M. ALEXANDER.

NEW readers are, of course, always welcome, but there is great satisfaction in winning back to the fold one of the old-timers who has lost interest. For example:

St. Louis, Mo.

I bought the first number of ARGOSY magazine as well as others you put out, and read them until some of them had stories which did not interest me. Recently I noticed the magazines have worthwhile stories of interest, so I have subscribed again. When you now have stories by such men who put brains into their stories, such as Mason and Brodeur and cut out a lot of impossible stories, it is time

to put your magazine in rank with some others, and I can see that in 1929 ARGOSY will be at the top.

A few suggestions: Have more stories of Crusades for those who only ride in flivvers and never read history; stories of the Civil War, which nowadays no one ever writes of; and other items of history and geography. Have some stories about South American heroes, such as Bolivar, Martin, *et cetera.*

For the price the magazine is a wonder.

JOSEPH S. SEELIG.

A RECIPE for a good magazine, from Mrs. Dammann:

Garrett, Ind.

I have been reading your magazine for almost fifteen years and I find it the best magazine I read—and I read a few.

Please do not change it in any way.

Too many of your readers fume about stories not to their liking. I read every one. 'Tis true, sometimes, there will be one I do not care for, but perhaps some one else liked it. That is why it's a good buy, as it caters to the tastes of all the reading public.

I hate to be reading an interesting tale, and come to "Continued on page so-and-so." After turning a lot of leaves, wading through a host of advertising matter, I find two or three paragraphs, and then "turn some more." The ARGOSY keeps away from that annoyance.

A good recipe for a magazine is—a dash of Western, a pinch of sport, a smack of science, some unusual, and a lot of romance and mystery. Put them all together between two beautifully colored bindings, such as we find on the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY. Eat 'em up. Easily digested.

MRS. F. H. DAMMANN.

"BESTS" are always interesting. Here are a few nominations for the "best" titles of the year:

Clarksburg, W. Va.

The stories which you are now printing in the ARGOSY seem to me to be of the highest class. I particularly like the four classes of stories under which most of your serials are appearing. They are: different, historical, business, and Western. I think you are making no mistake in printing those of the historical type.

To my mind the six best stories of the past year are: "Luckett of the Moon," "Blue Steel," "Crime Circus," "World Brigands," "He Rules Who Can," and the "Coast of Blue." The three best novelettes were: "Sea Marauders," "Last Thousand Miles," and "The Real Inside on Dirt." I think MacIsaac was the best author of the year, with Worts a close second.

FRED MINTER.

Woodmen, Colo.

I used to growl some about too many Westerns, but have been on my back for several months now and read quite a few magazines. I find that after reading a magazine of all Westerns, it is a real pleasure to read the Westerns in the ARGOSY; they are so much different.

My idea of a real story is "The Silver Fang." Have just finished the second installment. "The Crime Circus," and "The Scandal on Kiticat Key" were also excellent.

Have been reading the ARGOSY since just before combining with the *All-Story;* was only about fourteen years old at that time. May she prosper and never *die.*

WALTER J. SIMONS.

Salina, Kan.

I think that some of your best stories lately have been: "The Albino Ogre," "The Girl in the Moon," "Rain Magic," "He Rules Who Can," "War Lord of Many Swordsmen," "The Crime Circus," and many others whose names I have forgotten.

I thought that "The Crime Circus" was especially good.

Where you get your pictures for the covers is beyond me. At one of our magazine stands, about every kind of magazine is displayed. I like to look in his window and see all the colors. I think that four times out of five ARGOSY has the best.

I hope that you have some more stories by Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur. "He Rules Who Can" is surely fine. It is very well written and is interesting for every minute. "War Lord of Many Swordsmen" was another superstory.

K. R. REARWIN.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1._____

2._____

3._____

4._____

5._____

I did not like_____

because_____

*Name*_____

*Street*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____

2-2

Looking Ahead!

For health and strength Lionel Wing took passage on the Stella Maris, bound for South America. But hardly had the outlines of New York vanished over the horizon when queer and sinister forces started to evidence themselves—forces which were soon to make of the voyage a nightmare, gruesome and terrifying, gloated over by an evil genius in repulsive human form—

THE SPECTRAL PASSENGER

A Book-Length Novel

by FRED MacISAAC

tells the fascinating tale of that voyage. A tale of mystery; of death unexplained and of suspicion hanging over all.

It begins next week, in

The ISSUE OF FEBRUARY 9th

MADAGASCAR GOLD

A Complete Novelette

by HAROLD MONTANYE

A tale of adventure this—of two Americans who had served together in the French Foreign Legion seeking a fortune in the jungle wilderness of Madagascar—and finding trouble aplenty.

COMING! ***COMING!***

THE BLOOD OF MORGAN —by Lieut. John Hopper

With the Marines in Nicaragua—adventure and romance in the turbulent Central American republic!

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

"First In Fiction" ***Out Every Wednesday***

Now You Can Reduce 2 to 4 Lbs. in a Night

Eat what you please
Wear what you please
Do what you please
Take no risky medicine

Send the coupon for your first three Fayro Baths

Thousands of smart women have found this easy way to take off 2 to 4 pounds once or twice a week. These women take refreshing Fayro baths in the privacy of their own homes.

Fayro is the concentrate of the same natural mineral salts that make effective the waters of twenty-two hot springs of America, England and Continental Europe. For years the spas and hot springs bathing resorts have been the retreat of fair women and well groomed men.

Excess weight has been removed, skins have been made more lovely, bodies more shapely and minds brighter.

The Hot Springs are now Brought to You

A study of the analyses of the active ingredients of the waters from twenty-two of the most famous springs have taught us the secret of their effectiveness. You can now have all these benefits in your own bath. Merely put Fayro into your hot bath. It dissolves rapidly. You will notice and enjoy the pungent fragrance of its balsam oils and clean salts.

Then, Fayro, by opening your pores and stimulating perspiration, forces lazy body cells to sweat out surplus fat and bodily poisons. Add Fayro to your bath at night and immediately you will lose from 2 to 4 pounds in an easy, refreshing and absolutely harmless manner.

Your physician will tell you that Fayro is certain to do the work and that it is absolutely harmless.

Fayro will refresh you and help your body throw off worn out fat and bodily poisons. Your skin will be clearer and smoother. You will sleep better after your Fayro bath and awaken feeling as though you had enjoyed a week's vacation.

Lose Weight Where You Most Want To

Fayro reduces weight generally, but you can also concentrate its effect on abdomen, hips, legs, ankles, chin, or any part of the body you may wish.

Results Are Immediate

Weigh yourself before and after your Fayro bath. You will find you have lost from 2 to 4 pounds. And a few nights later when you again add Fayro to your bath, you will once more reduce your weight. Soon you will be the correct weight for your height. No need to deny yourself food you really want. No need for violent exercise. No need for drugs or medicines. Merely a refreshing Fayro bath in the privacy of your own home.

Try Fayro at our Risk

The regular price of Fayro is $1.00 a package. With the coupon you get 3 full sized packages and an interesting booklet "Health and Open Pores" for $2.50 plus the necessary postage. Send no money. Pay the postman. Your money refunded instantly if you want it.

If each healthful bath of Fayro does not reduce your weight from 2 to 4 pounds, we will refund your money without a question. You risk nothing. Clip the coupon and mail it to-day.

Fayro, Inc. MC-2-29
821 Locust St., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Send me 3 full sized boxes of Fayro in plain package. I will pay the postman $2.50 plus the necessary postage. It is understood that if I do not get satisfactory results with the first package I use, I am to return the other two and you will refund all of my money at once.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

If you live outside the United States send International Money Order with coupon.

HERE'S PROOF

Read what Fayro Baths have done for others

"Three Fayro baths reduced my weight 11 pounds in 8 days. I feel better than I have felt for years."

"I weigh 16 pounds less and feel younger and sleep better. Fayro is wonderful."

"My double chin vanished in the magic of Fayro baths."

"My hips were always too prominent until I commenced Fayro baths. I have lost 12 pounds."

"Thank you for Fayro. I lost 14 pounds in three weeks; feel better and certainly look better."

"Since childhood my thick ankles have always been a source of embarrassment. Fayro baths have reduced them beautifully. Thank you very much."

For obvious reasons, names are not quoted, but every letter published has been authorized and names and addresses will be given on request.

H A V E A

C A M E L

Camels, of course

The more you demand of a cigarette,
the quicker you come to

CAMELS